

April 8, 2020

Md. Ashadul Islam
Secretary
Health Care Division
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh

Subject: Demand to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to prohibit the sale of various tobacco products for causing health risks amid the outbreak of novel Covid-19 virus

We, the members of Tamak Birodhi Nari Jote (TABINAJ), the Women's Alliance in Tobacco Control have long been working against the negative impacts of tobacco consumption. At present, we are very much concerned about the spread of Coronavirus in our country. We all know that the organ in human body that is most affected due to Covid-19 virus is our respiratory organs, especially the lungs. The people who died of this virus all suffered from respiratory complications. Ventilators are required in the hospitals for the treatment of Covid-19 patients. But our hospitals do not have ventilators in sufficient numbers. Not only Bangladesh, many developed countries of the world are struggling with providing proper healthcare services to the increasing number of patients at a time as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak. As no medicine has been discovered to treat Covid-19 patients till now, the only way left before us is to take precautionary and preventive measures to contain the spread of this virus. One such preventive measures that can save the lives is by ensuring strong and healthy respiratory organs; and therefore there is need to prevent use of substances like tobacco which could damage our respiratory organs and thus leave us vulnerable to Coronavirus infection.

According to World Health Organization (WHO) any kind of tobacco smoking is harmful to the bodily systems, including the cardiovascular and respiratory systems. COVID-19 can also harm these systems. Information from China, where COVID-19 originated, shows that people who have cardiovascular and respiratory conditions caused by tobacco use, or otherwise, are at higher risk of developing severe COVID-19 symptoms. Smokers bring their hands close to their mouth every time during smoking cigarettes and thus increase the chance of being infected by the virus. WHO also stated that as smoking causes damages to lungs and other respiratory organs, it exacerbates the health conditions if any smoker is infected with Coronavirus.

We also know besides cigarettes, smokeless tobaccos like Jorda, Gul, Sada pata, etc. damage the immunity of the body, especially lungs and causes inflammation in the respiratory organs. Though sufficient researches have not been conducted till date on the effects of smokeless tobacco, nevertheless it is generally found to be harmful for health by the health experts in the country.

We are very concerned about the fact that though there is a Tobacco Control Act in effect in Bangladesh, 36.2% adult male smoke in our country. The percentage of smoking population among women is 0.8%. The people who died of Covid-19 virus in China and Italy are mostly male. From a statistics it has been found that 70% of the people who died in China are male. Though the number of smokers among women is low in Bangladesh, 24.8% women use smokeless tobacco, while the percentage of their male counterpart in this regard is 16.2%, i.e. less than women.

The number of people infected with Covid-19 virus is increasing rapidly in Bangladesh. Many people have died too. Government has taken some initiatives to contain the spread of Covid-19 by ordering lockdown, social distancing and creating awareness among the people to wash their hands and wear masks, which is commendable. Besides, all the shops and markets have been ordered to keep closed except for the grocery and medicine shops.

Cigarettes and other tobacco items are not daily necessity items. But all these harmful items are freely bought in the shops amid this lockdown situation as these are available in the tea stalls and grocery shops of the localities posing serious health risks. Poor Rickshaw pullers who cannot make their ends meet, however, buy cigarettes, biri, Jorda, Sada Pata from the tea- stalls and grocery shops because of their easy-availability and cheaper price as opposed to the daily necessary foods like rice, fishes, vegetables and lentils.

As we are very concerned about the negative impacts of these tobacco products on public health, especially amid the outbreak of novel Covid-19 virus, we demand prompt action on behalf of the government to remove these tobacco items from the grocery shops and tea-stalls for the greater sake of public health and stop their sale. At the same time we appeal to the government to increase the price of the tobacco items and impose a higher rate of tax on these items in the next national budget to discourage the users from buying it. As it is clear from the statement of the health experts that the impacts of Coronavirus probably will last a longer period of time, we need to prepare ourselves better to combat it.

We, the undersigned persons of this statement, request the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to take necessary steps to promptly prohibit the sale of tobacco items like Cigarettes, Biri and smokeless tobacco items like Jorda, Sada Pata, Gul etc. This initiative is very necessary in the time of such national health crisis.

Signatories:

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