

**Precarious lives caused by COVID-19 pandemic:
A qualitative study among the urban middle-class in
Dhaka, Bangladesh**

**by
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Abstract

This study closely examines the precarious situation and affective impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown on the urban middle-class population of Dhaka City, Bangladesh. The main argument of this thesis is: that the urban middle-class of Bangladesh has been through the traumatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and are still bearing scars, which have hardly been noticed by the appropriate authorities and the media. Using a multi-method qualitative approach and sampling, this field-based study has attempted to explore the answers to questions regarding the community of interest's uncertainties of life, the affective impacts of the pandemic, the adaptive strategies adopted by the people of the community of interest to cope with the sufferings of the pandemic, and their interpretations of their pandemic experience. The results unveil the losses, survival strategies, and fears that they experienced during the pandemic, contributing to the existing knowledge on the middle-class and affective experience of the pandemic.

Keywords: precarity; middle-class; affect; subjectivation

Dedication

To my family, whose support has backed me up throughout this graduate journey. Also, to all the women in my family, whose child marriage has paved my way to choose a different path in life.

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I started my graduate journey with online coursework from Bangladesh when it was still very challenging to travel due to the pandemic. Shifting to Canada in the middle of a term was not easy. Thanks to my teachers who were super supportive and understanding of my situation and supported me by all means.

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Finally, the inspiration for this scholarly work comes from my background, since I am also a part of the urban middle class of Dhaka. I saw people's harsh realities from close proximity during the pandemic and the lockdown period of 2020 and 2021 in Dhaka city. I want to dedicate my work to all those people, who have been through this COVID-19 era, and have been through losses and sufferings.

Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee	ii
Ethics Statement	iii
Abstract	iv
Dedication	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Table of Contents	vii
List of Table	ix
List of Acronyms.....	x
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
1.1. Background of the study	1
1.2. Chapter plan.....	6
Chapter 2. Literature Review	8
2.1. Introduction.....	8
2.2. Previous literatures on precarious conditions of people in South Asia and Dhaka due to COVID-19	8
2.3. Key concepts of this research	10
2.3.1. Middle-class	11
2.3.2. Affect.....	12
2.3.3. Subjectivation.....	14
2.4. Theories of precarity and theoretical framework for this research	16
Chapter 3. Sampling and Research Methodology.....	20
3.1. Introduction.....	20
3.2. Research methodology.....	20
3.3. Getting the ethics approval for human-oriented research.....	21
3.4. Recruiting the participants from the community of interest: Sampling	21
3.5. Research tools applied for fieldwork	26
3.5.1. Observation.....	26
3.5.2. Semi-structured interviews	27
3.6. Data analysis	28
3.7. Conclusion.....	28
Chapter 4. Experiences of losses due to COVID-19 pandemic: Grievability and non-grievability.....	29
4.1. Introduction.....	29
4.2. Background	29
4.3. Grievable losses	32
4.3.1. Loss of employment	32
4.3.2. Loss of income	34
4.3.3. Death of family members	36
4.3.4. Hospitalization & the experience of being COVID-19 positive.....	39

4.4.	Non-grievable losses	41
4.4.1.	Loss of good working environment	41
4.4.2.	Loss of relative job security	46
4.4.3.	Loss of confidence & self- motivation	49
4.4.4.	Physical and mental health difficulties posed by the lockdown	52
4.4.5.	Loss of good relationships between family members	57
4.5.	Conclusion.....	60
Chapter 5. Adjustment to the 'new normal' : Urban middle-class' adaptive strategies with COVID-19		62
5.1.	Introduction.....	62
5.2.	Middle class' struggle and the agency of survival	63
5.3.	The strategies taken by the urban middle class to cope up and overcome their problems	68
5.3.1.	Adjusting expenditure.....	68
5.3.2.	Looking for new sources of income	70
5.3.3.	Moving to ancestral homes or lower-rent tenancy	72
5.3.4.	Selling assets and breaking savings.....	75
5.3.5.	Making emotional requests to hold steady expenditures	76
5.3.6.	Using peer and family network to get a job.....	78
5.3.7.	Adjustments for home office	80
5.3.8.	Managing physical pain and mental anxiety by different treatments	82
5.4.	Conclusion.....	84
Chapter 6. Reflections on COVID-19 experiences with the neoliberal 'conduct of conduct'		86
6.1.	Introduction.....	86
6.2.	Causes of the suffering from participants' points of view.....	86
6.2.1.	Written in the Fate.....	86
6.2.2.	Policies and decisions made by employers	87
6.2.3.	Nature of their professions	88
6.2.4.	The structural limitations of Dhaka City	88
6.3.	The interpretations and realizations of people from the lockdown experience.....	89
6.4.	Formation of neo-liberal personhood and the internalization of the regime of psychic governmentality	93
6.5.	Conclusion.....	100
Conclusion		102
References.....		106

List of Table

Table 1.	Names and demographic information of the participants in the study from the community of interest	25
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List of Acronyms

BCS Cadre	Bangladesh Civil Service Cadre
FDR	Fixed Deposit Receipt
RMG	Ready Made Garments

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

It was the sixth house in a row. Since morning, I and my husband were looking for a new apartment to rent, along with our son in the same neighborhood. Having tours in all these six apartments had one common feature- all were fully furnished with the tenants' goods, but the tenants were missing. Caretakers had more or less same the reply to our questions: people left the apartments without any notice. For two to three months, they could not pay their apartment rent. Without giving notice to their landlords, they left their rented apartments, leaving all their belongings. The landlords tried to contact them, but they were traceless.

It was happening everywhere. Not only in the high-income neighborhood that we lived in but also in all neighborhoods in Dhaka and Chittagong, the biggest metropolitan cities across the country. People were fleeing from their houses, leaving all their goods behind. People were fleeing to their villages- to save money, as they were fired from their jobs. They ran for their ancestral village homes and acted as the vectors of the COVID-19 virus for their families and fellow villagers. Not only in the Bangladeshi context, but all around the world we see such incidents. In Italy, people were more afraid of living in their congested apartments in Milan and other big cities, along with stranger flat-mates, than of being COVID-positive(Fontefrancesco 2020). Dhaka city has always been known as the hub for jobs and resources. Even after attempts from the government to decentralize the state, people from all over the country gather in Dhaka for work, coaching, for opportunities. Yet, they were retreating this time. Ancestral homes in rural Bangladesh, which they left to obtain higher education, earn higher wages and to live in the center to avail better opportunities, ultimately became their shelter during the loss of employment, the loss of an environment to maintain physical distancing and the loss of money to buy food. Not only in Bangladesh, but - similar social situations took place in other geographical locations during this pandemic, when the seemingly non-existent reciprocal relationship of the rural and urban settings once again came under limelight. It became evident once again that it is not the rural social settings that depend one-sidedly on urban

settings' income; rather, urban people have also been dependent on rural agriculture for food supply (Stavig 2020).

In March 15, 2020, the government of Bangladesh first announced officially that COVID positive patients had been found in the country, and following the rest of the world, a lockdown was announced from March 17, 2020. Was the country actually prepared to provide social and financial support to the population during the time of the lockdown? Well, it was not. But lockdown and physical distancing were demanded to stop the contagion. It was the recommendation from the WHO.

This thesis is based on my research on the urban middle class segment of Bangladesh who, like the overall population, went through the difficult COVID-19 and lockdown experience in the years 2020 and 2021. Following a qualitative study of the sample population from the city of Dhaka, I have closely examined their narratives, their experiences from the time of distress and the aftermaths, their adaptive strategies to the new normal situation, and their reflections on their COVID experiences to get a holistic understanding of their then situation.

To narrow down the scope of this study, I focused on finding answers to the following research questions through this project:

1. How did the middle class urban people of Bangladesh, focusing on Dhaka, perceive and experience precarity in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How have the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown contributed to people's experience of economic uncertainty, their embodied affective emotional experiences, subjectivity and existential vulnerability?
3. How are people responding to and coping up with the newly posed financial and other struggles caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. Whom do the people hold responsible for their sufferings during and in the aftermath of the lockdown and how do they interpret and reflect on their COVID-19 experience?

As a researcher, I found it intriguing to explore the answers to these questions about the urban middle class. Middle class is a complex category, which has various interpretations set by different practitioners. In the same social setting, there may be two people, both of whom claim themselves to be from the category of middle class, but

characteristically, they may differ drastically from each other. For some segments of the lower-income group of people, identifying themselves as the middle class might be more respectful or empowering, while the more mainstream middle class people – though falling under the same social category- have found to have huge differences in income between each other. Ultimately, to fit the scope of this research's timeline and to narrow down and focus to explore the experience of a particular group of people, I had to set an operational definition of 'middle class' for this study, which focused less on the income group category and more on the ideology, educational standards and aspirations of this group of people. Anouk De Koning and Jose Mapril's work on Egyptian and South Asian society's class structure, as well as their shaping of the term 'middle-class' in the contexts of these two societies inspired me to draw the operational definition of middle-class for this study. In her study of Egyptian society and Cairo's urban people's identity-defining contexts, Anouk De Koning (2009) cited Walter Armbrust to show how the Egyptian middle-class differentiates themselves both from the rich and the poor by adhering to their fascination with academic education (which they consider as a major way for upward social mobility), derogatory attitude towards menial work, as well as by following many traditional ideals of Egyptian society to decide one's social position, such as- family background and origin. This, may seem contradictory with their emphasis on achieving modern Western education, yet, they co-exist simultaneously in their criteria of self-identification (Koning 2009). Similarly, Jose Mapril (2014) showed the aspirations of the South Asian middle-class to hold bureaucratic positions as government officials, since such administrative jobs are considered as symbols of status in the Indian subcontinent (Mapril 2014). To achieve them, middle-class has no other way but to get higher academic degrees. Both of these ethnographic works have been focused on populations that have close proximity to my community of interest for this study. Therefore, in this research, middle class refers to the group of people in the urban Bangladeshi settings, who have at least a Bachelor's or similar level of education, are professional or self-employed people, live in Dhaka city, and have operational knowledge or cognition of the English language. To narrow down more the community of interest in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I also set the condition that interested people in this research should be those from this category, who identify themselves as having been through financial and other kinds of loss (any kind of non-financial loss that they consider that they have been through due to the pandemic and lockdown, such as- death of family members or friends; loss of physical wellness for short or long term; loss of mental wellbeing; loss of motivation to work and

self-esteem; loss of peace and happiness from family life, and anything else that they consider as a 'loss' caused by the lockdown and the pandemic) during the pandemic.

There are some reasons for me as a researcher to choose this group of people as my community of interest for research. Born and brought up in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh- I myself belong to this particular social category of urban middle class. Having my peer network of colleagues, friends and extended family members from this urban middle class sector, I have observed that people from this social class had been through difficult experiences during the on and off lockdown phases in Bangladesh. As a social group, the urban middle class is proud and generally do not make themselves subject of pity or benevolence in front of others. They are generally known as an aloof and self-sufficient group of people. This is the reason that when the media, the non-governmental social services sector, and the government itself were busy making donations and rehabilitation programs and giving aid targeted to the poor segment of society, the middle class was losing their employment, struggling to get health care during the pandemic in hospitals and spending their savings to survive in the ocean of uncertainty and panic- all in silence and without the acknowledgment of the authorities. Before I began this research, I talked to different members of this social class from my social circles who lost their jobs, had to switch to lower-income neighborhoods to save money, and even had to sell gold jewelry to get some liquid cash in their hands. All these people, while discussing their bad situation, also made requests not to discuss it with others, so that their misery is kept hidden from society's eyes. This secrecy and the adherence to keeping their social status intact are two reasons that the urban middle class pandemic sufferings are less discussed. I found it compelling as a member of this social class to conduct research on this and to shed light on it – so that in the future, the government and other policy-implementing organizations can count them to as a vulnerable group of people who are worthy of support and rehabilitation projects.

Initially, I wanted to conduct the fieldwork on the community of interest from two of the biggest cities and centers of professionals - Dhaka and Chittagong. Eventually, I decided to focus only on Dhaka, the capital city and its urban middle class. It was partially due to the time limitation. Dhaka offers a more competitive setting for living and surviving for the urban middle class, given the higher living cost and housing prices, which did put them into more dilemma during the lockdown. Besides, most urban middle class historically tend to migrate to the capital city, start their professional lives here, and

eventually, after buying property, become homeowners in the capital. People also tend to migrate and settle in Dhaka city, since the best educational institutes are located here. Sending the children to the best schools and colleges is another top priority in urban middle class life since this group puts a very high value on education and they want their children to be white-collar job-holders in the future. Altogether it gave me the sense that fieldwork in Dhaka would provide good insight into the urban middle class' pandemic experience.

Many social thinkers have said it before- precarity is part and parcel of modern neoliberal times, and precarity is a quintessential element of human lives (Butler 2004; Masquelier 2019). True, if I want to understand the precarious situation of human lives, I do not need focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. There is already enough scope for anthropological analysis in this arena and many important works (Arora and Majumder 2021; Lazar and Sanchez 2019; Harris and Scully 2015; Lapinske 2018). Yet I chose the COVID-context and this particular social class. Because before COVID-19, there was an established idea about the middle class, which was that- their financially well-off situation had made them self-sufficient and quite a prosperous group in society (*British Council* 2015; Kamal et al. 2023). The urban middle class was known for their lavish foreign tours in five-star hotels and their photos uploaded on social media, for their presence in fine dining restaurants, for the yearly Umrah Hajj in the holy city of Mecca, and for their Eid shopping in the foreign market of Kolkata, India. There was once a time when only the middle-class people who were government job holders or in the BCS Cadre services¹- were deemed as established. Many multinational organizations and private companies too pay a handsome amount of salary to their employees, which has generated the popular idea that irrespective of the nature of their employer organizations, the urban middle class is wealthy. But just the first phase of the pandemic lockdown and the salary cut of only three-four months proved that the urban middle class had very little savings in their hands to survive in a difficult situation. It brings back the idea of uncertainty and

¹ People who pass the BCS examination and hold jobs in Cadre services. According to Wikipedia, The BCS Examination is a nationwide competitive examination in Bangladesh conducted by the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) for recruitment to the various Bangladesh Civil Service cadres, including BCS (Administration), BCS (Audit and Accounts), BCS (Taxation), BCS (Customs and Excise), BCS (Foreign Affairs), and BCS (Police) among others ("BCS Examination" 2024).

precarity of their existence. This is the reason that I chose to explore this particular social situation and their dealing with it as a class.

1.2. Chapter plan

I have arranged this thesis into five chapters and the conclusion for the ease of discussion and segmentation. The contents of these chapters will be:

Chapter 1: The introductory chapter discusses the background and the rationales of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review chapter. This chapter discusses the epistemological background of this research. It opens with the discussion of relevant literatures from the existing scholarly body of work on precarity, pandemic, people's affective experiences in South Asian and different other geographical contexts, as well as discussing the ways this study fills up at least some gaps in the existing body of knowledge through answering the research questions. It sets out the key terms to understand the subject matter of this research and their explanations; discussions on the body of theories related to the research topic; the limitations and strengths of different theoretical frameworks and among them, which ones are found more suitable to explain the particular social situation under this research, and the particular situations of the community of interest and to answer the proposed research questions.

Chapter 3: The methodology chapter. This chapter discusses the sampling techniques that have been adopted to choose a sample of the population, the operational definitions for this research, the defining features of the community of interest, the fieldwork research techniques and the reasons that they fit into this research model. It also sets out the way the participants were contacted and how their consent was gained for their participation in the study, and the process of cross-verification for ensuring whether they match the sample population criteria or not.

Chapter 4: This chapter explains the experiences of the urban middle class subjects' pandemic-led precarity and losses. Participants' narratives have been used to discuss and analyze different dimensions of losses that they experienced. Some losses, as they described, are socially recognized as 'mournable' and 'grievable' by others in the society, while there are other kinds of losses which are recognized as 'loss' only by the

people who are the first-hand sufferers of those losses. This chapter also provides a critical explanation of people's lived experiences of pandemic-led loss.

Chapter 5: This chapter discusses people's different adaptive strategies from the community of interest that they developed and adopted to survive when there were limited resources for their survival everywhere. People's complex interactions and their understandings and reactions to different situations are vital topics of discussion here.

Chapter 6: The last findings chapter discusses people's reflections and interpretations of their own experiences during the pandemic and the lockdown. It reveals that people's reflections and interpretations are not random or objective; instead, they are the consequences of their patterns of subjectivation and the outcomes of their fears, led by the coercive power of the sovereign.

Conclusion: Finally, I conclude with my reflections from the overall study, give some suggested directions for future studies in the area, and discuss ideas for policy directions suggested by the findings of this research.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss how scholarship in previous studies has discussed many facets of COVID-19 situations; the highlighted features in their studies; gaps in the existing literature and how my research is answering some of the questions yet unanswered. I will discuss the key concepts in this research, how they were developed, discussed and used by different theoretical schools and outline why and how I have chosen particular operational or proposed definitions of them for my study. From there, I elaborate which particular theories I found helped me to understand better the realities of my community of interest and how I tailored the theoretical framework for this research project on the basis of those theories.

2.2. Previous literatures on precarious conditions of people in South Asia and Dhaka due to COVID-19

The various impacts of COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown on South-Asian, as well as Bangladeshi populations, have been considered by scholars, which is evident from the existing literature. Akter & Ashadujjaman discussed in their study on Dhaka's middle class how pandemic and lockdown have led to this class' overall financial crisis and resultant child marriage rate increase, family crisis, increased divorce rate, deviant behavior, depression and other factors (Akter and Ashadujjaman 2022). The questioning factor that I found in this study was- that the researcher team mentioned that in the sixth highest densely populated city in the world, the majority of the population is middle-class. I find that middle-class is a vastly encompassing term that so many different groups of people attach to themselves, and the researcher team took it accordingly. They did not state any definition of the 'middle-class' in their study, which would narrow down the population studied. Instead, they included people as participants for their study, who self-identify themselves as 'middle-class'. They didn't define the 'middle-classness' of their population studied, and the quantitative data they gathered and used to do the study, in effect, included results from multiple layers of a densely populated city who are not all

middle-class. In addition to that, their assertion that most of the people in Dhaka city are 'middle-class' too is a blurry statement, which was not presented with supporting evidence.

In another study on Covid-19 pandemic's adverse effects on Dhaka's population, the research team explored how socio-economic and emotional well-being can be ensured by maintaining social as well as peer networks. Selima Sara Kabir and her team showed evidence from 40 in-depth interviews with the target population in informal settlements in Dhaka city, people are drawing support and help from their networks to avail mental health support through these social connections(Kabir et al. 2023). But this study was conducted with people who live in the informal settlements, aka shanties of Dhaka city, and generally they are not measured as 'middle-class' by any scale. In addition to that, this study explored how people find solutions from the existing resources to fight back. But the concept 'affect', which is one of the central themes in my research and implies studying underlying human emotions, was in no way a focus of this study. It rather focused on how sharing personal details of stress factors and sorrow with peer groups can reduce stress and negative emotions among the people from the community, since it generates empathy and kindness reciprocally among the people from the same neighborhood and same financial and cultural background.

One study that I found very much aligned with my research interests discussed the psychosocial anxiety caused by lockdown among North Bangladeshi people, where the writers suggested developing and implementing time-oriented policy to mitigate the severity of psychological anxiety of COVID-19 (Parvin et al. 2021). The research team did not use the word 'affect' in their article, yet they identified different stress-generated physical and mental outcomes such as temperamental changes and chaos in the household, insomnia, fatigue and others. Their mixed-method research suggested that psychosocial anxiety was more prominent among women than men - which I found not true for Dhakai middle-class, my community of interest for this project. My findings rather suggest that the temperamental outburst and affective traits caused by lockdown and COVID-19 pandemic are 'gender-neutral' in terms of impact on men and women. It mostly depends on how financial responsibilities or emotional labor are borne by the person in consideration. If a person's partner or parents are financially well-off and financial hurdles created due to pandemic are not something that would jeopardize the family's basic living- then the person in consideration, man or woman- would be less vulnerable to the situation in comparison with a person who bears the primary responsibility of running a household

financially. Besides, this study's focus of interest was the geographically Northern Bangladesh community, irrespective of their age, sex or socio-economic class.

Besides these, there are varieties of other literature in which scholars have considered the various impacts of COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown on South Asian, as well as Bangladeshi populations. They apprehend that South Asian populations, in contrast to the rest of the world, will be more vulnerable to pandemics and resultant difficulties due to denser population, high poverty rates and weaker healthcare facilities (Rasul et al. 2021). In Bangladesh, people did not initially apprehend the risks of the pandemic hazard and travelled to their ancestral villages to cut the cost of living. People who are pious practitioners also initially assumed that COVID will not impact them. These practices demonstrate the ontological potentialities and the differences among Bangladeshi people (Hasan 2022). Informal sector workers who migrated from different areas to the big cities for work and could not afford to go back to their villages - ended up selling jewellery, consuming less food and cutting costs in the household as their coping strategies with the lockdown (Sohel et al. 2021). Studies also show that the already marginal groups of people in the society, such as- the Hijra or transgender population in the capital city Dhaka suffered from more physical and mental stress and faced mental health disorders while seeking healthcare during COVID-19 pandemic in comparison with other Bangladeshis, as they are more vulnerable and getting healthcare is already difficult for them (Sifat et al. 2023). This existing scholarship focuses on different aspects of people's sufferings in the country. When I started to plan this research, scholarly focus was mostly on working-class people's perspectives in pandemic. Gradually the middle-class is coming into scholarly focus. However, there is still a void of ethnographic and qualitative research on Dhaka's middle-class' affective experience due to financial and non-financial distresses of pandemic. There are lots of stories that are yet untold and unheard about their struggles and fights and the bigger uncertainties that are implicit behind their decisions.

2.3. Key concepts of this research

The key concepts that will be found throughout this thesis are elaborated here. Some of these key terms have been used and explained by former scholarly work, while some are established ideas in social sciences. For this research, some of these key terms bear their original sociological meaning, while I adapted some for an operational definition

and explanation that better fit interlocutors' realities and experiences. I will discuss them below.

2.3.1. Middle-class

Class is, perhaps, the most overarching term to cover a wide variety of populations of a complex community. The term has changed its meanings over time and it refers to the social classes who display different kinds of characteristics in different countries. Perhaps the reason that there is no standard definition of 'Middle-classness' is - that it means different things to different people (Tarkhnishvili and Tarkhnishvili 2013). The existing literature, broadly defines middle-class on the basis of two scales: its relationship to the means of production and property (the Marxist genre), and its existence as a status group who believe in somewhat similar ideology (the Weberian genre). In the Marxist tradition, the middle-class are those who are below the bourgeois, which means they do not own the means of production and thus cannot generate and reinvest capital. Like the proletariat, middle-classes also sell their labour. The difference is that instead of physical labour, middle-class sells mental and intellectual labour, and possess some assets and properties. Karl Marx referred to this particular social class as the 'Petty bourgeoisie', but didn't spend much time to analyze them, since his focus was mostly the class struggle and the emancipation of the proletariat.

Max Weber, on the other hand, referred to the middle-class as a 'status group'. For Weber, any social class is not only defined by its possession of assets, but also by some other crucial factors, such as their positionality in the capitalist market, their consumption of the products and services in the capitalist market, and their achieved credentials from educational institutions due to the maximum rationalization of the bureaucratic social order. Altogether these factors create what we call 'status' (Bottomore 1991). For Weber, the middle-class is a status group. For this research, I therefore adhere to the Weberian understanding of middle-class: a status group, members of whom may have different incomes, but all of whom more or less follow a similar ideology. This includes - looking down upon menial labour and having the capacity to serve as the mental and intellectual labour for the society, have professional memberships and skills in intellectual sectors, be in constant competition to consume what the capitalist market system has to offer (which defines the class identity) and associate prestige with their institutional degrees. Middle-class also has internal cultural dynamics of power, through

which, they continuously construct themselves in a discursive process, and they value the other kinds of capitals too, which are not essentially economic by nature (Mapril 2014; Liechty 2002). Jose Mapril's study on migrant middle-class Bangladeshis in Portugal (Mapril 2014) and Anouk de Koning's study on Cairo's middle-class population in Egypt (Koning 2009) are two ethnographic studies on middle-class that inspired me to adopt middle-class as a social category in the way I depicted in this thesis. Both of these authors have found middle-class not as an economic class; instead, as a cultural practice, whose followers identify themselves and one another through their certain ideological similarities regarding standards of morality, literacy, patterns of profession and so on. Mapril also mentioned the identity as well as the cultural practice of middle-class as discursively constructed, as it is something that evolves over time (Mapril 2014).

2.3.2. Affect

Affect is another crucial term in this research. I used affect as a tool to explain the multi-level physio-mental situations that the research participants went through during COVID-19 lockdown and the post-lockdown situation. Though affect has been interpreted differently by different social thinkers (some say affects are more than emotions, an embodiment of emotions and physiological in nature (Probyn 2005), while some suggest that affects are emotions are contained by the same identity and use these two terms synonymously (Ngai 2007)), for this research my focus is more on the expression and interpretation of affect and how it motivates people's perception of their subjectivity, bodily expression of stress and other factors.

Though the idea of 'Affect' was first generated by Baruch Spinoza in early 17th century, it was since 1995 that 'Affective turn' made its comeback in social sciences and political philosophy. Brian Massumi and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) brought forth the framework of affect to challenge the frameworks that insist on social structures as the formative mechanics of subject, instead of interpersonal relationships (Hemmings 2005). Brian Massumi asserts that affect has an autonomous existence and it exists outside of social influence (Massumi 1996). Inspired by Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi (translator) 1987), Massumi takes on a non-humanist objective base as the centre of affect. In his narrative, humans have the ability to feel emotions, but affect resides in material objects- which, when they come into exposure of individuals, can make an affective impact on them. For example- a piece of fossil, or an exotic cultural item - can

make a lasting impression on a person, which is affect. In Massumi's explanation, affect has such autonomous existence in the non-anthropomorphic material world, outside of individuals. This is known as the autonomous interpretation of affect. Massumi's interpretation of affect is quite abstract in nature, in the sense that he considers affect to reside in materials, not in humans. In addition to that, he mainly focuses on affective impact on individuals.

Clare Hemmings (Hemmings 2005) argues with Massumi's idea of the arbitrary independent existence of affect, since, in her view, affect does not produce different individuals, rather it reproduces social beings through its mechanism. Hemmings represents Lauren Berlant's examples in this aspect: "The delight of consumerism, feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism or fascism, to suggest just several contexts, are affective responses that strengthen rather than challenge a dominant social order."(Lauren Gail Berlant 1997; Hemmings 2005). Berlant's idea of affect differs from Massumi's in the sense that Massumi's concept of affect resides in the material world, and has an impact the on individual person, but Berlant's idea of affect circles around social beings, who are influenced by other social and global factors. Berlant's idea emphasises that mere material things cannot generate affect, unless it is interpreted by the social individuals with the help of the knowledge that is generated by the culture, politics, economy and other social facts. Since then, affect has shed much light in the new thoughts regarding feminist studies, day to day lives of people and their sufferings and subjectivation in the neoliberal global economy. For this research, affect has been considered as embodied emotion generated by social happenings around individuals, which is not arbitrary by any means.

Sara Ahmed (Ahmed 2004) discusses the cultural nature of emotions, replacing the established notion that emotions are psychological. She argues that emotions are not something that people possess as personal feelings, rather emotions are something with which people respond with different things, phenomena and objects. Her emphasis on emotion as a cultural thing is due to the fact that the same object or phenomenon may generate the same emotion (such as - sadness due to losing family in road accident) among people, but it is people who subjectively demonstrate different reactions towards these phenomena. Thus the bodily experience of affect caused by the same emotion may be different for different subjects.

Like Sara Ahmed, Denise Riley too views affect as a result of being in the social sphere. In her work, she discusses the affective result language has over people. The title or referent the society ascribes upon somebody, it is more likely that the person will accept the accusation or naming, somehow to prove it correct (Riley 2005). For this study, both Sara Ahmed and Denise Riley's discussions of affect have been central in the understanding of COVID-19 pandemic's direct and indirect impacts on victims' lived experience of sufferings. Findings from the fieldwork of this study indicates that the people under consideration may have been through more or less the same horrible situation as a consequence of COVID and the lockdown, but how intensely or slightly one has been affected by the traumatizing experiences- that has been individualistic and subjective experience. Following Sara Ahmed's insights, the same experience can generate different intensities of reactions among different individuals, although, both persons may have been through the same experience and may have the same kind of emotion (generated by their cultural knowledge) towards that experience. Similarly, cultural knowledge teaches people to consider a non-earning man as a man who has lost his pride of masculinity, since cultural knowledge about man is- that he is supposed to take care of the family financially. If he fails to do so, he is not considered (symbolically) 'a man'. Field findings show that this cultural learning is so prominent among men that even when nobody around shows any gesture of this believe, men whose earnings have been hampered due to the lockdown acted mostly inspired by this belief. The outburst of this hurt masculinity was demonstrated in different forms - from domestic violence, and crying outbursts to irreconcilable marital differences between spouses.

2.3.3. Subjectivation

Subjectivation, or the subjectification of individuals refers to the submission to and the embodiment of coercive power by individuals and becoming subject to the power. French philosopher Michel Foucault, in his discussion of power and governmentality, first described how power is coercive and it makes people obedient to it (Foucault 1982, cited by Butler 1997, p. 2). To explain this idea, he followed Louis Althusser's idea of 'interpellation' (Ong-Van-Cung 2011). The difference is that - what Althusser referred to as 'Interpellation', Foucault referred to it as the 'discursive productivity of language' (Butler 1997). Both terms mean giving a particular interpretation or meaning to somebody or something and making this attributed meaning accepted by all through a truth regime. The

truth regime is produced by the psychic form of power. Judith Butler, upon inspecting Foucault's explanation of power's role in the subjectivation of the individual, says that Foucault explained the role power plays here in subjectivation but did not shed light on how the power takes the psychic form to penetrate people's psyche and work there. Thus she combined the 'theory of power and the 'theory of psyche' to answer this inquiry (Butler 1997).

Butler says that the psychic power of governmentality works tropologically, and it is not initiated by any subject. To penetrate an individual's psyche, this power generates a sense of self-beratement in the individual. Thus a 'bad consciousness' is created inside the individual. Eventually the subjectified individual begins to eye himself with the lens of the master, which is that - he internalizes the consciousness of the master and thus, like the master- sees himself in his mirror as lower or bad. This vision of oneself forms his self-identity and it happens because the external power takes the psychic form and resides inside the psyche of individuals. Interpellation or the discursive productivity happen due to the authoritative voice.

Among all the theorists, Judith Butler in particular specifies that subject and individual are not the same. The subject is a linguistic category. In addition to that, the paradoxical relationship that the subject has with power is that - an individual is subjectified by the authoritative power that coerces and invades him. It is very crucial for subject formation. At the same time, the subject is that force that holds the power to change the discourse and subvert the authority of the structural power. It means the subject is the existence that is the result of power, as well as the threat to its forming power.

Subjectivation also makes the individuals internalize the fears, the dreams and aspirations, the cultural ideals of the social class in which they belong. It also makes their belonging in their social class and consequently, the oppression that they go through- look like a natural law- divine and non-alterable. Thus the precarious situation that they go through is also normalized sometimes as a change and consequence of the neoliberal global capitalism and part of the regular struggle of the class.

2.4. Theories of precarity and theoretical framework for this research

Theories that explain and discuss precarious situation and precarity can be divided into three frames: the political economy perspective, the Marxist perspective and the existential vulnerability perspective (Millar 2017). The root of the political economy approach to precarity can be found in the scholarly articles of French scholars during 1970s (Masquelier 2019), especially in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu. The global socio-economic shifts that took place in the 1970s as a result of neoliberalism, post-Fordist era and service economy made employment more uncertain and precarious everywhere- which was referred as precarity (Strauss 2018). Pierre Bourdieu used this term to explain how the nature of employment and income sources of people will continue to be scarcer and more flexible in the neoliberal era (Millar 2017). Standard employment relationship (SER) is a concept that plays a key role in this theorization, since some say that due to neoliberalization the SER has gone down and workers' lives have become precarious, while others while others argue that SER was never universally true for all workers irrespective of their differences (Strauss 2018). Pierre Bourdieu's explanation and use of the term 'precarity' is viewed as a resistance to 'the tyranny of the market' and Bourdieu wanted to provide it as "a weapon to all those who are striving to resist the scourge of neoliberalism (Soron 2004, p. 267). However, Bourdieu is not the only proponent of this theoretical stream. Albeit not central in his discussion, Michel Foucault too viewed precarity in a similar way and used this lens to see the neoliberal society (Masquelier 2019). Foucault narrated 'the fear of loss' of modern people that constantly haunts and makes them 'self-discipline' themselves, propagated by the sovereign- as 'precarity' of modern lives (M. Foucault, Davidson, and Burchell 2008).

The political economy school views precarity largely as the consequence of the shift of world economy to neoliberalization and the eventual uncertainty people have been experiencing in their professional sector and income generation. I find it remarkable how this stream of theories depict the growing instability of people's financial well-being across the world and explain clearly that financial precarity is generated by the political and economical framework. Yet, I do not find this school of thought providing much insight for my research due to the fact that although job uncertainty and unemployment and temporary employment are growing in ratio in Bangladesh, in general this trend was prevalent even before pandemic, which is why the unemployment and lay-offs during the

pandemic era cannot be wholly blamed on neoliberal capitalism. One of my central points of focus is affective emotions due to precarious situation. My findings in the field show that financial uncertainty generated, and still generating lots of affective impacts on participants' physio-mental well-being and political economic theory of precarity can articulate this relationship. But it is true at the same time that the affective emotions of participants during pandemic were not entirely generated by their financial crises, neither it was only about the financial solvency to live a good life. What was the reason beyond financial crisis that made people feel bad and helpless at that time is left unanswered if I see and test the findings with the political economy lens.

Guy Standing on the other hand considers the 'precariat' as the newly emerging 'proletariats' in the new millennium (Standing 2011). He examined the temporarily employed, working-class population as the 'lumpen proletariat' and a growing dangerous class in the 21st century. From a Marxist framework, he analyzed the precariat, who are the biggest in number of members throughout the world and can reform the society. Since Standing's precariat have a uniform character and they only come under the same umbrella due to their financial hurdles, I do not consider this model to be aligned or good one to explain middle-class Dhakai people's situation. In addition to that, Standing's theory does not articulate well with theory of affect, which is central in my research. Therefore I will not consider this school too to design my theoretical framework.

The lens of seeing precarity as people's existential vulnerability was mainly proposed by Judith Butler (Millar 2017). In their view, precarity is a part of human existence that simultaneously makes them vulnerable and make them sympathize with each other (Millar 2017). I find Butler's view intricately articulated with the idea of social inequality and affect. They assert that the same phenomenon is not felt in the same way by all the different population in the world. Precariousness and precarity are two different concepts in Butler's view. Precariousness is the vulnerability of people's lives, and precarity means the ways different institutions of the society distribute the conditions of life differently among different social groups (Millar 2017). If a comparison is done between political economy school and existential school, the later one can see more differences among cultures and contexts of people's live' as well as how precarity is conditioned by different factors in different societies. Judith Butler initially developed their discussion on precariousness and precarity to examine and explain the US policy and politics post 9/11, but very recently they also examined the COVID-19 pandemic in the light of precarity.

COVID-19, in their eyes, was not experienced similarly by all people in the world, and the structural inequalities too were different for different groups of people. They associated the concept of 'melancholy' and the 'grievability of somebody's loss of any sort' to explain the uncertainties of the pandemic (Butler 2022, page 90).

They write that although people faced the loss of lives or other losses due to the pandemic, not all of those losses are grievable. Some of the losses of lives or something else are 'grievable' in nature, and some are not considered as 'grievable'. This 'grievability' and 'ungrievability' is decided by the inequalities of society and the economy. People become the category victims of these structures. Some of them are 'left to die' or 'to fall in loss' while society saves the rest. Thus people turn into the victims of this 'necropolitics' of society. It is not that people are unaware of it. They know that some of their losses (can be the lives of their own, or their close ones, or some losses that cannot be put to words) are not grievable at all. Butler specifically used the term 'acknowledgment' to mean 'to show grief for somebody/something'. This realization of 'not being unacknowledged' makes people melancholic.

My original research questions concern the emotional affect of precarity due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. I find that Judith Butler's theory of precarity, melancholy, and the 'grievability/non-grievability of a loss' can shed light on the affective outcomes of the pandemic in people's lives. The findings from the field further suggest that the affective emotions that people felt and are still feeling are largely due to financial strains, but it is well-known that the pandemic's financial strain was different in nature than the overarching neoliberal one, and not all the physio-mental stresses, negative emotions and sense of loss were generated by the financial uncertainty. Butler's theory of precarity, nevertheless, cannot elucidate how people fought back or coped up with their situations. Thus I take refuge to 'practice theory' to some extent to get an understanding of people's fight for survival.

To elucidate on people's surviving strategy, I will take theoretical backup from anthropologist Sherry Ortner's Practice theory and the concept of agency (Ortner 2006). Ortner in her Practice theory discussed the nuanced and expanded forms that power has and is spread across the different organizations and actors in the society. Her theory of power came as a reaction to 1970s theories of power, where people were portrayed as the pawns of societal rules and regulations, such that are depicted by Symbolism,

Structuralism and Marxist schools. Ortner first depicted power as something that is not top-down or held and imposed only by the powerful social structure. Instead, in her narrative, power is something that works in multiple forms, in not only coercive forms but also in nuanced delicate forms, not only imposed by structures but also utilized by the seemingly weak subjects. This nuanced, complicated power play has been coined by her as the 'serious games' (Ortner 2006). To Ortner, social power structure has turned individuals as subjects to that power. Yet, these subjects are not as passive and docile as they had been seen earlier. They show their reactions towards the structural authority. Sometimes, they fight against the structure to change the consequences, singularly or in groups, and sometimes they do nothing and remain silent. But whether they struggle against the structure or not they decide to remain silent - it is a demonstration of their 'agency', and this agency is also a form of power that resides inside the subjects and is a reactionary power to the established structure. To me, this theory of Ortner is very much similar to James Scott's idea of 'resistance' (Scott 1987) and Michel Foucault's narrative of power, where he detailed how power is like a weave and is articulated in every single interaction and sphere of social life. Similarly, the picture of the social 'subject' that she draws matches with the one that is subjectified by the interpellation or the discursive language of the society as well as internalizes and demonstrates power as the social subjects- which is portrayed by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Practice theory has helped me to provide explanation of people's adaptive strategies to the COVID-19 situation.

Finally, my last research question was to learn how the community of interest itself interprets their experience and learnings from COVID-19 pandemic. To interpret my research finding in this matter, I got my theoretical support from Michel Foucault and Judith Butler's idea of psychic governmentality of power and the subjectivation of individuals in the society.

Overall, my theoretical framework is mostly inspired by Judith Butler's theory of precarity and pandemic, as well as theories of 'affect and emotion', Sherry Ortner's 'practice theory' and Judith Butler and Michel Foucault's idea of subjectivation and psychic power.

Chapter 3.

Sampling and Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the sampling techniques that I adopted for this study to recruit my research participants, as well as the research methodologies to conduct the fieldwork for this study.

3.2. Research methodology

My approach for the fieldwork of this research has been exclusively qualitative. Instead of surveys and seeking out answers from the participants through structured questionnaires, I opted for mostly listening to their narratives and getting an essence of their perspectives. The reason that I preferred qualitative study over quantitative is- that the research questions that led me to investigate the COVID conditions of the Dhakaiya middle-class are suited to the open-ended answers of the research participants, described and explained by the people who have embodied the experience. It is true that some answers could have been predicted, such as- their financial coping strategies for the lockdown. But non-financial and other struggles and adaptive strategies for them could not have been pre-decided and provided as possible options in a survey. For the other research questions, such as people's embodied affective emotional experience or the perception and experience of precarity due to COVID-19- listening to people's narratives and stories is the most appropriate method for investigation. Altogether these led me to opt for a multi-method qualitative study.

As research methods, I decided to apply semi-structured interviews, where I did not design any formal questionnaire for my conversations and meetings with the participants, yet had an overall guideline for the discussions. To obtain ethics approval for the study, I had to submit a sample questionnaire to the Research Ethics Board where there were questions that I was supposed to ask my participants. This sample questionnaire helped me as a discussion guideline, to remind me of the areas that I need to ask or influence the participants to discuss about their experience from that COVID

context and time frame. Along with the semi-structured interviews, observation was another research tool that I applied for the fieldwork. Observing the participants' choice of meeting, their homes, workplaces, and engaging in conversations in casual settings with their friends and close family members helped a great deal to cross-verify many of their stories and loosening up the researcher-researched tension of power.

3.3. Getting the ethics approval for human-oriented research

Since this study is a human-research, I had to obtain TCPS Core2 Certificate provided by the Research Ethics Board of SFU to conduct the fieldwork. I also had to provide the final drafts of all my recruitment advertisements, interview questionnaire, and consent forms both in English and Bengali languages along with my ethics approval application and research proposal to get the approval. The interviews and all other interactions were conducted in Bengali since the community of interest for this study are all Bengali speakers and at conducting the recruitment and interviews in Bengali would keep the process more informal and participants at ease.

Upon approval, it was advised by the Research Ethics Board that to ensure data security and to keep the research participants' identities hidden, I would use codenames in my report and in all presentations of the research findings (be it public presentations, knowledge mobilizing means and others). All real names, and identifying information were recorded and kept only in SFU Vault- a secured data storage cloud supported by SFU, and only the research team had access to this information. I was also given four months of time post-fieldwork to transcribe the recorded interviews since it was also mentioned in the consent forms shared with participants that the recorded interviews would be kept by the researcher for a period of four months. The fieldwork took me three months to complete, which I conducted from September-December 2022. After that, from January to April 2023, I transcribed all the recorded interviews for coding and analysis.

3.4. Recruiting the participants from the community of interest: Sampling

The community of interest in this study, the urban middle-class population in Dhaka city, is a massive one. Metropolitan Dhaka has a population of 10.2 million, among which,

a big proportion call themselves as middle-class. It was a primary challenge to determine an operational definition of middle-class for this study, as middle-class is a multi-meaning category and there can be multiple groups in a single geographical setting who call themselves as middle-class, who have different income ranges, different cultural and ideological backgrounds and different standards. For this, I had to carefully set up the operational definition of middle-class for this particular study in all the recruiting advertisements, which was: “We are looking for adult people from the urban middle-class category of Dhaka city, who have graduation or similar level of education from any institution, have been involved either in their own business or in a job where intellectual or skilled labor is a more vital requirement than manual labor, have at least operational knowledge in English and either faced loss in business, a layoff in a job or lost the then existing job during COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdown.” I was influenced to set this operational definition of the middle-class from Anouk de Koning’s study of the middle-class population in Cairo as well as Jose Mapril’s study of Bangladeshi middle-class in the context of their homeland, as well as in Portugal as migrants (Koning 2009; Mapril 2014). It made it easier to select and recruit the participants.

I generated the recruiting advertisement of the participants after getting approval from the Research Ethics Board. Mostly, I depended on social media for advertising the study. I posted the advertisement on my Facebook timeline, shared it with some of my friends who shared it on their timelines and in different professional Facebook groups where they have been members too, and posted the advertisement in different Facebook groups, where I have been a member. These included Facebook groups of different non-profit organizations, alumni groups of my university and neighborhoods, photography groups and the student groups of the university where I work as an academic. I also posted posters of the advertisement on notice boards of the university where I am employed and on study leave to reach more people. I shared the advertisement with my colleagues so that they could circulate it among their circles. After posting the advertisements, some participants contacted me by themselves over the phone and the email addresses given in the advertisements. Since I did not make any face sheet for the recruitment, neither was I permitted to meet them in person before the recruitment and consent form signing, I had to talk to them over the phone to make sure that they fit my criteria. In these cases, they provided me with their number and a convenient time to call and talk and I maintained their schedule to contact them.

Non-probability sampling methods are best to recruit participants from this kind of vast population (Reid, Greaves, and Kirby 2017; Ravitch and Carl 2020). I recruited some through these advertisements. A few participants were sought through snowball sampling, which is why a few of the participants were from the same previous organization (which means, they worked together in an organization previously, and then were fired from that organization, or the organization itself was bankrupt during the pandemic. Now they work in different organizations, but have contact with each other from their previous professional affiliation with the same organization). But it also made the sample too mono-professional and male-focused. I wanted to ensure that people from different sectors could be recruited for the study. That is why, even after matching all the criteria, I purposefully did not recruit some participants and chose other professionals from other sectors. Also, I had to carefully select female participants to ensure both male and female participation. Thus, snowball and purposive sampling methods were both applied in this study to recruit participants.

In this recruitment procedure, I could not include two groups of people- one, people from the community of interest who are over fifty years old (and generally, it takes people to reach more or less this age to have a good amount of money saved in their bank accounts, to be exact, to reach closer to their retirement age – which is approximately 59 years in the context of Bangladesh), and two, people from the community of interest, who are government service holders.

The first group was not included in this study mostly due to the limitation of time and reach of the recruitment advertisement. Following the conditions attributed by the Research Ethics Board, it had to be mutually agreed upon participation from the participants' end, who had to be fully aware of the scope of the investigation and the data sharing process. I could not personally reach any participant to persuade him or her to join the study. I proposed to the Research Ethic Board to put advertisements on social media, in different professional groups and in the academic institutes, of which, I am a member. People who belong to this age group (50 years old or over) – comprise a significant number of members in these professional groups and on social media platforms. I made sure that they become aware of the study and its procedures. But none of them willfully stepped forward to participate in the study. Since Dhakaiya urban middle-class always try to hide any kind of financial hardship to uplift their respect in the gaze of outsiders, and

these narratives of their COVID struggles are something which contradict their ideology - they did not want to discuss it with somebody like me, who is an outsider of their families.

Nevertheless, indirectly their situations were part of the analysis for this research. In four or five cases, the participants, while discussing their own experiences- also discussed about the narratives of their fathers, who also lost their employment or faced the loss of self-employment due to the lockdown. Since their fathers were not the direct participants of this study, I did not list them in the participant list. Despite making a request through their children, they were reluctant to meet and talk. This is the reason that the oldest participant in this study was 46 years old.

The other group of urban middle-class whose discussions have been omitted from this study are the segment of the community of interest, who are government service holders in different offices. There are multiple reasons behind that. Firstly, government officials generally have to obtain written permission from their higher officials or supervisors before participating in such talks or conversations, even if it is clearly mentioned that their names and identities will be kept secret. If a government officer participates in such a study without permission from the authority and later it comes to the authority's knowledge, they can be demanded with a show-cause which is considered bad for one's professional reputation, even worse, the employee can be suspended from his duty. Besides, talking to a researcher who is representative of a foreign research organization (Simon Fraser University in this case) creates ambiguities. Finally, popular opinion and my observation direct that government officials were the most financially secure group who went through the lockdown experience among the urban middle-class. When most private organizations stopped or limited the regular salaries of their employees due to the survival struggle amid a pandemic, government officials of all levels regularly received their normal pay-scale salary. Indeed, the lockdown and pandemic-generated sufferings are not limited to financial difficulties only, and a large portion of the government's official urban middle-class people went through serious health, family life, and other kinds of challenges. Despite that, due to official protocols and boundaries that are part and parcel of government jobs, government service holder urban middle-class were excluded from this study. If I could hear their accounts of COVID experience, it could have added some other aspects of the 'secure government service holder' middle-class' reality. Failure to incorporate them in this study, to some extent, limits the scope of this study.

I am presenting a list of the participants who took part in this study. To value their privacy, as well as to maintain the data security of the study, I will mention only their pseudonyms in this dissertation. All these participants took part in interview sessions with me, which took to the form of narratives and story-telling sessions from their end, where I was the listener. With most of them, these interview sessions were not a one-time session. Instead, I met with most of them multiple times to continue discussions. Only with one person, I conducted the interview over Zoom due to their circumstances. Otherwise, all the interviews were in-person. I recorded the interview sessions upon their consent in a digital recorder. Later I transcribed the recorded interviews after coming back from the field. In some cases, I took a few notes in the notebook during the interviews. But mostly I depended on the recordings. Each day, after each session, I came back home and wrote my observations and thoughts in the notebook, which the recordings could not capture. Here is the list of the participants who took part in this study.

Table 1. Names and demographic information of the participants in the study from the community of interest

Participant code	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Marital status
P001	Runy	Female	35	Non-governmental sector professional	Single
P002	Sumy	Female	31	Non-governmental sector professional	Married
P003	Mazumdar	Male	43	Corporate researcher	Married
P004	Sage	Female	42	Private sector administrator	Married
P005	Ashim	Male	27	Student	Single
P006	Tanvir	Male	46	Merchandizer in a buying house	Married
P007	Ashley	Male	33	Merchandizer in a liaison office	Married
P008	Joan	Female	38	Merchandizer in a buying house	Divorced
P009	Mehbub	Male	37	Private job holder in a fertilizer company	Single
P010	Xahin	Male	34	Banker	Single
P011	James	Male	29	Student and part-time job holder	Single
P012	Nisa	Female	33	School teacher	Married
P013	Jahir	Male	36	Textile engineer	Married
P014	Meraj	Male	36	Quality control officer in a textile buying house	Married
P015	Nayan	Male	44	Development sector professional	Married
P016	Lamia	Female	37	Human resource officer (now unemployed at will)	Married
P017	Shiraj	Male	35	Textile engineer	Married
P018	Sadia	Female	35	School teacher	Married
P019	Badsha	Male	35	Private service holder in a monetary organization	Married

3.5. Research tools applied for fieldwork

Qualitative tools those were applied to understand the reality and perspectives of the research participants in this study were observation and semi-structured interviews. In the paragraphs below, I discuss how these two techniques helped me during fieldwork for data collection and getting a perspective of the research participants as well as the community of interest.

3.5.1. Observation

Observation has been a vital research tool for this study. I met and interacted with the participants in the social settings that they decided and that made them feel most at ease for such discussions. It gave me a great deal of opportunity to observe the behavior and social surroundings of the participants. Some participants called me at their homes, some said that they would feel comfortable in a café or restaurant, some invited me in their offices. There have been two female participants who, even though I came to the venues of their choices, did not feel secure in my presence. Therefore, one of them had her friends in one case, and the other had her cousin sitting in a different table of the café and restaurant while talking to me. Dhaka has not lately been known as a safe city for women. These precautions taken by some female participants give a hint of the overall situation.

I felt fortunate when some of the participants invited me to their homes for interview sessions. It gave me extended chance to observe their living conditions, their neighborhoods, have chats with their family members, and observe other details, such as- what kind of food they offer to their guests, whether the story of miseries that they were describing matched their household gadgets and belongings or not and so forth. But in other cases too, there was potential scope for observation to understand the situation of the participants. Office environments, for example, ensured the much needed privacy for discussions for many participants, who considered that COVID-related memories difficult to discuss in the presence of their partners or other family members. There were emotional moments in the discussions that they did not want to reveal in front of their spouses and others.

Something that caught my attention was- the choice of the venues for interviews by the participants. In many cases, a common choice for the participants was different high-end cafes in the rich neighborhoods of Dhaka. One reason was close proximity to their homes or offices. But it was evident that they thought they would feel comfortable discussing their personal experiences of grief and not-so-wellbeing in such public spaces. It may indicate Dhaka's restaurant-based culture for all kinds of social gatherings, since there are not many options for quiet places for having a discussion in Dhaka. Even restaurants are crowded too. But somehow, high-end cafes have earned a reputation as open working space for many. I observed that even during working hours, there were many people of different age groups in these cafes, working on their laptops and having coffee. It also indicates the possible threats that the participants felt while meeting a stranger like me.

The recognition of the cafes as work spaces also indicates the good monetary situation of the middle and upper middle-class. To sit in these cafes, customers have to order at least a cup of coffee, and these cafes charge quite a lot of money in Bangladeshi standard for everything. Still people are coming to these hubs for work and coffee, which indicates their high affordability.

3.5.2. Semi-structured interviews

Before the field study, I submitted a draft list of questions to the Research Ethics Board of SFU to get ethics approval for this study. During the interactions and conversations with participants, I mostly stuck to the questions that I presented to the Research Ethics Board of SFU. In addition to that, I had to ask them questions about their backgrounds, to build up rapport and to follow up questions from previously asked questions. It helped me in two ways: firstly, to get the demographic information about my participants, and secondly, to dive into a deeper conversation about their pandemic and post-pandemic experiences. In addition to answering the interview questions, participants shared their other personal experiences of the pandemic, ranging from immediate family member's death to the harassment in family sphere due to over-sensitivity regarding cleanliness and hygiene. They also shared their funny and exceptional experiences that provided insights about their embodied experiences, which, came out as a part of conversation, instead of the direct answers to the interview-questions. Mostly I tried to engage my participants in meaningful conversations and wanted to find answers to my

questions from there, instead of asking the questions directly, which imposes inhibition on the participants sometimes.

3.6. Data analysis

For data analysis, I used the 'storyline coding' approach to draw patterns and themes aka codes in the observation field notes and transcriptions and found my criteria of analysis in this way. Initially, I tried to approach coding my transcriptions through inductive or deductive coding methods, but eventually found the storyline to be the best approach for this study, since arbitrary coding was making the research more scattered instead of focused, and the deductive method was giving me a feeling that as a researcher I am drawing something that I am intentionally trying to draw. Thus, I planned my chapters first and developed themes from my data to fit each chapter's goal and target (Tsang 2019; Taylor and Bogdan 1998; Birks and Mills 2015). To develop the chapter plan, I targeted that each findings chapter would answer each one of my research questions. Key findings and criteria of analysis were developed in this way. From there I developed a mind map of my plans and findings, which made the overall idea even more coherent for me.

I did the coding both manually, as well as using Nvivo.

3.7. Conclusion

The research questions that worked as the starting point of this fieldwork, also helped to shape the research methodology, choice of research tools and deciding the defining features of the community of interest for this study. The operational definition also helped both the participants and me as the researcher to check the criteria of the participants whether they match the

The preparation for fieldwork, acquiring ethics approval for the fieldwork of human research, immersion, recruitment, rapport-building, having meaningful in-depth conversation with research participants, data storage, data analysis and drawing conclusions from the data took a significant amount of time from the research timeline of this study. Yet, the whole experience was very meaningful in the sense that it helped me get data-driven answers to my original research questions and gave me insights as well as first-hand experience of my community of interest.

Chapter 4.

Experiences of losses due to COVID-19 pandemic: Grievability and non-grievability

4.1. Introduction

How did people experience the pandemic and the lockdown in 2020-2021 in Dhaka city? In which ways did they feel that their lives became miserable at that time? The field data shows that lockdown did not come with bitter experiences alone. A busy dad who barely used to be able to spend time with his little kid, got the chance to build up sweet memories together for the first time. The eldest sister cooked exotic meals for the family. Family members' bonding grew stronger by doing household chores altogether. People took part in prayers to seek help from their God. But lockdown also brought difficult times for a vast majority of people, among which, the community of interest of this study are included too. This chapter will be about urban middle-class people's experience of COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic situation in Dhaka city. It will elucidate the first research question of this project, which focuses on people's embodied experience of the pandemic. Following the theoretical framework, I will discuss my categories of analysis and explain them one by one based on the data from the fieldwork. This will bring out how people viewed their own precarious situation in the pandemic framework.

4.2. Background

In their post-9/11 scholarly work, Judith Butler has been focusing more on the existential vulnerability of human lives and the inevitability of this vulnerability. Although Butler had the US-Afghan war and the post-war situation in mind while defining human existential vulnerability, the pandemic has brought a new dimension to their framework of vulnerability. It re-introduced us to the idea of shared vulnerability and connectedness to each other. In their words,

“We won't be able to understand shared vulnerability and interdependency unless we concede that we pass the air we breathe to one another, that we share the surfaces of the world, and that we cannot touch one another without also being touched. We lose sight of that overlapping and reciprocity when, for instance, we forget that being infected and becoming

infectious are linked together. What happens to me happens to another, at least potentially.” (Butler 2022, page 11-12)

This demonstrates two things simultaneously: One, the world is not just something which humans act on, but rather humans act on the world, and at the same time, the world shapes human lives. Two, not only during the outbreak of war but also during an outbreak of such a pandemic, people’s lives are vulnerable, however much someone or some group take precautions to safeguard themselves. The dangers, the miseries- all are shared among people. Some experienced it to a greater extent, while some faced it in indirect ways. The urban middle class, who are considered the ‘comparatively secured class’ in the country, also went through a situation that was very unlikely for them at a regular time. Unlike the people who earn money as daily wages, such as rickshaw pullers, security guards, household caregivers, or those in other lower-income jobs, their income was not immediately at a halt. Yet previously the middle class had the financial capability to have a foreign tour with family members once a year, or have exotic dinners with spouses in lavish restaurants, and so on, which they lost the ability to carry on anymore during and after the pandemic. Instead, their day-to-day essential expenses became their burden during the COVID-19 era. In such a populous city like Dhaka, physical distancing, which was the main key to be safe from contagion, was a utopian idea. There are lower income neighborhoods and shanties, where one room is rented by a family of 12 members. In such families, all members do not even sleep at the same time at night. They have sleeping schedules set - some sleep in the day time, some sleep at night. When some members of the family are sleeping, others go for their respective jobs or work outside, so that they do not disturb the sleeping members and the room does not lose its capacity to accommodate people. When lockdown was announced, a few days these people stayed at home due to the fear of the unknown danger. But their living system does not support physical distancing and quarantining.

The middle-class did not go through this kind of extremities. Yet many of them had to lower their living standards to a great extent. From the people whom I talked to during the fieldwork, I came to learn about the different variations of pandemic and post-pandemic sufferings during in-depth interviews and chats. From there, I have developed two bigger criteria of analysis to understand and explain people’s experience of precarity in that time frame. Under these two bigger themes, there are many sub-themes, which I will discuss one by one.

The theoretical foundation that led me to this thematic analysis of people's precarity experience of lockdown is Judith Butler's proposed idea of 'grievability' of people's loss in today's world. Butler, while proposing this concept, had 9/11 and post-9/11 consequences in their mind, but they also brought back this idea of the 'grievability' of people's losses in the modern world to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and people's renewed realization about the cosmological order. In their words, like many other things, the pandemic suffering was not isolated. It was enmeshed with the existing social inequalities, which, to some extent, were intensified by the new normal conditions (Butler 2022). Loss of employment and financial insecurities were already there. But we cannot only blame neoliberal conditions for people's financial hurdles during the pandemic, which was different in nature and cause. The unequal distribution of opportunities, facilities, and wealth creates differences between people. Depending on this, it is decided whether somebody's loss of life or other things are 'grievable' or not. 'Grievability' refers to the acknowledgment of a loss by the greater society and reflects the distribution of power within it. According to Butler, all people's lives are not equally 'grievable', and neither are all losses 'grievable'. Society acknowledges some losses as supreme and mourns for them, while some losses are not even acknowledged (Butler 2022, page 93). This acknowledgment of the grievability and the non-grievability of somebody's loss is decided by different factors. The world is such a place that does not provide equal opportunities and privileges to all groups of people. Even while living in the same society, people face discrimination, misjudgment, aggression, and maltreatment based on their belongingness to particular ethnic, racial, religious, national and economic groups. These discriminations and inequalities are part of the structure of the sovereign, which, sometimes are visible to bare eyes, sometimes are more nuanced. It is these structural inequalities that acknowledge some people's loss, while not acknowledging others'.

When I analyzed the field data, I found that Butler's concept of 'grievability' explains the emerging themes. I found that people's narratives regarding their experience of precariousness and losses can be divided into two bigger categories: 1) Grievable losses, 2) Non-grievable losses. The difference between these two categories is drawn by the 'scalability' of the loss or suffering. In simple words, losses or negative experiences that can be measured or scaled in numbers are 'grievable losses' for people. On the other hand, losses that cannot be expressed or measured in numbers are non-scalable or 'non-grievable' losses for them. The scalable losses are acknowledged by the sufferer's peer

groups, officials, news media and the government. The non-scalable losses are mostly acknowledged by the sufferers and their immediate family members. In most cases, non-scalable losses are not considered as discussable topics in a social settings. Non-grievable losses are also mostly the affective experiences of the participants due to different direct or indirect effects of the pandemic.

4.3. Grievable losses

Grievable losses of the urban middle-class in Dhaka city during the pandemic and post-pandemic period are those which are most importantly highlighted as the miseries of people in mass and social media, as well as in government calculations. People acknowledge them as vital losses. Some of them are temporary, such as a job loss or layoffs² for a particular period of time, some are permanent, such as the loss of a parent, or having a difficult experience availing life support or proper treatment during lockdown. Whatever the nature is, the expression through numeric figures is a vital characteristic of grievable losses during the pandemic. Although one of the most acknowledged losses due to pandemic has been the death of people, the accurate number of daily deaths from COVID-infection has been always a matter of ambiguity throughout the lockdown. It was due to the discrepancy between the governmental and private healthcare sector's calculations. Not all the deaths from COVID-infection were acknowledged. Reasons were: lack of facilities to test the contagion, social superstitions around COVID infection, and death as well as the fear of being secluded from the society; the willful attempt of the government to keep the numbers low and to keep people's fear at bay; and, the need to keep necessary organizations and offices open for functions.) I am going to discuss the categories of analysis with narratives and cases from participants' experiences below.

4.3.1. Loss of employment

Losing employment from the beginning to the post-pandemic situation was the most common outcome of the pandemic for the urban middle-class, which is especially

² Refraining from giving the full amount of salary to the employees for a particular period of time and instead, cutting 40% or more from the actual sum. It happened in so many incidents in different private sector organizations on and off during the lockdown. Mostly, the employees reluctantly supported this system, since it was considered better than losing job in the midst of the pandemic.

true for private-sector job holders. All the participants in this study shared their experiences that they were fired by their employees or someone from their families and friends went through the same experience. In all these cases, the firing process was rapid and without any prior notice. Although all of them said that according to their job agreements they were supposed to be given at least a two months' notice before such termination of employment. Along with that, they were supposed to receive their provident fund and gratuity³ amassed in their official accounts from the employers. In almost all cases the companies either didn't pay that half employee provided- half employer provided fund to their owners, or, they paid, but after long struggle.

In some cases, the employees were not even talked to through a higher official to inform them personally about no longer requiring their services. Jahir (pseudonym), age 35 and a textile engineer by profession, is one of the participants in this study. Through him, I talked to two of his former colleagues from the same company. They all were working as merchandizers and textile engineers for a renowned UK-based clothing brand's Bangladeshi liaison office. The pandemic hit the UK before Bangladesh, and the Bangladeshi government declared the lockdown by late March 2020. When Jahir and his other Bangladeshi colleagues were staying in their respective houses as the lockdown had just begun one week ago, they all got one common email in their official email addresses that their Bangladeshi liaison office was closed down for an unprecedented amount of time. Their services were no longer required. Hopefully they will understand the situation, as the company has faced a huge loss from the pandemic. Jahir told in his narrative,

“Even in lockdown we couldn't resist to go to our office to investigate the situation in person. It was difficult to commute. I have a car, but many of my colleagues walked from their houses avoiding the eyes of the military and police who were guarding the roads so that nobody can come out there and spread infection. When we all met in front of the office building wearing gloves and maintaining as much distance we could maintain as possible, we met the owner of the office floor. Learned that the office didn't pay him

³ “Provident Fund” means a fund in which subscriptions or deposits of any class or classes of employees are received and held on their individual accounts, and includes any contribution and any interest or increment accruing on such subscriptions, deposits or contributions under the rules of the Fund. There is an act in Bangladesh that is called The Provident Funds Act 1925. It extends to the whole Bangladesh, irrespective of Government and other jobs (“The Provident Funds Act, 1925,” n.d.)

the rent for the office floor for last two months. He sealed the office floors. We couldn't even collect our belongings from the office and had to leave.”

In another case, Ashley (pseudonym) used to work for two and half years in a different RMG⁴ liaison office as a very promising officer. When he and his entire team were fired from the office, he as the team leader initially proposed a new way to limit the budget and to reduce the losses of the office. However, the higher officials in their Srilankan office were eager to cut the employees from the job. Ashley and his other teammates were given very little compared to what they were supposed to get from the office before leaving. Among all, Ashley was the only one who filed a complaint against the office's work ethics and procedure to the Ministry of Labour and Employment in Bangladesh. Four months later, he was the only one to receive full payment from his former office. His other colleagues were afraid to file complaints and stopped the matter there with whatever amount they were paid. Their point was that - the authorities of the organization have connections with powerful people in the bureaucracy, as well as they have money. Besides, even if they pay them the money, but spread rumors about them in the market that these employees took legal action against the organization, there may be good chance that nobody will want to hire them again in future.

Sumy (pseudonym) was another participant who had slightly different experience. She was already an expecting mother before COVID-19 and gave birth to her daughter in the middle of the first wave of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. She secured herself a full-time contract remote job through a renowned INGO for a development project before lockdown, when she was at the end of her second trimester. But in the face of the COVID outbreak, the project was not launched. Being the main breadwinner of her family and being an expecting mother, her time was very stressful due to this job loss.

4.3.2. Loss of income

Partially cutting the salary off the employees' monthly income for an amount of time was a common practice in the private sector during the COVID-19 outbreak. Many

⁴ Ready-made garments, which is the number one export item in Bangladesh's economy and the source of earning the lion share of it's foreign currency. According to the Embassy of the People's Republic of Bangladesh's website in Kathmundu, Nepal, in the fiscal year 2021-22, the export value of Bangladeshi ready-made garments (RMG) sector reached an estimated \$31.46 billion or 3,33,639 crore Bangladeshi Taka (“Major Export Products of Bangladesh,” n.d.)

offices considered it to be a more humane way of treating employees during the stressful period, as well as to minimize the loss of their businesses. Even in many cases in official Zoom meetings, the employees themselves proposed to the management that instead of cutting a few employees off from their employment, it is better that they all willingly receive a lesser amount of monthly salaries for six to twelve months so that nobody faces a very harsh situation. Out of the 20 participants, eight had this experience where their offices paid them 30-50% less salary than their pre-COVID pay. In only three offices, seven months to one and a half years later the payment went back to the former scale. The other five offices still paid them the same lower salary that they started to pay during the lockdown. When their employees asked them about such low payment, most of them faced threats of termination from their authority, or the authorities made excuses about their loss in business. Sadia (pseudonym), age 35, a school teacher in a renowned Bengali-medium school in Dhaka shared her experiences,

“When the school governing board held a zoom meeting for us regarding taking classes online and running activities so that the school can demand monthly fees from the guardians of the students, they also declared to us that they will pay only the basic salary to all teachers from that time until further notice. But they at least promised to return to our regular payments when there will be a good time. We, the teachers were not happy with this decision. But what choice did we have! Survival was the target for all of us. I teach Bengali literature and linguistics. Given my discipline, I do not have any additional income source like Maths or English language teachers. I used to get 38k per month as my salary. After this new rule, I began to receive only 18k per month. Not all teachers are paid similarly, since there is not fixed pay scale. Everyone was offered different payments during their interviews and recruitment. Of course seniors get more money than juniors. I heard from my colleagues from Maths, Physics and English classes that they continued their batch by batch private tuitions online. Guardians are so competitive and conscious of their children’s education. So they pay for online batch tuitions as well. But I had to run my pocket money, savings as well as my parents’ household expenses with this 18K amount, which became so tough all of a sudden. After one year, we asked the school management board that when they are planning to return to our normal payment, and also requested them to do it at their earliest convenience. But they said that they cannot do it, since the school fund has barely any money left. They are bloody liars! We know, everybody knows that Meghalaya school (pseudonym) fund has an abundance of money. Already they are building a third building in the main campus to admit more students next year. The school board was showing excuse that the construction and maintenance of that new building cost a lot of money. But we know where all the money goes! To the managing board members’ own pockets!”

In addition to that, the employees who began to receive their original salary after a few months, or, even after some time, managed to land a new job where they were offered the same amount of money as their old offices were not happy either. COVID caused a huge price hike in everything. Maintaining the same standard of living was not possible given the same salary. Ashley, who after 9 months of unemployment, finally was able to take a new job in the same industry and with the same pay scale, exclaimed,

“Two years ago when I used to get paid the same 170k amount of salary per month, I used to think that I was a higher middle-class person. My concerns back then were going to the newly opened exotic restaurant as early as possible with my spouse and baby, or staying in a 5-star hotel during my family trips in Cox’s Bazar. Now, with the same amount of money in hand, I have different concerns. Concerns, which are way more basic in nature: buying diapers for my baby, or managing to build up my savings which I squeezed to the fullest during my dark time of unemployment. Luxury evaporated. I am no longer a higher middle-class. I am simply a middle-class now. When will I be able to go back to my former position- I have no clue.”

Along with the price hike, inflation also hit hard during these two years. Therefore, going back to their previous income did not help much the urban middle-class. Yet, people who had no other option but to provide service at a lower salary considered those who got back to their previous salary as more fortunate for good reasons.

4.3.3. Death of family members

The death of a dear family member is always something difficult to bear. During the pandemic, it was even scarier and more melancholic, due to two factors: firstly, even though the deceased family member was a chronic patient of some other disease, due to the extreme load of patients in hospitals and due to the contamination of ICU, CCU, life support and other medical units they were not provided with proper attention, care, and guidelines. Secondly, a lack of proper solemnization of funerals, Namaz-e-Janaza, and other rituals to pay final respects to the deceased people.

Chronic patients, such as- patients who needs to take dialysis on a regular basis, heart patients or patients of chemotherapy are the groups of people who were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. When normal people were being infected and were seeking health care from medical centers for asphyxia and shortness of breath, the medical centers initially provided them with as much support as possible for them.

Gradually newer information was being discovered and revealed about COVID-19 contamination by the WHO. N-95 masks were a mandatory prerequisite to visit the patients, but a piece of N-95 has a particular time of durability and to provide the maximum coverage. There was shortness in supply, along with a lack of cautiousness that caused a huge number of doctors' deaths during that period. People came to learn that after the installation of a life support machine to a COVID-19 patient's system, the machine too became the carrier of COVID-19 virus, which can easily contaminate the next patient. Chronic patients generally have weaker immune systems that made them the most vulnerable group of patients to COVID-19. Lamia (pseudonym), a former HR officer in an organization and now a homemaker, who lost her mother in September 2020 explained her situation like this,

“My mother was already a cancer patient when the pandemic hit our land. My father and my unmarried sister were with my mom all the time for her care. Yet, day after day taking care of a seriously ill patient is very tiring and exhausting for the caregivers. Besides, it was me who was the mommy's pet throughout my life. Even after marriage, I took it as a responsibility to take care of my mom and to give all kinds of support that is possible. During COVID, it was not easy. The office was closed, but we had to attend meetings every single day. After two months, roster duty at the office began, so I had to go to the office twice a week. Luckily, my parent's house is not very far from my in-laws' house, where I live together with my husband. Still it was challenging. I am taking my mom to the hospital for her chemo and medical checkups. After fetching her from hospital to her home, I returned to my husband's. Everything was planned accordingly- I will come back from the hospital, will in no way touch anything in the house or anybody in the house, will leave all my clothes, and will take a thorough shower in the guest room's bathroom. Only after that, I will meet my family members. Still, my mother-in-law had problems to let me go to the hospital for my mom's treatment. Eventually, my mom died- not from cancer or chemo, but from the inattentiveness of the doctors. There was always a shortage of doctors at that time, and when my mom had a shortness of breath, the service providers delayed providing oxygen.”

Lamia's mother was already a cancer patient. Due to that, the hospital authority did not order an autopsy. Besides, the family was not interested in running any incisions or cutting on the dead body.

Another participant Ashim's (pseudonym) mother died too during May, 2020. His mother was a secondary school teacher in Dhaka. She had cold and cough. Since testing for COVID-19 infection is a painful process of entering an ear bud into the nostrils, many people were afraid of it and wanted to avoid the testing procedure by all means. In addition

to that, testing for COVID-19 with a PCR test from a government organization required standing in long queues for hours in close proximity to many other COVID patients. Ashim's mother did not test herself for COVID-19. On the seventh day of her cough and fever, she died. In Ashim's words,

“My mother was a very popular and senior teacher. She served as a teacher in the same educational institution for the last 28 years. We have lived in this neighborhood since I was born, and there are countless former and current students of my mother who live in this area. Those who do not live here, even they are connected to each other through social media. Yet, when my mom died, it became difficult for me and my father to arrange a funeral and Namaz-e-Janaza⁵ for my mother. Even worse, we couldn't find any female relative who would give my mother a final bath. Finally, some unknown women came forward for a large amount of money. Not a single colleague of hers came to see her for one last time. Relatives called a few times but later stopped calling in fear that we might call them to come and help us. I understand the situation, I understand everything. But nobody knows whether my mother actually died of COVID, or just some random cold. I know that people were scared at that time. But as her child, it felt to be very disrespectful from their end.”

What Ashim felt and continues to feel from time to time is an affective experience of COVID-19 caused by his mom's death. Following Butler's theory, it is both mourning and melancholia at the same time. In their words, when somebody's love or attachment for somebody else is not acknowledged properly, and the beloved person dies, the person whose emotions have remained unacknowledged falls into melancholia (Butler 2022). In this case, Ashim's feelings about this death and post-death treatment of his mother are experienced as such as his mother was not treated like a normal and respectable person after her death due to the fear that she might have died of COVID-1. Ashim feels that as the only son, he failed to fulfill his duties towards his mother and did not pay proper respect to her. His love for his mother has remained unacknowledged - by his deceased mother, by the society, by all. He understands the reasons, and is well aware of the fact that gathering could have caused other healthy people to be sick - yet, he feels sadness due to this incident. He accepts his mother's untimely death, since there was nothing to be done from his end. That is why he mourns for his mother. But the proper funeral that she was supposed to get at her death as a respected teacher in the community school - she

⁵ The funeral prayer performed by Muslims for a dead Muslim person before putting the body in the grave. It is considered as 'Fard-e-kifayaa', which means, even if some people from the community (not everyone) perform this prayer, everybody's responsibility to the dead person will be fulfilled by that.

did not receive it. It is so difficult to accept for him as the son of the deceased, and a part of him still denies that it actually happened in reality. It makes him melancholic. Yet I feel that this melancholic experience should be included in the grievable experience category- that it is scalable at the same time. Loss of people's lives was being considered not as events, but as rising numbers during the pandemic era. IEDCR (Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control & Research) telecast the number of new patients and deaths daily on the Bangladesh National Television (BTV) to the nation. People used to sit and wait for this announcement and check the updates of new patients every day, whereas the National TV channel is generally avoided and distrusted for not reporting real data.

4.3.4. Hospitalization & the experience of being COVID-19 positive

Despite avoiding death, getting COVID-19 at different times was a common experience for all participants, their family members as well as the bigger community. Initially what were considered innocent colds, sore throats, coughs, and seasonal fever - ultimately left many with near-death experiences. When it was revealed that there was an outbreak of a new virus and there was very little that the medical care providers could do - the frenzy spread among people very soon through mass and social media. Along with that, the severity of disease symptoms was different from person to person, and even the same person suffered differently at different periods of being COVID-19-positive.

Many participants, while describing their COVID stories, mentioned that they assumed that they had COVID-positive periods during pandemic and post-pandemic times. Going to a government-owned medical center for a PCR test and waiting hours after hours in a crowd during lockdown was such a hurdle and was a potential ground to be COVID-positive if one already is not, and calling sample collectors from a private organization cost a lot of money- many of them did not bother to take a test and to make sure the cause of the symptoms. Since COVID has no treatment or medicine except vaccines, they stayed at home. Given the setting in most of the houses, even isolating oneself in a separate room for 7-10 days was impossible. For mothers with small children, it was even more difficult, since nobody in the family could take the place of the primary caregiver. Therefore in many cases, possible COVID patients didn't even separate themselves for quarantine and continued to live with the rest of the family. They wore cloth or disposable masks and stopped going outside. In some cases, they bought Oxymeters

online to check the saturation of oxygen in their bodies, so that if the saturation went down too much, the family members could call an ambulance to take them to the hospital.

Joan (pseudonym), age 37, is a merchandiser in a buying house who lives with her mother, younger sister, and younger brother in a rented house. Joan has fatty liver problems, as well as some other female reproductive health problems, due to which, she avoids all kinds of fatty food that can cause her potential harm. She thinks that she was affected by the COVID-19 virus three times throughout 2020-2021- twice in 2020, and once in 2021. In none of these cases did she ever test herself through professionals to get a confident decision that she was actually COVID-positive. The last time, she took an antigen test at home and found herself COVID-positive. In all three cases, she lost her olfactory senses, and taste senses and had a cough and fever. But the last time was the worst of all when she had a very bad body ache and felt very weak, even after three doses of vaccines. She also thinks that she has lost her short-term memory to some extent after the third attack of COVID and feels weak all the time from the virus attack.

Sumy (pseudonym), on the other hand, was pregnant during the first wave and the first lockdown. Due to her hormones, unemployment, and stress from the unknown danger, she had a nervous breakdown during her pregnancy, which continued long after childbirth as well. She does not blame the pandemic exclusively for that, however. She has a previous history of miscarriage, which, in her eyes, made her extremely protective of her baby. She and her husband did not let anyone enter or leave the house throughout the first five months. But five months later her husband had to go to his ancestral village home for the celebration of Eid, while Sumy stayed at their home in Dhaka with the baby. Her husband, eventually, became COVID-positive and had to stay in his village home for the next month, which made Sumy and her mom who co-resided with them in the same house very tense. Sumy herself turned out to be COVID-positive when her daughter was seven months old. Precautions could not save her at last. She panicked a lot during that time since she raised her baby as an exclusively breast-fed one, and she was the primary caregiver of the baby.

Even without deaths and extremely bad situations, people had miserable experiences due to the lockdown and the virus, and in this segment I have considered only the physiological sufferings due to COVID-19. In the next section, I will discuss non-

grievable losses that people have been through during the COVID-19 lockdown- those experiences that had more affective sides and are more non-scalable in nature.

4.4. Non-grievable losses

4.4.1. Loss of good working environment

Most participants, who were able to retain their jobs during the pandemic, had a common complaint- loss of a good working environment. When I asked them whether their previous working environment was an ideal one, most of them denied it. Three of them said that their office had a standard working environment before the pandemic, when I asked them about what the reasons are that made the office environment so perfect for them, all of them mentioned their positive relationship with their colleagues. Loss of a good working environment often meant missing the good social environment in their respective offices. They missed the social ambiance and the physically present teamwork that they used to do in their offices.

What stands as the loss of a good working environment for them? There are many. Nisa (pseudonym), age 34, an elementary school teacher in a renowned English-medium school in Dhaka shared her experience like this,

“In my home, I never had a formal office room. I never needed one. I never even had a PC! I always used to do my jobs at the computer lab of my school. When the lockdown hit and after one month we were shifted to the online mode, it was a hell of a new challenge for me, and especially for my elderly colleagues. Many of them had their laptops, but learning to take classes online was a new challenge that they faced in their professional career. IT experts gave us just four hours of training on how to use Zoom and Jamboard for classes. That was a good start for me, but not for many of my other colleagues, since they didn’t even know how to use video-calling. Gradually I learned so many new things and became a pro in using Zoom, but it was due to my initiative of learning from YouTube and the internet.

I had other challenges too. First of all, I did not have a PC, and taking classes over a smartphone is very challenging. Our salary was already cut at that point, so my income became less than before. Yet, with my saved money, I bought my maternal uncle’s second-hand laptop. It did not have a webcam. It was mandatory for all teachers and students to keep their webcams on all the time. Since I did not have a webcam in my camera and buying a new webcam was another expense, I took a different path. I used to log in with two devices- the laptop and my smartphone. Students could

see me through the smartphone's camera, while they could listen to me and see the slides through the laptop.

Secondly, my daughter is usually taken care of by my own mother, who does not live far from this house. Before school, I usually take her to my mother's house and she stays there for the whole day. My mother-in-law takes care of her daughter's children, so three children would be too much for her to handle. Since my baby was born, the whole situation was like this. But during the lockdown, when sometimes due to the roadblocks I couldn't fetch her there, it created a lot more pressure for me to take the classes from home. I used to sit in my bedroom by locking the door. My daughter will always knock at the door while I am taking classes. If I let her come, she will come in front of the camera and begin chatting with my students. I cannot let that happen, since that breaks the focus of the class. If I forcefully take her outside and lock the door again, she will begin calling me from the patio and will break my concentration. My mother-in-law tried to divert her attention, but she was so adamant! This is not a standard classroom environment in any measurement!

Thirdly, children ask us to go to the bathroom and thus to turn off the webcam. I permit them. Then they go away by turning off the webcam, and do not come back at all! Some of them open another tab and watch YouTube or play video games. I and my other colleagues had to check those situations as well. It was a goddamn battle to survive. We all were fighting, since the school authority was looking for the slightest chance to cut the employees from the pay scale. In the meantime, the assistant teachers who were temporary and worked the hardest among us, lost their jobs at the very beginning of the lockdown. Remember, the school is very rich and has enough budget. Yet they left them in hot water during that difficult time."

For Nisa, it was a struggle for survival. But she feels that the school authority left them very under-prepared for this battle, whereas the slightest mistake or even worse, committing no mistake too could make them sacrifice their earnings. Being so unequipped and under-prepared were the main reasons Nisa felt the loss of a good working environment.

Mehbub (pseudonym) age 34, who is a marketing professional in a fertilizer and pesticide-producing company, used to work in the digital marketing team for a renowned private airline in Bangladesh during the pandemic. It was a very lucrative job when he joined the team since the airline offered him almost double the salary that his former office used to give him. He joined there in November 2019. Since April 2020, when even the first month of the declared pandemic was not over, the airline authority pressured them to be in the office regularly and also threatened them that if they did not do so, the payment of their salaries would be halted. Mehbub had a motorbike that he used as a private transport.

Commuting remained a great problem for him, since there was law enforcement patrolling all main roads to reduce public crowding. Yet he used side roads and other means to commute to the office. He could only imagine how his other former colleagues in that office used to commute in that situation. In his opinion, it was a meaningless summoning. He and his team were in digital marketing, the task of which could be done online and through meetings on Zoom. Yet, the airline authority's attitude was that- if you are not present physically, then you are being deceitful to your duty. Many of his colleagues thought and talked about complaining anonymously to the police about the company for not obeying the national rules. But at the end of the day, nobody dared to do so. When it was three months the company did not pay them their salary, and Mehbub tried hard to return to his previous employers. They paid less than the airline, yet it was regular. Finally, during the end of 2020, the airline was shut down for good. For Mehbub, even these days if someone asks for career advice, he recommends that nobody should change an employer just to get a higher salary, rather they should look for stability and other facilities offered along with the salary. He considers himself a victim of cruel treatment during the pandemic by his former employers.

For Xahin (age 31), a cash officer in a private bank, the problem was posed differently. Xahin's bank cut all employees' salaries by 30% from May 2020 to December 2020. It was not a big problem for him, since he was relieved that at least his job had been saved. The problem was that- like hospital workers and police, bankers too were the front-line fighters during the pandemic in Bangladesh. Whereas all other government and private employees could work from home and retain their paycheques, the banking system in Bangladesh has not yet been set up so that everything can be operated online and from home. Therefore bankers had to continue going to the office. Xahin could stay at home during lockdown only for one week. Therefore, he and his other co-workers had been going to the office since March 2020, the first wave of the pandemic. There was no gap, no extra payment for the health hazards, no travel expenses during the lockdown when the public transportation was off, and on top of that- the layoff. Nevertheless, the biggest threat Xahin felt from his working environment during the pandemic was- the irresponsible behavior from his customers. Since he is a cash officer, most of the people who come to the bank to deposit or take money, had to stand in a queue in front of him. He used to wear one-time use masks, which are not as powerful as N-95 masks that were used by the health professionals. There is a glass wall between him and his customers, which has

a two-inch gap from the counter and the above part is open. Although there were marked spaces in the queue where people were supposed to stand 6 feet apart from each other and were also supposed to wear masks, most people, due to noise in the office area, used to open the masks when they came to the counter to communicate with him. He requested them to put them back on, but only some used to listen to his request, and some used to ignore it. By the time they used to put their masks on, microdroplets from their spit were already in the air. Also, since the bank was air-conditioned and outside was hot and sunny, people did not want to obey the six-foot space rule and used to enter the bank in a bunch, making the bank a crowded place. All of these made Xahin a person at high risk of COVID-19 and in fact, he suffered four times from COVID-19 in the years 2020-2021. Three doses of vaccines did not help him much.

Apart from that, there were other problems that he faced while doing his professional work during the pandemic. In pre-pandemic times, he and his other colleagues used to go to the lounge to have their lunches. During COVID-19, however, the authority closed the lounge for general usage. Therefore, he and others had to have their lunches at their desks during their different break times. It was difficult since privacy was not possible at the front desk and it looked very unprofessional in his opinion. They had to eat in front of the customers, in an unhealthy environment. Since the lounge was closed, the options of using cutlery and microwave were off too. Xahin used to take lunch from the house, which generally included rice, curry, and other stuff. Since the closure of the lounge, he stopped taking such food, which was generally his preferred lunch, as well as the general lunch menu for most Bengali people. There were some restaurants near his office, which were closed due to the lockdown. He had to unwillingly shift to dry food, such as biscuits, dry fruits, and bananas for lunch which are quick to eat and not messy at all. It was a difficult adjustment for him since he always had rice and curry for lunch and dinner. As a result, he always felt hungry and agitated at that time.

Lamia (pseudonym), age 37, an HR professional in an RMG (Ready-made garments) Liaison office had a different problem while performing professional duties in her job. Lamia's office had three different RMG factories in the outskirts of Dhaka city. All of the employees from the lowest to the highest were recruited by the HR department in the head office of Dhaka, of which team, Lamia had been a member. When the lockdown started, the management board of the liaison office called a meeting with the HR team to discuss possible ways to cut expenses. Lamia and her team proposed a plan of layoff for

all the higher-level team members in the organization, avoiding the lower officials and workers in the hierarchy for a particular period. They had strong logic to propose such a plan. Since higher officials get a higher salary, maintaining them is more expensive for the organization. Meanwhile, workers get paid less than them. Therefore, if they plan to layoff higher officials, then the costs will be minimized, and workers will save their jobs. The management did not agree with them. Within one week, they began to dismiss many workers from their jobs. These workers were generally interviewed and recruited on the factory premises. They did not know much about the head office in Dhaka, where the HR team sits. Yet, after getting fired, many of them managed to call the HR office. They cried, they begged the company to have mercy on them and to let them retain their work so that they could survive. Many of them even mentioned that they did not need the salary and asked – just to let them retain their positions. Since these decisions were made not by the HR, but by the management- all these requests were not listened to. Gradually these requests and crying turned into threats, slang, and curses - not to the management of the company, but to the HR team. Since the workers could not see the management and HR were the most immediate team responsible for their suffering - they attacked the HR team with all these verbal weapons. Many of the HR members were even threatened over the phone that they would be attacked, murdered, and raped outside of their office. Lamia began to fear that these threats would have a very dangerous effect on them and their families. Her mother was a cancer patient at that time, which made her even more sad and vulnerable. After her mother died of cancer and breathing difficulties, she couldn't help but leave the job. She adjusted her expenses by other means, but could not afford to work there anymore in fear of harm to herself and her family.

In these narratives of different people who feel that their working environment deteriorated drastically during the pandemic, they defined the deterioration in different ways, shaped by their own experiences. Above all, these incidents had financial impacts, yet the participants mostly highlighted their affective sides. Any social experience is confronted and reacted by different actors differently. Sarah Ahmed (2004) thus explained emotions as mediums to respond to cultural products - the way an individual responds to a common cultural phenomenon, object, or happening. Since different people react differently to different things, their affective impacts are different. For Nisa, the online teaching experience was overwhelming, since she was not prepared at all for this, nor did she have any previous exposure to it. Her main focus was to save her job, no matter what.

For Mehbub, the forced commuting was a big red alert. But the salary pause was the breaking point when he couldn't help but look for other options. For Xahin, it was not the salary, rather the health hazard that played the big part in feeling the loss of a standard working environment. Finally, for Lamia, her job pressure and worries about her cancer patient mother were already enough. But the curses and threats were what made her take the final decision, since her job is to provide guidance for recruitment and giving directions for a better business, not to work as the customer care manager of the company and to listen to complaints of the employees. All these experiences made the participants feel the loss and the vulnerability of the situation, where they were losing something that is important to them - job, prestige, health or money.

4.4.2. Loss of relative job security

In the neoliberal era, job security in the private sector job is already a matter that is being diminished day by day. In the Bangladeshi context, high-paid private jobs were gradually emerging as an alternative to government sector jobs. The job scarcity caused by the pandemic is different in nature from the work precarity created by the neoliberal economy, where the subject has to monitor his performance all the time, and if he fails to fulfill the goals, then it is nobody's fault but his own, yet the pandemic worked as a reminder for the urban middle-class in Dhaka that however good the money they are making, the source can dry up for them.

Mazumdar (age 42), is a statistician and a quantitative researcher who used to work in a famous multinational market research organization in Dhaka. After graduating from his university, he worked for a few years for the Population Council, Bangladesh, and later joined his now-former company as a quantitative researcher. Throughout the last thirteen years, he worked rigorously to achieve and retain his fame for being hardworking, having incredible time management capability, and project management experience. His ACR⁶s were always good. His bosses and colleagues always approved of him as a passionately hard-working and non-political officer and his own team quite liked his leadership. Yet, when his office began to terminate employees one by one for different

⁶ The Annual Confidential Report of an official, which is generally prepared by the immediate superior personnel. The official's yearly performance, behavior, conduct, capabilities are assessed and described here impartially. Depending on the ACR, it is generally decided by the higher authority whether that official deserves a promotion, increment or not.

reasons, he was one of those unfortunate employees whose service was no longer required. Mazumdar was the team leader. He was selected “Employee of the Year” three times in recent years and had vast knowledge about his industry. Yet his job was not secured by this. The hard realization that hit him after his dismissal was,

“I am a workaholic in nature. In Bangladesh, there is no concept of overtime payment, or a standard working hour, not at least in my last organization. So many days I worked in the office way past midnight. I did not spend much time with my family for professional work. I used to think that my office was like my family. Now I realize, nobody is irreplaceable in an office. I also realize, that when there is such a distress period, nobody is your own, except your family. Family always remains by your side.”

Mazumdar’s realization shows how the optimistic attachments he had throughout his professional life and work sphere (that he is well-valued and appreciated at his workplace because he prioritizes his organization and his work over his family) crashed once the hard reality hit. He had the optimistic dream that hard work and dedication would help him to retain his job, as well as bring him success and a higher position in the hierarchy. The optimistic attachment to this dream turned cruel (Berlant 2011) once the lockdown and the budget-shortening appeared and he came to the realization that nobody’s work is secured, no matter how hard they dedicate themselves to it.

Like Mazumdar, Ashley has a somewhat similar realization. Working for an India-based Liaison office nowadays, Ashley’s reminiscence of his previous workplace,

“I was the most promising employee in my previous office. My fame was at this level that when I used to work and we had a meeting at the same time, our boss used to tell others not to disturb me since I was working. They knew that I was capable of bringing big profits to the organization. When they said that they were going to dismiss me and my whole team, it was a bolt out of the blue. I realize now, nobody is essential. However good you perform, nothing can secure your work.”

Nisa, a schoolteacher in a famous English-medium school in Dhaka, shared her experience and her point of view towards job security like this,

“Usually, as a teacher, I always have a voice of authority over my students. In Bangladesh, it is customary that teachers will be respected no matter what. During the lockdown, I first realized that actually, I am just a salaried employee, nothing more than that. The respect for the teaching profession is absolutely utopian. Let me tell you, how I realized it... During the lockdown, we used to take online classes. Let me tell you one thing- in person, taking control of a class is way easier than having that control in

an online class. Do you know why? In an actual class, you will deal with only your students, but in an online class, you have to deal with their parents too. These parents, sit in front of the camera along with their children, since children tend to focus on different other objects than the academic content. Guardians take notes of what you say or do. If you mispronounce any word or scold any kid for not paying attention, or if the other children do not pay attention to your lecture, the guardians will complain about you to the authorities. At that time, authority was ready to terminate any employee for any slightest reason. Guardians became furious at that time, because many of them had financial difficulties, yet the school forced them to pay the tuition fees regularly. Maybe that is why they wanted to retaliate. But the problem in that view is- that we the teachers do not pose such pressure on them, the authority does. But we became their prey.

In addition to that, the teacher monitors (the teaching representative leaders) used to anonymously appear in random classes for monitoring-whether the class activities were being conducted accordingly or not. It was one kind of surveillance, which never happens in a real-life class. All of these were pretty pressing on teachers. We could not say anything, because securing the job was essential for all.”

Badsha (age 35), a field officer in a financial organization shared his experience of the lack of job security in his narrative,

“I had to use a motorbike provided by my former office to travel to different remote regions of Dhaka district. It was not only discouraged but forbidden to leave people’s respective houses during the pandemic. The residential area where I used to live at that time is considered one of the most elite neighborhoods in Dhaka city. The security guards did not let any outsiders come inside the neighborhood, as well as asked thousands of questions to anybody who used to travel out of the neighborhood, both before leaving and after returning. I had nowhere to go, since shifting somewhere else was super challenging for anybody at that time. Besides, I had to retain my job, as my parents in my ancestral home depended on my income. I tolerated these interrogations two times every single day to retain my job. Besides, during commuting, I was halted so many times by the law enforcement agency’s patrols and had to show my ID cards to get the pass. I used to think, “When the rest of the people were staying secure at their own houses, I am the one who has to face the COVID virus to live.”

In all these narratives, we see that the sense of job security for the urban middle-class was lost for many during the COVID period. The middle-class in Dhaka receive higher education from renowned Bangladeshi institutions to secure their placements in the employment sector. Many even take big amounts of loans from banks or sell their share of land in their respective ancestral villages to collect the money for university tuition fees. It is said that the South Asian middle class has a distaste for menial labor and a fascination

with higher education and administrative jobs due to the colonial history of the Indian Subcontinent (Joshi 2017). This is why switching from one industry to another industry is not an easy task there, especially, if the new industry requires more physical toil. It involves many other issues, such as the question of ‘respectability’ of one among his peer group and in the eyes of the society. One lockdown made everybody vulnerable to the situation. The job market was already more or less saturated from the high supply and low demand situation in the labour market, as well as the external factors such as the neoliberal economic system.

4.4.3. Loss of confidence & self- motivation

Loss of confidence and self-motivation to work for one’s progress and under pressure is another facet of loss that is considered a less discussable matter in front of others, as well as a ‘non-scalable loss’ in this discussion. Many participants in this study talked about this kind of loss, which they agreed was not a discussable topic in front of others, since so many people died in the pandemic and they are at least fortunate enough to be alive. Yet, in their assessment, financial losses can be overcome. Once somebody starts a new job, he can once again start saving money to have a financial backup. But the lost confidence in oneself and in his capacity to bear the expenses of his family or complete a task efficiently is very hard to recover. Many of them are no longer unemployed, yet, the trauma of being unemployed during such an uncertain time still haunts them. It is worth mentioning that the participants who mentioned this kind of loss have not been to a counselor or psychologist for therapy or counseling.

Tanvir (pseudonym), age 45, is a quality control manager in an Indian-owned Bangladesh-based RMG liaison office. His current organization is a recent one that he joined after being unemployed for 15 months. He was dismissed from his previous job. Tanvir lives in a rented apartment with his wife and only daughter. He reminisces about his lockdown experience like this,

“I was unemployed for 15 months during lockdown. I was one of those who was thrown out of their organizations during the initial period of lockdown. Before this disaster, at this stage in my long career in the RMG sector, I used to think that I was quite self-accomplished. I do not own a house in Dhaka city, yet, I am at least providing a good lifestyle for my family. I have good bank balance in my bank account. I have my own private car. My daughter is going to a very good school. All my in-laws live in Jordan. So I

have a connection with abroad. The lockdown brought me down to the earth. In the initial period, things went just like normal. I was looking for jobs, but most of them offered me one-fourth of my previous salary. I did not accept those offers. Gradually apartment rent was due for a long time. Fortunately, the landlord has known us for a long time, and I have a good reputation for him. Eventually, in these 15 months, I had to break all my savings, I had to sell my car, I even had to sell my wife's gold jewelry to pay all the loans and debts that I made during the pandemic. My daughter used to go to school, but her exam results were never published during this period, since her tuition fees were due. I had to beg to the teachers to let her attend classes at least, that is why she could attend her classes. My wife had a lot of gold jewelry that she brought from her parents. I gave her very little. Now she just has a gold chain. She has turned into a depressed patient by going through all these, but never pointed a single finger or complained towards me. I had to take her to the psychologist's chamber several times. She is from a wealthy family, who never went through poverty...I do not feel like a man anymore. A man will never sell his woman's gold for a living. I will only feel like a man again once I can buy her new gold jewelry, the same amount that I took from her to sell. I don't know when that day will come...I was a confident man. Now I don't have any confidence left in me. I am afraid, I am scared. If an event comes like COVID again, I don't know how I will cope with it. I had the confidence that with my experience and knowledge in my industry, I could get a job anywhere. Now I am just an afraid man. If somebody from the authority calls me in this new office and even very politely says that I could have done something differently, I cannot defend myself anymore. I am scared.. what if they fire me again!"

The way Tanvir considers himself not a masculine man as he sold his wife's gold jewelry for survival is a culturally set idea. In Bangladeshi culture, a man is generally deemed responsible for bearing all the expenses of his family members, especially his wife and children. Although a man can sell his wife's jewelry during a difficult time, but the jewelry was generally bought as gifts by the husband when the time was good. In Tanvir's case, his wife's jewelry was mostly provided by her parents, not by Tanvir. A man, who depends upon his wife's or in-law's financial support is considered less masculine and less respectable in Bengali culture. Tanvir, following Denise Riley's postulate (Riley 2005), has accepted and embodied the idea of lost masculinity. It has an affective impact on him, on his personality and attitude to work too.

Ashley's narrative is another example of how people lose confidence in such circumstances. In his previous office, he was treated with additional facilities. His decisions were rarely questioned. In his view, the way he was making progress, he would have risen up the ladder by now. But that did not happen. COVID stopped his pace of moving forward. In Ashley's view, he has 'lost his pace'. Before he used to feel like his organization's

success is his personal success. Now he is working in a different company, for the same amount of money as two years ago. But now he feels that he cannot work and make decisions confidently like before. He feels an 'unknown fear' in him. He also feels that he should not dedicate himself so deeply to an organization, as ultimately he is not an owner of it, and he is replaceable.

Shiraj (pseudonym), age 33, is a textile engineer who works in a buying house. When his previous office was shut down with one week's notice, he was left with not much in his hands. He lives with his parents in their house, which is why he does not have to pay the rent. But he had to contribute money to his family expenses budget so he had to break his savings. He attended interviews in many offices after that. But most people offered him a small amount of salary, lower than his previous job. Upon mentioning that, he received replies that he should be happy with whatever is offered since people are looking for jobs everywhere and there were very few opportunities in the market. It left him saddened and discouraged to look further.

This discouraged feeling was generated among the participants for a few reasons. First, the dismissal might be okay, but finding the next job was difficult during the pandemic. Two, the offered jobs brought very limited prospects for further progress for them. In addition to that, many of them felt that their loyalty to their organization was lost forever when they were thrown out during an immediate danger. All these experiences shared by the participants can be considered as non-grievable experiences, as they are mostly not numerically scalable, and most importantly, participants stated that these losses are considered very minor in the scale of severity among other 'large-scale losses due to the pandemic. If they claim that their lives have been changed due to these losses of the pandemic, nobody will acknowledge and appreciate them as losses. In many of their descriptions, they discussed some of their stories with their peer groups and friends. Only the closest ones acknowledge these as losses. And, after initially empathizing, they also tell them that they are lucky since they survived the pandemic with only a lack of esteem, a little bit of anxiety, or repeated arguments between spouses - yet, they are alive, and have lots of opportunities ahead. The dead people have no further chance.

4.4.4. Physical and mental health difficulties posed by the lockdown

Mental health care has always been a less highlighted matter in Bangladeshi society. In a situation when availing of essential physical healthcare is scarce, it is obvious that mental health will be overlooked. This is what happened during the pandemic and lockdown. Participants in this study narrated their different physical and mental health problems during the lockdown and post-lockdown period, which, according to them, were directly and indirectly connected to the physical and mental stress, tension, and depression posed by the pandemic and its consequences. Directly and indirectly, they had an impact on their overall health as well as negative impacts on their lives. If effects are considered as embodied emotions that have bodily expressions of different forms, these participants from the community of interest themselves had different such expressions, for which they hold the pandemic and the lockdown responsible.

One of the participants from the community of interest is Sumy (age 31), who was an expecting mother during the first wave of the pandemic in Bangladesh. Sumy lost her first child from a miscarriage and after quite a few month's break, she was able to conceive again. She sought a hybrid job so that she could take care of her baby properly after it had been born. When her job in a development project was not launched and got postponed, she was already frustrated, as her income is the one that has always been used to support the family. Besides, it was her long sought-after pregnancy, yet, she could not visit the gynecologist month to month, could not have an anomaly scan, and most importantly, could not eat her favorite food from different places due to the lockdown. In her words,

“This will always be a matter of grief in me that I could not avail proper medical care even though living in Dhaka. In my first trimester, I was pretty nauseous and could not eat anything properly. Since the second trimester, I was caged in my home and was bound to eat only home-cooked meals, since all restaurants were closed, or we could not dare to avail the home delivery due to my unemployed status and the fear of COVID contamination. All these together, as well as the encaged life of the lockdown, made me pretty much close to a nervous breakdown.

I made sure that nobody came or went out of our house. Nobody was allowed to leave the house or come from outside. It made my relationship with my relatives, who lived next door to me at that time. I feel like I always have a competitive relationship with my paternal aunts and their children. It used to affect me a lot during my childhood, as my paternal aunt loves to compare me with her daughter who has a fair complexion than me and more stylish. We never had a healthy relationship, it was always full of

competition and negative energy. But so many years later, it affected me very badly during my pregnancy and in the lockdown. I had nothing to do at home. My mom lives with me and my husband, thus she handles the kitchen. To divert my tense mind and to keep myself busy, I began cooking different fancy items during the lockdown. I am not a person who is much into social media. Yet, I began posting my cooked food photos on Facebook. That was for my relief and just my pleasure. But my paternal cousins and even my aunt began to write attacking comments about me on that public platform. Comments such as, "We live next door to you, and you make Jalebis but do not share with us! How scrooge of you! It's okay, we are not gonna put evil eye on your food" or, "How more do you want to save money? Do you wanna be a millionaire? Now share with us."

I generally never react to their competition since I had this realization that this kind of relationship is toxic and never brings anything good for anybody. Since I am the more educated and enlightened person here, I must keep my self-dignity higher and never engage in a battle with them. But maybe it was hormones, maybe it was the stress and the uncertainty of the pandemic that what would happen with my pregnancy- I just burst into tears seeing these comments. Not only that day, but throughout my pregnancy, I broke down by remembering this event, or even from the slightest marital tension between me and my husband. I am a very strong and self-dependent woman and never ask for anything from my husband that other women ask for. But at that time I always felt that I need extra attention from him and that he is not ready to pay. Crying and sobbing became a practice at that time, and long after my delivery. Maybe it was my baby blue. But it was intensified by the loneliness and the fear of the pandemic."

Sumy's emotional breakdowns were a combination of hormonal fluctuation outcomes, post-partum depression, and the impact of the pandemic's fear and uncertainty. Sara Ahmed, in her discussion of affect and its cultural impact, said that people may have the same experience and the same emotions, but different people have different reactions to that same event. Lockdown experiences were terrifying for a normal person, whereas a pregnant woman has twice the risk - for her own compromised immunity system and her baby's wellbeing. Sumy's emotional outbursts, therefore, can be the affective reactions of her emotions to the pandemic and the consequential lockdown.

Mazumdar, like Sumy, had bodily expressions of anxiety and stress, but in a different way. Being the only breadwinner in his family and the only graduate so far among his siblings who live in the ancestral village, Mazumdar fulfills a lot of familial responsibilities. But when he got dismissed by his office after thirteen years of service, he had to make some adjustments. He used to bear all the study expenses of his nephew, who is his eldest brother's only son. He feels that it is his responsibility to do, since this

brother bore all Mazumdar's educational expenses after their dad's demise. But when it was challenging to even bear the living costs of his own family, he had to back off for the time being from those extended familial responsibilities. Mazumdar did not feel good while unable to pay for his nephew's education. It made him feel lower, though his brother was very considerate of the situation. Similarly, he felt that at one point he felt that living in Dhaka city was beyond his capability, even after adjusting for different household expenses. His wife is from his ancestral village. According to Mazumdar, she never asks for anything expensive in their entire conjugal life. She has a fascination for makeup and jewelry, but she always manages to purchase them from cheap sources, and cheap brands. The only thing she has ever demanded from her husband was to keep her in Dhaka city all the time and never to settle again for village life. She lived her pre-marriage life in the village and now she feels comfortable living in Dhaka city- whatever the neighborhood is. When Mazumdar felt that living in Dhaka city was unbearable for him, he began to feel multiple physical problems. In his own words,

“I had a perfect blood pressure and blood sugar level. I have no other physical problem, except occasional back pain from time to time, which used to happen when I attended office, but not during the second wave of lockdown, since I was fired. Yet, I couldn't sleep at night. My wife and daughter used to sleep, and I used to sit on the patio hour after hour at night. I knew exactly how much money I had left in my bank account at that time. I knew the basic sectors of cost-cutting in my house. Yet I could not find out if I could not manage a new job somewhere, what would happen to my wife and baby. I was also paying for the construction of my apartment in Dhaka during that time. But the construction was at a pause for so many months at that time. I am a very cool-tempered person and generally do not get excited by simple triggers. My family is my source of happiness. But at that time, I used to speak very few words with them. I knew, that if I say much, my inner tensions may come out and affect their mental well-being. I may sometimes misbehave with them, which my wife will remember for a long time. I didn't want that to happen.”

In a patriarchal and patrilineal society, men are considered the 'provider of the family', and if they fail to do so, even if they do not face any harsh treatment from their peer group, the inherent social norm embedded in their psyche is what decides their reaction towards the situation. In Mazumdar's case, his physical reactions following his emotions were expressed through insomnia and restlessness.

Ashley had a similar sort of feeling of physical illness during the pandemic from a similar experience of employment termination to Mazumdar. Ashley has his wife, only son,

and younger brother in his family. His father used to live with them before. But after Ashley's mother's death, he married a second time, which Ashley and his brother did not take easily. His son is a special child, who has Autism and cannot speak at the age of four. When Ashley lost his job, it was the time of the pandemic. Yet, he used to think that everything would turn out fine as soon as he could get a new job. The dilemma was that - he sat for online interviews and landed a few job offers, but not a single one had the similar salary and other benefits that were offered in his previous job. He could have accepted one of them at the initial stage of his unemployment, but he did not. In their industry, if someone accepts to work at a lower salary scale, it is very unlikely that the person will ever go back to his previous better salary scale. Thinking about the better decision in the long run, he stopped himself from accepting lower-paying jobs. But things got worse after the sixth month of his unemployment. His savings were diminishing. He was constantly thinking about adjusting and making progress in the tough times, but could not find a solution. Since Ashley had a good income before, his son was always treated with all the best things. He and his wife used to buy the most expensive toys and other things for him since money was never a problem. In Ashley's narrative, Autistic children are very sensitive to changes. They cannot tolerate changes and react very badly if anything in their routine change suddenly. Ashley's then two-and-a-half-year-old son was used to drinking a particular formula milk which is not produced locally, and only a few shops imported it from Dubai. Due to the lockdown and the pandemic, imported items' prices, especially baby formula milk and diapers, were going up at that time. Ashley's income was zero, but this was a household expense that he could not minimize like many others. One night his son was having a hysterical reaction because his mother offered him a different formula milk than his regular one. Ashley shouted like a mad person at his son and wife. The subject of shouting was- why does the kid eat so much? Why does he need to have such expensive milk as his father is no longer a wealthy man? How will he produce money?

Of course, it did not help the situation. Instead, the reaction of the child grew wilder, and Ashley's wife began to sob with him as well. To this day, Ashley feels very guilty that he yelled so badly at his son.

Joan had depression and sadness for a different reason. When her job in the famous UK-based liaison office was over due to the bankruptcy of the organization, she had 800,000 BDT in her savings account. Initially, she did not want to find a new job. She

planned to start a business with her savings. Her third elder sister's husband came to meet her. He offered that if she gave him 500,000 BDT from her savings, he would invest that money in his new business. He promised that Joan would receive the interest from that money, plus she would have a share of the business. Since she had a plan to go into business and the brother-in-law was known as a senior and wise person in their family, she gave him the money. Eventually, the business was a loss. Though the brother-in-law promised her that he would return the money to Joan no matter what, it is uncertain when that will ever happen. Joan asked him several times for the money, but it made the relationship bitter to some extent. Joan's mother now requests her not to ask for her money from the brother-in-law again, since he is the husband of her third elder sister and this asking repeatedly can jeopardize her marital life. She also tells her that as he promised to give back the money, he will do it one day. Joan understands the situation and realizes that giving the money as an investment was a bad decision from her end. Yet, it was a shock for her that she was cheated on by such a close family member. Joan's own marital life was not a happy one. She barely had any marriage proposals. That is why when her family could arrange a groom, they did not do a thorough background check and married her off. Eventually, he turned out to be a victim of substance abuse, who regularly beat Joan during their short married life. Joan was so devastated from being cheated by the brother-in-law that sometimes she used to think that if she had a husband, nobody could cheat her like this. She feels depressed and sad from the bitter experience. This saved money was accumulated after so many years of hard work and self-restraint. Her plan of starting a business has been doomed as well. She, after a gap of seven months, again joined a new buying house. She is trying to save money again through small steps.

Xahin had a difficult time during the lockdown performing his professional duties. He also went through a COVID-positive situation three times during 2020-2021. But one of the reasons caused him direct physical injury during this period. Since his office and his residence are 25 kilometers distance apart, he had to commute this distance every single day. He does not own a private vehicle. Public buses were his only means of transportation before COVID. But public transportation was off during this time from the fear of spreading the virus. Rickshaws were the only vehicles that could escape the eyes of the militia patrols and could take the side roads easily due to their noise-less feature and small size. Xahin used to hire rickshaw pullers during this time to commute from his home to the office and vice versa. It was cheaper than CNG vehicles. But it took a toll on his health in a different

way. The rickshaw jerks a lot while moving forward. Besides, so many side roads from his home to the office were very rough and broken. Due to the regular travel jerking, he developed bad back pain, which still accompanies him. Now the situation has become better. He does not have to take rickshaw anymore. Yet, the back pain does not leave him.

Participants' multiple experiences of physical and mental health difficulties and their variation in nature show that the physical and mental affective impact of the pandemic and the lockdown are not linear in nature. They were caused by different triggers and different personal experiences of the actors. Many of them were also influenced by childhood traumas or past contexts. Some were generated by cultural beliefs such as the idea of the standard duties of a man and the idea of his masculinity and the failure in fulfilling those duties. Some were the result of the uncertainty and fear of the virus, as well as the fear that the next dead person could be from their own families. People have different negative emotions that come out from stressful environments such as a lockdown. These negative emotions are embodied and displayed by different means. This is what I refer to here as the affective impact of the lockdown on people from the urban middle-class in Dhaka.

4.4.5. Loss of good relationships between family members

Like the affective outbursts and back pain from long hours of sitting in front of the laptop at home, people's monotonous lives behind the four walls and the loss of a social life worsened another important thing- the good relationship between family members. Family is the immediate and the most important social unit of humans. But in modern life, people spend a significant amount of time of the day with their colleagues and co-workers, or friends and other social groups. When the lockdown was declared, people were occupied with the well-being of their family members the most. But day by day the monotony, tension, the stress over physical and monetary survival had adverse effects on family relationships. A few cases from the participants from the community of interest may elucidate this.

Sumy can recall one day's event that made her view herself and her marital life in a different light. It was during the lockdown. She was still unemployed at that time, but her baby was delivered safely and was seven months old. Since she was panicked about her

baby's safety, she and her husband did not take the baby to her husband's ancestral village to show the newborn baby to her parents-in-law. It was before the Eid-ul-Fitr, the second biggest religious festival of Muslims. During this month of Ramadan, her husband's elder brother came to Dhaka from Noakhali, the ancestral village to have an eye surgery. It was long due but was postponed due to the lockdown. Everything was decided before, and since it was a medical emergency, he got a permit for inter-district travel. The plan was like this - he would come in a hired minibus, have the surgery, then after resting for one night in the hospital, he would go back to the village in the same rented minibus. Since nobody from her in-law's house ever saw the newborn baby and it was such a long journey for a post-operative patient, Sumy herself requested her brother-in-law over the phone to stop at their house for the Iftar, rest for a few hours and then resume his journey to the village. He agreed to stop at Sumy's to see his new niece. Since there was nothing special cooked in the house, Sumy arranged a few home-cooked items and ordered some fruits in an online shop for home delivery. When the delivery person came with the fruits, she found that she did not have cash with her. So she requested her husband to pay for the delivery. Her husband did not know about the online order. Upon hearing everything, he did not say anything. Silently after paying the bill, receiving the parcel, and closing the door, he turned to Sumy and said something very rude to her about spending money without his permission. Sumy was speechless since she never asked for anything from her husband and she always bore all expenses for the household from her pocket. Days passed, and the relationship looked just as warm as before. But that incident changed Sumy's view and next steps toward the future drastically. She nowadays thinks that she, as a woman of the house, has sacrificed too much. This is not women's empowerment or freedom. This, in her view, was foolish that she never asked for any money or goods or gifts from her husband. She spoiled her husband, and due to that, now her husband thinks that it is Sumy's responsibility to manage all costs from her earnings. Sumy also bears her two younger brothers' expenses partially. One of them has recently graduated and has become an engineer. Right after he gets a job, Sumy will stop paying his expenses and will make him contribute some money for their mother's expenses. Otherwise, she believes, her brothers will never stop taking from her.

Jahir had a different dilemma. During the lockdown, for five months, he was the unemployed stay-at-home spouse and his wife was the only earning member of the family. At that time, when he was sitting at home, he tried by all means to support his wife's job.

However, it was too difficult for him due to inexperience and lack of practice. Being a regular Bengali man, he never really took part in nurturing their baby. Now the baby had become so attached to the mother that it did not want to stay with its father for more than 15 minutes. Formula milk, toys, or YouTube videos- nothing could stop it from asking and crying for mom. Jahir tried for a few days and eventually returned to his wife with the burdens of household chores and baby-nurturing tasks. Before the pandemic, they had a helper for household chores and a nanny for the care of the baby. During the lockdown, their whole building was blocked by police, since a COVID patient was found in the building. As a result, nobody could go out or come in. Sometimes, Jahir even opened locked doors to hand over the crying baby to his wife's lap when she was attending a meeting with her colleagues. It seemed like a battlefield for both the spouses. That period is long over, but Jahir's wife still time to time taunts him for lack of responsibility and for being so pressing on her during that tough time.

Lamia, after her mother's demise due to cancer and lack of care from the understaffed hospital, did not have a normal regular relationship with her husband for a long period. She was not present and could not care for her mother as she wanted to due to the obstacles imposed by her husband and mother-in-law. They were mostly afraid that Lamia would bring the virus to the family and contaminate the baby. But Lamia always had the highest level of protection possible to avoid that. Yet, she could not take care of her mother properly and was not by her side at the time of her death. Lamia, out of grief, holds her husband and mother-in-law partially responsible for this. This had a very bad effect on their married life. Lamia stopped having any coitus with her husband for a long period after her mother's demise. She even started to live in her father's house with her baby, her father, and her younger sister to avoid any interaction with her husband. Later, gradually it was her father and sister who did a lot of counseling for her and also talked to her husband to start anew. It was very recently that the ice between these two began to break.

Badsha and his wife used to live in an apartment where there was nobody in the entire building, except these two during the pandemic. It was also their honeymoon period of marriage, which is why they enjoyed it a lot. Since none of his wife's family knew about this marriage, she could not video call to her parents during this time, as there was the fear that they might question about the strange residence and her relation with the man beside her. Badsha believes that this was a reason that his wife, after three months of the

lockdown became furious about a very simple matter. Badsha used to go to work every day, and she used to stay at home. One day an old friend of his tagged him in an old photo, where Badsha was standing with a former date. His wife reacted very badly to this. She became furious and attacked the friend of Badsha with lots of hate comments and harsh words. Some other common friends got involved in this fight. Things got ugly and at one point, she violently asked Badsha to unfriend all his university friends on Facebook, so that they could start anew. It was already late and he had to start for his office. When his wife was being very adamant about pressing Badsha for doing this, he slapped her in the face hard. Later, after coming back from the office, he asked for forgiveness several times. Still, his wife cooks for one person in the house, and that is her. She stopped cooking for her husband so far.

4.5. Conclusion

As people's subjective experiences are different throughout their lives, their sorrows and patterns of suffering too are different. Similarly, as is evident in many of the above-mentioned narratives, many participants believe that their affective experiences were also linked to their childhood and past experiences. Similarly, the sufferings of people due to social seclusion and other hurdles are linked to their other problems in life, problems that existed after the emergence of the COVID-19 virus. We say that the pandemic was a global phenomenon, but it was experienced differently by different geographical regions and by different demographic groups. It is because we cannot investigate lockdown problems separately, in a vacuum environment. Lockdown and the pandemic sufferings are also a reflection of how a particular population had already been problem-stricken and the pandemic just intensified some of these problems, in addition to adding some new kinds of complexities. Following Butler's view, in the cosmological order, we have to understand the link between different elements to understand their relationship better. Both the grievable and non-grievable losses of the urban middle-class in Dhaka city were the results of new and some pre-existing problems. The secure class was not, after all, that secure to survive the financial and health impacts of the pandemic, and their real situation was exposed to the daylight due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Altogether, the two kinds of losses or sufferings of the pandemic that people experienced from the pandemic and the lockdown (the grievable and non-grievable losses) depict how differently people's lives have been impacted by the COVID-19

pandemic. Furthermore, the recognition of some of the negative impacts and the non-recognition of some of them prove that the impacts of this pandemic on the lives of people need long-term research and study. What may seem naïve and minor loss at this moment, may cause larger consequences in the future. Loss of confidence in oneself regarding capabilities, and loss of good relationships between family members can call upon complex problems in the future, which may be not so visible right now. Already we see that COVID changed people's work culture by bringing online and work-from-home into fashion. What may seem grievable right now is due to their immediate effect. It is possible that the non-grievables' longitudinal effects are yet to be seen.

Chapter 5.

Adjustment to the 'new normal' : Urban middle-class' adaptive strategies with COVID-19

5.1. Introduction

“I cannot sit here and watch everything go down. Even if my husband does not want to work, I am also a parent, and I have to do something to ensure my children’s better future.”

Suraiya told it to me while we were sitting in front of her thatched house in Jessore, Bangladesh. Suraiya was a research participant in a different research project of mine, where I wanted to explore why people receive vocational trainings, especially women in rural Bangladesh. When asked, Suraiya expressed her opinion and thoughts - regarding this. She wanted to be a change-maker in her family, to change the fate of her poor family, as well as to overcome the boundaries set by the society on women, especially, on illiterate women from poor rural families in her area. She had never earned money before in her life. But day by day she turned impatient with her husband, who does nothing but sleeps all day, or plays cards with local boys who are unemployed as well. She knows that it is her who had to take the lead of the house at that point.

The situation urban middle-class has been through or are still going through is different in context than Suraiya’s one. Poverty had forever been a part and parcel of Suraiya’s life, whereas the urban middle-class in Dhaka city was pretty much content with their standards of living and financial planning before the pandemic hit. Yet, when the financial struggles or physio-mental health struggles hit like a bolt out of the blue, they were not shattered. Damage control or looking for ways to adapt to the new situation, as well as finding ways to get through the bad period were all in their list to be done during the pandemic and the lockdown. How the urban middle-class adapted to their ‘new normal situation’ in life (not only in WHO-generated meaning, but also to the new normal in all spheres of life) and how they have tried to overcome their situation through different means, will be discussed in this chapter.

5.2. Middle class' struggle and the agency of survival

While going through the stories of survival and changing fate from the participants of this research, one thing was evident to me- all the strategies adopted by the middle class are planned and executed by themselves. True, they are known as the educated class who supposedly, never needs support or backup from others. This popular belief is evident in work procedures and policies in different social agendas. When the price hikes were a much-discussed issue, the only step taken by the government was establishing TCB (Trading Corporation Bangladesh) 'Fair price shops' at different corners in metropolitan Dhaka where rice, lentils, oil and some other very basic daily necessary staples were sold and distributed among people from open trucks. This project was still in action on and off during the lockdown. Nevertheless, being a status-conscious class, the middle-class in general considered it derogatory to queue up with others to collect rations rice and lentils from these trucks. The social tags attributed to the customers of this project were 'needy' and 'helpless', which, even though the middle-class felt this themselves, did not want to show their peer group or neighbors their real situation. Besides, standing in queues in close proximity of each other during the pandemic was a physical threat too.

Other supportive non-governmental social projects that were targeted to help needy people were Anandashrom's "Ek Takar Ahar" (Meal for one Bangladeshi Taka), where people could go to the different centres of Anandashrom, pay one BDT and could have a full- sized meal in a combination of carbohydrate, protein, vitamins and minerals. A lot of donations were raised from different people and organizations to support the "Ek Takar Ahar" project which is still serving the lower-income people in Dhaka. Other volunteer organizations also distributed necessary goods and COVID-protective equipment in different lower-income neighborhoods of Dhaka.

Unfortunately, none of these projects were targeted at the middle-class strata of the society- neither rural nor the urban. Therefore, the middle class was on their own in their struggle against the difficulties posed by COVID. Analyzing the discussions and the observations from the field, I found eight categories of action that people have taken to adjust to their new situations: financial struggles due to unemployment or layoff, physical and mental stresses due to performing professional duties or the fear of contamination and above all, survival in a new situation which was unanticipated.

Two similarities are common in people's struggle for survival: one, for the urban middle-class, it is not the state or governmental or non-governmental organizations, but the people, their peer groups and social networks that came forward to help each other as much as possible to overcome difficult situations. Two, the survival struggles of the community of interest demonstrate people's agency to change their fate and the way people become involved in 'serious games' to balance with the coercive power of the social hierarchy and institutions as well as to adapt their coping strategies to sync with the system.

'Serious games' is an analytical term used by American anthropologist and practice theorist Sherry Ortner. She used this term to depict and analyze the very unequal power relations in the gender hierarchy of Polynesian societies (Ortner 1981). Later, the concept of serious games was used by other social scientists to provide cultural explanations and logic behind the power structure of societies and the social actors' reactional actions towards it (Jakimow 2012; Voss 2019). Jakimow uses the serious games model to analyze and explain the shifting purposes and intentions that direct people's lives in rural Telengana region of India. On the other hand, Voss uses the same model for archaeological inquiry of material culture through dining practices of people from a nineteenth-century Chinatown. Ortner originally used the concept to mean people's and society's dynamic, nuanced and more expansive perspective of power play. Being always keen to learn about people's actions, decision-makings and which cultural rules encouraged or discouraged people from taking certain actions - Ortner proposed a very power-focused practice theory, where social actors are at least 'partially knowing subjects' of the power games happening around them, and they make informed decisions about actions that benefit them in situations while, at the same time, being obedient to the existing power structure (Ortner 2006). According to Ortner, social actors who get involved in the 'serious games' of the society, do not undermine the power and authority of the established system or institution. Yet, day by day the small actions of these individual actors are what brings changes in the established systems. Being a student of Clifford Geertz, Ortner's lens is symbolism-inspired by nature. Yet, symbolism in her view does not see the power game of the society, which practice theories overcome. Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins- both used the idea of practice theory in their scholarly work and demonstrated how all practices by people are cultural by nature and end in social reproduction of the same social order (Bourdieu and Nice (Translator) 2013; Sahlins

2000). Ortner differs with the previous practice theorists on the point their discussions mostly revolve around the ideas of how strong and constraining the power structure of the society is, and how it imposes its constraining power to make and alter individual's decisions. One big difference between these previous practice theories and Ortner's power-focused practice theory that- it is Ortner's theory shows how serious games of the society are embedded with the actions and counter-actions of the structural constraining power, as well as the agency of the actors (Ortner 2006). Bourdieu's key term 'habitus' is undoubtedly an explanation of social reproduction through cultural knowledge, and the idea of culture and it's influencing power to draw the trajectory of people's practice is central to it (Bourdieu and Nice (Translator) 2013). But it does not discuss the existence of agency and it's part in the serious games of the society. In many ways, the consequences of the small actions of the actors on the social structure cause socio-cultural changes over time (which Ortner referred to as 'agency'), which cannot be envisioned in the immediate contemporary context. Ortner feels that this perspective on agency was overlooked by the previous practice theorists.

There are some reasons that I find practice theory and the idea of serious games provide good conceptual support to understand the cultural explanation of people's patterns of adaptive strategies and coping mechanisms in the context of COVID-19. Themes from the fieldwork findings show that the urban middle-class sought different ways to overcome their difficult situations, and all of them involved personal initiatives, personal adjustments and seeking support and help from family and peer networks - instead of the government or non-government organizations or any other social forums. Since they are not considered as a vulnerable group by the social authorities and governing bodies, the extent of support for them was very limited. At least, nobody from the group of participants for this study could name any organization or fund that was known to provide support or rehabilitation for the distressed middle-class. Therefore, middle-class' support-seeking patterns are strictly among themselves and mostly in different patterns of self-adjustment. In these adjustments and support-seeking activities, people were seen taking steps that are generally expected from them as a "self-sufficient" class by the society. It mostly involved, "taking care of their business/problems by themselves and not bothering others." As social actors, this, in my sense, is one way to ensure their social reproduction, since they are reflecting in their activities what they are expected to do in distress. It is the reflection of their class-specific ideology taught by the family and

society. Social actors, through their activities, decisions and performances - re-enforce the social power structures - that form their subjectivity. It is also a pattern of neoliberal subjectivity.

Although most of the participants gave detailed descriptions of how they managed to mitigate their difficult situations, many of them also took advantage of peer networks to secure themselves jobs or other help during the difficult times, which involved knowing somebody through somebody (social networks). The direct and linear process of getting a job is very difficult and competitive. Besides, the job market was exceptionally rigid and non-negotiable at that period. Both in the government and non-government sectors, it has always been difficult to secure a job for oneself - even if the candidate is a very good fit for the vacant position. One has to fulfill so many criteria along with being a great candidate: lobbying through politically powerful personnel to reach the board of decision-makers; providing good amount of money as an “incentive” or “gift” (in practical sense, a bribe) to the recruiting board members; or simply lobbying through somebody who, though not a political figure, is still an influential figure in that terrain to secure oneself a job. Not only in the job sector, but in any difficult situation such as - getting a seat in a hospital when there is a waiting list, knowing somebody powerful or knowing exactly whom to request to secure it, or having powerful connections to make an exception of the rule for oneself, is important in Bangladeshi settings. In Ortner’s narratives, though the actors are the products of the coercive power structure of the society, they are at least “partially knowing subjects”, who know what is going on around them (Ortner 2006). They follow the laws, rules and order of the system, but at the same time, whenever it is possible, at least some of them take other means to cross the boundaries and to make exceptions. This playing with the rules by the social actors for their benefit is the ‘serious games’ of the society. Serious games do not hamper the standard power structured, as it is seen in the Bangladeshi society that the standard rules are same for everybody, which involves tampering by individual actors for their own benefits whenever possible. Serious games might have long-term impact on the existing power structure of the society, but immediately it is not felt or might not be considered as a threat for the power hierarchy.

Another important finding that I got from the field immersion is that - all social actors are more or less knowing subjects of the power games in their surroundings. Serious games are something that refers specifically when any of them manipulate the standard norms of the power hierarchy of the society for their benefit or change of position. But

even those actors who refrain from doing that or just use other means to adjust to the situation - have more or less of an understanding of the barriers and limitations of the existing system. Power has a very nuanced and pervasive existence in the society. Actors have their own agency that they sometimes demonstrate directly through their actions or decisions. But sometimes the demonstration of agency more opaque, since the actor understands the power inequality and his less privileged position in the power hierarchy, but chooses not to resist or fight against it. But this action of choosing not to react or show resistance is also a mode of agency. Sometimes people adhere to the social norms and regulations, sometimes they do something out of the box.

When I observed the actions and the strategies of people from the community of interest to understand people's ways of dealing with the new normal during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, practice theory, the idea of agency and serious games stood out as the most suitable theoretical framework to analyze people's behavior and the cultural logic behind their decisions. What the urban middle-class did or are currently doing are obvious culture-abiding decisions. But through their actions they are both adhering to the cultural norms, as well as breaking and re-making cultural norms day by day. Even seeking help from peer groups and contacts is a pattern of activities or help-seeking that relates to their cultural knowledge and demonstrates their identity as informed subjects in the Bangladeshi cultural context. Adaptive strategy analysis of the urban middle-class for this study required observing people's actions and following their narratives of what they did or decided to do during the difficult period of the pandemic.

Finally, the serious games are a coping mechanism engaged in by the partially knowing subjects of the society, in this case, the urban middle-class people of Dhaka city. Given their exposure and experiences of the socio-politico-economic situation of Dhaka and in a greater Bangladeshi context, they have a pretty good idea of the ways their lives are vulnerable, and how they can get at least some support from existing sources. Thus, serious games- in this context- is helping the social agents to provide support for each other, share the vulnerabilities and survive in the situation altogether.

5.3. The strategies taken by the urban middle class to cope up and overcome their problems

Analyzing the field data and the transcribed interviews, there emerged a few patterns of people's coping and problem-solving strategies. They are:

5.3.1. Adjusting expenditure

Adjusting expenditures from household expenses and daily necessities was a general strategy for most of the participants. Sumy, who was pregnant during the first three months of the pandemic, and has always been the sole person to bear the household expenditures for her family, said that she didn't have to struggle a lot to adjust the expenses initially. In her words,

"I have always been a person who loves to save money. Even when I was a student, it was my passion. My friends used to go to restaurants together. They used to call me. I refused most of the time. I come from such a family, where our dad did not leave us much after his death. Probably that is why I always prioritize saving. It was in fact, quite easy to do during the pandemic. You do not have any additional sector than the bare necessities to spend for. Just buy the groceries online once, and you are good to go. We do not need new dress or to go to visit places when there is a pandemic outside."

Along with that, one of Sumy's younger brothers used to live in Chittagong at that time. He was a student who used to attend university there. Although he had private tuitions to bear as well as his living costs, Sumy always used to send him some money as the responsible elder sister, since their father was no longer alive. During the pandemic, Sumy had no other way but to stop sending money to her brother at Chittagong.

Like Sumy, it was more or less easy for Mazumdar as well. In his case, the transportation costs to his office and back home were saved during 2020, since they were ordered to work from home. In his view, it was not much saving, and his salary was reduced 30% during that time. Yet, any kind of savings during that time of distress was a big relief. By the end of 2020, when his office cut him loose, then it became more challenging for him. Without any employment, he had only his savings left to run himself and his family. To adjust the expenditures, he took some steps, such as that he stopped sending money to his elder brother for his son's study, which he has been doing for a long time. Other household cost-cutting included : he stopped buying mutton, which is their

family favourite; stopped giving pocket money to his wife; and stopped eating out with any friend or family member, since it was considered very risky, and restaurants mostly ran on online orders at that time.

Ashley did not focus on adjusting expenditures in the beginning when he lost his job. To him, still, it is a shock that he remained unemployed for so many months during 2020. At the initial stage, he had a good amount of money in his bank account, as well as the confidence in himself that he would have something good waiting for him in the near future. But after five months, the scenario changed for him. He had to stop buying meat and other groceries (especially beef and mutton) to reduce costs. In addition to that, buying diapers for his son and eating out occasionally were two sectors of expenses that were minimized during this period. Ashley, due to his generosity and good earnings, used to buy lots of gifts for his villagers relatives. Since the pandemic, he swore that he would try to be as kind to his relatives as possible, but would never spend money so lavishly, since money is a limited asset that no one will ever give him when he is in distress.

Sage's journey was a little bit different. Her husband worked for a renowned INGO, where they applied a salary cut to everyone, but that was minor. Her family life and living standard were not hampered by that salary cut, since she was not the main breadwinner of her family. But when she was fired by her previous office after serving there for fifteen years, and she had to adjust her expenditures due to the halt of her income, it affected her parents' family heavily, since she used to provide a good amount of her salary to her parents' household. She has two other sisters, but no brother. In Bangladeshi society, parents usually co-reside with their son and his spouse throughout their lives, while daughters leave their parental homes after marriage. Since Sage has no brother and her husband earns a good amount of money, she contributes to her parents' expenses to run the household. It was a heart-breaking decision from her end to make to stop sending money, since she has been doing it since the beginning of her professional life. But now her parents have to depend on her other two sisters' donations. She has not yet landed any good job. Nor is her husband is any longer encouraging or enthusiastic about her working outside home.

For Mehbub, the strategy of adjusting expenses mostly was limited transportation costs to travel back and forth to his then office and home. He used to work in an airlines company, which did not require employees travel to the office every other day. It was even

illegal at that time. Yet the office rule was - everyone had to be physically present in the office at least three days a week. It was difficult for Mehbub, as well as others. They were not paid their wages at that time. Mehbub usually does not pay household expenses. But during that time, his elder brother, who is a marine engineer by profession- was devastated by an accident both physically and mentally. For a long time, he did not have any income. Mehbub, as the next brother, had to bear the responsibility for the family at that time. To run his and his family's expenses, he worked as a food delivery person in the Bashundhara Residential Area. It was his way to adjust his income to meet his expenses.

Sadia's school too cut her and her colleagues' wages to a great extent, which has not yet been revised, even after two and half years. She used to spend her salary as her pocket money, a little bit of savings, and her parents' family's expenses to some extent. Her father is also a school teacher in a different school, and her mother is a homemaker. Sadia has always been known as a very dutiful daughter. Since her school is far away from her in-law's home, she has to commute to the school by leaving her daughter with her mom. Thus it is a three-way transport, which is, by all means, private. Now she adjusts her expenditures by contributing to her parents' house and for commuting to the school, her parents' house, and her in-law's house. She has given up saving money. For the last two and half years, she has not saved a penny. She is entirely dependent upon her husband for her retired life and for rainy days.

5.3.2. Looking for new sources of income

Many participants from the community of interest, as well as people from their known circle opted for finding out additional or substitute sources of income. This was another way of adapting to the new normal. Some got good outcome from these additional sources, while some could not.

Sumy's income source was completely shuttered when her almost-launched development project was postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. She waited, applied to other jobs - but could not land in a good position anywhere. The postponed project was re-launched later that year, when the NGO decided that they would not retain the previously recruited ones, and they called for freelance consultants. Sumy submitted her proposal for that project, but her one was not accepted. When she found that her savings were almost depleted, she chose to go back to a previous job that she used to do when

she was a student in Dhaka University. Translating transcribed interviews or focus group discussions from Bengali to English for a renowned INGO in Bangladesh is that old source of income. At her stage of experience, people usually do not go back to this kind of job, where you have barely any intellectual or skilled contribution to give, other than the linguistic skills. But when she approached different people in her network for a job, somebody from the old organization convinced her that as long as it is bringing her money, and she is unemployed- she should not look down upon this job. Therefore, she began to translate interview and group discussion transcriptions and began to make money. She knew that this was temporary. But now, even when she already has a job, she has not yet stopped doing translations. She now considers it to be an additional source of income for her which means she does not spend entirely her savings.

Joan, after losing her job and the shut down of her previous organization's head office in London, thought that - this was the end. She would not go back to a regular 9-to-5 job anymore. She had some savings in her account, which she would invest to establish a small business and be an entrepreneur. The problem was, in her words, when a woman has no father or husband, in the Bangladeshi context, people consider her a sheep without a guardian, and try to take advantage of her. Since Joan is divorced and her father is not alive anymore, she had to face a similar situation. Her sister's husband came to her one morning. He counselled her that he was going to start a new business of shipping in Chittagong, where he needed money. He wanted Joan to be an investor in the business. When he would turn a profit, Joan would get her money in return with the profit. At first, Joan was hesitant. She asked several questions to her sister's husband about the nature and the possibility of profit in the business. Most importantly, she knew that her sister's husband had no experience of doing business, it was a maiden venture. But two things worked in her: one was greed, because the amount of profit that business was supposed to make was huge. The other is that - the person asking for the monetary help was her elder sister's husband. In Bangladesh, a daughter or sister's husband is looked upon and treated with immense respect and special treatment. The underlying reason is that - if the daughter or sister's husband is treated badly or made unhappy for some reason, the daughter or the sister's married life, as well her life, will be in serious jeopardy. Joan could not take any risk with her sister's married life. She is herself divorcee. Their mother could not stand the divorce of any more of her daughters. Thus she was, at least indirectly, bound to invest a large chunk of her savings to her sister's husband's new venture. It was

a great loss. The man himself too lost his money, along with Joan's one. She is still traumatized. The worst part is that - she and her family cannot even force this person to return the money, since he is the husband of their daughter and sister. Joan ended up doing a job with less salary than before to run herself and her family. Eventually, she landed herself a better opportunity.

James did not start a new business when he and his roommate-cum-colleague from the same office were told that they did not have to come to the office until further notice. He had some savings in his bank, which he knew, would not last very long. Like Sumy, he went back to a previous profession which he used to do when he was an undergraduate student in Washington. He became a call center worker and started selling products from USA online to different clientele bases. Since his office time was matched to the local time of Washington, he had to sleep during the daytime, while working at night. It was his gut feelings that his local office in Bangladesh would not call them back for an unprecedented amount of time, which led him to dedicate even more time and energy to this call center job. His prediction was right. The NGO where he and his colleague used to work for later informed them online that their services were no longer required. James later joined a special team of the Rapid Action Battalion of the Bangladesh Police.

Jahir, after losing his employment, started to look for other jobs rigorously in his industry. Along with that, he started a short-term business. Since during the pandemic different types of face masks, hand sanitizer, face shields, eye shield, hair covers, one-time PPE, and Oxymeters were high demand products, Jahir opened an online page in Facebook and started selling these items to people. He found a wholesale source that imported these items from China. For his page, he used to buy these products from that wholesale source and sold them in a retail style to customers. He used the courier services for home delivery, which was an additional attraction for his customers since they did not have to go out and buy these necessary items in person. It was a good initiative, according to him, which did not last long. A few months later he found a new job and dedicated his full focus to that. The online business was discarded.

5.3.3. Moving to ancestral homes or lower-rent tenancy

The middle class of Dhaka is generally a proud group of people with savings consciousness. Yet, the price of land and real estate in Dhaka city have always been high

for most people. Many people from the community of interest have been living in Dhaka for 15-20 years, yet, could not secure a property of their own. Hence, the tenancy in the city is expensive too. Holding a tenancy in a particular neighborhood or in a particular facility can have multiple reasons - proximity to offices or schools for kids that saves time and transportation costs, good amenities offered by the facility or the neighborhood, living in a renowned neighborhood to increase one's reputation and respectability among the peer group and relatives and many more. But when a person loses their regular income and cost-reduction becomes a priority, living in an expensive neighborhood or tenancy becomes a burden. Participants in this study from the community of interest had the same situation, due to which, to adapt to the lower income or no-income situation, many of them opted for lower-rent tenancy, or even shifting to the ancestral village to live with the extended family and to save monthly expenses for house rent.

Mazumdar, along with his wife and daughter used to live in Kochukhet area in Mirpur, near Banani. Kochukhet is a lower-middle income neighborhood, near Dhaka cantonment. The pros of this neighborhood are that - it is situated in the walking distance of Banani and Glushan- two of the elite neighborhoods in Dhaka city. Along with lavish houses, they also encompass corporate offices of many companies, banks, financial organizations and consultancy firms. The market research office where Mazumdar used to work since 2010 is situated in Banani. Since he has no other permanent address in Dhaka, it was easy for him to rent an apartment in Kochukhet, so that he could live in close proximity to his office and can take a walk in the morning there. It also provided him with the opportunity to be there always on time, as he did not have to face regular traffic jams. When the office finally announced to him that his service is no longer required his contract would be terminated by December 2020, the first thing he did to save household expense was to give a notice to his landlord and shifted his home to Gabtoli- a far less expensive and lower-income neighborhood in Dhaka. Leaving behind a two-bedroom apartment with elevator and generator facilities and opting to live in a one-bedroom apartment with no elevator or generator was not an easy option. Yet it helped him to save a huge chunk of money from his monthly expenses, which for the first eight months after his dismissal from the previous office, he had to pay from his savings. Mazumdar has now established a small market research company along with some other people from his network. It is a very new venture and they have limited resources. If the company does not find enough

assignments to provide a good income, he will eventually have to shift to his ancestral village with his wife and daughter.

Joan, when she realized that her sister's husband would take more time than expected to return her money to her, knew that she and her dependent family members were in hot water. She and her family live in a building, where there are different kinds of apartments and there are multiple owners of different apartments. She knew that a three-bedroom apartment at that time was a luxury for them, given the fact that she was the only breadwinner for the family. She knew the landlord very well, as they are a long-term tenant. The landlord had another apartment in the same building, which was abandoned by the tenant during the pandemic. They could not pay the rent of the place. Therefore, one night, they left the apartment secretly, leaving most of their belongings. The landlord decided to rent that apartment anew by emptying all the furniture of the previous tenants. Joan knew that apartment's rent was lower than theirs due to its small size. Upon her request, the landlord agreed to rent her the smaller apartment. She saved 5,000BDT rent per month by shifting her family to a smaller apartment. Only recently, when her younger brother got married, did she again rent the three-bedroom apartment for themselves, where her brother too now contributes money.

Badsha made a different kind of adjustment to cope with the new normal situation. The apartment where he and his wife used to live in Bashundhara R/A belonged to a person, who was a senior colleague from his then office, as well as a senior person from his network in his university. Since Badhsa had no place to live and was looking for a place when he began that job, this person offered for him to stay in his apartment. The reason behind this generosity was that - the apartment was overall ready to live in, but the building was still under construction. Somehow the home owners did not agree upon something, due to which, the construction work was hampered and delayed. The person in whose apartment Badsha used to live - did not feel it safe to leave the apartment empty. But nobody wanted to be his tenant in a building where no other people lived. Therefore Badsha got lucky to have a free living place, as well as he had to take care of the apartment so that no outsider can trespass or ruin the property. But when employer started to lay off employees, this owner of the apartment became a victim of the mass dismissal. He did not want to go back to live in the rented apartment where he used to live before. He told Badsha to empty the apartment with his and his wife's belongings. Badsha too lost his job, but he found another one soon. He accepted the request of the senior brother and found

themselves a cheaper place to live in, in a different neighborhood that was closer to his new office.

5.3.4. Selling assets and breaking savings

This was something that most of the participants found to be the first and the easiest option to survive and to adapt to the new normal situation when regular income was hampered from different circumstances. Many of the participants even broke their FDR⁷ savings to have liquid money in their accounts to pay for household expenditures.

Mazumdar, when left his previous employers, were given a good amount of provident fund and gratuity since he had worked for that company for ten years. But being a financially smart person, he did some other arrangements, such as lowering the standard of living by switching the apartment to a poorer neighborhood to save some money. Yet, after a few months he had no other way but to take out money from his savings account to pay debts and house rent. One exception with others was that he had- he spent a good portion of his provident fund to build the apartment that was under construction prior to the COVID pandemic. After five months of his dismissal from the previous office, he started the construction work again. According to him, he had a feeling that this problem was not going to be solved overnight. So, better invest the provident fund in asset building and spend savings money for household expenditures.

Ashim's mother died during the first wave of COVID-19. She was the main breadwinner of the family after the retirement of Ashim's father. There was an obvious gap of net family income after the demise. In addition to that, the tenants of their building could not pay their monthly rent for quite a few months at that time. Due to humanitarian reasons, they could not force them to do that too. It left no other way for Ashim and his father but to take out liquid money from his mother's account to run the household expenses.

Tanvir, too had to spend his savings during his 11 months of unemployment in 2020. His job was gone and his wife is a stay-at-home mother- which makes him the sole responsible person to bear the household expenses. In the worst situation, he even had

⁷ A fixed deposit receipt (FDR) is a financial instrument provided by banks in Bangladesh which provides investors with a higher rate of interest than a regular savings account, until the given maturity date ("How to Invest Fixed Deposit Receipt - United Commercial Bank (UCB)," n.d.)

to sell his Toyota sedan to pay the house rent to his landlord and his wife's gold jewelry to pay his daughter's private school fees and other expenses.

Shiraj did not face any severe financial difficulty during his unemployment in the COVID-19 pandemic. The issue with him was, instead, that - he was afraid that if his parents came to know about his job dismissal, they would become sick. Given the fact that his father is a heart patient, he did not want to take any risk with that. To keep his image as the breadwinner of the family intact, he had to break his savings and keep giving money to his mother, so that his parents could not understand about his misfortune.

5.3.5. Making emotional requests to hold steady expenditures

When situations became very difficult, many people made emotional requests to the debtors and other service providers to withhold the regular rent or fees and to consider their situation for the time being. It bought them some time to solve the situation as well as to reduce stress and tension to catch up on payments.

Sumy, when found out after three months of the lockdown that the much desired development project that she was waiting to join was not going to be launched anytime soon, she felt that financial havoc was lurking behind the door. She knew that with pregnancy and a newborn on the way, they path will not be easy for her and her family. By that point, everybody knew about her panicking behavior towards any possibility of infection. But being a responsible tenant that she is, she made a request to her landlord that she might delay paying the rents from that point. She also stated that if the landlord wanted her to pay the rents monthly without delay, he had to decrease the rent for a while until she finds a new job. The landlord was not very happy about the arrangement. But he needed the money. He made a pact with Sumy that the moment she lands a job, she has to pay the full rent. He also mentioned that he only agreed to do this as a favor to her, since he knew her father was a good man, and her mother was always a nice lady.

Tanvir, on the other hand, had to make two different emotional requests: to his landlord, and his daughter's school authority. He requested his landlord to give him additional time to pay the house rent. His landlord was considerate and knew about his situation. He agreed to provide as extension. But it could not save him from harm. At last, he had to sell property to pay the six months of rent as the landlord at last threatened to

take their furniture and other household goods and file a police case against him if he did not pay the due rent. In addition to that, he also had to request his daughter's school authority to let her attend online classes, even if he delayed paying the school fees. Since Tanvir is Christian and the private school that his daughter attends is a missionary school, they considered Tanvir's misery. There were some other guardians too who were on the same boat as Tanvir. Though his daughter could attend all the classes and sat for exams, her results were not published until Tanvir cleared all the dues in the school fees account.

James's eldest sister, who used to treat James like her own son- died due to COVID-19, along with her husband. The couple left three children in the custody of James and his parents. They used to live in a good neighborhood in the Uttara region of Dhaka city, since all the three kids used to go to a renowned Bengali medium school at Uttara. When James and his parents completed all the formalities and the funerals were done for the husband and wife, there was another situation waiting for them. They did not know that the James' eldest sister's husband had loans to run his business. His debtors demanded money from the family. It was a huge amount. James' brother-in-law's family did not accept this loan. They neither offered money to pay the loan, nor did they accept any responsibility for the orphaned children, who, according to the patriarchal social system of Bangladeshi Muslim society, were the blood descendants of their son. At last, the family sold some furniture. Apart from the memory and emotional attachments, there was no other issue in that, since the kids were supposed to stay from then on with their maternal grandparents. But the family really wanted to keep the bank savings of the deceased father for children's future. Therefore, they sold the furniture to pay a good portion of the debt and then made emotional request to the debtors to forgive the rest of the money, since the kids were young and orphaned. People are not heartless. They considered the situation and showed kindness by forgiving rest of the debt, with good wishes for the children.

Jahir, too, had to request that his landlord consider his situation and provide additional time to pay the full house rent. He had money at that time, but did not want to break his fixed deposits due to the stoppage of the salary. He made a deal with the landlord that for five months, he would pay only the basic house rent, excluding service charges and other facilities. From the sixth month, he would pay the regular rent, as well as pay the due fees of service charges of previous months gradually. He was not sure

whether he would get a new job within five months or not. He just wanted to buy himself some additional time to search for jobs.

5.3.6. Using peer and family network to get a job

During the lockdown and the intermittent breaks of lockdowns throughout the years 2020 and 2021, the job market was pretty adverse for job-seekers. Not only were most companies busy reducing the number of employees, but also they stopped hiring new employees for the positions available as cost-cutting was the goal. Although many participants received invitations for job interviews, most of these experiences were not very pleasant. Hirers offered them a lot less salary than the positions should offer. In the participants' view who went through this kind of encounter, it was a result of the "less demand more supply" situation at that time. The hiring organizations needed to hire employees to do the official duties. They even lacked manpower, since they fired a lot of skilled employees to cut costs. But when they found that skilled people were getting fired from different organizations who needed jobs and these organizations needed skilled employees, they wanted to take advantage of people's misery. Many of the hiring organizations consciously offered a fraction of the actual salary for a position that they used to pay prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the job market was this tight and adverse for private sector employees, networking and referral became an ultimate recourse for job seekers. Everybody applied to the circulars published in newspapers, LinkedIn, BDJobs24.com and other platforms. But only those who had referrals from internal officials or somebody superior had a chance to get a foot in the door.

Tanvir lost his job and looked for jobs in different liaison offices and buying houses for the next years. This is his area of expertise, since from the beginning of his career he had been working in the readymade garments industry. The problem was that - his hirers offered him a fraction of his previous salary, which he found very disrespectful and pointless to sell his labor for as he is an experienced man in his industry. The other probable reason for his unemployed situation was that - he did not originally have a degree in supply chain management, textile engineering, or merchandizing, which many young professionals have these days in the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh. They get priority from HR managers. Whatever the reason was, normal applications to different

openings did not favor Tanvir's luck. After eleven months of unemployment, when his self-esteem almost hit the ground, he received a piece of news from a former colleague that a large India-based company's liaison office was going to open in Dhaka, and they were looking for experts in the area. His former colleague was also applying and he recommended Tanvir's name to his bosses, who were known to him from a previous deal. This way, Tanvir's luck changed for the first time in the year of 2020.

Mehbub saw the light in the dark tunnel in the same way. The airlines company for whom he was working in 2020 was drowning, and the employees were drowning too, along with their families. Mehbub was already doing food delivery part-time, along with the full-time designing job for the company. He sensed that he had to manage an escape for himself if he wanted to get paid. Since he had a good reputation in his previous company that produces fertilizers, he tried to knock on the doors of a few colleagues and senior people there, and told them about his situation. From their referral and trial, Mehbub was re-employed in that fertilizer company- even with a raise.

When Badsha's previous office was cutting the salary of the employees, it was already difficult for Badsha to continue that job. His salary was much lower than most of his colleagues from the same order. Yet, the job market in lockdown as very tight. Thinking of this, he used to gnash his teeth and continued his work. He had responsibilities to fulfill- sending money to his parents in the ancestral village and bearing expenses for his wife in Dhaka. But when the office began to dismiss the employees from job one by one, he knew that his time would come. The company began with firing the higher officials first, since the amount of salary that they are paid is higher than the medium-level and lower officials. But day by day it came down to the territory officers' level- to which, Badsha belonged himself. He was already requesting people from his known circle secretly to find a job for him. It was a secret request, since many of his colleagues from his former office also belonged to the same circle. Badsha's good networking skills saved him from a big danger, since the notice of his job dismissal came out of the blue. But, he remained unemployed only for a week. One of his contacts managed a job for him in a similar financial office and he joined there in no time.

5.3.7. Adjustments for home office

Adjustment to the new normal practice of performing official duties from home was a new adjustment for the Dhakaiya urban middle-class. Work-from-home was a brand new concept that was promoted and popularized during this lockdown period. But a noticeable difference between government and private-sector employees was that - work from home was almost a monopoly rule for private sector employees. Government service holders either went to the office (either regularly or on roaster duties), or just stayed at home and received their monthly salary. The reason that private sector employees had to abide by the work-from-home regulation was that - in most cases, it is their service that generates the revenue of the company, as well as their salary. Therefore, when companies promoted the rule and provided training for working from home, employees were eager to avoid commute to their offices, keep their service to the office and their salary as regular as possible. But it was not an easy adjustment. When a person is more accustomed to perform official duties from the office in-person, the need to work from the home environment is less ideal - which is why most people immediately felt the lack of an appropriate work environment in their home settings. The crisis was multiple: lack of internet facilities, non-stop electricity supply, limited access to office quality computers and webcams, lack of noise and interference-free environments and many more.

For many participants, the office provided them with a beginner-level training online to perform duties and to attend meetings on Zoom or on Google Meet. But for many employees who were not accustomed to using modern technologies - these trainings were not sufficient. Moreover, the office just provided the initial pieces of training but did not provide any subsidies or monetary support for other essential elements to perform official duties. The number one problem was load shedding- which is a regular phenomenon throughout Bangladesh that disrupts electricity supply, even in the capital city. Offices generally provide electricity during load shedding through private generators. But everybody cannot afford generators in their home. Therefore the ultimate solution was to keep devices charged all the time. If somebody got disconnected due to load shedding, they usually reconnected to attend important meetings or sessions through cell phone, since cell phones can hold charge for a longer time than laptops or desktops.

Similarly, disconnection from Wi-Fi routers comes hand in hand with load shedding. In those cases too, people bought mobile data with personal expenses to keep

themselves connected with rest of their office teams. Sometimes some offices provided a small subsidy to buy data packages. But these were rare cases, and in most of the times, insufficient compared to the demand. Many had to buy laptops and other gadgets to perform professional duties, and that too with their own money. Even after that, going to the mall and testing gadgets firsthand and bargaining with the retail sellers was a difficult task for people, since commuting was barred and shops were mostly closed. To find a solution for such problems, people took different initiatives. Some depended on second-hand cheaper deals in the Facebook marketplace to do official tasks. Commuting was not a big issue in these cases. To solve the Wi-Fi disconnection issue during load shedding, people bought mobile data packages with their own money, even if the office did not provide subsidy for that. Senior colleagues, who are generally not tech-savvy, learned so many tips and tricks from their young colleagues at this time over phone or messenger calls. It was necessary to learn to retain their jobs at that time. Junior colleagues too were kind and patient enough to discuss these technical matters with their seniors.

Newspaper articles and social media newsfeed shows that domestic violence and quarrels rose during the lockdown. There were many reasons for that. Participants from the community of interest for this study narrated their own experiences from the lockdown period to discuss how they faced familial difficulties to fulfill both household and official duties. When a person generally stays in office for the whole day, the other members of the family do not have expectations from that person to do household chores during the day time. But the same person, when he or she is performing official duties from home - family members generally do not count that as a professional task, and demand duties and services from that member. This has been especially true for female professionals who had to work from home during lockdown. Most of them generally send their children to their own mothers or mother-in-law's are while they attend office. But when the kids find that their mommy is not in the office but at home, they demand their time and attention by all possible means. Even the regular caregivers cannot divert the kids' attention from their mothers. In addition to that, family members demand that the female professionals have to cook for the family since they are at home, which hinders in their way of performing job duties. If the husband and the wife both worked from home in many cases, the female partners almost always faced male domination from their relationship structure. Even knowing that the wife too had work to do from home, the husband demanded that the wife had to take care of the kids as well as perform her professional tasks while he attended

his meetings. These orders in many cases were expressed with anger and impatience which ultimately resulted in domestic quarrels and violence. Overall, the idea of the 'second shift' for women was regenerated and realized anew by female professionals during work-from-home era of the pandemic.

In settings where colleagues generally have a competitive and corporate relationship as well as being generally hostile for women, showed a vast difference during the time of the pandemic. Colleagues were excused by one another for interference from their kids or other members and considered with respectfulness. These were all adaptive strategies practiced by people to save their own back, as well as others. People discussed in their narratives how they proposed from their end to start salary reductioned for all to the managers, so that nobody gets fired during the pandemic. When they could not stop that, they at least tried their best to be respectful and kind to each other. It was not similar situation for all to be able to manage more or less decent working environment at home and to provide similar attention and dedication to work from home. Yet, many of them kept it hidden from the higher managers and solved the issues with subordinates in private Zoom meetings., so that the subordinates would not become targets for the next dismissal. Moreover, living and working from home and even after that, staying at home mandatorily was entrapping for many, especially for outgoing people who used to have a colorful social life before. This entrapment at home, as well as other pressures and the fear of getting contaminated by the COVID-19 virus, were very distressing. People tried to adapt to the new situation by being helpful to each other in these different ways.

5.3.8. Managing physical pain and mental anxiety by different treatments

There were inevitable reasons for people to not feel well physically and mentally throughout the lockdown, as well as in the later period when the lockdown was not enforced, but the conditions and the ratio of contamination were the same or even higher than the actual lockdown. Staying at home for a long time without any face-to-face contact with people who are outside of immediate family, extensive usage of social media, living a domestic life day after day without face-to-face access to the outside world, fear of the unknown nature of the virus and the probable ways of getting infected, stress and fear towards the uncertain nature of income and above all life, sorrow for oneself and for other

and physical difficulties caused by sedentary indoor life and other reasons- these all - hampered people's well-being.

It is not that Dhaka has a reputation for being a very liveable city for people. Being heavily polluted by different environmental factors, traffic jams, corruption and a high crime rate, Dhaka offers very little as a peaceful place to its dwellers. Yet, people had their particular way of life in Dhaka. The middle-classes love to go to movie theatres, restaurants, amusement parks and to out-of-Dhaka tourist places and resorts for relaxation and tourism. Everything was shattered close from this lockdown. It took a huge toll on people's overall well-being.

Physical strains had various reasons to happen. From sitting with a bad posture hours after hours for office work at home, commuting to the office on a daily basis by bad transportation, being COVID-positive and suffering from resultant after-effects of COVID-19, taking care of COVID-positive patients from one's immediate family, to putting on weight due to the sedentary living situation - everything caused physical strain on people.

Thus, mental anxiety or depression, and sadness took place among people during this period. That included and being tense about the uncertain situation of the overall life, feeling sad for one's own misery as well as others' misfortune, stress caused by death and the management of health services from hospitals when needed, being alienated from one's social circles, and being hypercritical or being seriously criticized by family members for trivial reasons. It also included being drained out of energy due to workload of both home and office as well as from attending the office online way after the regular office hours, having the tension of finding employment or money sources to run regular expenses, and having quarrels or domestic fights with a spouse or other family members and many more.

Many participants in this study discussed their ways of coping with the physical and mental strains that happened during the pandemic and post-pandemic situation. One interesting finding was that - social media, especially Facebook in this case, became a vital source of news for people, since due to the aversion to touch, many people stopped reading newspapers at home. They opted for television or social media to keep up-to-date news of the country and the world. Along with Facebook, Netflix also was a preferable platform for the Dhakaiya middle-class to spend their time at home with relative ease. If

people chose Facebook as a source of news, they also used the app to pass time, like Netflix. It reduced stress and helped to keep family members peace between each other by passing time on movies and series.

Unlike Canada, People in Dhaka are to a large extent dependent on domestic workers and part-time house maids to do household chores for them. In many elite neighborhoods, the security members stopped outsiders from entering the neighborhood. In addition to that, letting someone enter the house during the time of a highly infective virus was a matter of fury for everybody. Since going outside was banned for the time being, many people took up the responsibility of cleaning and cooking instead of depending on domestic workers. It became their resource to keep themselves fit and to reduce stress. In many households, doing household chores together increased bonding between husband and wife.

Along with that, doing free-hand exercise and yoga were people's strategies to keep themselves distracted and fit for the lockdown time. Many of the participants told me about their poor physical conditions that were caused by the office workload and commute. Other family members in these cases helped them to recover by putting hot water bags on their wounded places and giving them massages at home to reduce pain. Many took over-the-counter painkillers and other pain-relieving medicines to manage their pains. One off the participants even ordered a chair online during the lockdown so that he could manage his back pain by ensuring a good posture.

Along with physical difficulties, mental stress, and strain were vital problems for many people during the pandemic. People generally opted for prayers and yoga to solve these-related problems. In addition to that, talking to one's family members during relaxation, chatting with unknown people over messenger app, listening to songs, watching movies and series, reading books, cooking food, baking cakes and posting photos on social media- all were strategies of people to reduce stress and to keep themselves mentally busy during the pandemic.

5.4. Conclusion

Dhakaiya urban middle-class people's help-seeking strategies and their proneness to manage their own problems by themselves demonstrated their independence on one

hand, and their distinction from the working class on the other, who are signified as the 'help-seeking class' by the political leaders and social services. Since they know the serious games around them, they play by the rules, and sometimes partially bend the societal rules for their sake. As social actors, their adaptive strategies to cope with the difficulties of lockdown life show them as 'knowing subjects', who are aware that they have to depend on their own ability to solve the problem- either with their bank savings, or with their possible network or by buying over-the-counter pain medications. Their adaptive strategies are various and innovative.

One of the research questions that I intended to find the answer for was- how are the urban middle-class coping with the new normal situation? Emerging themes suggested that despite the ignorance of the state and the bureaucracy towards their miseries, they were not entirely lone-fighters in this battle. Along with their own resources, they also took refuge from their wider social networks and peer groups for finding jobs, support and other resources. Seen with the lens of practice theory, it demonstrates that even if the overarching powerful sovereign does not provide help and support for a portion of the population, people, utilizing the societal and cultural practices, still find ways to survive. People are innovative, and they know how to find out loopholes in the system to survive, even when there is no support around. Practice theory demonstrates that finding these loopholes for survival is 'serious games', where people's survival struggles are the demonstration of their agency, against the structure. In addition to that, these social agents, through these survival attempts are - not harming or attacking the existing social norms directly, but are making adjustments to them. Their actions both reinforce the social norms (in this case, the government is still escaping from providing support and assistance for rehabilitation of the urban middle-class, since they are managing and innovating ways to support themselves) and re-shaping them (in this case, though started with small and individual steps, urban middle-class is extracting their personal network and resources for survival, which, in long term, may free them from looking up for support from the authority on one hand, and may generate more resentment and eventually might lead to a public revolt against the authority).

Chapter 6.

Reflections on COVID-19 experiences with the neoliberal 'conduct of conduct'

6.1. Introduction

In previous chapters, we saw the lived experience of precarity and sorrow by the urban middle-class of Dhaka city, as well as their reactions to the system and structure, as well as to the evolving situations. None of it quite depicts the explanation of the situation from their end. Any phenomenon can have multiple explanations from different stakeholders. Different stakeholders have different sides of a story, which, altogether, build up the discourse of a particular phenomenon. The pandemic and lockdown are such phenomena that have explanations from different stakeholders. Newspapers, social media, government, and experts explain the impact of the pandemic differently. Similarly, the urban middle-class of Dhaka city, who are the focus of this study- have their distinct explanations regarding their sufferings and reasons behind those sufferings. In this chapter, I will discuss the ways the community of interest sees and interprets their COVID-19 experience, as well as the factors that motivate them to view the COVID-19 experience in this way. It is an outcome of their neoliberal subject-hood, as well as the root of governmentality in people's psyche that together makes them interpret their precarious experience of COVID-19 the way they do it.

6.2. Causes of the suffering from participants' points of view

Upon analyzing the explanations and narratives of the participants, the possible causes that they find to be responsible for their sufferings are from a wide variety of ranges. They consist of:

6.2.1. Written in the Fate

Many of the participants impose the reason for their sufferings on their fate. It is because of their religiosity or being fatalist.

In particular, Muslim participants responded that Allah tests His dear servants by making them face difficult situations. In such cases, the more the servant remains calm and has faith in Allah's power to solve all problems, the bigger the award awaits him at the end. To many of the participants, lockdown and related problems with lockdown are one kind of test taken by Allah. It was written in their fate, which had made them stronger. Those who lost their dear ones during COVID-19 due to the virus contamination or for other reasons such as poor healthcare services in the hospitals or due to not receiving proper treatment on time- they too believed that somehow those people had their deaths written in their fate in that way. I am stating this based on my interactions and conversations with some of my participants. Three of my participants for this study had immediate family members who died during the lockdown, directly or indirectly due to the pandemic. All of them stated that though the COVID infection and other prior complications were the apparent reasons of their family members' death, it was their fate that was the main reason. According to Islamic ideology, people are born on this earth with a pre-determined lifespan, decided by the God. When that time is up, people have to go back to their creator, and the death takes place in one way or another). Thus, a big portion of the community of interest interprets their ill fate from a fatalistic point of view.

6.2.2. Policies and decisions made by employers

Many of the participants, who were victims of financial trauma due to loss of employment during the pandemic period- held the harsh policies of the companies responsible for that. In their view, their organizations had policies that were not considerate of the employees, who helped to make a profit. That is why, even at the initial stage of the pandemic, many companies began cutting salaries and employment of their regular employees. Many of the participants believed that their employers could have reduced their sufferings by offering the deserved amount of money at the end of their employment as was promised in their recruitment contracts. In two cases, the employer organization was already at a loss. The lockdown for COVID-19 allowed them to shut the company without prior notice and deprive the employees of their rights. The fact that they did not make any such attempt and tried to get casually rid of the employees during the pandemic proves that they had no such interest. They only thought about the company's profit, not about the families of the employees. Therefore, the financial hurdles of the

people were mostly caused by the policies and rapid decisions made by the owners of companies.

6.2.3. Nature of their professions

People who were financially at a loss due to the pandemic - were mostly those people who work in the private sector. Government employees received their whole amount of salary on a regular basis throughout the lockdown. During the fieldwork, I did not put any boundary between government and private sector employees to participate in this study. But along with other kinds of losses, experience of financial loss was also mentioned in the description of the project to potential participants. Due to the reception of full salary on a regular basis throughout the lockdown period, government employees did not experience the drastic changes in their financial well-being in this time frame. This is one of the two reasons that no government employees participated in this study. The other reason is that - when somebody holds a position in the government, he has official restrictions to participate in such studies which is led by a non-government entity. In this case, it was clearly mentioned in the consent form and the recruitment advertisements that although for academic research, this study was being conducted by a student in a foreign university and is being supervised by foreign researchers. These are the reasons that no government employee urban middle-class participants were included for this study.

People who are in the police force, as well as government-employed doctors- went through serious risks in terms of physical harm in long and short terms however. Private sector employees experienced severe financial and health risks during this period, for which- no reimbursement was offered in general. Nevertheless, people who went through such experiences from private sector jobs recognize this as the nature of their employment. In many of their views, the lack of social security and insurance are part and parcel of private sector jobs. Since they are offered more salary than government employees, their policy is to save more money on their private initiatives for rainy days. The pandemic was an unanticipated incident, which caught them off-guard.

6.2.4. The structural limitations of Dhaka City

Dhaka City's structural limitations in providing civic facilities to its total population is also held responsible by a lot of participants from the community of interest. People who

had to travel to their offices during the pandemic - were often bound to use public transport. Public transport - despite the attempts from the government, was not kept COVID-safe during the lockdown. Initially, people were very afraid and adhered to the standard rules and regulations to protect themselves from the virus. Gradually, they discovered that only sitting at home was the safest measure to protect themselves from COVID-19. But ultimately many still had to leave for their workplaces. When a lot of people try to reach workplaces at the same time using public transport, eventually the physical distancing and safety rules necessary for COVID-19 protection become compromised. Ultimately, physical distancing- which was known to be the most important rule of COVID-19 protection became the least followed, and people generally depended on using facemasks, face shields, hand sanitizers, head covers, and low-quality PPE to protect themselves in a public setting.

Similarly, structural limitations were seen in hospitals and clinical settings, banks, and other offices. Bangladesh, as well as Dhaka, were not prepared for fully-equipped online settings to allow people to work from home, to do their groceries without touch, or to do banking without physically going to the ATM booth or bank branches. People could not follow the health instructions properly, even if they wanted to do so. Ultimately it added more misery to their fate, ranging from illness to the services that they get by depending on other people in the society.

6.3. The interpretations and realizations of people from the lockdown experience

People's realizations and interpretations of the suffering and experiences of the COVID-10 situation and the resultant lockdown can be categorized into a few categories:

Firstly, they now have the realization that no employee is essential for an organization. Many of the participants, in their narratives, described how their roles and duties were valued by their higher authorities in their respective offices. In the end, their good reputation could not save them from losing work. Priority was given to saving expenditure from annual budgets to avoid loss, instead of losing valuable employees. In all the cases, they inquired with their former employers, only to find out that the office managed to get their jobs done by somebody else- either in the very same office or in a different regional office in Asia. It has generated a realization among the participants that

can give one hundred percent dedication to their profession. Yet, their need as an employee can always be fulfilled by another. Thus, employment is not secured even after full dedication and validation from the authority.

Secondly, for such an unprecedented danger like the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, the urban middle class of Dhaka city is not prepared. For the last few years, it has been observed that the urban middle-class' living standard has risen to a higher level due to the good earnings from private sector employment income. This includes spending on foreign tours, buying luxury smartphones, going to local expensive resorts for a family outing, and many more. Given the context that government employment has always been highly valued in Bangladesh, this lavish lifestyle of private sector employees draws a sharp contrast. Everything was shattered after COVID-19, when government employees received their regular salary throughout the time, and private sector employees had to compromise in terms of financial well-being. Since the pension and other long-term plans for private sector employees are not as stable as the government sector, they tend to save money in their private bank accounts for rainy days. The lockdown has made people realize that neither their savings nor high salary is good enough to tackle an unprecedented danger like the COVID-19 pandemic. If the head of the household remains unemployed for a year, then the savings in the bank always seem inadequate, as nobody knows when the main breadwinner will again get a job that will provide a similar amount of cash flow.

Thirdly, the urban middle class has an enchantment with life in First World countries, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, or Western European countries, as they believe that these countries provide better life security to their citizens and residents than Bangladesh. Yet some people are aware of the fact that lots of people died in Italy and the rest of Europe during the first outbreak of COVID-19 through newspapers and social media. This particular social class has close and distant relatives living in Europe and North America, with whom they are connected through different means, and heard about the situation in those countries when COVID hit the ground. The comparison was more or less similar to the Dhakaiya setup, except the fact that physical distancing was enforced very strictly in the global North, which was not possible in the global South, such as- in places like Dhaka due to the lived reality (Bhan et al. 2020). Yet, people from the urban middle class tend to think that their suffering would have been less if they were in a developed country. There are stories that they shared with me during interviews. Some of

them are heard from their relatives living abroad. One participant told me that she heard that the Canadian Prime Minister was distributing food for Iftar among Muslims in Ottawa when physical distancing was enacted and people could not go out to do their groceries. It inspired her a lot to pack her bag with her family and go to Canada to live there. This is just one example. But overall, the urban middle class has somehow lost its faith in its government, and its system of society and believes that anywhere else in this world would be better to start all over and get something good in life. Lamia, one of my participants for this study, says

“My husband’s elder sister lives in Sweden with her family. When I was being threatened by the workers of the buying house where I used to work as the HR, my life was miserable. On one hand I had been always stressed out about my mother’s illness, on the other hand, these workers held me and my team as responsible for their miseries, whereas we were making no decisions regarding their job dismissals. We were just sending the notices approved by the authority. I used to break down and cry after coming back to home, while describing these situations to my husband. His sister heard about my situation from him and my mother-in-law. Comparing to me, she was living in a dreamland. Life was not easy for them too, since there were restrictions to move or travel. But both she and her husband were working from home, getting groceries and other supplies from online shopping and were protecting themselves from negative working environment and contamination. She is also a HR officer for an office, just like me. But her life is totally different from ours. Since then, she has been encouraging us to move abroad and start a new life there. I and my husband are also giving it a consideration.”

Fourthly, the urban middle class believes that prestigious degrees from prestigious institutions cannot ensure financial security for one after the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned earlier, this particular class has a fascination for administrative jobs, has strong distaste for menial labor or mechanical work and is very much aware of its higher social status. The urban middle class category of today was planned by the British colonial government, where they consciously crafted the ideals and standards of this class for the support of the British government. From the British colonial period to day, even if skilled workers in different mechanical jobs make much more money than the administrators or desk job holders, the middle class will consciously avoid those jobs and will stick to their class conscious notions of a high status position in the society (Joshi 2017). The aspiration to become a white-collar job-holder brings with it a lot of investment from parents’ end. When a potential portion of society wants their children to become white-collar job-holders, it is evident that there will be a lot of competition for this kind of job, as well as an

abundance of supply of potential employees. Thus, these potential employees have to obtain expensive university degrees, especially in business and technology fields to make themselves compatible for the job market. There are strong reasons to believe in such prestigious degrees. Apart from three prime public universities, there are two or three private universities, whose credentials are considered under initial selection by most of the HR officers. If any candidate comes from some other institutions apart from these few, their resumes are not even reviewed by the selection board for interviews. Nevertheless, this pandemic has changed people's approach towards prestigious degrees in a few months. Now most of them assert that even these degrees, which are expensive as well, cannot guarantee people's job security when there is national distress. Nor they can ensure people's re-employability in a different organization after they lose their job. Prestigious degrees can only provide some advantages during regular recruitment. Other than that, they have no additional value.

Fifth, people have re-realized the true value of their family as the ultimate unit for an emotional support system. This realization came as a result of the detachment from the wider social network and the peer groups for the sake of social distancing. Once people find that there is nobody there to take care of them when they are sick or not feeling well except their immediate family, they understand that individual's life matters only to a close circle, with whom they share an intimate bond. Of course, there are differences and arguments over so many things among family members. Even in some cases, lockdown gave birth to newer family arguments and quarrels among spouses and among other family members. Yet people realized that during this stressful period, from providing financial and mental support to work as the caregiver for the COVID patient in the family- it is the family members who put the other family members' well-being over their own. Stories range from taking care of an ill mother and sister who were COVID patients during the pandemic, being extra cautious in limiting household expenses due to a husband's salary cut to having phone calls regularly from a non-resident Bangladeshi elder sister living in the US to cheer up her younger brother- in all cases, people acknowledged the valuable contribution of family members in their lives. In their narratives, family is like Oxygen before: they realized the existence of this Oxygen only when helplessness and misery began to suffocate them.

Sixth, the urban middle class re-realized the importance of saving money and buying assets. Many participants asserted that they wished they did not spend money the

way they used to in the pre-COVID era and were more thoughtful in making monetary decisions. In their depictions, less-thoughtful monetary decisions that they made in the past included spending unnecessary amounts of money for village relatives' gifts on Eid, eating too much in expensive restaurants, planning holidays once a year abroad and once in countryside and so on. In most participants' point of view, they never thought that something like COVID-19 could occur in Bangladesh that could cause them so much misery. If they knew, they would have prepared themselves strongly to face the situation. In the answer to the question of what or in which ways they think they would have prepared themselves better for the lockdown and the pandemic situation, people answered mostly two options- one, saving lots of liquid money; and two, buying gold and other assets as a preparation. For some, the first one seems to be a more convenient way to safeguard themselves in such a situation, since to convert gold or assets into liquid money during the time of a disaster, one has to sell it first, which is, sometimes difficult to do during a period like the lockdown.

Finally, there is a realization that was emphasized several times by the male participants in this study, which is that - if a man cannot earn and provide, his masculinity is heavily devalued. It is not like these men's masculinity was questioned by their wives, immediate family members or the wider society. It is a feeling that they constantly felt themselves during their financial situations in the lockdown and post-lockdown time. There is rarely any validating incident or case found to support this realization of urban middle class men. But it is an embodied feeling of low self-esteem that they felt through their unemployment situation. Female participants did not feel this loss of their gender identity while going through such a situation, but men did. This is due to the societal gendered division of labor ideology that teaches men to be the financial provider, while women to be dependent. Even if men provide for the family, that is an obvious role of the man, but women who become financial providers for their families, their roles are highly valued in their families.

6.4. Formation of neo-liberal personhood and the internalization of the regime of psychic governmentality

When I was going through the field findings for this study and the similar patterns began to come forward about participants' own interpretations and explanations of their

situations, the first thing that came to my mind was the repeated denial of the role of government and other powerful decision-makers and the continuous taking up of the responsibility of their suffering on their own shoulders (although COVID was not an outcome of individuals' shortcomings). This reflects a particular pattern of subjectivity, which has long been discussed and debated in critical theory and social science, of the neoliberal subjects. Neoliberal subjects have a pattern of subjectivation where they internalize the state-led 'conduct of conduct' to advance and help themselves to grow and prosper (Tie 2011). In his article on neoliberal government and personhood, Warwick Tie discussed the formation of and the premises of the formation of neoliberal subjectivity by drawing different perspectives of the same process discussed earlier by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek and Louis Althusser. He also shed light on the role of 'Uncanny', as discussed by Sigmund Freud to elucidate the incitement of some uncanny in the neoliberal subjects who self-regulate to become better and revised subjects of the state. In Freudian discourse, 'uncanny' is a creepy, terrifying emotion attached to a social incident, material or phenomena- that is generally unknown to the people, yet somehow it feels familiar (Freud and Strachey (translator) 1957). The uncanny feels so familiar to people, as they personally do not know this matter or phenomena that generates uncanny feeling, but somehow they have always known or have heard about uncanny that took place with somebody else in the contemporary society, or with their ancestors.

In my analysis, I find two kinds of 'uncanny' that regulate the urban middle-class' self-accusation for all their bad luck and vulnerable experiences, as well as in turn, make them self-regulatory and self-helping citizens of the state. One is- their fear that they might lag behind in the rat race of the job market and be deemed as less competent and complaining. The other is- their fear that if they point their fingers at any particular powerful authority, the well-being of themselves and their families might be at risk. I will discuss these two uncanny and why in particular this urban middle class has such fears. But before that, it is necessary to discuss the process of subject formation and how psychic governmentality operates by utilizing an individual's attachment to other persons. We have to keep in mind that an individual cannot become a subject unless he has a passionate emotional attachment to some other people in the society (Butler 1997). Their fear of losing these people generates a 'bad consciousness' among them, helps the external coercing power to become internalized by them, inculcates the fear of losing their dear ones (the uncanny), and ultimately, their subjectivation takes place in effect.

The question is: who are the subjects, and how does the subjectivation process take place irrespective of different generations and time? Michel Foucault held responsible 'the discursive productivity of the subject' as the reason for individuals' subjectivation. Louis Althusser called it 'interpellation' (Butler 1997). In both discussions, it means the inculcation of a particular idea into the psyche of the society's people in such a way, that people begin to consider that idea as their own and refrain from challenging that. It happens through referring somebody with a particular term or name, by repeated discussions among social individuals of that idea through different engagements; that is through discourse. In this way, the idea achieves social acceptance through different generations. Slavoj Žižek, in his discussion on the legal system of the sovereign, shed light on this idea and how it is appropriated to achieve the 'beyond question' status of the legal rules that are applied on subjects' lives. These rules, through interpellation, achieve such a status that people start to believe that they are not man-made standards; instead, they are natural law (Tie 2011). In this way, individuals learn about social rules and their inevitability. Judith Butler anchors the theory of power and theory of psyche together to explain how the coercive power of the sovereign takes the form of a psychic power to penetrate into an individual's psyche and to make them devoted and obedient subjects. Her theory is more about understanding the psychic game of the subjectivation process, unlike Žižek's model of legal system analysis.

Butler, in her re-reading of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser's theories of subjectivation, elaborates the idea of conjoining the theory of power and the theory of psyche together to explain the whereabouts of an individual's subjectivation process. When Michel Foucault presented his famous idea that individuals become subjects through the 'discursive productivity of language', Butler found the gap in Foucault's framework in this particular place where Foucault describes the process of subjectivation, but does not quite explain the mechanism (the mechanism of power, which is, essential for subjectivation) through which this process takes place. In their narrative, the coercive power of the sovereign takes the form of psychic power and penetrates an individual's psyche. It creates a 'false consciousness' or 'bad consciousness' in an individual's mind about himself. In this way, the individual chooses the master's consciousness as his own consciousness, turns into a devoted subject and the subjectivation process takes place (Butler 1997). Butler also explains the existence of resistance in subject's psyche, even after becoming subordinated by the coercive power of the sovereign. Butler's model of

psychic power of governmentality has been adopted by George Gonzalez to explain the consumer culture and consumer nature of Americans as a religious creed where he shows that American religious history has long been used by the motivational marketing figures to encourage consumers to keep on consuming and keep the balls of capitalism rolling (Gonzalez 2021).

The reason I find Judith Butler's theory of psychic subjectivation appropriate to explain the psychology of the Dhakaiya urban middle-class is that - it leads me as a researcher to the next node of analysis- why these people from the community of interest deem other factors responsible for their pain and sufferings but not the government, whereas it is evident that it is the system and the mismanagement of health service, the non-existence of private sector employee benefits, failure of the insurance of safety and security by the administration and what not by the government- that are responsible primarily for their miseries. It leads me to finding the explanation of this behavioral and psychic pattern in the concept of "the art of government" or "the conduct of conduct" (Michel Foucault et al. 1991). It is the governing pattern of the neoliberal government, where it wants its subjects to self-regulate and condition their behavior by themselves in such a way, that will ease the governing protocol and activities of the neoliberal government (Tie 2011). It is easier to do than to explain since subjects already occupy the mindset of the master aka the government about themselves. But to explain the reasons that subjects who belong to the urban middle-class do not hold the government responsible, I will discuss the Freudian idea of 'the uncanny' and how it regulates the urban middle-class psyche.

How Sigmund Freud depicted the idea of 'uncanny' reflects very well how a mode of governance regulates its subjects. In Freudian explanation, 'uncanny' is a frightening effect of an unknown object or power (Tie 2011). But it is not comparable to belief in just any supernatural power. In Warwick Tie's explanation, 'uncanny' is faith or belief in that special supernatural power or fact, that people have not experienced by themselves. Yet, they have immense faith and fear in it, since they bear the uncanny's 'residue of experience' in their memory (it is because their ancestors experienced 'uncanny' in the past, or at least, they heard so). There exists an immense sense of threat in the subject's memory regarding the 'uncanny'. Freud also highlighted that this uncanny can generate a repressed psychological complex in the subject's psyche and regulate their behavior.

When I mentioned previously that the urban middle class of Bangladesh do not hold the government responsible for their irony and misfortune, I find multiple factors that work behind such psychology of not holding anybody responsible for their misery.

Firstly, neoliberal governance always spreads and promotes 'the conduct of conduct'. Since Bangladesh's governing system follows the model of neoliberalism (Muhammad 2015; Nuruzzaman 2004), in all kinds of infrastructure and work models, the neoliberal code of conduct is inculcated in subjects' psyche, where they are taught that self-regulation and self-development are the only key to success and to remain relevant and compatible in the market. People learn and begin to believe that individual's success is only at the individual's hands, no external factor has any impact on individual's personal success. In addition to that, they also learn to believe that complaining about the system makes them incompatible with the market. They learn that no question should be asked and no allegation should be thrown upon the system. Instead, individuals should shape themselves to fit in the system. If you lack any particular qualification, try to achieve that, and you will eventually win. Everybody is so busy making themselves compatible and hireable in the market that ultimately, they become docile bodies of the state and remain silent. In this study, I find the reflection of neoliberal governance and the self-regulating subject's psyche among the urban middle class, which is the class of people who remain under immense social pressure to attain white-collar jobs after graduation in government and private sectors, especially the male population. Their vital learning from their habitus is that - if they want to remain relevant and competent, they should not challenge the system, but rather shape themselves per the system. This is the reason that even in such an extreme situation like the pandemic and the maltreatment by the state, they stick to their cultural learning and do not hold the sovereign responsible for their misery.

Secondly, the fear of 'uncanny' is also largely responsible for their overall indifference to and, silence about the system. Uncanny can be of different sorts. In this case, this is the untold fear of state-led violence and enforced disappearance led by the state. In a previous study, I studied people's narratives about different rumors that are popular and widely accepted by the general masses in Bangladesh⁸. One of the widely

⁸ This study I conducted back in 2015 based on secondary sources. The rumors and hoaxes that were considered for that study were about different social incidents in Bangladesh that generated waves across the nation. Ranging from the disappearance of famous political leader of the

accepted narratives is that there is a special branch of the police force in Bangladesh that works for the government. But their operations are not like the regular police. Whenever government intelligence suspects somebody that this person is doing something that may hamper the peace and harmony of the country, spreading any news, or taking any action that may go against the government- a few people who are a part of this special force and do not wear the official police uniform, they unanimously go to that suspected person's house to capture him. Sometimes, another force of Bangladesh police named as RAB (Rapid Action Battalion) is also held responsible for most disappearances of citizens. They do not even need any warrant to arrest a person. There is no record of such arrests in the regular police stations. It is repeatedly reported and accused by the relatives and family members of the suspected victim that they went to their local police stations for further inquiry for their missing family member and got refused by the police personnel in the police station that they were not aware of any such police operation to anybody's house. Afterwards, the suspected person sometimes returns to his family after interrogation. But in most cases, he does not. Whether they live, or die- nobody knows. Their bodies are never handed over to their families. In Bengali, this kind of disappearance of people led by police without the uniform is called 'Goom' (meaning 'enforced disappearance').

Rumors are known as partial truth. But they extract some of their elements from real experiences of people. People who came back from such enforced disappearances, described their interrogation experiences, but could not reveal the identity of the interrogators. These partial descriptions gave birth to the rumor of state-led violence on disobeying subjects. This fear of state-led violence or disappearance is one kind of 'uncanny', which people did not experience by themselves, but have heard that their previous generation did, or somebody else from the society did, which has an impact on their psyche, as well as their practices. Urban middle classes do not complain against the state system, since it can be detrimental for themselves and their families.

Finally, there is another crucial factor that restrains the urban middle class of Dhaka from speaking of the violation of their rights and their financial and personal miseries to people who are not their immediate family members, and this factor is- the cultural idea of 'urban emotional common sense' (Ramos-Zayas 2012, p. 3). I have borrowed this exact term from Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, which she used to describe the

opposition party to the existence of a child's dead body in a deserted well- this study also focused on the existence of uncanny among people's psyche.

portrayal of African American women in the eyes of other US-born Latino women and Latino migrant women, whose gaze towards the African American women has been shaped by the neoliberal market economy's corporate and managerial views. Along with the neoliberal corporate retail settings, these US-born Latino women and Latino migrant women consider African American women as not quite fit enough for upward cultural mobility. It is because neoliberal society has a set of 'meta-sentiments', which set standards or scales for people. People learn from these sets of meta-sentiments that what to feel, and what not to feel, that is, what kind of individual to be and what kind of individual not to be. Overall, Ramos-Zayas' proposition about this whole social situation is that - neoliberal social system wants to shape a particular kind of individuals, whose emotions they want to regulate. Ramos-Zayas calls it 'neoliberal personhood', and she also claims that in such situations, the social psychology of individuals are being shaped by the market system, race is psychologized and affect is racialized (Ramos-Zayas 2012).

Although Ramos-Zayas talked about a society which is more culturally diverse and more centrally located in the neoliberal system, this kind of social psychological shaping is not novel for Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka's setting. I am not associating the idea of psychologizing race, or racializing affect, but the shaping of emotional behavior, to teach a person in a particular situation what to feel and what not to feel, to set an ideal or to lead people to be a particular kind of individuals – these processes all take place for the urban middle-class in Dhaka city, the basis of which is that - somebody's financial or personal failure should be kept hidden, since it is shameful to make it a matter of discussion in public. The urban middle-class have to keep up a particular kind of status quo. From this class, even if somebody is broke, they cannot shift down to lower-level housing or neighborhood; or, cannot just ask for help from the society and social services; or, cannot be a receiver of micro credit to change their situation; or, even cannot let wider family and their colleague network to know of their hardships. It is shameful, it is very belittling. There is a face value of the middle-class, which is that - they are socially stable, financially affluent and a high status group. Sharing their misery with outsiders can pull them down. The 'urban emotional common sense' (Ramos-Zayas 2012, p. 3) teaches them not to share their situation with anyone, not to bring shame to the individual and family members. This is something that is very important to the core of their middle class identity, and a very crucial reason that the urban middle class do not hold any particular stakeholder to

be responsible for their misery, or they do not want to ask for help and support from the authority.

6.5. Conclusion

In my original research statement, I proposed a research question to be investigated, which was whether the sufferings and miseries of the urban middle class in Dhaka city a result of the necropolitics of the state or not. With time, more exposure to the field and the community of interest, I came to change this question. In the revised version, I leaned more to learn about their own interpretations of their embodied experiences. It happened for a reason. When I crafted my original research question, I had a presumption that state is intentionally jeopardizing the lives of the urban middle class by forcing them to perform their duties in this distressed period, or not providing enough social support for them to survive. But ultimately the worst sufferers of this pandemic and pandemic-led lockdown were the people of the grass-roots level, who neither had bank savings, nor had way to distance themselves physically from others to safeguard themselves from the contagion. The only upper hand that the lower-income people had in this pandemic was that - they were the known vulnerable group of the lockdown, who had different resources to seek help from, and people, structure, organizations - all were sympathetic to them. Such is not true for the middle class, especially the urban middle class. Observing their nature and having more understanding of the community of interest, I rephrased my research question to understand their own interpretations, where one of the central theme was- whom do they hold responsible for their sufferings?

Apparently, most people from the community of interest were confused to understand the inner meaning of this question. After rephrasing and explaining it to them, most of them looked confused, as if, they never thought about this before. Who is responsible for their suffering? It is easier to hold God responsible since He does not come to ask you questions. The religion says that all earthly difficulties are examinations of God. If people endure them with patience and grace, eventually they will achieve the satisfaction of God, which, in turn, will reward them in life after death. In the religion of Islam (which is the religious creed in which most of these people believe), the after-death reward or success is more important than this-worldly successes. It influences people's thoughts and actions. But the evidence was people's fear, or avoidance of talking about the authorities, or the ignorance of their rights – stop them from pointing their fingers at

anybody, be it the organization, the industry, or the authority of the sovereign. This led me to the analysis of neoliberal subjectivation and the shaping of neoliberal personhood.

Subjectivation is a part and parcel of modern human life. It is so obvious and such an important mechanism that it becomes a part of our habitus and how we become the managers of ourselves, as well as others of our families- we often un-see that. These cultural learnings of the habitus too are the reason that we learn to fear the uncannies of our social surroundings. For example - most young women in Bangladeshi settings (irrespective of all religious creeds) are strictly encouraged to maintain a modest dress code when going outside. The fear of the uncanny that works behind this social psychological shaping is that the not-so-modest dress of an attractive woman can bring chaos to the society, and eventually can lead to the violence, and the victim-blaming of the society and the defamation of the victim's family. This is not a social experience that the practitioner of modest dress and its propagators may have first-hand, but they learn about such incidents from newspapers, from peer groups, from neighbors, since some people of the society have been through such a traumatic experience. It also indicates how the law-enforcing system is not active enough in society, and people shape their behavior to avoid unanticipated dangers, to avoid pointing fingers at the law-enforcing agency and the government - dress modestly, and do not regret later.

A thorough analysis of people's interpretations of their miseries seemed important to me for this research, because it leads to the analysis of the community of interest's silence regarding other social problems and helps better understand the nature of the state. It is possible that to revive from the trauma of the COVID-19 and such other experiences, many victims of the community of interest need counseling and discussions, instead of financial loans or support, which the structural system considers as the only remedy for the problem. The self-regulatory or self-managing mechanism of the neoliberal agenda, at least in this case, caught the urban middle class of Dhaka city off-guard in solving their own problems by themselves.

Conclusion

In this study, I began my journey to explore the answers of research questions that are central to this research: what were the urban middle class people's experience of lockdown and COVID-19 in Dhaka city and how did they experience precarity; How did these people adapt and adjust to the new normal situation in their lives and how do these people analyze and interpret their own experiences of sufferings and misery. After all data synthesis and analysis, I found that the urban middle class' losses from the pandemic and the COVID-19 are diverse - some grievable, quantifiable and widely discussed, while some are non-grievable, not quantifiable and not accepted as a topic of discussion in public as a 'loss', which are more 'affective' in nature. I also found that this group of people managed a wide variety of ways to adapt and survive in their time of distress- from financial surviving to coping up with back pain for long hours - and all of these they did by themselves, with more or less help from their peer groups and network. Finally, their own reflections and interpretations of their COVID experience show their neoliberal self-shaping subjectivity as well as their fear of the uncanny, shaped by the state. By analyzing the urban middle class' experience and behavioral approach towards the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant exposure to the sufferings, this thesis shows that how the impacts of COVID-19 have been so vivid and adverse in both short and long term even for a potentially stable class of people in the South Asian society. Arguably, because apparently all of the participants in this study had liquid savings to cope up with the situation initially, which people from the working class and grass-roots level do not have, the latter are truly the worst sufferers of the pandemic by all means, who are utilized by the state in the practice of necropolitics).

For this work, I adopted a multi-method qualitative approach for this study. One of the reasons was to grab a hold of the reality of people's lives from the community of interest in a short period and through more focused methodologies to gather data. At the same time, the acceptance of participants' freedom to choose the location and times of interaction for research assisted me in interacting with them when they were most at ease and comfortable while talking with a stranger like me, instead of a set environment and recordings where corporate qualitative studies generally take place. All I expected initially from my approach was to listen to the stories of people - stories of their survival and challenges, stories of grieving people for the losses faced and trying to heal from them.

What I came to listen to and learn from them was much more- I learned about the affective sides of the pandemic losses, which are never listed in the newspaper or television. I came to learn about people's power of overcoming all obstacles and finding ways in the darkness.

An interesting observation that I could not overlook from this fieldwork engagement was that - before all my interactions with the potential participants, I made it sure that they know of my, as well as this project's intentions thoroughly and the possible usages, exposure and the storage procedures of the data gathered about them for this research. Yet I found that a majority of the participants ultimately intended and came to participate in this research to learn about the know-hows of coming and settling to Canada from me, since I am an international student in a Canadian institute and the names of my supervisory committee members (who have foreign-sounding names in Bangladeshi context) were mentioned in the consent forms. Networking purpose was a main interest for many of my participants. Their keen interest to leave Bangladesh for good and become a part of the diaspora community in North America gives an interesting insight- even being a part of the majority ethnic group and one of the most privileged classes in the domestic context, people have discontented feelings towards their social situation and standing. From my interactions, I have seen that even many Canadians are not happy with the social standing and the services provided by their country and they think that life somewhere else would be better. But the recent flow of migrants from Bangladesh to Canadian territories (and given the fact that this flow includes even very high-level professionals from different sectors, who belong to the urban middle class section) asserts that 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) of foreign life has hit really hard among this community. This research clearly illustrates pandemic-led precarity experience of the urban middle class, but also raise research concerns for migration and diaspora studies.

'Loss' or 'suffering' bears different meanings to the victims and to other people, who do not put their feet into victims' shoes. What a victim of the pandemic from the urban middle class feels as a loss, such as the loss of motivation to work dedicatedly for long-term improvement of career, might not be considered as a loss at all by other people who did not go through a sudden discharge from employment. In such cases, even re-appointment of the victim in a similar scale of position or setting too might not heal the scar. The victim may overlook the limitations of the system or the maltreatment or discrimination done to him. Instead, he may look introspectively to find out his

shortcomings and the rationale behind the treatment that he got. It can lead to a long-term lack of self-esteem for a person. This kind of situation needs mental health counseling for the victim to ease the pain and find motivation again. Unfortunately, on one hand, mental health care is not considered an important aspect of the healthcare of the citizens, and on the other hand, even the necessary physical healthcare support is scarcer than needed.

Pandemic victims are trauma victims of different levels. Even after the loss of employment, most of the participants in this study somehow found ways to get back on their professional tracks. But the same is not true for those participants who went through the loss of family members, or the sufferers of domestic violence who are still living together with their abusive partners (we all know, not all abuse are physical abuse). People can get mental health counseling from paid resources, or some charity organizations. But receiving counseling bears the social stigma of mental health problems, or 'madness' from the peer groups. Perhaps if the donor organizations or the government want to support the rehabilitation of the pandemic victims, trauma counseling can be made free and available for them at local level. But if it comes to encouraging people to receive counseling, that is a different story. People need to discuss their problems with somebody, which they do not realize. Somehow breaking the social stigma regarding counseling needs to be broken through media and root-level health care providers.

This thesis is a focused discussion on urban middle class's precarious lives in the pandemic context. Given the realizations that they generated during interactions, their lives are precarious from other aspects too. Compared with similar level government employees, private job holders and small entrepreneurs stand on quicksand in terms of social security. The urban environment, the limitations of all resources and the day-to-day struggles to run daily activities- all make their lives more precarious and like a sponge: people absorb all the affective impacts of these daily hurdles and repression. To better understand an important implication of this study which is- that the urban middle class is actually a glorified 'stable social class', which in reality they are not - future studies can address the other uncertainties that this particular class of people faces in their daily lives, even when there is no overarching factor like the pandemic. From my view, it can be focused on professional women's struggles and affective labor in the Bangladeshi Muslim-majority patriarchal settings, the increasing price of housing and real estate, and the precarious status stability of the urban middle class, the precarity of the urban middle class

in terms of getting healthcare in the neoliberal social settings of Bangladesh and many more.

I have already discussed in the literature review of this thesis that I want to fill the gap about the particular community of interest through this study. In the context of South Asia, there have been quite a few studies that focused on the miseries and sufferings of South Asian people in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Rasul et al. 2021; Hasan 2022; Sifat et al. 2023; Sohel et al. 2021). But none of them focused on the urban middle class in the Bangladeshi context. Given the different types of city escapes and the nature, culture, and exposure of inhabitants, Bangladeshi urban settings are different from other megacities in South Asia under consideration, such as Mumbai, New Delhi, or Islamabad. I wanted this study to be especially about the Bangladeshi urban middle class and to critically examine the popular ideas about this particular class. Lots of ethnographic work has been generated on different aspects of Bangladeshi urban problems, but not this one. In that sense, I hope that this study has been successful in filling up the gap to some extent in the existing literature on Bangladeshi society, South Asian society as well as social studies on the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, it also sheds light on the affective aspect of the pandemic on the population from different angles and the shifting class relations in the context of Bangladesh. Middle-class are evolving, and so are their standards, ideals, goals, perspectives, and visions about their home and abroad. Perhaps further anthropological studies on these evolving patterns can bring out a better understanding of them.

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