

# **The Other Face of Globalisation**

COVID-19, International Labour Migrants and  
Left-behind Families in Bangladesh

Edited by  
Tasneem Siddiqui



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**Bangladesh Civil Society  
for Migrants**



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**Dedicated to  
those unfortunate migrant sons and daughters of  
Bangladesh who sacrificed their lives to COVID-19 in  
different destination countries.**

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## Acronyms

<b>ADB</b>	Asian Development Bank
<b>AIDS</b>	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
<b>ARMACO</b>	Arabian American Oil Company
<b>BCSM</b>	Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants
<b>BDT</b>	Bangladeshi Taka
<b>BMET</b>	Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training
<b>CGIAR</b>	Chapter 7
<b>CIDRAP</b>	Centre for Infectious Disease Research & Policy
<b>COVID-19</b>	Corona Virus Disease 19
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based Violence
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GFMD</b>	Global Forum on Migration and Development
<b>GoB</b>	Government of Bangladesh
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>HRW</b>	Human Rights Watch
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>MDP</b>	Chapter 4
<b>MFA</b>	Migrant Forum in Asia
<b>MoEWOE</b>	Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment

<b>MoHFW</b>	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>MPI</b>	Migration Policy Institute
<b>NGO</b>	Non-government Organization
<b>NTS</b>	Non-Traditional Security
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>RMMRU</b>	Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit
<b>SARS</b>	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual Gender Based Violence
<b>SPSS</b>	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
<b>TB</b>	Tuberculosis
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNAIDS</b>	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNO</b>	Upazilla Nirbahi Officer
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>WARBE</b>	Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants
<b>WEWB</b>	Wage Earners Welfare Board
<b>WEWD</b>	Wage Earners Welfare Desk
<b>WEWF</b>	Wage Earners Welfare Fund
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

## Glossary of Non-English Terms

<i>Amphan</i>	Super cyclonic storm of 2020
<i>Eid</i>	Grand festival celebrated by the Muslim community
<i>Eid ul Fitr</i>	Festival of breaking fast / grand festival celebrated by Muslim Community after Ramadan month
<i>Forontaine</i>	A sarcastic and ironic term of quarantine
<i>Hundi</i>	An unconditional order in writing made by a person directing another to pay a certain sum of money to a person named in the order (defined by the Reserve Bank of India)
<i>Mem sahib</i>	female head of the household
<i>Mohajons</i>	Money Lender / Creditor
<i>Sadar</i>	<i>Small town</i>
<i>Upazila</i>	<i>Sub-district</i>



## Foreword

We are pleased to commend the publication *The Other Face of Globalisation: COVID-19, International Labour Migrants and Left-behind Families in Bangladesh*, under the leadership of Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui. In normal circumstances, ensuring protection of the international migrant workers is recognised as a complex global challenge. Crisis situation exacerbates the pre-existing challenges further. During the entire year of 2020, the world witnessed the greatest health hazard of the century. By March, the World Health Organisation had declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. The year has experienced unprecedented rate of death due to the virus.

Unfortunately, among all types of population, it is the migrant workers who have taken the worst hit of the pandemic. Infection and death rates are the highest among the migrants. Along with bearing the heavy toll of death, migrants were identified by different quarters as the source of spreading infection. Many of the labour receiving countries did announce equal treatment of migrants and their nationals in respect to receiving healthcare and other essential services. Some countries included migrants in their subsidy packages. Nonetheless, in pursuing policies to prevent the pandemic, other countries have bypassed the migrants. Mainstream labour receiving countries have deported a large number of migrants to their countries of origin. Multilateral bodies including the UN have made various attempts to dissuade the destination countries from doing so, with little success.

Bangladesh Civil Society of Migrants (BCSM) members felt that it is important to document the experiences of Bangladeshi migrants during the pandemic. On behalf of BCSM and RMMRU, Tasneem Siddiqui and her team has vividly sketched the plight of Bangladeshi migrants both male and female in different destination countries and upon their return. They also looked into the hardship of the migrants' left-behind households in the absence or partial absence of remittances. The research dealt with issues such as securitisation process, anomalies between increased flows of remittances at the national level, partial or full suspension of remittances at household level and experience of gender based violence among the female migrants as well as the left-behind female members of the migrant households.

We hope that this publication will work as a reference for interested researchers and practitioners in Bangladesh as well as for the global readers. We also wish that this research will support the government of Bangladesh to frame appropriate strategies in providing services to its migrant population during future crisis.



**Dr. C R Abrar**  
Chair, BCSM



**Syed Saiful Haque**  
Co-chair, BCSM

## Preface

No rights activist can remain unmoved while watching the sufferings of migrant workers and their left behind families at the outbreak of COVID-19. What they have been experiencing exposes the dark side of globalisation. Culmination of a new challenge, also create opportunity for transformation. Situation of both internal and international labour migrants during COVID-19 is one such challenge that global community has to address. Bangladesh Civil Society of Migrants (BCSM) is a platform of Bangladeshi organizations who work to uphold the rights of international migrants. Since the very beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic, its members jointly raised the voice of the migrants and demanded their inclusion in all national actions undertaken by destination countries and the government of Bangladesh. While providing emergency services at the airport, Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) compiled the story of fifty migrants who had to return involuntarily from various Gulf, other Arab and a few Southeast Asian countries. The stories depicted stark reality they were exposed to, that included health shocks and risks, lack of access to health care services, partial or full loss of employment, food scarcity, fear of arrest, detention and deportation etc. We at RMMRU felt that a quick and realistic policy targeted research is needed straight away to inform the policy makers of Bangladesh and also the global audience.

RMMRU organised a webinar and provided a preliminary analysis based on the experiences of the fifty involuntarily

returned migrants on 22 June 2020. Policy makers, civil society representatives, government functionaries and the media – all appreciated the findings and proposed that findings have to be placed before the concerned authorities so that it helps them to chart out their next course of action for alleviating the sufferings of the migrants. Although research is necessary where would we get the fund? At a BCSM meeting I proposed to member organizations to conduct interview of returnee migrants in their project areas based on the same questionnaire that RMMRU did, so that we could come up with a story of a large cohort of workers. All members of BCSM responded positively and nine organizations that have field level programmes joined hands to take forward the research. The organizations are WARBE DF, BOMSA, BASTOB, Rights Jashore, ASK, BASUG, YPSA, BOAF and RMMRU. Those who could not participate also extended their support to the research. A training session was organised for those who conducted the interviews. The interviews were completed by July 20. I offer my sincere thanks to all BCSM members for their conviction to the cause of the migrants.

The interviews were conducted over phone, using KoBo Toolbox application. Parvez Alam, Senior IT Officer managed the data. Trishita Saleem and Saira Afrin, also of RMMRU, conducted the 25 qualitative interviews and collected extra information through repeated phone calls to the migrants and their left behind family members. I express my deep appreciation for their efforts.

Another webinar was organised on 27 July 2020 jointly by BCSM and RMMRU where the plight of left behind family members were presented. Ms. Aroma Dutta MP, Ms. Shirin Akhter MP, Dr. Ahmed Munirus Saleheen, Secretary of the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry, Mr. Md. Nazrul Islam, Director General, Economic Affairs Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ms. Saheen Anam, MJF and Mr. William Gois of Migrant Forum in Asia provided their valuable input on the findings during the first webinar.

Imran Ahmad MP, Honourable Minister, the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry graced the second webinar as the chief guest. He also encouraged BCSM and RMMRU to provide the ministry with the outcome of the research. Barrister Shameem H. Patwary, MP, Chair, Parliamentarians' Caucus on Migration and Development, Dr. Kamal Uddin Ahmed, full time member and the Chair of Migration, Migrant Workers' Right and Trafficking Thematic Committee, National Human Rights Commission and Ali Reza Mazid, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief also reflected on the findings and reiterated the policy relevance of the results. We thank all of them for sharing their insights.

Once the data were processed, I invited RMMRU general body members to lead the writing of individual chapters. I deeply acknowledge that despite being busy otherwise all of them responded favourably to my request. I thank Dr. Syeda Rozana Rashid, Dr. Md. Jalal Uddin Sikder, Dr. Selim Reza, Mr. Motasim Billah, and Mr. Anas Ansar for showing their commitment to the migrants who are their principal research subjects. I also thank Farida Yeasmin, Jasiya Khatoon, Marina Sultana, Sarawat Binte Islam, Ranjit Das, Abdus Sabur, Faria Iffat Mim, Yar Mahbub, Nazmul Ahsan, Tahmid Akash, Rabeya Nasrin Sultana, Nusrat Mahmood and Md. Inzamal Haque for contributing their time and effort in writing different parts of this book. My deep appreciation for them all

I thank Manusher Jonno Foundation and PROKAS for being our partners in SEEM and FLM projects respectively that provided us the opportunity to work at the grassroots level and pick up concerns that have major policy relevance.

My special thanks of Hossain Mohammad Fazle Jahid, Sr. Programme Officer (Legal Support) of RMMRU, who has been patiently assisting me in all types of activities, ranging from coordinating the survey, writing sections, organizing meetings,

collecting chapters from authors and on top of all spending long hours with me in finalising the draft chapters for the last six months.

A very important learning from this research project is that when the cause is worth then everyone participates spontaneously. BCSM member organizations proved that if commitment is there, initiatives do not have to wait for resources. I have committed my last three months fully to this book, of course at the cost of missing many of my other commitments and deadlines, yet there remain many shortcomings of the book. Analysis of data could have gone deeper on many issues. I hope the readers will understand the urgency of publishing the outcome, appreciate the results and overlook the omissions.

Professor Tasneem Siddiqui  
27 January 2021

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Tasneem Siddiqui

**T**his research is about the situation of Bangladeshi male and female short-term contract labour migrants and their left behind family members amidst of COVID-19. Bangladesh is one of the major labour surplus countries of the world and it participates in the supply side of the labour market. Each year, 700,000-800,000 Bangladeshis migrate overseas to take a foreign employment. Twelve percent of them are women. Annually Bangladesh receives more than US\$18 billion as remittance. Remittances constitute the highest net foreign exchange earning source of the country and it is equivalent to six percent of the country's gross domestic product. More importantly migrant sending households are heavily dependent on the earnings of their family members who work overseas. On an average remittance constitutes eighty percent of the household income of these families. COVID-19 has exposed the migrants to health as well as economic emergencies. In the absence of regular flow of remittance, the migrant households should also be facing major challenges in maintaining expenditures related to health, education, food and other consumptions. This research attempts to understand the nature of challenges that the migrants have faced in the countries of destination as well as situation of those who had to return abruptly to Bangladesh due to spread of COVID-19. It also explores the condition of left-behind migrant households who are not receiving remittances.

Integration of global labour market created scope for marginalised people to benefit from globalisation through accessing employment in countries of their own as well as overseas. Globalisation has significantly contributed to increased level of international migration in terms of volume, diversity, geographical scope etc. (Czaika and Haas, 2018). However, It is generally accepted that link between migration and globalization is extremely complex. Along with the economic, social and cultural gains experienced by countries of destination, migration also helped labour surplus countries to manage its economy better through access to foreign exchange sent by its international migrant work force. At the same time current form of globalization of labour market has exposed international labour migrants to experience decent work deficits. Their rights at work, social protection and bargaining capacity are severely curtailed particularly in case of the low-skilled workers. Situation of migrants who are in irregular status are worse off.

Violation of rights, particularly of low-skilled workers is perpetual in current form of globalization. Migrant workers earn significantly less than nationals in same occupations (ILO June, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Majority of the migrants depending on their skills levels, migration status, and type of employment are excluded from various social protection entitlements (ILO June, 2020). Access to labour rights is again determined by gender (ILO 2020)<sup>2</sup>. None the less during crisis situations violation of decent work conditions and other rights exacerbates to an extent that a number of migrants are exposed to life threatening situations; some of them fully or partially lose their jobs and others are forced to return without reaping benefit from the investment they made to migrate in the first place. History indicates that international migrants bear the brunt of any crisis disproportionately more compared to local population. The great depression of 1930s, the oil crisis of 1973, Asian financial crisis of 1997 and 1999 and the global financial crisis of 2009-10 all demonstrate that migrants

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1 ILO monitor: COVID 19 and the world of work, 4th edition.

2 ILO (2020) Protection of Migrant Workers During COVID 19 Pandemic: Recommendations for Policy Makers and Constituents, ILO Policy Brief, April 2020

are used as the safety valves to reduce the negative outcomes of the crisis (Castles and Vezzoli 2018). The United States of America put embargo on movement between the US and Mexico to reduce unemployment during the great depression. British Government, Taiwan, South Korea limited the scope of migration during the 1973 oil crisis. Thailand did not renew registration of the migrants to overcome the oil crisis. During Asian financial crisis, South East Asian countries expelled foreign workers. Plantation workers of Malaysia and fishing workers of Thailand are typical examples of this.

Since the beginning of 2020 the world has been facing COVID-19, the largest health crisis of the century. By March the World Health Organization has declared this as a pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 is again showing us the other face of globalization in respect to labour migration. The past trends of global crisis in respect to migration are again visible. Like the previous situations, return of the migrants to the homeland, drastic reduction of immigration, pressure on the migrants to leave countries of destination without respecting the contract, reduced flow of remittance and increased hostility towards migrants have surfaced in many of the countries of destination. The unique characteristics of COVID-19 compared to previous crisis reveals health vulnerabilities more acutely. Infection rate among the migrant communities is much higher compared to the nationals. In Saudi Arabia, where migrants account for 38 percent of the population, the Ministry of Health reported on May 5 that 76 percent of new confirmed cases were among foreigners (MPI 2020, Migration Data Portal November 2020<sup>3</sup>). Singapore is one of the best examples of non-discrimination in respect to treating COVID-19 affected persons and there is a downward trend in number of new cases in that country, residents of dormitories all of whom are migrants, account for nearly 94 percent of the cumulative number of infected cases in Singapore<sup>4</sup>. Migration

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3 Migration Data Portal (2020) <https://migrationdataportal.org/themen/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic>, November 2020

4 Upto 4 November 2020

Data Portal (2020) informs that migrant population constitute around four and a half percent of total population in 20 developed countries where as, in 8 of these countries ten percent of the COVID- 19 affected cases are of migrant workers. Unfortunately discrimination in accessing health services is also severely pronounced. Destination countries have developed stimulus packages to face the COVID-19 crisis however; migrants are mostly excluded from such packages, owing to their pre-existing precarious work conditions. The government of Malaysia provided financial support to employers for payment of the wages of their workers. It kept those employers outside the programme who employed foreign workers. Low-skilled workers, migrants working in informal sectors, migrants who are in irregular status remain outside any such package.

Like other previous crisis, destination countries have used encouraging return of the migrants as one of the mechanisms of addressing COVID-19. Most of the South Asian countries including Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka experienced large scales return of their nationals from different labour receiving countries. As early as in May 2020 Nikkei Asia reported that from the Middle-east at least 900,000 South Asians, mostly migrants were awaiting for repatriation (Nikkei Asia, 2020)<sup>5</sup>. In response to the crisis, a number of host countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Maldives, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, put pressure on countries of origin to repatriate their citizens. At least 1,500,000 migrant workers of Indian nationality and 400,000 Nepalese workers were estimated to return home due to the pandemic<sup>6</sup>.

Banulescu-Bogdan et al (2020) and ISD (2020), show that COVID-19 has provided opportunity to certain quarters to spread

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5 Coronavirus Wrecks South Asian Migrant Livelihoods in Middle East, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Coronavirus-wrecks-South-Asian-migrant-livelihoods-in-Middle-East>, May 2020

6 The Financial Express, May 20, 2020 South Asia scrambles to bring home crisis-hit migrant workers <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/world/asia/south-asia-scrambles-to-bring-home-crisis-hit-migrant-workers-1589898482>

anti-migrant narratives and to call for stricter migration regimes. Xenophobic stances have largely mirrored pre-existing patterns of discrimination. Unfortunately, migrants faced stigmatization in their home communities upon their return, leading to occasional confrontations and violence.

When migrants are in crisis, their left-behind family members also suffer. A large number of the left-behind households fully or partially depend on remittances for their day to day expenditure. Income generating activities of the family members also depend on access to remittances as capital. Education of children, health care services to the elderly as well as other members also suffer if access to remittances is not ensured.

Different researches are emerging that have demonstrated similar to earlier crisis, during COVID-19 as well, women migrants are facing increased exposure to gender based violence, domestic violence and a general lack of personal space due to confinement measures (ILO,2020)<sup>7</sup>. There is hardly any research that highlights the implications of lack of income of the left-behind migrant households in the absence of remittance on the women members of the left-behind migrant households. None the less, in the South-Asian context, empirical research is still skewed that highlight the hardship of the women members of the left-behind migrant households.

This research attempts to conduct an in-depth analysis of the concerns expressed in global literatures by taking Bangladesh as a case study. It looks into all three stages of hardship- faced by the migrants soon after the outbreak of COVID-19 in destination countries; faced by those migrants who were forced to return and faced by the left-behind households who have one or more migrants still residing abroad but are unable to remit.

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7 ILO (2020), Protecting the Rights at Work of Refugees and Other Forcibly Displaced Persons During the COVID-19 Pandemic [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS\\_748485/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_748485/lang--en/index.htm) , June 2020

## **Section II: Rationale of the research**

Hardship faced by Bangladeshi migrants in the countries of destination, arbitrary return of a section of them particularly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Maldives etc have been continuously reported in the newspapers. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 till December 2020, altogether 2,330 Bangladeshis have died in different parts of the world<sup>8</sup>. The highest number of death toll is reported in Saudi Arabia (959)<sup>9</sup>. 326,000 migrants had to come back mostly from the Gulf and other Arab countries. The government has also taken various measures- providing emergency assistance to the migrants during the initial face of COVID-19 in different destination countries, repatriating some of the workers from different destinations by sending charter planes, declaring reintegration loan programmes in lower interest rate etc. There is however, a lack of systematic research that documents the experience of COVID-19 crisis faced by both male and female migrants in destination, upon return as well as by the left-behind members of the current migrant households. The study attempts to collate first hand experiences from the migrants themselves and their family members.

## **Section III: Objectives**

The main objective of this research is to help the policy makers with evidence, based on which the government can develop systematic policies to support and protect the migrants during future crisis situation. To provide country specific experience to global and national civil societies in developing their campaign to raise the voice of both male and female migrants in forums such as Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), Global Compact for Migration etc. The aim in this respect is to help these multi-lateral forums to review the existing normative guidelines from the lense that identifies the challenges of those documents in ensuring protection of migrants during crisis

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8 Prothom alo, 28 December 2020

9 The figure mentioned covers the period from March till October 2020 Prothom Alo (Shesh Biday Janate Na Parar Koshto Link) 28 November 2020

situations. The other significant objective is to contribute to the global research pool on migrants in crisis situation.

## **Section IV: Major research questions**

What is the manifestation of outbreak of COVID-19 on the migrants in respect to decent work conditions in destination? In comparison to total migrant population, what would be the share of those who are facing problems with their jobs? Are there any specific types of jobs where vulnerabilities are more? Which group of migrants is experiencing termination? How effective are the job contracts to ensure health care during COVID 19? Does access to health care depend on type of visa status? How about food security? How did the migrants who got terminated or whose jobs were on hold, manage their food consumption? How have the migrants managed their stress?

Did the migrants experience return? Were the returns voluntary or they were forced? Who organized their return and who paid for it? What role did the government of Bangladesh play in facilitating their return? Did the migrants experience securitization in the countries of destination? Who were the securitizing actors? After returning to Bangladesh what type of human security concerns did they face? Did they maintain quarantine? Why were they seen as a security threat by the people of their local communities? How are these returned migrants surviving? Did they receive any assistance from government or any other sources?

How the left-behind migrant households are affected COVID-19? Could the families maintain regular contact with their migrant members who were still residing in destination? What type of anxieties did the family members experience about their migrants? Could they maintain regular communication with their migrant sons and daughters/ parents/ spouses? Did they have information on work and payment status of their migrant members in destination?

What was the nature of annual remittance flow before COVID-19? How has COVID-19 affected that flow? What is the level of dependence of the migrant households on remittances? What percentage of household income dependant on remittances?

How had the left- behind households been coping in the absence of remittances? How had they been managing day to day expenditure? How did these families plan for financing expenditure in future? Was there any formal system of assistance? Did the migrant households fall under any social safety network?

Did COVID-19 contribute to increase level of gender based violence in the destination countries? What are the experiences of women of the left-behind migrant households? Did they face violence committed by the involuntarily returned migrants? Has there been any evidence of violence committed on the women by other family members?

## **Section V: Methodology of the research**

The research followed mixed method. Primary data includes survey, in-depth interview and case studies. It conducted survey of 200 households in 21 districts of Bangladesh, in-depth interview of 25 involuntarily returned migrants, 30 case studies of gender based violence in 5 districts. Secondary information were gathered from newspaper reports, transcripts prepared from e-symposiums series of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) on COVID-19 and Migration; and Webinars on South Asian Experience organized by Forum Asia, Indira Gandhi University of Delhi and Migrant Forum Asia. The webinars were particularly effective in gathering reflections of policy makers and global experts on relevant issues.

Surveys on 200 households of returned migrants, as well as left-behind migrant households were conducted by 9 member

organizations of BCSM. One day long training was organized for those who conducted interviews. The interviews were conducted online using Kobo tool programme. The survey did not follow rigorous methodological techniques for obvious reasons. Doing such rigorous methodological research would entail a reasonable length of time and funding. This research was conducted voluntarily by the migrant rights activist organizations to understand the lived reality of the arbitrarily returned migrants and the left-behind members of migrant households. The aim was to create evidence to convince the policy makers for undertaking support initiatives targeted towards different groups of stakeholders among the migrant community itself. Therefore the limitation of this research is that it is not representative of national scenario. Besides, some of the questions raised above, still remained unresolved.

## **Section VI: Conceptual framework**

The research is conceptualized based on two streams of literature. These are globalization and labour migration (Czaika and Haas 2018, Castles and Miller 2003, 2009, Arango 2000, Faist 2000, Held et. al. 1999); and implications of different global crisis on migrants in destination and communities in origin (Castles and Vezzoli 2009). The framework starts from the premise that globalization effects labour migration both positively and negatively. It has increased access of people from remote areas of different origin countries to the global labour market. It created scopes of employment for all types of workers including unskilled and lowly skilled. Due to lack of implementation of labour standards, the rights of migrants in respect to minimum wage, working hours, overtime, holidays, compensation, pension etc are compromised in different countries of destination. A large number of migrants experience contract substitution, precarious work condition, exploitation, fraudulence, torture, abuse etc. Female migrants face all of these and on top, experience sexual abuse. Any crisis situation acerbates these vulnerabilities many fold. But experiences of enduring crisis vary on the basis of certain indicators. Important among these are migration status,

nature of job performed by the migrants, their skills level, and gender. Based on immigration status at a general level, migrants are classified as regular and irregular. Migrants in irregular status are more exposed to harm compared to those in regular status. Again, on the basis of skills, migrants are divided into different categories ranging from highly skilled to unskilled. Unskilled workers are more likely to face discrimination in availing health care and other services compared to the skilled and professional workers. Sectors of employment also effect treatment towards migrants during crisis. Those who work in formal sector are more likely to remain outside the social protection measures compared to those in formal sector. Both male and female are exposed to vulnerabilities during crisis yet, types of vulnerabilities vary between sexes.

This study has divided the vulnerabilities of the migrants and their households under three broad heads. These are vulnerabilities of migrants in the destination countries, vulnerabilities upon return and finally, vulnerabilities of the left-behind households. While understanding vulnerabilities in destination, important issues are exposure to infection, access to treatment, job and income Status, nature of social protection, security perception and migrants, access to government stimulus as important areas for investigation.

In understanding the situation of involuntarily returned migrants issues identified are job and income situation upon return, perception on migrants as health risks, government policies of reintegration and civil Society. While evaluating the situation of left-behind members of current migrants, issues which have been chosen are: income source, access to remittance, coping mechanism in absence of remittance, access to government stimulus programmes and roles of civil society. Each chapter deals with one of the above situations using this framework.

## **VII: Structure of the book**

The book is divided into 9 chapters. Chapter I presents the major research problem, identifies the objective of the research, develops the conceptual framework and describes the methodology it used. Chapter II gives an overview of labour migration scenario of Bangladesh during COVID-19. Chapter III presents the socio demographic profile of the migrants and left-behind members of households. Chapter IV highlights the concerns of Bangladeshi migrants in destination countries. Chapter V depicts the experience of return of the migrants within the framework of securitization. Chapter VI looks into the flow of remittances during COVID-19 and highlights the anomaly between household experience of receiving remittances and the national figures of remittances. VII portrays the coping mechanism of the left-behind migrant households in the absence of remittance or in the aftermath of untimely return of the migrant members of the household. Chapter VIII particularly looks into the extent of gender based violence in the migrant households during the difficult time of COVID-19. Chapter IX draws major conclusions and provides some modest recommendations.



## **Chapter II**

# **MIGRATION SCENRIO OF BANGLADESH DURING COVID-19**

Tasneem Siddiqui, Marina Sultana, Hossain Mohammad  
FazleJahid, Nusrat Mahmood and Mohammad Inzamul Haque

**T**his chapter highlights the broader migration scenario of Bangladesh in the context of COVID-19. It looks into the extent of male and female migration from the country during this period. COVID-19 resulted in untimely return. On the basis of government data this chapter also provides information on return flow. This is followed by discussion on flow of remittances to the country. It draws on important issues related to migration during pandemic. This includes health risks of the migrants, identification of migrants as security threat, arrest of a section a migrants after return, reflection of COVID-19, government steps taken to rehabilitate the untimely involuntarily returned migrants, extent of human smuggling and trafficking during this period.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. After this introductory one, section II presents the extent of labour migration from Bangladesh in 2020. Section III highlights major concerns about Bangladeshi migrants in different destinations amidst of COVID-19. Section IV highlights how migrants are being identified as security risks. Section V elaborates government

initiatives in addressing the plight of migrants at home and abroad. Section VI gives an idea of the roles of civil society in respect to the migrants since the outbreak of COVID-19. Section VII draws major conclusions.

## **Section II: Labour migration from Bangladesh 2020**

**Flow:** A total of 2,17,669 Bangladeshi migrant workers went to different countries of the world including the Gulf, other Arab and South-East Asian countries in 2020. 10 Among them 181,218 workers migrated from January to March of this year<sup>11</sup>. Due to lockdown, migration from Bangladesh came to standstill from April to June 2020. Since July to December 2020 only 36,413<sup>12</sup> migrant were able to migrate to take up overseas employment. This year (2020), the flow of migration has decreased by about 69 percent in comparison to the previous year as a result of COVID-19. Although there was a possibility to increase the migration by 3.52 percent if the trend of migration continued like the first 3 months of 2020. Near about 100,000 new workers who completed all the procedures before COVID-19, could not migrate due to outbreak of the pandemic.

A total of 21,934 female workers migrated from Bangladesh for work in 2020<sup>13</sup>. In 2019 the total number of female workers who migrated from Bangladesh stood at 104,786. Female migration also did not take place from April to June and from July to December only 3,121 female workers migrated. Female migration from Bangladesh reduced 79 percent compared to the previous year.

**Number of returned migrants:** In the outbreak of COVID-19 the focus is on the return rather than the flow of out-migration.

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10 <https://www.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladesh-starts-sending-workers-abroad-after-months-of-uncertainty-1606531269>

11 BMET Website (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>)

12 BMET Website (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>)

13 Website (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>)

According to the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment in 2020 a total of 408,000 migrant workers have returned to the country<sup>14</sup>. The rate of losing jobs and returning home has increased in the last 4 months (September to December) of this year. On an average, about 2,000 workers are returning every day. Earlier the ministry also informed on August 27 around 85,790 migrant workers returned from 26 countries for various reasons including losing jobs from April 1 to August 27<sup>15</sup>. So in the last four months, the rate of return of migrants has almost quadrupled compared to the previous five months. During the previous years on an average around 50,000 workers returned to Bangladesh. Return migration in 2020 is eight times higher than the previous years.

More than 46,000 female migrants returned from April 1 to 17 December 2020<sup>16</sup> 20,238 have returned from Saudi Arabia, 10,461 returned from the United Arab Emirates, 4,328 from Qatar, 2,916 returned from Oman, 2,803 from Lebanon, 1,876 from Jordan during this time<sup>17</sup>. In case of female migrants as well majority of the return took place from September to December.

**Stranded in Bangladesh:** Due to COVID-19 a large number of Bangladeshis who came on holidays could not go back and rejoin their work in different destinations. Only in Saudi Arabia alone 150,000 migrants got stranded during the initial months of outbreak of COVID-19. Since the beginning of October 2020, migrants who were stranded started to return. By the end of December 284,000 Bangladeshi migrants went back and join their jobs.

**Countries of destination:** Obviously hardly anyone could migrate during the initial months of COVID-19 pandemic. From

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14 Statistics of return migrants from 1st April to 31 December 2020, Welfare Desk, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka

15 Somoynews, 27 August 2020 (<https://www.somoynews.tv/pages/details/232330/>)

16 Figure of from April 1 to November 30 from different countries

17 Probash Barta , December 14 2020 at <http://probashbarta.com/2020/12/14/>

July 1 to December labour migration resumed in a very low scale. As seen in the above discussion, in 2020 a total of 217,669 male and female workers migrated from Bangladesh for taking up foreign employment. This includes both of those who has gone before the break out COVID-19 and during the last few months of the year. This does not include those who have been stranded and later returned to their work places when situation became better. The highest number of Bangladeshi workers migrated to Saudi Arabia. The figure stood at 161,726 which is about 74.30 percent of the total flow of migrants. The second-largest flow is towards Oman-21,071 migrants has gone to that country which constitutes 9.68 percent of the total flow. Singapore has been the third-largest destination country for Bangladeshi workers which received 10,085 (4.63 percent) migrants. Jordan is in the 4th position by receiving 3,769 (1.73 percent) of workers. Qatar is ranked fifth with a total of 3,608 migrants going to that country which is about 1.65 percent of the total number of migrants who has gone abroad for work. During COVID-19 like any other year Saudi Arabia has been the major destination for female migrants. About 58 percent of the female (12,735) went to Saudi Arabia during this period,3,661 female migrated to Jordan 3,358 female migrated to Oman<sup>18</sup>At the far end of the year a number of Bangladeshis also migrated to some non-traditional countries such Uzbekistan and Albania.<sup>19</sup>

**Source area:** The largest outflow of international migrants in 2020 was from Cumilla district. It accounted for 11.18 percent (24,338) of the total flow. 6.65 percent migrated from Brahmanbaria (14,476). Chattogram is the third largest migrant sending district with 5.26 percent (11,460) of the total flow. 4.28 percent workers migrated from Chandur (9,333).

**Remittances:** World Bank forecasted that remittance of Bangladesh could fall to US\$1,400 crore in 2020. This means that

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18 Website (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>)

19 <https://www.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladesh-starts-sending-workers-abroad-after-months-of-uncertainty-1606531269>

remittance flow during this year would be 25 percent less than the last year.<sup>20</sup> However, such fall did not take place. Remittances received this year were even more than the last year or the year before. Bangladeshi migrants have remitted US\$21.74 billion in 2020.<sup>21</sup> It is 18.60 percent higher than that of 2019 (US\$18.33 billion). The economy of Bangladesh did not face major hurdle as its foreign exchange reserve remained satisfactory. In 2020, the total reserve of Bangladesh Bank stood at US\$43.95 billion which has been US\$38.50 billion in the last year.<sup>22</sup>

In respect to percentage share of different remittance source country of Bangladesh, data is available up to November 2020. Like the previous years, the largest amount of remittances came from Saudi Arabia. Bangladesh received 4.186 billion from the country which is 21.26 percent of the total flow. It is followed by the United States. 13.22 percent (2.603 billion) came from this country. Next is United Arab Emirates. 10.91 percent (2.147 billion) of the remittances came from UAE. 7.06 percent (1.389 billion) of the remittances came from Malaysia and 6.98 percent (1.374 billion) from the United Kingdom and 6.43 percent (1.266 billion) from Oman. According to Bangladesh Bank, the largest share of remittance (26.25 percent) was received by Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited followed by Agrani Bank (11.30 percent), Dutch Bangla Bank (8.99 percent), Sonali Bank (6.62 percent) and Janata Bank (4.24 percent)<sup>23</sup>

The flow of remittances declined from February to April, but since then the flow continued to rise. There are many reasons behind the increase in remittances. Firstly, since 1st July 2019 the government has offered 2 percent incentive to encourage migrants to send remittance through formal channel. Migrants are receiving 2 taka against 100 taka remittance. Government allocated 3,060 crore taka for this purpose in the budget of 2019-

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21 <https://www.bb.org.bd/econdata/wageremittance.php>

22 <https://www.bb.org.bd/econdata/intreserve.php>

23 Information from Bangladesh Bank

20 fiscal year. In addition, some of the banks have been offering 1 percent more on top of government incentives to attract remittance through them.

Secondly, in an ideal situation work permit for the labour migrants should be free of cost. But in reality, for a long time work visas are sold by the employers and the recruiting agencies purchased those in high cost. Sharma and Zaman (2009) found that as early as in 2009 average cost of individual visa was \$2,300. Then the recruiting agencies sell those visas to the migrant workers at a higher cost. The recruiting agencies have to purchase these visas unofficially as outward remittance for visa purchase is not allowed by the government of Bangladesh. Therefore, the recruiting agencies of Bangladesh and also their counterpart in the countries of destination take help of hundi operation. They generate the finance from the hundi operators. Hundi operators on the other hand, collect the remittances of the migrants in destination and pay the migrant families in origin in local currency of Bangladesh. In a regular year 700,000 visas are purchased. A recent study of BBS shows that currently the migrant pay around US\$5000 for each visa in order to migrate abroad. For each visa the recruiting agencies and their intermediaries in destination countries have to pay around US\$3,000 on an average and the rest of the money is shared by recruiting agencies and other intermediaries. This year around 217,669 workers have migrated. Therefore, around 482,331 visas were not needed to be purchased. This resource was not required by the recruiting agencies as they did not require purchasing these visas. Therefore, US\$1,446,993,000 was not required from the hundi operators<sup>24</sup>. The recruiting agencies in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi sub-agents in destination countries did not need the money to pay for the work permit.

This year business and commerce was much less than usual. In a regular year, in order to avoid paying taxes a large section of the business houses under invoice for the imports they do. They pay

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24 517,000 who could not migrate X \$3,000 cost of visa purchase = \$1,551,000,000

a large portion of the cost of raw materials in the countries from where they purchase by taking money from the hundi operators. This year as import was less, the business houses also had less demand for the resources from hundi operators. In Bangladesh majority of the gold are smuggled. The gold smugglers are completely dependent on hundi operators for conducting their payment. This year there was hardly any demand for gold jewelries. Therefore, they also did not need to take support from the hundi operation. All these resources therefore were available for the formal sources of remittance transfer.

It was seen that a large number of migrants had to return to Bangladesh because of COVID-19. Those who had returned or those who were likely to return have sent their savings back to the country because there are restrictions on hand-carrying money for more than a certain amount. A section of the migrants, who may not have to return, but felt insecure and transferred their savings to Bangladesh. Migrants also sent money to help the families during COVID-19 crisis, cyclone Amphan and the severe flood that affected Bangladesh during monsoon.

The above discussion only highlights that increased flow of remittance does not mean that migrants are doing alright. The increase in remittances is due to many complex factors. Remittances are always cumulative. Those who migrate this year, usually they start remitting regularly from the next year. Since migration flow was significantly less this year, remittance flow for the next year could be lower.

### **Section III: COVID-19 and migrants in destinations**

**Health risks of the migrant workers:** In the first four months of the pandemic 70,000 Bangladeshi migrants in 186 countries have been infected with the COVID-19 virus. In Singapore alone 23,000 Bangladeshis got infected by COVID-19 by the end of November. As of December 28, more than 2,330 Bangladeshis

had died in COVID-19 in abroad. In Saudi Arabia alone, 979 migrants have died. The death toll of Bangladeshis is much higher in comparison with the migrants of other countries. As of July, 327 migrants died in the United Arab Emirates. 122 of them were Bangladeshi citizens. 382 migrants died in Kuwait. 70 of them were Bangladeshis. Death rate in Singapore is however quite low. Due to timely treatment and other safety measures, deaths of Bangladeshi migrants could be contained into two. The Maldives has a large number of Bangladeshi workers in the tourism sector, most of whom are irregular. Although one thousand Bangladeshi migrants were infected, no one lost their lives.

**Access to health care:** Any international labour standard or conditions of decent work entails that during any crisis situation is it natural disaster or health, the responsibility of ensuring healthcare lies with to destination countries. The governments of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Singapore did announce equal treatments of migrant workers and the nationals in respective to accessing services regarding COVID-19 test. The access is ensured irrespective of their legal status of the migrants. Except Singapore accessing such services were not straight forward. RMMRU (2020) study finds only 46 percent of those who were forcibly returned during the COVID-19 period were tested in the countries of destination before they arrived in Bangladesh. The rest returned without the test. Singapore can be treated as the best practice when it comes to providing treatment to the COVID-19 infected migrants. Infected migrants were taken from the camps to hotels or shelters for medical treatment and isolation.

#### **Section IV: Identification of involuntarily returned migrants as security risk**

**Securitization:** At any disaster period, there is a tendency to identify migrants as a security threat both in origin and destination countries. Certain sections of destination countries usually securitize migration to send the migrants back to their home countries. Unfortunately, the Bangladeshi migrants went through

a securitization process even upon return by different actors including media, government authorities and local population. They were considered as health security threat to the community. During the initial period of COVID-19, an unintended outcome of government announcements to control the spread of the pandemic resulted in identification of migrants as the source of infection. Government decided to monitor strict implementation of quarantine by placing red flags at their residences. This also generated an anti-migrant psyche in different rural areas.

**Arrest of involuntarily returned migrants:** Arrest and detention of a number of forcedly returned migrants by the Ministry of Home Affairs of Bangladesh can be treated as a unique example of action that followed securitization by the actors of an origin country. 107 migrants who returned to Bangladesh from Vietnam were arrested on 16 August 2020. These returnee migrants were first taken to formal quarantine centers. After they completed their 14 days of quarantine, 61 of them were arrested under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure of Bangladesh. These migrants went to Vietnam for employment following all the legal procedures. They received the clearance for departure from the authority, which are the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training. Upon arriving in Vietnam these migrants found themselves into slave like work condition. Many of them were not given job or received employment occasionally. In order to receive assistance from the Bangladesh embassy in Vietnam, these migrants conducted demonstration in front of the embassy. After being jobless for a long time these migrants demanded repatriation. They have been repatriated but after that they were arrested on the charge that they have “conspired against the government and the state”, “disruption of public order” and “tarnishing the image of the country”. Along with those who returned from Vietnam, a number of migrants from Gulf and other Arab countries were also arrested. Altogether the number of arrested migrants stood at 219. None of the arrested migrants were brought back under restoration contract. It is the civil society bodies who have brought these out of jail through formal litigation.

## Section V: Government initiatives

The Wage Earners Welfare Board of the Ministry of EWOE has started a special scheme of Tk. 200 crore (US\$23,529,412) for the reintegration of involuntarily returned migrants. Under this scheme the returnee migrants or their family members will be able to take loans from the Migrant Welfare Bank. The migrants would be able to borrow from Tk. 100,000 to 500,000 at a maximum interest rate of 4 percent<sup>25</sup>. An online registration system<sup>26</sup> has been developed to collect information of returnee migrants as well as to provide short training projects based on job experiences abroad. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has provided a budgetary allocation of Taka 500 crore (US\$58,823,529) to further support the reintegration programme of distressed returned migrants. The Bangladesh Bank has taken an initiative under which it will provide loan to migrants who had been forced to return due to COVID-19. It will provide loans of up to 500,000 taka without any proof of sending remittance through formal channel. In order to receive higher amount the returned migrants will have to demonstrate that they have sent remittances or invested in different Wage Earners' Schemes.

Wage Earners Welfare Board has an ongoing programme of providing TK. 300,000 (US\$3,530) to the family members of migrants who died while working abroad<sup>27</sup>. In normal circumstances, this support used to be provided only to those who have gone through formal channel. After the outbreak of COVID-19 the Board extended the support to migrants who died in irregular status as well.

About 6,000 workers, who returned to the country between the times of April 29 to May 31, have been provided with immediate assistance of Tk. 5,000 for each as conveyance from airport to home<sup>28</sup>. It also repatriated 207 female migrants from the

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25 <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/first-page/358899/>

26 <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/returnMigrant>

27 <https://www.rtvonline.com/bangladesh/98626/>

28 The amount spent in this respect is Tk. 2.97 crore (\$349,400)

deportation center Saudi Arabia by paying airfare, similarly, 95 workers from Lebanon and 105 workers stranded in Vietnam using this fund. Besides, Tk. 422,873 has been paid as goodwill assistance of Maldives government according to the directives of Prime Minister from this fund.

A project has been formulated by the Wage Earners Welfare Board for the reintegration of returnee migrants with World Bank funding to enhance the skills of expatriate workers and strengthen welfare services for migrant workers. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment has distributed medicines, relief and emergency items worth around Tk. 11 crore among the migrant workers through the Labour Welfare Wing of Bangladesh Mission Abroad during the COVID period. It is pertinent to mention that the funds of the WEWB are mainly constituted by compulsory subscription of the migrant workers.

Up to July 2020, BMET has provided pre-departure briefings to a total of 11,736 workers. In 2020, a total of 2,884 dead bodies have been brought back to the country. This is outside those who died in COVID-19. Those who died due to the infection of the virus were buried straight away in the destination countries. To provide shelter to female migrant workers who faced torture, harassment, insecurity and other similar problems, five safe homes are managed in 3 countries. 3 of them are situated in Saudi Arabia and 1 each in Oman and Lebanon. All these functions are performed with the resources of WEFW.

## **Section VI: COVID-19 and civil society**

The civil society organizations of Bangladesh have played a significant role in upholding the rights of Bangladeshi migrants during the COVID-19 crisis. They strongly demanded budgetary allocation from the government to support the migrants and their left-behind households to overcome the hardship caused by the pandemic. Individually each organization conducted various programmes to support the migrants at the same time they also

worked together under the umbrella of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM).

BCSM appealed to the Prime Minister to allocate resources for the distressed migrants and left-behind members of their families. It also requested to increase the incentive to keep the flow of remittances steady and gear up the administration to reduce the scope of trafficking in post COVID-19 situation. BCSM members also suggested the PM to forcefully present the concerns of migrants in various multilateral forums and to take initiative to create a positive mindset about the migrants ensuring that they are treated with dignity. 20 days after the appeal, the Prime Minister declared a stimulus package of Tk. 500 crore (US\$58,823,530)<sup>29</sup>.

BCSM submitted a memorandum to the United Nations Secretary General highlighting the plight of the Bangladeshi migrants amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It appealed to the Secretary General for ensuring appropriate accommodation of migrants in which they can live safely in accordance with the WHO guidelines. It requested the Secretary General to use the good will of his office to advise the destination countries not to pursue arbitrary return of the migrants, clear due wages when during involuntary return and also to declare remittance transfer as essential service<sup>30</sup>.

BCSM, Migrant Forum Asia, Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit (RMMRU) organised a one minute silence campaign jointly for the migrant workers who lost their lives due to COVID-19. BCSM articulated the demand for immediate and unconditional release of 219 Bangladeshi forcibly returned migrants who were arrested by the law enforcement agencies upon their return<sup>31</sup>.

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29 <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Open-Letter-to-PM-in-Bangla.pdf>

<http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Open-Letter-to-PM-in-English.pdf>

30 <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BCSM-Memorandum-to-Secretary-General-of-UN.pdf>

31 <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Detainee->

## **Section VI: Chapter conclusion**

This chapter gives an overview of migration scenario of Bangladesh during the COVID-19 crisis. It shows that migration has reduced by 69 percent from the previous year due to the extraordinary situation created by the pandemic. The country has experienced massive return flow of migrants. Almost 400,000 migrants have returned from different parts of the world. Of course, majority of them returned from the Gulf and other Arab countries. The complexity of current day migration is exposed from the fact that flow of remittances instead of reducing has increased by 18.60 percent making the prediction of the World Bank untenable. The pandemic has again demonstrated that migrant workers are the most unprotected workforce of the world. 2,330 migrants have succumbed to COVID-19 in different parts of the world up to December 2020. Spread of infection among the Bangladeshi migrants has also been very high. The chapter also shows that migrants were not only securitized in different countries of destination, they have experienced the same in their motherland as well. Unfortunately, the migrants also experienced unlawful arrests in their own country upon return.

The government of Bangladesh has taken various initiatives to support the migrants. This ranges from providing food support in the destination to help reintegration of the forced returnees with loan programmes. The civil society organizations of Bangladesh under the umbrella of BCSM have also played important roles in respect to upholding the dignity of the migrants as well as providing assistance at the grassroots. The following chapters will give a detailed account of experience of COVID-19 faced by one hundred involuntarily returned migrants and one hundred left-behind households of current migrants.



## CHAPTER III

# SOCIO ECONOMIC PROFILE AND MIGRATION TRAJECTORY

Farida Yeasmin, Abdus Sabur, Faria Iffat Mim, Parvez Alam  
and Trishita Saleem

**T**his chapter introduces the survey respondents. The survey directly interviewed hundred involuntarily returned migrants and hundred migrants who were still residing in the countries of destination through interviews of their household members. It presents the socio economic profiles of both groups of migrants. The profiles of involuntarily returned and those still residing in different countries of destination are presented side by side. The socio economic profile includes sex, age, family size and district of origin of the migrants. The chapter also throws some lights on their migration experiences. It gives an idea of the countries where they migrated, type of occupation they have been involved in those destination countries, amount of remittances they used to send before COVID-19 and the duration for which they stayed abroad.

### **Section II: Socio economic profile**

**Sex:** Table 3.1 shows the distribution of male and female migrants. Altogether 200 households were covered. 100 of them were involuntarily returned whom the study team directly interviewed. Information of another 100 who at the time of

interview were residing in different destination countries was gathered through interview of left-behind household heads of those families. 14 percent of the total 200 households were female migrant households and the rest 86 percent male migrant households. 98 percent of those who have been involuntarily returned were men. Only two percent of the involuntarily returned migrants were female. This indicates that experience of involuntary return was faced predominantly by the men. 74 percent of the migrants who were during the time of interview residing in destination countries were men and 26 percent were female migrant workers.

**Table 3.1: Parentage of male and female migrants interviewed by migration statuses**

Nature	Male in %	Female in %	Total in %
Involuntarily returned migrants	98.00	2.00	100.00
Migrants in destination countries	74.00	26.00	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>86 (172)</b>	<b>14 (28)</b>	<b>100 (200)</b>

Source: BCSM Survey 2020

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate the total number of respondents

**Age group of migrants:** Table 3.2 provides the age group of the migrants. Eighty three percent of the migrants are below the age of 45. This shows that migrants give their best working years to different employers of abroad. The data is divided in two sub groups involuntarily returned and migrants who are currently in destination. It is interesting to note that population below 45 is more in case of the involuntary returnees (89 percent). 77 percent among the current migrant households belong to this age group. Among the involuntary returnees only 11 percent are more than 45 years of age. Among the current migrants 23 percent are more than 45 years. Average age of involuntarily returned migrants is 34 and for the current migrants it is 36. Combined average age of male migrants is 36 and of female migrants is 32.

**Table 3.2: Age group of involuntarily returned and current migrants**

Age Group	Involuntarily Returned Migrants in %			Migrants currently in destination countries in %			Grand Total in %
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
20-24	5.10	0	5.00	17.57	7.69	15.00	<b>10.00</b>
25-29	28.57	0	28.00	16.22	38.46	22.00	<b>25.00</b>
30-34	22.45	0	22.00	16.22	11.54	15.00	<b>18.50</b>
35-39	20.41	100.00	22.00	9.46	11.54	10.00	<b>16.00</b>
40-44	12.24	0	12.00	10.81	26.92	15.00	<b>13.50</b>
45-49	6.12	0	6.00	13.51	3.85	11.00	<b>8.50</b>
50-55	5.10	0	5.00	13.51	0	10.00	<b>7.50</b>
56-60				2.70	0	2.00	<b>1.00</b>
<b>Grand Total in No.</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

**Table 3.3: Country wise average age of the involuntarily returned migrants**

Country	Minimum age	Maximum age	Average age
UAE	24	55	36
Lebanon	36	48	42.0
Malaysia	20	45	31
Oman	25	54	34
Iraq	28	28	28.0
KSA	21	50	32
Qatar	30	42	36.0
Kuwait	27	55	41
Bahrain	32	32	32.0
Singapore	34	36	35.0
<b>Other</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>41</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

**Size of the households:** This study defines family as, household members who eat from same cooking. It could be more than one

families or it may be one nuclear family. As long as they eat from the same kitchen, they are treated as household members. If the household has support staff and if they eat from the same kitchen, they are also treated as household members. Table 3.4 shows the average family size of involuntarily migrants are 5.5 and average family size of current migrant households is 5.6. Sixty-six percent of the households have two to five members. Only a handful of the households (less than 3.5 percent) have more than ten members.

**Table 3.4: Size of the household**

Family members	Involuntarily returned migrant HHs in %	Current migrant HHs in %	Grand Total in %
2-5 members	69.00	63.00	66.00
6-9 members	27.00	28.00	27.50
10-12 members	2.00	4.00	3.00
13+ members	2.00	5.00	3.50
Total No.	100	100	200
<b>Average HH size</b>	<b>5.50</b>	<b>5.60</b>	<b>5.55</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

**Household income and remittance:** Average family income of both groups of households was 17,85532. No significant difference has been observed among involuntarily returned and current migrant households in respect to household income. For 56 percent families' remittance is the only source of income (Table 3.5). Three fourth portion of 24 percent household's income comes from remittance. For 13 percent household remittance constitutes half of the family income.

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32 Data on HH income is presented in figure 7.4 of chapter 7

**Table 3.5: Dependence on remittance for expenditure of involuntarily returned and current migrant HHs**

Share of remittance	Involuntarily Returned Migrants in %			Current migrant HHs in %			Grand Total in %
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	
Fully dependent	0.00	54.60	53.50	80.80	50.00	58.00	55.75
Three fourth of the expenditure	100.00	26.80	28.30	11.50	21.60	19.00	23.65
Half of the expenditure	0.00	11.30	11.10	0.00	18.90	14.00	12.55
Quarter of the expenditure	0.00	5.20	5.10	7.70	6.80	7.00	6.05
Less than Quarter of the expenditure	0.00	2.10	2.00	0.00	2.70	2.00	2.00
<b>Total No.</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

The table 3.6 shows the amount of remittance spent by the last three months before the outbreak of COVID-19. Before the outbreak of COVID-19 all the migrants remitted. On an average involuntarily returned migrants sent Tk. 54,000 (US\$635) and households whose migrants are still abroad received around Tk. 45,000 (US\$529) during the three months before COVID-19. Highest remittance was experienced by an involuntarily returned household. It received Tk. 210,000 (US\$2471).

**Table 3.6: Remittances of three months before COVID-19 by status of the migrants (in Tk.)**

Amount	Involuntarily Returned Migrants	Current Migrants	All Groups
Maximum	210,000	150,000	180,000
Minimum	5000	25,000	15,000
Average	54,284	45,050	49,667

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Table 3.7 made a comparison of remittance flow to the left behind migrant households before and during COVID-19. It gathered information of remittance transfer during the months of November, December, 2019 and January, 2020 and compared that with the remittance figure of May, June and July, 2020. It shows that these households received 38 percent less than what it received during COVID-19 period compared to that of pre COVID months.

**Table 3.7: Reduction in remittances of current migrant HHs (in Tk.)**

Amount	Current Migrants		Reduction in flow in %
	Before COVID	After COVID	
Maximum	150,000	100,000	33.33
Minimum	25,000	3,000	88.00
Average	45,050	27,895	38.08

Source: BCSM and RMMMURU Survey 2020

### Section III: Migration trajectory

**District of origin of involuntarily returned and current migrants:** The returnees whom the study interviewed originated from 21 districts. Table 3.8 shows the origin districts of returnee migrant workers. Twenty-six percent of involuntarily returned migrants are from Dhaka, 14 percent from Jashore, 10 percent each from Tangail and Chattogram, 6 percent from Narail, 5 percent each from Jhainadah, Cumilla, Narshingdi, 4 percent each from Natore and Kishorganj, 2 percent from Barishal, 1 percent each from Rajshahi, Shariatpur. Others include Jhalokati, Pirojpur, Chandpur, Madaripur, Meherpur, Gazipur and Feni.

Households of current migrants belong to 11 districts. Around 50 percent of them are from Dhaka and Chattogram followed by Tangail, Jashore and Cumilla. Five percent of the migrants originated from Narail, Jhainadah and Cox's Bazar. The rest migrated from Shariatpur, Rajshahi and Narsingdi.

**Table 3.8: Name of the district of origin**

Name of district	Involuntarily Returned Migrants in %	Current Migrants in %	Total in %
Dhaka	26.00	25.00	25.50
Jashore	14.00	9.00	11.50
Tangail	10.00	16.00	13.00
Chattogram	10.00	23.00	16.50
Narail	6.00	5.00	5.50
Jhinaidah	5.00	5.00	5.00
Cumilla	5.00	6.00	5.50
Narsingdi	5.00	1.00	3.00
Natore	4.00	-	2.00
Kishoreganj	4.00	-	2.00
Barishal	2.00	-	1.00
Rajshahi	1.00	1.00	1.00
Shariatpur	1.00	4.00	2.50
Cox's Bazar	-	5.00	2.50
Others	7.00	-	3.50
<b>Total No.</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMMURU Survey 2020

Note: Others include Jhalokati, Pirojpur, Chandpur, Madaripur, Meherpur, Gazipur and Feni

**Duration of migration:** Table 3.9 shows the duration of migration of both involuntarily returned and current migrants. Around half of them have migrated for up to five years. Migration experience of more than 22 percent of them ranges between six to ten years. Another 17 percent have eleven to fifteen years of migration experience. One migrant has been staying abroad for more than 30 years. There are two female involuntary returnees. They have been staying abroad for around 9 years. Current female migrants have migrated for around six years. On an average involuntarily returned male migrants have 7.30 years of migration experience. Current male migrants have 9 years of migration experience.

**Table 3.9: Duration of Migration by sex**

Duration in year	Involuntarily returned migrants in %			Current Migrants in %			Grand Total in %
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	
Less than 1 year	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.85	0	1.0	0.50
1-5	50.00	47.96	48.00	57.69	48.65	51.00	49.50
6-10	0.00	30.61	30.00	11.54	16.22	15.00	22.50
11-15	50.00	17.35	18.00	19.23	16.22	17.00	17.50
16-19	0.00	0.00	0.00	7.69	9.46	9.00	4.50
20-25	0.00	4.08	4.00	0.00	5.41	4.00	4.00
26-30	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.70	2.00	1.00
31-35	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.35	1.00	0.50
<b>Total in number</b>	<b>02</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>
Average years	9.5	7.30	7.34	5.81	9.07	8.22	7.78

Source: BCSM and RMMMRU Survey 2020

**Destination countries:** The migrants both involuntarily returned and current were working in 17 countries. Seventy-two percent of them went to Gulf and other Arab countries (Table 3.10). Again, one fourth of these migrants went to Saudi Arabia and another one fourth to UAE. South-east Asian countries have been destinations of these migrants. Of course, predominantly they have gone to Malaysia. If the two cases of return from Italy and USA are kept aside, other cases such as Somalia, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine are not regular destinations for Bangladeshi workers. There is a great possibility that these migrants have been attempting to go to other destinations of Europe or there are countries where irregular migration takes place.

**Table 3.10: Destination countries by migration status**

Destination country	Involuntarily returned in %	Current Migrants in %	Total in %
UAE	30.00	23.00	26.50
Malaysia	27.00	19.00	23.00

Saudi Arabia	19.00	36.00	27.50
Oman	8.00	8.00	8.00
Kuwait	3.00	4.00	3.50
Qatar	2.00	3.00	2.50
Singapore	2.00	3.00	2.50
Lebanon	2.00	1.00	1.50
Iraq	1.00	-	0.50
Bahrain	1.00	2.00	1.50
Jordan	-	1.00	0.50
Others	5	-	2.50
<b>Total No.</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>200</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMMRU Survey 2020

Note: Others include Italy, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine and USA

## Section IV: Chapter conclusion

This chapter gives an idea about the basic socio-economic characteristics of the migrants and it also throws light on their migration trajectory. 86 percent of these respondents of the study are male migrants and 14 percent are female migrants. Migrants have spent their best working years of life in serving the countries of their migration. 83 percent of them are below the age of 45. The average household size of these migrants is around 5.5. Before COVID-19 the average household income of these migrants is around Tk. 18,000 (US\$212). The interviewees originated from 21 districts of Bangladesh. However, Dhaka and Chattogram are the two major origin areas. Years that the migrants spent abroad are also quite significant. Female migrants on an average stayed abroad for six years and male migrants stayed for nine years. Saudi Arabia is the major destination. Half the current and involuntarily returned migrants went to Saudi Arabia and UAE. It is interesting that number of migrants particularly those returned during COVID-19 came back from non-traditional countries. These are Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Somalia. There is a possibility that these are destinations of irregular migrants.



## CHAPTER IV

### FACING COVID-19 IN COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION:

Health Shocks, Income Risks, Detention, Deportation and Wage Theft

Syeda Rozana Rashid, Hossain Mohammad Fazle Jahid  
and Rabeya Nasrin

**T**his chapter looks into the vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi migrant workers in destination countries during the spread of Covid-19. It particularly attempts to understand the lived experiences of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in the aftermath of the pandemic and its impact on their lives and livelihoods. Using first-hand and micro data and adopting a rights-based approach the chapter unpacks the situation faced by migrants during the pandemic. It argues that the pre-existing structural inadequacies such as constrained access to healthcare, hazardous living condition, low wages coupled with the lack of preparedness and willingness of destination countries to treat the migrants equally with their nationals, resulted in pandemic quandary for the migrants.

**The major research questions pursued in this chapter are:** What are the effects of COVID-19 on Bangladeshi migrant workers in different destination countries? What types of vulnerabilities and risks were encountered by the migrants when COVID-19 broke out? How did they face health risks and shocks of COVID-19? Did the Bangladeshi migrants experience

arrest and detention in destination countries during COVID-19? Was there any push for arbitrarily return of the Bangladeshi migrants by the destination countries? If that was the case, how did the destination countries facilitate the return? What are the experiences of return of both male and female migrants? In case of arbitrary return did the employers settle the migrants' unpaid dues before their return?

Drawing on primary data from 100 involuntarily returned migrants and 100 current migrants, the chapter analyses the circumstances that underpin migrants' vulnerability in respect to health, income and job. Secondary data was gathered from review of literature available both at global and regional levels, newspaper clippings and national and international webinars organised between March-November, 2020.

This chapter is organized in seven sections. Section I sets the context. Section II underpins the conceptual understanding about the challenges faced by migrants during COVID-19. The third section deals with Bangladesh migrants' health risks and shocks. Section IV explores the situation of income and employment of migrants during COVID-19. Section V and section VI deal with detention and deportation. Section VII tries to assess the extent of unpaid wages and other dues that migrants have left behind in the countries of destinations. The concluding section summarises the major findings and provides some recommendations.

## **Section II: Conceptual understanding**

Studies have shown during any public health emergency migrant workers suffer disproportionately more. Wickramage and Agampodi (2013) show the 2005 avian influenza viral outbreak severely impacted the Asian migrant workers in poultry and animal husbandry sectors. West African seasonal migrant workers were considered both causes and victims of Ebola virus (CIDRAP, 2014). Numerous studies in different part of the world were undertaken to understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on

the migrants since its outbreak (Beech, 2020; Guadagno, 2020; ILO, 2020). They highlighted different forms of vulnerabilities of the international migrants during COVID-19.

**Health risks and shocks:** Almost all the studies recently undertaken conclude that spread of COVID-19 is higher among the migrants compared to the nationals in all the destination countries irrespective of the economic status. Migrants from the twenty countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases accounted for nearly thirty-two per cent of the total international migrant stock (MDP, 2020). Official data on the COVID-19-positive people of Saudi Arabia and Singapore show migrant workers are exposed to the virus of the migrant population. In Qatar, one-in-four people were tested positive and majority of the infected were migrant workers<sup>33</sup>. 25,000 among 150,000 Bangladeshi workers in Singapore were corona-positive by May 2020, while the total number of cases in that point of time in the country was 40,969<sup>34</sup>.

In most of the destination countries, migrants do not enjoy equal access to healthcare like the citizens, and hence automatically became ineligible for COVID-19 treatment (Vearey et. al. 2020). Guadagno (2020) finds even where they were entitled to relevant services, many of the migrants could not avail those due to language barriers, limited knowledge of the host country context, overreliance on informal communication channels, or prioritization of citizens. Bauomy (2020) on the other hand shows access to services become more problematic for the migrants because of the spread of fake news, misinformation and politicization.

Siddiqui (2020) shows that the extent to which migrants are

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33 The Business Standard, Infections among Bangladeshi migrants on the rise, 6 May 2020a. <https://tbsnews.net/COVID-19-chronicle/infections-among-bangladeshi-migrants-rise-78109>

34 The Business Standard, 2020c Thousands of Bangladeshi workers detained in Kuwait's detention camps 16 May. <https://tbsnews.net/COVID-19-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/watch-thousands-bangladeshi-workers-detained-kuwaits>

exposed and vulnerable to COVID-19 depended largely on the types of work they were engaged in<sup>35</sup>. Migrants involved in agriculture, construction work, logistics and deliveries, personal and health-care and cleaning services were more exposed to COVID-19 than others. Inability to work remotely, limited access to private transportation, physical proximity with coworkers and customers and lack of adequate protective equipments and hygiene options made these occupations particularly risky (Gelatt, 2020). Although these migrants were praised for providing essential services, their security has not been ensured the way it should have been. Migrants are over-represented in some of the industries and sectors which are the hardest hit by the crisis. Those involved in food services and domestic works are good examples. The negative health and socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 and the response measures affect irregular migrants more than the regular migrants (ILO 2016, 2020). They fear being reported to the immigration authorities and deported if they seek assistance, which reduced their willingness to come forward for screening, testing, contact tracing or treatment (Jordan, 2020).

**Living arrangements:** The outbreak of the COVID-19 led to closures, quarantines, and mobility restrictions (Ng, 2020). Segregation and confinement at both ends became common results of the pandemic on migrants (ibid). The effectiveness of lockdown and relocation to contain the risk of infection restricted their ability to move, access food, basic services and earn an income (Pattison, 2020). Business and Human Rights Resource Center (BHRC), (2020) expressed that for migrants working in Malaysia, lack of food was a larger threat than Covid-19. BHRC asserted that living in overcrowded environments without adequate access to water and hygiene products prevented migrants from respecting social distancing and other basic practices. Even self-isolation became impossible in case of

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35 RMMRU (2020) The other face of globalization: COVID 19, Arbitrary Return of Bangladeshi Migrants and their Unpaid Dues, RMMRU Policy Brief, July 2020 <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Policy-Brief-30.pdf>

illness. In the absence of systematic screening and tracing, the risk of a spread of the disease increased in the migrant intensive areas. IOM (2020) finds that the migrants felt socially isolated and unable to decide on their future actions due to closure of borders and restriction on movements.

**Income and jobs:** COVID-19 pushed relatively unprotected workers to underemployment and unemployment leaving a series of impact such as sudden income loss, reduced consumption of essential items and products and impoverishment (ILO, 2020; Crawford et. at. 2020; Khan and Harroff-Tavel, 2011). Due to COVID-19, migrants lost their jobs across a range of sectors, including aviation, tourism, transportation, retail, hospitality, amusement, and street vending (Sorker, 2020). Regardless of their legal status, a section of migrants were laid off by their companies.

Female migrant workers are employed in jobs that fall at the bottom ranks, which typically involve tasks that are culturally devalued and receive limited socio-legal recognition (Piper, 2011). Exploitative working conditions affected their health and well-being. UN Women (2020a) stresses that woman migrants are generally less protected from job losses and economic recessions. They are more likely to experience violence within workplaces (Hennebry and Petrozziello, 2019; Aoun, 2020). They are extremely isolated (Amnesty International, 2020). ILO (2016) pointed out physical violence, sexual exploitation and denial of basic rights are widely reported in domestic work which in turn affects their mental and physical well-being.

**Detention, deportation and wage theft:** Many host countries returned the workers back to their own countries. Even those who had years of work experience faced cancellation of work permits and consequently a large number of migrants have returned home. In most cases they returned without receiving any financial compensation or support from their employers in the destination countries.

For irregular migrants, taking a decision to ‘return’ is even harder since it requires availability, capacity and affordability to travel within strict policies governing cross-border mobility (İçduygu, 2020). For them, ‘return in COVID-19 situation’ also implies losing their chances of employment, earning their livelihood abroad and supporting day-to-day subsistence of their families left behind.

A section of the South Asian female workers were also compelled to return home (UN Women, 2020b). Female migrants faced challenges in ensuring regular food intake, went through health risks and also were exposed to gender-based violence<sup>36</sup>. Upon return, female migrants also experienced social stigma<sup>37</sup>.

Closely associated with involuntary return of migrants during COVID-19 is the issue of wage theft. Though wage theft had always been a challenge, it has been exacerbated by the current crisis (MFA, 2020). Migrants’ rights to access justice are compromised when they are arbitrarily returned without being able to lodge their due claims. MFA (2020) argues millions of dollars are lost in the form of remittances due to wage theft in pandemic. It is not only a violation of migrants’ human rights but also lead to situations of debt bondage.

In the following four sections situation of Bangladeshi migrants in respect to health risks and shocks, income and job loss, detention and deportation and wage theft is analyzed. It begins with a discussion on health risks and shocks of migrants in the aftermath of COVID-19.

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36 The Daily Star, ‘Female Migrant Workers: 10,430 returnees to get assistance’, 6 September 2020. <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/female-migrant-workers-10430-returnees-get-assistance-1956489>

37 The Himalayan, ‘COVID escalates vulnerability of female migrant Workers’, 26 August 2020 <https://thehimalayantimes.com/>

### Section III: Health risks and shocks of Bangladeshi migrants

**Exposure to COVID-19:** As of December, 2020, more than 2,330 Bangladeshis died from COVID-19 infection in 19 countries of the world<sup>38</sup>. Among 200 involuntarily returned and current migrant households studied, 2 households reported death of the migrants during COVID-19. One migrant died of COVID-19 virus and the other from brain stroke. Before he passed away, Abdul (38), who died of brain stroke, informed his family that he had cold but he could not go out to secure treatment due to his irregular status. His fellow workers informed the family that he had all the symptoms of COVID-19. Abdul might not been infected by COVID-19 but he passed away without treatment because of his fear of being arrested and deported.

**Table 4.1 Spread of COVID-19 among migrants and fellow workers (each column represents 100 percent of the response)**

COVID-19 infection among migrants				COVID-19 infection among fellow workers		
Type	Infected	Not infected	Total	Infected	Not infected	Total
Current migrant	1.00	99.00	100.00	0.00	100.00	100.00
Involuntarily returned	1.00	99.00	100.00	7.00	93.00	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>2 (1%)</b>	<b>198 (99%)</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>7 (3.5%)</b>	<b>193 (96.5%)</b>	<b>200</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Table 4.1 reveals that among the involuntarily returned migrants, 7 percent informed that their fellow workers were detected with COVID-19. During in-depth interviews the migrants revealed that when someone got detected in a residence, the whole premise went through strict quarantine. It became difficult for other migrants to go out for work. Even going out for fetching food also became difficult. Maintaining physical distance was tough in their congested shared accommodations. However, there were good

<sup>38</sup> Prothom Alo, December 28, 2020

examples as well. Singapore authorities evacuated the infected migrants when they were detected COVID-19 positive. Fazlur Rahman returned from Singapore. He said, ‘Singapore took good care of those who were infected with COVID-19. If a migrant is detected COVID-19 positive, he is evacuated from the dormitory and usually placed in a hotel’. Fazlur Rahman had been working in Singapore for seven years as a construction worker.

**Table 4.2: Experience of COVID-19 test of current and forcibly returned migrants**

Responses	Involuntarily returned in %			Current Migrants HHs in %		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Yes	45.92	50.00	46.00	1.36	0.00	1.00
No	54.08	50.00	54.00	98.65	100.00	99.00
<b>Total No.</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

**Access to healthcare services:** In the Gulf and Arab countries migrants are supposed to be provided with health insurance by the employers. In reality the employers put the burden on the shoulder of the migrants through deduction from their wages. Lowly skilled workers do not have the power or the knowledge to exercise such entitlements (Yara, 2020). Migrants in so called free visa and the irregular migrants are not covered by health care. COVID-19 has exacerbated these preexisting precarities of work in respect to health care.

Only one family of the current migrants revealed that its migrant member who at the time of the interview was residing in Saudi Arabia was detected COVID-19 positive. He went through COVID-19 test. Rest of the families informed that their migrant members residing abroad did not go through any COVID-19 test. Or they did not have information on that. Thirty eight year old Abul had been residing in Qatar for the last twelve years. It is understood that migrants who went abroad in so called ‘free visa’ as well as those in irregular status will not volunteer to

take COVID-19 tests even if they were sick. The fear of being caught and deported would deter them to go for testing. A number of involuntarily returned migrants however, experienced COVID-19 testing. Table 4.2 shows that forty-six percent of those returned migrants had to go through COVID-19 test before they were deported but none of them were found positive.

It seems that migrants residing in destination countries normally did not access COVID-19 tests. Again, in cases where the migrants were forced to return, more than half of them did not go through COVID-19 test. Mohon Ali who returned from UAE, stated that a common certificate was provided to those who were traveling stating that they did not have COVID-19.

Live-in female workers staying with employers had relatively better access to health care compared to those who were live-out domestic workers. Since they were staying inside homes of the employers, the latter had to ensure same type of safety measures for the domestic workers. They were not allowed to go out. A couple of the live-in domestic workers did avail treatment during COVID-19. Shahnaz (32), a live-in domestic worker of Saudi Arabia, for instance, broke her hand. Her employer arranged treatment for her. However, Shahnaz was upset and told her family that the employer informed her that they would deduct the cost of treatment from her salary. Live-out female migrants, on the contrary, would have to bear the cost of testing themselves.

**Stress and anxiety:** Eighty-seven percent (Table 4.3) of the current migrants both male and female expressed various types of anxieties to their left behind family members. Some of the sources of fear are common for male and female migrants. However, some other varied according to their sex. Stresses that male migrants expressed can be divided in three types; health related, mental stress related and financial situation related. Health related stresses include inability to access normal health services. Mental stress arises from being confined in one room since March and feeling of isolation and suffocation. Nafiz

informed that ‘if one person of a camp is detected positive, the whole camp is put in isolation. Then many of us faced situations of no work, no wage, and no food. So, you can imagine what type of stresses we go through’. Most of the workers who migrated recently have borrowed money to bear their migration costs. They expressed concern about how to clear those loans. Almost all of them were worried about their uncertain future in destination. For some, visa would expire soon. They could have taken imitative to renew those if situation was normal. Worries of irregular migrants were related to possibility of detention and arrest. They passed through agonising time as they felt that police may catch them any time and send back home. Financial worries include current lack of income or possibility of losing jobs. Due to irregular status, a section of them could not go out to look for work. Those who experienced salary cut were worried about ensuring food during rest of the COVID-19 period in destination. Some of them were surviving by taking loan from fellow workers. They were worried how they would pay the money back. Those who were involved in grocery business were incurring major losses. Many of their products could not be sold any more, as those had past the expiry date.

**Table 4.3: Percentage of left-behind migrant households who expressed anxiety**

Stress	Involuntarily returned in %			Current Migrants HHs in %		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Yes	100.00	93.88	94.00	80.80	89.20	87.00
No	0.00	6.12	6.00	19.20	10.80	13.00
<b>Total in No.</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Female workers also expressed worries to their families concerning possibilities of being infected with COVID-19, non-payment of salary etc (81%), yet there are some stresses which are only felt by female. Stresses of female workers also vary according to their types of jobs or places of residence.

Live-in domestic workers were concerned about delayed or nonpayment of wages, increased work load and reduced level communication with family. Along with these, live-out domestic and other female workers experienced job loss like their male counterparts. Shahnaz (Saudi Arabia) is a live-in domestic worker. Her employer was not paying her salary. She was worried how her mother would feed her two children whom she left behind with her. Her mother did not have any other sources of income. Her children were stressed as they could not talk to their mother frequently. Earlier she used to ring up every day, but during COVID-19 she only managed to call once a week. Neither she had the money to recharge her mobile, nor was she allowed to go out to do the same. Left behind family members of migrants also went through various types of anxieties. They expressed that when their migrant members were suffering, they also went through traumatic situation. Besides, planning to run the households without remittances was another headache.

#### **Section IV: Income and job loss**

COVID-19 affected the jobs of workers in many ways. Some fully lost their jobs (34 percent male and 8 percent female), and some partly (26 percent of the male and 27 percent of the female). Forty percent male and 65 percent female migrants could retain their jobs but of course a section of them were paid reduced salaries or delayed payment (Table 4.4). They used to work with different companies. Perhaps they were on so called free visa. Working for cleaning companies and construction firms sounds formal in nature, yet workers were mostly informally recruited through supply companies. They also lost jobs. These workers suffered the most since they often relied on short-term or casual work. They did not have a regular employer to provide food and housing. These migrants spent their savings and borrowed money from friends and relatives for their subsistence and also for payment of house rent.

Interestingly, migrants received both good and bad treatment

from employers in this situation. Although the government allocated stimulus packages so that employers continue to provide workers with food and accommodation, some employers kept the migrants outside that safety net. It is more explicit in the following statements of forcedly returned migrants.

**Table 4.4: Employment Status in destination during COVID-19**

Employment Status	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total No.
Employed	65.00	40.00	47
Partially employed	27.00	26.00	26
Unemployed	8.00	34.00	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: BCSM Survey 2020

Twenty two year old Showkat migrated to Qatar only a year ago. He used to work in a construction firm. Construction work came to a complete halt. He did not have any income and was in deep trouble. In his own words, ‘I desperately looked for work everywhere as my construction company was closed. I found work at a vegetable shop near my camp. At the end of the day I would receive some income with which I could barely purchase my food’.

Thirty two year old Ashraf was involuntarily returned from UAE. He could have continued his work. He was a victim of wrong doing by law enforcing agency and was sent back arbitrarily. He said with sorrow, ‘My employer was good. During COVID-19 I was working half time and getting half payment. My office maintained strict regulations on wearing masks and cleaning hands’.

During COVID-19 Nazim could continue to work. He said, ‘I worked in a supply company. During lockdown my work continued. Cleaning premises was treated as essential work. I was receiving partial payments with an assurance that dues will be cleared once the situation improves’.

**Table 4.5: Payment of wages/salary after the outbreak of COVID-19**

Gender	Full payment (%)	Partial payment (%)	No payment (%)	Total No.
Male	24.00	36.00	40.00	74
Female	58.00	34.00	8.00	26
<b>Total No. respondent</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: BCSM Survey 2020

Left behind family members informed that 40 percent male and 8 percent female migrants did not receive salaries since the pandemic (Table 4.5). Thirty four to Thirty six percent of the migrants, irrespective of their gender received partial payment. Fifty eight percent female and 24 percent male migrants either received their payments or they secured commitments that they would be paid full salary after the situation improves.

Some of the migrants who were in irregular status could not go out to look for work. Shajal (38) from UAE informed, ‘I did not have work and I had look for work desperate during COVID-19 situation. I found a casual work and received some Iftaar at the end of the day. My wage remained pending for the work I did. I was in such a bad shape that my family from Bangladesh had to send money and with that I paid the rent’.

The above cases indicate that major financial sufferings arose from loss of job, reduced duration of job, nonpayment of salary etc. Bangladeshi female migrants are predominantly engaged as domestic workers. Live-in domestic workers did not experience loss of jobs due to COVID-19. They suffered from non-payment of wages, increased workload and reduced communication with the family. Nazneen Akhtar (Saudi Arabia) informed her family that since the start of the pandemic her workload increased manifold. Her washing load increased many a time. For touching soap all the time, she had developed skin disease. Employers are sympathetic and bought medicine for her. Employers of Shahnaz, another live-in worker has denied her salary as they bore the cost of treatment.

The live-out female domestic workers did suffer job loss. In order to maintain safety, employers of live-out domestic workers stopped taking their services. Any decent work condition would indicate that even if the employer decided not to allow the female migrants inside the home, they should continue to pay their salary. But it did not happen in most of the cases. Live-out domestic workers usually work in more than one house.

Saima (28) is one of the live-out domestic workers who experienced loss of job. Saima was working in Saudi Arabia. The company forced her to sign a paper stating it is no longer able to pay her salary. Shumi Khatun (35) was employed in Dubai as a live-out domestic worker and used to work in three houses. With the outbreak of COVID-19 two employers stopped taking her service. It became difficult for her to even manage food and accommodation with the reduced earning. Her family informed that she was in distress. While earlier she used to call home now and then, after corona pandemic she could afford to make calls once in ten days.

## Section V: Detention

**Experience of detention:** In the past while facing any crisis the destination countries have used the migrants as the safety valve. In order to convince their citizens that they are taking decisive measures to reduce the hardship experienced by the people of the country the policy makers of those countries usually identify migrants as the ‘others’. Sending back the migrant workers to their countries of origin becomes one of their popular measures (Asian Financial Crisis 1997 and 1999, Global Financial Crisis 2009-10). The same method has been used by many of the labour receiving countries of Bangladesh. From early April 2020, governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Maldives started negotiating with the government of Bangladesh to take back Bangladeshi workers who were in irregular status. They also offered the option of pardoning the migrants who have been convicted if Bangladesh committed to bring them back. Arrest

and detaining migrants in the pretext of strict implementation of lockdown and drive against irregular migrants are also some important methods of law enforcers of destination countries to collect migrants together and subsequently deport them to their countries of origin.

Table 4.6 shows that fifty-five percent of the migrants experienced detention/ jail<sup>39</sup>. Only a few of them were already serving jail time from before. Chapter 2 showed that 46,000 female migrant came back from different parts of the world during COVID-19, however, detention was not used as a method for women. Besides, interviews have taken place during June-July. Return of female migrants mostly started from September. None of the two female returnees experienced detention neither did they have information of other female migrants being detained. The highest number of interviewees was from UAE. 67 percent of them experienced detention. 27 of the involuntarily returned migrants came from Malaysia. 33 percent of them experienced detention. 19 of the interviewees returned from Saudi Arabia. 56 percent of them experienced detention.

**Table 4.6: Experience of detention before involuntary return**

Country	No (%)	Yes (%)	Clm. %	Total No.
UAE	33.33	66.67	100.00	30
Lebanon	100.00	0.00	100.00	2
Malaysia	66.67	33.33	100.00	27
Oman	50.00	50.00	100.00	8
Iraq	100.00	0.00	100.00	1
Saudi Arabia	43.33	56.67	100.00	19
Qatar	100.00	0.00	100.00	2
Kuwait	0.00	100.00	100.00	3

39 Percentage of migrants who were detained is over-represented in the data as a large number of the interviews were conducted on those who have been provided emergency services at the Dhaka airport. If data was collected by following a rigorous methodology of sampling at village level, then the number of detained migrants would have been less.

Bahrain	0.00	100.00	100.00	1
Singapore	100.00	0.00	100.00	2
Others	100.00	0.00	100.00	5
<b>Total No.</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Migrants who have been detained during COVID-19 in different countries were picked up from different sites. Some were picked up from stores, some from roads and some others from next to their shelters. Twenty two year old Tota Miya migrated to Saudi Arabia. In his words, ‘I was returning from work after finishing my shift. White clothed police stopped me. I produced all my papers. Yet they detained me’. Mohan Ali was working in Qatar. Currently he is 43 years old. He described his experience as, ‘My job did not fetch enough. I had a side business of vending cigarette. One of my customers ordered a few packets of cigarettes and I was waiting with that on a roadside. All of a sudden police came and put me in the police car. I tried my best to convince him that I had valid visa but they put me in jail anyway.’ The story of Mohammad Ashraf is more pathetic. He said, ‘For a few days I did not eat. It was Eid day. Although it was a lockdown situation I went out to a nearby place, stood in front of a tea stall with the hope that people may give me something to eat. When police came, others ran away. Thinking me to be the tea stall owner they arrested me’.

Two migrants who returned from Kuwait, in fact voluntarily availed detention. The Kuwait government announced general amnesty to those who have overstayed their visa. The government informed that it would not punish the migrants for over staying rather they will be provided assistance to return to their countries of origin. Those who returned from Kuwait explained that as there was no work and their savings were also disappearing, they did not have any other option than to decide to come back. Salam stated that, ‘for months I did not have any work. Every year we need to save some money for renewing our visa. Since I

did not have work, I was maintaining my day-to-day expenditure from that savings. That savings was also coming to an end. Then, the Kuwaiti government declared general amnesty. As per the Kuwaiti government's suggestion, we went to our embassy and then enlisted ourselves for returning. Once Bangladesh embassy issued the document of proof, we submitted that to Kuwaiti authority and they put us into detention camp'.

**Treatment in detention camps:** After being picked up from different places, migrants were sent to jail/ detention centers. In case of Kuwait, once the migrant opted for general amnesty, they were taken to detention camps. The situation of detention camps of Kuwait was very poor. Around 200 migrants had to share one toilet. In some cases they were under the open sky. The majority of detained migrants in other countries narrated dehumanizing treatments. Only a section felt that they were treated alright. Some were subjected to physical assault. Toilet and shower facilities were extremely inadequate. Health issues were not taken into consideration. Two to three people had to share a single bed. They were provided with very low quality food.

Kajol did not have much to complain about food and other facilities in the detention centers. He said, 'I didn't face major problem in jail. Food was available. What else do you expect; you are not a guest there. Therefore it is natural that the quality of food was not good. Nonetheless, I received a piece of bread in the morning; rice and lentil for dinner and lunch. I am upset because when they put me in jail they took away my money and the cell phone. They never returned them'.

Some migrant observed that health and hygiene were severely compromised in the detention camps. Thirty eight year old Rashid was detained in Dubai. He stated before being arrested that, 'I was told by my office to maintain cleanliness. But in jail I stayed in a pair of clothes for 28 days. While taking shower I wore a plastic bag. They had one rule for themselves and another for us'.

Thirty nine year old Iqbal is still traumatized with his experience of detention. He revealed that, ‘for four hours the police wouldn’t give me a glass of water. I had 180 dirham (Tk. 4200) with me. Police took that money. I was then sent to a detention camp. It wasn’t a detention camp per say. I along with others was under the open sky, at day time under scorching sun and at night in shivering cold. They did not bother to give me a blanket. I was later transferred to another jail. Altogether I was there for 22 days in single attire. If I asked anything I was beaten by the security guards. I endured all these despite having a valid visa. Instead of coming to my rescue the employer handed over my passport to the police who then sent me back home’.

## **Section VI: Involuntarily return**

Chapter two of the book informed that around 326,758 Bangladeshi workers returned home between April 1 to December 27 of 2020 (MoEWOE, 2020)<sup>40</sup>. During the beginning of November, 2020, the Ministry shared a country wise breakdown of return. At that point of time total number of returnees was 227,000<sup>41</sup>. The highest number of 76,922 migrants returned from Saudi Arabia followed by 71,903 from the UAE.

The involuntarily returned migrants interviewed in this research came from seventeen countries. Table 4.7 shows that the two female came just before the lockdown. Out of the rest, 98 male migrants 67.34 percent of them were forced to return. 9.18 percent came on leave just before the lockdown and 25.51 percent either opted or their employers helped them to return to Bangladesh, some with a commitment that they might take them back when the situation changes. The returned migrants are of four types. One group includes those who were picked up from different places, detained and then deported and the other group is constituted by those who opted for general amnesty.

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40 Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), 2020, <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>

41 <http://probashbarta.com/2020/12/14/>

A section of the respondents served jail term and returned with ‘out passes’. However, some of the 25.51 percent who opted to return voluntarily were from the USA, Uzbekistan, Ukraine and Somalia.

**Table 4.7: Nature of return of 98 male migrants (made a change in the list of tables)**

Type of return	Male %
Involuntary return	67.34
Just before lockdown opted to return	7.14
Opted to return	25.51
<b>Percentage and total number</b>	<b>100.00 (98)</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Note: Only 2 female migrants were interviewed and they came back just before the lockdown began.

Although the countries of destination may vary, the experiences of forced return are similar. Both Tota Miya and Mohon Ali were deported back from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Wasim was deported from UAE. His story is similar to Tota Miya and Mohan Ali. He said ‘On 10 June 2020, I was walking near my residence after finishing daily work. Suddenly police came and arrested me. I told them that I had all the necessary valid documents before the police but they did not listen to anything. Police remained silent about the reason behind my arrest and later threatened to beat me, as I was trying to convince them. I was thrown to jail. I stayed there for three days. After testing COVID-19 negative, I was given an air ticket. This is how I returned.’

Table 4.8 shows that a large number of those who were returned arbitrarily claimed that their visa did not expire. It is as high as sixty-eight percent. Many of those who said their visa did not expire included those whose visa would run out after a few months. But, they knew in usual situation they would have been able to extend them. Selim returned from Kuwait. His case explains the situation. Selim stated that he was staying in Kuwait

for the last five years. Each year he needed to renew his visa. Usually, all the migrants in Kuwait save a portion of their income to pay for their visas. When lockdown was imposed, he could not work. And he was paying for his food and accommodation with the savings he generated for paying the visa renewal fee. His savings were almost at the last end. At this point Kuwait government announced general amnesty and he opted for that. In his word, ‘although I voluntarily decided to return to take the benefit of general amnesty but in a normal situation I would not have decided to return. Therefore, I would say my visa did not expire. Knowing that the government will not renew, I was forced to return’.

**Table4.8: Visa status of forcibly returned migrants**

Gender	Expired	Did not expire	Total No.
Male	31.63	68.37	98
Female	0.00	100.00	2
<b>Total No.</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

## **Section VII: Unpaid wage and other dues**

Experiences of Asian migrants who were forced to return during COVID-19 revealed that a large number of them have left behind some financial and other assets in the countries of their destination. Payments of a substantial majority of these migrants were not fully cleared. Some of their wages remained due. A section of them paid the subcontractors or middlemen to renew their visa. Unfortunately, that money is lost as the migrants were not able to ensure refund from the middlemen. It is a common practice among the migrants to lend each other during hardship with the assurance that person who is lending will also receive similar assistance when s/he is in need. A number of them had lent money to their fellow workers from other countries and could not get that money back before they returned. Almost all of them left some belongings in the destination.

**Table 4.9: Unpaid wage and other dues of involuntarily returned migrants (each column represents answer of 100 migrants)**

Resources left	Left resources (%)	Did not leave any (%)	Total
Unpaid wage	67.00	33.00	100
Assets left	62.00	38.00	100
Payment for visa renewal	7.00	93.00	100
Loan to friends	5.00	95.00	100
Confiscated by law enforcing agencies	19.00	81.00	100

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Table 4.9 finds 67 percent of the involuntarily returned migrants left a portion of their hard-earned income in destination countries in the form of unpaid wage/ salary. And other sixty-two percent had left some assets/ belongings/ goods in destination. Nineteen percent of the migrants experienced confiscation of their money by the law enforcing agencies when they were arrested. Seven percent lost money that they spent for renewal of their visa. Five percent lent money to their fellow workers which they lost.

Fifty five year old Atiq was forced to return from the UAE. In many of the Gulf countries in certain types of jobs full salaries are not cleared regularly. They are paid a lump sum subsistence and later at the end of the year or before they go for holidays, the payments are cleared. In his words, ‘I had been working in a steel factory for 14 years. As part of my payment procedure I used to get a small amount per month and at the end of the year the owner cleared my due. I was planning my visit to Bangladesh. My employer was supposed to clear all my dues before my return. It is my bad luck that I got arrested and deported. I still have an outstanding amount of around Tk. 500,000 including last two months’ salary’.

Forty one year old Belal was working in Saudi Arabia for quite some times. He knew a Pakistani who used to be a migrant

before. He had his connection with the authorities of visa renewal. Belal took his Pakistani friend's help to renew his visa. In his words, 'My visa would have expired in June 2020. Just before COVID-19, I have given 3,000 dirham (Tk. 70,000) to a Pakistani friend of mine for renewing my visa. As I suffered sudden arrest, I could not contact my Pakistani friend and for all practical purpose I lost that money'.

Twenty four year old Sabuj was working in Qatar. He lost money as he lent that to one of his friends. He said, 'One of my camp mates from India had financial emergency back home. He borrowed an equivalent of Tk. 25,000 from me. There is no way I will get back that money again'.

On an average, the affected migrants lost Tk.175,000. The highest amount of loss was experienced by Atiq. He lost Tk. 500,000 as unpaid wage. The minimum loss was reported by Kalam who was forced to return from UAE. He had some dirham in his pocket which was equivalent to Tk. 9,500. Law enforcing agencies took that money when they arrested him.

## **Section VIII: Chapter conclusion**

This chapter contributes to literature on migrants in crisis situation by unfolding the pandemic experiences of overseas Bangladeshi workers. Drawing on forcedly returned and current migrants' survey data and secondary analysis of literature and media reports the chapter expounded Bangladeshi migrants' vulnerabilities during the COVID-19.

The chapter begins by exploring health risks and shocks of the migrants. It reveals that during COVID-19 Bangladeshi migrants like all other migrants around the world were highly exposed to health risks. Data at national level showed that by December 27, 2020 2,330 Bangladeshis died all over the world due to COVID-19. The highest number of deaths occurred in Saudi Arabia. Out

of two hundred migrants interviewed under this study, one was infected with COVID-19. Two of the migrants died. One of them died in destination and other in Bangladesh within a month of his return. Most of the governments of destination countries officially included all migrants irrespective of their visa status in their health care system. However access of Bangladeshi migrants hindered for different reasons. Professional and highly skilled obviously did not face hindrance in availing health care. Those who are in irregular status have not availed health care because of fear of arrest and deportation. One of the deceased could have been alive if he could come out of hiding and go to the hospital. Those who were on free visa in the Gulf could have attained healthcare when needed but many of them did not have access to information on services available. It seems live-in women migrants had better access to health care, but the live-out female domestic workers as well as those working in cleaning industries could not avail access to health care. To be more precise, they did not have access to COVID-19 testing due to lack of financial resources. The cost of testing would have to be borne by them.

Both the involuntarily returned migrants and the current migrants who still remained in their countries of destination went through different types of anxieties. This is true for both the male and female migrants. However, the nature of anxiety varied between the two sexes as well as on the basis of their location and type of work. Male migrants highlighted anxieties related to health and financial burden. Being confined to a room, prospect on defaulting in paying back loans, distressed with the feeling of helplessness as they were not being able to send remittances to the left-behind family members, possibility of expiry of visa, shutdown of business and loss of capital etc were highlighted by the male migrants. Live-out female migrants also mentioned similar stresses; however, stresses of life-in domestic workers were different. Reduced communication with families, no or partial payment of salary, and increased workload had been their sources of anxiety. Their families at home also felt the heat of the COVID-19 related stress during communication with migrants.

Short-term migrants both men and women experienced loss of job, reduced level of job and income. Only forty percent of the workers could maintain their job. Rest of the seventy two percent of the migrants either lost their jobs or became partially employed or their salaries were reduced. It is the live-in domestic workers whose jobs were not terminated. Whereas, the live-out domestic workers like their male counterparts experienced termination. These women were extremely vulnerable to the extent of not having access to food. The work load of live-in domestic workers increased manifold and their payment of wages was constrained.

A very significant finding of the study is that like any other crisis situations of the past, the destination countries used forced return of the migrants to their origin countries as one of the methods of tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. None of the international normative frameworks or standards could ensure protection of the migrant community. These guidelines or standards were not respected by the destination countries when it came to the issue of returning workers to their origin countries. Arrest and detention were two instruments used by some of the Gulf countries in hauling up migrants for future deportation. Declaration of general amnesty to the visa over-stayers was another way of encouraging deportation. Three-fourths of the returned migrants experienced detention. Arrest and detention were mostly experienced by male migrants. Those who experienced arrest and detention were picked up from public places, roads or, from in front of their shelters. On an average male migrants were detained for around 20 days. Majority of them experienced inhuman and degrading behavior in the jail or detention centres. Some of them were physically assaulted. Most of the detainees remained in same cloth for the entire period of incarceration. These migrants at a later stage were sent back to Bangladesh.

Due to abrupt nature of the return, many of the migrants left behind a portion of their hard earned income in the destination countries. Wages of sixty-seven percent of the migrants were not fully cleared. Sixty-two percent of the migrants left some of

their assets, belongings and materials in destination countries. Nineteen percent of the migrants experienced confiscation of their money, mobiles, watches etc by the law enforcing agencies during arbitrary arrests. Seven percent had to forego large sums of money which they paid to the intermediaries for annual renewal of their visas.

The Bangladeshi case illustrates that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected migrants who were already suffering rights and protection deprivation. None of the labour receiving countries has any policy to guide their actions in treating migrants during emergency situations. Lack of policy of the host countries created a situation where during the time of crisis migrants went through great insecurities in respect to food, accommodation, health and wage.

The experiences of migrants in destination countries in facing COVID-19 have clearly demonstrated the need for effective implementation of global labour standards. It also indicates that all the labour origin and destination countries require having an emergency guideline that protects basic rights of the migrants. The emergency guideline needs to be sensitive to both male and female migrants and migrants in both regular and irregular status.



## Chapter V

### SECURITIES AND INSECURITIES UPON RETURN DURING COVID-19

Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, Sarawat Binte Islam, Jasiya Khaton

Since the end of the Cold War, when the traditional security analysis was broadening its area, it integrated migration as one of the security concerns that can undermine stability by generating inter and intra state conflicts (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998 and Buzan and Wæver, 2003). Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic and fear of ‘the other’ are further contributing to securitizing migration. Migrant workers are depicted as source of COVID-19. Migrants in Asia, Africa and Latin America have been identified as a security threat and stigmatised for spreading COVID-19 (Chugh, 2020, UN, 2020 and seven can, 2020). During the COVID 19 outbreak, several Bangladeshi migrants and members of its diaspora returned to Bangladesh. From 1st April to 30th December 2020, a total of 326,758 migrants returned to Bangladesh from different countries (WEWD, 2020).<sup>42</sup> This chapter aims to investigate (i) securitization of migration in destination, (ii) insecurities and vulnerabilities of migrants upon return to Bangladesh (iii) securitizing acts of the state and society in Bangladesh and (iv) human insecurity of migrants due to securitisation.

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42 According to the Bangladesh Wage Earners’ Welfare Desk at the Shahjalal International Airport report.

The chapter is divided into eight sections including introduction and conclusion. Section II examines the conceptual understanding of migration as a non-traditional security threat during COVID-19. The section III presents the methodology of the research. Section IV explores how migrants were securitised in destination countries. Section V reviews the treatment of the involuntarily returned migrants upon arrival. Section VI describes the process and outcome of securitisation at national and local levels. Section VII illustrates the impact of securitization on the human security of migrants. Finally, section VIII summaries key findings.

## **Section II: Conceptual framework: the spread of COVID-19 and securitisation of migration**

Since the end of the Cold War, the study of international relations and its sub-field, security studies, has attempted to re-conceptualise the notion of security. Along with conventional state-centric military security, various non-traditional issues were brought in to security discourse under the broad head of non-traditional security (NTS). Non-military threats are considered to be greater in certain parts of the world than the military strength of certain prospective enemy states. The discourse of the NTS, therefore, calls for the widening of the field of security studies, including economic, environmental, health and social problems (Booth, 1991, Wæver, 1995, and Ayoob, 1997). It is within this emerging discourse that population movement, specifically cross-border migration, the spread of infectious diseases, transnational organised crime (e.g. the smuggling of weapons and narcotics, the trafficking of human beings, natural disasters etc.), has been treated as a security concern.

Teitelbaum (2002) first systematically brought migration into security discourse. He perceived migration as an existential threat to the origin communities. He argues that the large scale population movements of refugees and other migrants across borders affects the stability of destination societies and generate political and social conflicts. Movements bear the risk of facilitating

terrorism and international criminal activities between origin and destination countries. Therefore, he prescribed ‘securitisation’ measures beyond the usual political boundaries and proposes emergency measures such as controlling borders or introducing tighter immigration policies to deal with the insecurity arising from migration. d’Appollonia (2015: 37) and Farny (2016: 4) felt migration may lead to disintegration and potential radicalisation. Buzan, Wæver and Japp de Wilde (1998) looked at migration as a non-traditional issue from the perspective of cohesion of a society. They argue that population influxes from another community with distinct characteristics can change the identity of the receiving community by altering the population composition and can, therefore, be viewed as the threat to the identity of the latter. However, Buzan et.al showed that the challenge of migration cannot be met by securitizing it, rather such initiatives will result in increased exploitation, discrimination, injustice and even harassment and abuse of the migrants. When migration is securitised, this can create a new threat to the human security of migrants. The interpretation of migrants as threat to social stability or economic opportunities contributes to a coercive response on the part of the host community and migrants can fall prey to abuse and unequal treatment. Such treatment will breach all seven elements of human security (economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security). Thus it makes the migrant community a highly vulnerable group of people. The irregular migrants become the most insecure in this respect.

As a non-traditional security threat, the concern about the spread of infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and emerging drug-resistant Tuberculosis (TB) strains and Ebola has also attracted significant policy attention. This has led to growing interest in securitising infectious diseases to protect the state and human security among academics in international relations and security studies (Caballero-Anthony, 2006: 106). However, given the rapid shifts in the global environment and the dynamic interplay between

various pandemic-related hazards, it is possible that securitisation of infectious diseases is no longer sufficient as an approach to responding to these threats efficiently. Addressing pandemic requires the participation of a large range of actors. Therefore, while securitising infectious diseases can be a decisive approach to draw attention for responding to such serious threats, other approaches must be added to create a systematic, coordinated stance for handling such complex problems (ibid, 106).

A complex relationship exists between cross-border movements and infectious diseases. Human mobility may result in the virus moving between different populations. There is a belief that, when entering any country or group, mobile populations, including cross border migrants, may carry virus with them (Skeldon, 2000, UNDP, 2004, Sikder, 2008 and Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011). In the HIV/AIDS and migration position paper, IOM (2002:2) states that population mobility and HIV/AIDS are connected to the conditions and structures of the migration process, including in the communities of origin, during transit, at the destination and upon their return. In the absence of services and information, migrants not only become vulnerable to disease but also unknowingly serve to transmit the virus to others, including their spouses, to whom they return at periodic intervals.

It is not surprising that, by March 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, that led to the shutting down of the economy, closure of borders and fear of the unseen enemy, had contributed to the hardening of migration policies around the world as well as the rise of a new ‘health securitisation’ migration rhetoric (Chugh, 2020). Stigmatisation, misinformation and discrimination have caused increased xenophobia against the migrants’ in destination countries. Several states have created a paradoxical ‘quasi-quarantine’ which leads to a regime of segregation. Therefore, it seems that the longer-term implications for the migration policy are moving towards further control of mobility and social inclusion (ibid). During crisis securitisation of a certain group is not new. From terrorism to diseases outbreak, migrants have

often been made the scapegoat and perceived as placing the native population at risk (UN, 2020).

Securitisation of migration after the COVID-19 has resulted in increased health risk of the migrants, lack of access to healthcare services; job and income loss etc. involuntary return is one of the important outcomes of securitization of migration during the pandemic. Venezuelan migrants who lived in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru have been forced to return. Unfortunately, they faced obstacles to enter their own country as they were perceived as carriers of the virus and the government tightly controlled the border (Correa and Costa, 2020). In a similar scenario, as many Mozambican migrants returned home from South Africa, concern grew that they could potentially spread COVID-19 in their home country (UN, 2020). As possible virus carriers, migrants also face growing hostility. Many Ethiopian, Indian and Nepalese returnee migrants reported that, on their return, their families feared that they would infect them with the virus, even if the migrants were virus-free. Their neighbours and communities also suspected and avoided them (Bhattacharya, Banerjee and Rao, 2020 and IOM, 2020a).

Most of the migrants who had to return home face a high risk of unemployment. The prospect of finding work appeared especially grim within months after the pandemic broke out. Lack of jobs and uncertainty made individuals vulnerable to self-harm and depression (Bhattacharya, Banerjee and Rao, 2020). Since returning to their home countries without money or savings, they became the victims of economic stigma<sup>43</sup>. There are also reports of increasing gender-based domestic violence against returnee female migrants (IOM, 2020b, UN Women, 2020 and HRW, 2020).

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43 Donovan, L., & Obiria, M. (2020, 3 September 2020). After Escaping Abuse in the Middle East, Domestic Workers' Woes Are Far From Over in this Pandemic. The Telegraph. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/escaping-abuse-middle-east-domestic-workers-woes-far-pandemic/>

During this crisis, the governments of many origin countries have allocated funds for the reintegration of forced returnees (Dunghana and Ghimire, 2020 and Henderson, 2021). In the long-term, a lack of access to social protection, stigmatisation and/or discrimination can negatively impact the ability of migrants to integrate into their own societies. This not only threatens migrants and their families' well-being, but also weakens individuals and their families' social resilience, thus increases insecurities and vulnerabilities.

In this chapter, we build on and contribute to this work by focusing on the insecurity of involuntarily returned Bangladeshi migrants and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. This produces a more fine-grained, micro-social understanding of how a lack of access to, social, psychosocial and economic services and absence of strategies to cope with emergency situations increases the vulnerability of the migrants' return journey starting from destination to place of origin.

### **Section III: Methodology**

In order to meet the objectives of the research, the paper employs primarily a mixed-method approach. A total of 200 respondents (100 involuntarily returned migrants and 100 left behind households of current migrants) were interviewed. The field work was conducted from May to June, 2020 and held in 21 districts of Bangladesh. As a first step, this research also conducted a desk review of recently published articles, media reports, white papers and other online content to help answer the research questions as well as inform the approach to the forthcoming primary data collection activities. The interviews were analysed using SPSS. The field notes contributed to the task of understanding the situation as well as the circumstances of the participants. The case profiles were based on data from the interviews with the returnee migrants, the household members and other sources.

## **Section IV: Treating migrants as a security threat at destination**

When the major migrant receiving countries', economies were directly affected by the rapid outbreak of COVID-19, these countries introduced multilevel restrictive measures i.e. mass COVID-19 testing, temporary lockdowns, amnesty, market closures, sanctions and involuntary deportation etc. to monitor and prevent the spread of COVID-19 among local and foreign migrant workers. These state policies have threatened major sectors that are heavily employed by foreign migrant workers. They couldn't go back to their countries of origin even if they wanted due to restriction of movements in both destinations as well as in their origin countries (İçduygu, 2020: 1-3). Many receiving countries identified migrants as security threat and used involuntarily return as measure in response to COVID-19 (UNNM, 2020). For example, Saudi Arabia was struggling to contain COVID-19 outbreak and used deportation of migrant workers as one of the solutions. By mid-April, because of the pandemic, Saudi Arabia had deported nearly 2,900 Ethiopians. In May Saudi Arabia was accused by Houthi Authorities of Yemen of deporting and dumping 800 Somali Migrants on the desert frontier against their will. As a result of growing virus concerns in Yemen, these migrants were verbally and physically abused<sup>44</sup>.

Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and the Maldives urged the Government of Bangladesh to repatriate tens of thousands undocumented workers, officials of Ministry of Home and Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment stated in a press conference on 5 April 2020.<sup>45</sup> The government of UAE threatened to cease labour relations with countries that refuse to take back their people. It has also considered placing strict quotas

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44 AP. (2020, 15 July 2020). UN: Migrant workers in Yemen are Blamed for Virus, Stranded, abused. The Associate Press Network Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/article/6a1f08cc6ef31a2461512e4970f2858b>

45 Uttom, S. (2020, 7 April 2020). Bangladesh asked for take Thousands of Migrant Workers. Retrieved from <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-asked-to-take-back-thousands-of-migrant-workers/87658#>

on work visas for citizens of states which were not in accordance with the repatriation policy.<sup>46</sup> Subsequently the government of Bangladesh agreed to bring back its workers<sup>47</sup>.

325,000 Bangladesh workers were involuntarily repatriated from March to December 2020. Of the 100 returnee migrants in this study, 18 migrants reported that police arrested them when they went out to work or shopping. These migrant workers used to work in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and Malaysia. On the other hand, of 100 migrant households in this study, 48 households also described that migrant workers in their destination countries were insecure because of COVID-19 situation. Migrants informed their household members at home that they could be arrested at any moment and be repatriated. The migrants informed their families that they were seen as a source of threat of spreading COVID-19.

Khalilur Rahman (30) had been working for a welding company in Dubai for four years. When the authorities announced lockdown, all work stopped. Under dire conditions he was working in a nearby fruit shop. The fruit shop operated during breaks of curfew. The police raided his workplace, arrested him and confiscated his passport. He was sent to jail for 22 days, then sent back to his own country. The story of the misery of returnee migrant workers, no matter which country they have been the same in this pandemic situation. Abdur Rahim, aged 24, used to work repairing roads in Malaysia. He described how he entered the local market for buying household goods. A police officer came and told him he needed to undergo COVID-19 test. He was asked to get in the car. He thought he would be taken to a hospital but was taken to the jail. He was detained for five days before

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46 The New Arab. (2020, 12 April 2020). Gulf Countries Slammed for 'Reckless' Mass Deportation of Migrant Workers. Retrieved from <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/4/12/gulf-countries-slammed-for-mass-deportations-of-migrant-workers>

47 Foreign Minister of Bangladesh A.K. Abdul Momen said that the government will bring back workers, although talks with these countries have been ongoing to resolve the issue (Uttom, 2020).

being sent back home, empty-handed. He stated that, ‘Police sent me back even I had work permit and the visa was valid. I begged them, but they did not listen. Their hearts could not be melted. I was treated unfairly despite having all my papers were up to date. The situation of most Bangladeshi migrant workers was like me. In fact, there is no one to see us, neither the government of our country nor the government of Malaysia’.

Subramaniam (2020) found that the migrant workers faced persistent prejudice and discrimination in Gulf and Southeast Asian countries during COVID-19. He documented that across the Gulf countries, certain media figures, actors made xenophobic statements. A South Asian migrant from the Saudi oil giant, ARMACO, was seen dressed as a life-sized sanitiser dispenser in online event. The picture attracted fierce criticism and the organization later apologised for this action. He also presented cases in Malaysia that include a senior minister making statements that the responsibly of feeding the migrants during COVID-19 should lie with the embassies of their own countries. However, Malaysian authorities did supply food to the migrants in some locations but there were xenophobic outcries on social media questioning why the government had to supply these workers with food (Subramaniam, 2020).

Hayat Al-Fahad, a well-known actress, told a broadcaster that Kuwait should expel migrants ‘into the desert’, who make up two-third of the population of Kuwait to save hospital beds for the Kuwaitis<sup>48</sup>. Safaa Al-Hashem, a Member of Parliament of Kuwait also made similar statements. He called for the expulsion of migrants to ‘purify’ the country (Batta, 2020). In Saudi Arabia, some blamed migrants for the spread of the Virus for not practicing social distance.<sup>49</sup> Al Yourm News paper

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48 Yee, V. (2020, 26 October 2020). Virus Forces Persian Gulf States to Reckon With Migrant Labor. The New York Times, Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/world/middleeast/virus-forces-persian-gulf-states-to-reckon-with-migrant-labor.html>

49 Yee, V. (2020, *ibid*).

reported that Saudi nationals living in Al Khobar province were resentful to migrants from different countries. According to them the 'migrant workers presence is causing problems and solutions should in place. Migrants are not maintaining health instructions such as social distancing, wearing face masks or hand sanitization. Saudis are urging the government officials to take actions, including deportation of migrants'<sup>50</sup>. As a result of COVID-19, hate speech had grown during the initial months of the pandemic.

## **Section V: Treatment upon arrival in Bangladesh**

**Airport:** The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has past experience of dealing with the emergency return of Bangladeshi migrants during Iraq Kuwait war of 1990, during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002-2003, the Libyan civil war (from 2014 to date), nevertheless, the Coronavirus outbreak has revealed new form of preparedness is required from the authority in handling health crisis. As per the instruction of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), the involuntarily returned migrants are expected to observe self-quarantine. The government containment procedure for returnee migrants initially included airport screening, after which migrants without any obvious symptoms were quarantined for 14 days in Hajj camps and only infected migrants were sent to designated hospitals. However, due to poor implementation of self-quarantine and the fear generated through media led to more stringent application of self-quarantine.

When the migrant workers returned to Bangladesh, in dire straits, they faced mixed experiences at their own country's airport. The migrants had to wait for a long time. Of 100 returnee migrants, 87 percent reported that they had to spend on average 5.5 hours at the airport. Some even had to spend upto 9 hours. The airport

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50 Sherbini, Al. R. (2020, 29 August 2020). Deport Illegal Migrant Workers Spreading COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia, say angry residents. The Gulf News. Retrieved from <https://gulfnnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/deport-illegal-migrant-workers-spreading-covid-19-in-saudi-arabia-say-angry-residents-1.73505961>

authorities only provided bread and bananas. Even drinking water was not available. Being hungry some had to buy foods from the shops inside the airport but the price was high. Thus, while waiting migrants were in need of proper meal. Forty four year old Monir who returned from Qatar stated that ‘Our plane landed in Bangladesh at 4 am in the morning. At around 9 am we were offered bread and banana. We were kept at the airport for examination. It was only at 4 pm that I could get out of the airport, very hungry. I heard others who came earlier got Tk. 5000 to get back home. We were not that lucky’. Nurul Alam, a returnee migrant from UAE, stated that there was much room for improvement in conducting official formalities with the migrants at the airport. Khalilur Rahman was disappointed with the attitude and body language of officials at the airport. He said, ‘They looked at us as if the returnee migrants could infect them with virus’. At the airport, the migrants did not go through any COVID tests. A number of migrants stated that the scanner which was used to measure their body temperature was not working. But the majority of the migrants reported that their body temperature was checked. Hasanuz zaman, 28 years, a returnee migrant from Malaysia Reported that his body temperature was slightly high; therefore, the airport authorities put him in a single room, then later released him. He had not been instructed to stay at the Haji camp for the mandatory 14 days quarantine. Most returnee migrants also reported that as part of their safety, they were asked to remain in quarantine at home for 14 days. A contact number of Upazila Health Complex was provided in case of any health problems.

Saiful Islam, 25 years returnee migrant from Saudi Arabia reported that, when the doctor at the airport suspected that he had Corona virus. Immediately, he was transferred to the Haji camp. Mosquitos and flies were scattered around and he had to spend 14 days in agony. He further claimed that few returnees at the Haji camp did not stay more than 2 days and they bribed guards to leave the camp. Since returned with empty hand, he was not able to manage the authority to escape the 14 days like some others.

Migrants who came during April and May received Tk. 5,000 (US\$60) from the government. Involuntarily returned migrants interviewed for this study returned after the government scheme ended. Twenty six migrants were given food packages and Tk. 2,000 (US\$23) for their return journey by non-government organizations.

When the migrant workers return to their country of origin, their families usually come to the airport to welcome them. The situation was different this time. Once they arrived nobody came to the airport due to the lockdown condition. The main problem for the returnee migrants was that they had to arrange transport to reach their village of origin because of lockdown transport facilities were unavailable. They also did not receive any assistance either from the Government in this regard. They had to pay exorbitant charge to the vehicle operators. One of the respondents, Latif who returned from UAE was drugged on his way home. He reached home after two days. He said that he found himself lying in a roadside and whatever belonging he had are all gone.

Once they arrived in their village, they observed that there was anxiety on the faces of their family members. Sagor Hossain, 26 years of returnee migrant from Malaysia stated that his family behaved rather strangely when he arrived. They were worried that the migrant could be infected by COVID-19. He felt emotionally vulnerable due to such behavior by my family.

**Trauma:** Involuntarily repatriation is often the source of distress for migrants. In addition, it has also detrimental influence on the emotional well-being of such communities (Virupaksha, Kumar and Nirmala, 2014: 233). In this situation early process of support and adaptation- which value local mental health or psychosocial healing customs-help the affected individuals and societies to cope better with a challenging situation. This process can help turn individuals into active survivors rather

than passive victims (IFRC, 2020). Of the hundred involuntarily returned migrants who returned empty-handed, 92 percent did not receive any psychosocial support or counseling at the airport or at the community level, which was initially needed for stress management to reduce the shock and stress of the migrants. Only eight (8) returnee migrants including 2 (two) female migrants reported that they received counseling from a Non-government Organization (NGO). Shumi Khatun informed that she felt comfortable after receiving counseling but later became depressed again as her future was uncertain.

## **Section VI: Process and outcome of securitisation**

**Media:** Soon after the outbreak of COVID-19, electronic and print media have been placing news that migrants were spreading COVID-19. They were increasingly being accused of transferring the virus from overseas. Both electronic and print media without realizing the negative consequence of securitization on the migrant community disseminated a vast amount of disinformation through social media. Migrants are branded ‘dangerously infected people’ in some areas and communities and there have been reports of red flags being lifted over their homes to identify them as households containing migrants and, therefore, the virus (RMMRU and 2020b51 and BASUG, 2020). 52

After the breakout of the COVID-19 in order to contain the virus the radio/TV announcements made by the authorities asked the general people to report if they come across any person who came from abroad. This created panic among the locals and they thought migrants are the carriers of the virus. Migrants got branded as ‘dangerously infected people’ in some areas

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51 RMMRU. (2020a, 24 April 2020). Migrants are Anxiously Waiting. Let us not Fail Them, The Daily Star. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/migrants-are-anxiously-waiting-let-us-not-fail-them-1896052>

52 RMMRU. (2020b). Migrants’ Plea to the Hon’ble Prime Minister Open Letter of 16 Migrant Rights Organisations Retrieved 15 October 2020, from <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Open-Letter-to-PM-in-English.pdf>

and communities. In order to ensure quarantine, the authorities marked migrant houses with red flags. This resulted in outlasting those families by the service providers such as shops, restaurants etc. Seeking medical treatment became very difficult, for the households where a migrant has returned. A few involuntarily returned migrants experienced abuse and discrimination. RMMRU (2020)<sup>53</sup> mentioned incidents where migrants experienced physical attacks and extortion. The Migrant Rights Organizations brought the issue before the policy makers and very quickly authorities changed the TV/radio/public service announcements which were creating such prejudice against the migrants.

**Harassment at local level:** The interview of the involuntarily returned migrants took place during the period of May-July. By then the negative speech-acts which securitized the migrants has been reduced significantly. This is reflected in the survey data. A total of 88 respondents did not face any harassment at their locality. Only 12 respondents faced verbal and other forms of abuse. A few of them were asked by the shopkeepers not to enter their shops. Mohon Ali stated that, even after finishing quarantine, he could not go anywhere, such as shopping. When he went out after 25 days, the people in his neighborhoods threatened him. Later, he had to inform the police for his own safety. After a final check by the doctor, he can move around normally. Some migrants reported that their neighbours and local community looked at them sideways and verbally abused them, many speaking harshly and describing returnee migrants as carriers of COVID-19.

Shimul Hossain, a 40 years returnee migrant from Kuwait stated that, once the quarantine period was over, a member of the local administration visited his house and pressured him to observe quarantine again. When he disagreed to abide by his instruction, the local political leaders and activists threatened him. Kazi

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53 Situation Report, 2020

Mansur Khaiam, a 56 years returnee migrant from USA reported that one of the neighbors misbehaved when he went to visit his sister. He had been told to leave the house as early as possible. He further said that ‘it was emotionally painful as, having suffered physical and mental problems abroad, after finishing my quarantine; in my own relative’s house I suffered similar harassment’. These experiences implied that there was a lack of reliable information about how to reduce the discrimination and stigmatisation of migrant workers. RMMRU<sup>54</sup> Report highlights that media did not address the issue with sensitivity. Initially, both electronic and print media reported numerous news that returnee migrants were the sources for spread of the virus throughout the country<sup>55</sup>.

The interviews data also reveal of the migrants were instructed to follow quarantine for 14 days, and 85 percent of the involuntarily returned migrants did abide by the instruction. Selim stated that, ‘I personally felt the need of maintaining quarantine for the safety of my family members. A person from UNO<sup>56</sup> visited my house to check whether I had been following the government order or not. Not out of embarrassment or fear, I obeyed because of my own family’s security’. Migrants who could not always follow the safety instruction of the government were basically in dire need of an income to survive. Sabour Miah stated that, ‘If I stayed at home, there was no way to provide food for the family. The important thing for me at that time was to earn an income for ensuring survival of my family members. He explained during the interview, ‘How can I maintain quarantine if there is no income? Where would the food come from, if I stay at home doing nothing? This quarantine and forantaine<sup>57</sup>are funny words and useless to me.’ In this context, Sabour Miah’s ‘forantaine’ is significant; it implies recognition that, without a social protection policy, it would be difficult to convince any

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54 The Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit

55 RMMRU. (2020, *ibid*).

56 UpazilaNirbahi (Executive) Officer

57 Forantaine(ফরেন্টাইনে)- an ironic term.

helpless, badly-affected person, like a returnee migrant, to obey the law. Ensuring a livelihood for the family members is more important than any other issue. This brings to the next section that discusses human security threats of the migrants.

## **Section VII: Human security threats of the migrants**

Two types of insecurities were highlighted by the involuntary returned migrants. These are Psychological insecurity and income insecurity. Eighty four percent of the involuntarily returned migrants and also the left behind members of current migrant households faced social and income insecurity. A large number of the involuntarily returned migrant workers were the sole income earners in their families. Since their income had been stopped, the tension in the family has heightened. In this COVID-19 situation, local jobs are scarce, this has made their life more difficult. One of the female returnees was psychologically torn as her family members were of the opinion that she should not have returned while other female migrants remained overseas. Selim and many others have reported that they have been running their household by borrowing money from their relatives and local mohajons<sup>58</sup>. Only a few had been living on their savings. It will be difficult to find a job during the lockdown situation. Migrants are also status conscious. Karan stated that, ‘I cannot take any job that is available. After staying at Saudi Arabia for 4 years I have developed certain place in society. I cannot compromise that’. Migrants were not keen on taking bank loan to start a business. Sobur said, he was informed by WARBE<sup>59</sup> about option of loan to be provided by Probashi Kallyan Bank<sup>60</sup> to start a business. He was not keen to start a new business from scratch since he had been out of the country for a long time and had little idea about current agricultural and non-agricultural enterprises. Since most migrants worked in the construction and

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58 Local moneylenders.

59 Welfare Association of Repatriated of Bangladeshi Employees

60 The Expatriates Welfare Bank.

manufacturing industries abroad, it would not be easy for them to start a business. Besides, they also lack training. Because of these uncertainties, 86 percent of the returned migrants reported that they would attempt to re-migrate once the situation is back to normal again.

Education of children and health care of household members also suffered due to lack of income. Shumi Khatun's son Ismot was studying in class 4. His school was closed. Her mother who looks after Ismot informed that she had to stop the private tutor as her daughter could not send remittance. Omorsiddiqui's father needs blood pressure medicine. He also has some more complications. He does not know how to buy his father's medicine for the coming months. It is clear that migrants are no security threat; rather their security was in threat.

## **Section VIII: Chapter conclusion**

This chapter concludes that Bangladeshi migrants were securitized both in the countries of the destination as well as when they returned to Bangladesh. The chapter also identified the grave consequences of securitisation manifested in lower levels of human security of the migrants and their household members.

This chapter demonstrates that migrants are the most voiceless people in the countries of destination, and it is quite easy to securitize them. In destination countries media securitized migrants by reporting that they were one of the major sources of spreading COVID-19. Media highlighted that migrants were not abiding by the strict instruction of observing lockdown. Some of them came out of their residences to look for jobs, food, or medicine. All these survival activities were seen as making the citizens of destination countries insecure to the virus. Media reports have again helped the authorities to justify their decision to send back more than 325000 workers to Bangladesh during COVID-19.

Unfortunately, the securitization of the migrants did not end when they left their countries of destination. They faced same kind of securitization by speech act in their homeland as well. Government functionaries provided their services to the migrants at the airport with great suspicion. Some of the airport officials were expressive up to the point that they made remarks such as, these less educated migrants who do not care for the security of others are making the government functionaries vulnerable. It was painted in the government functionaries faces that the return of the migrants has put the country into great insecurity.

When the migrants returned to their villages, the local population did not treat them well. During the initial stages, they were verbally abused, and their household members were even denied access to local markets. After a few months, the attitude of local population changed to some extent. Migrants who came since June did not face the hostility of the local population with same rigor as did their predecessors. Nonetheless, the local population, politicians and government functionaries had abused their power and authority over some of these migrant families. Access to day to day consumable was problematic for some because of unnecessarily strict supervision, up to the extent that a migrant was asked to go into quarantine again after 25 days of his return.

In some cases, migrants were saddened with treatment they received from their household members. The members have expressed their dissatisfaction either verbally or through their body languages. Major concern was of course financial insecurity, nonetheless most of the family members hardly could appreciate the psychological trauma that migrants were undergoing upon their return.

COVID-19 had severely affected the human security of the migrants during the period of interview. Lack of jobs and income were the major sources of human insecurity for the migrant households. Maintaining day to day subsistence became

problematic for the majority of those migrants. Borrowing money became their major source for ensuring day to day consumption. Along with food intake, education of the school going children was compromised. The migrant households discontinued with the private tutors. Health care of the families particularly with elderly members had also suffered. Purchasing medicine became a challenge for a few families.



## CHAPTER VI

# ANOMALIES BETWEEN NATIONAL STATISTICS AND HOUSEHOLD REMITTANCE FLOW DURING COVID-19

Selim Reza, Tasneem Siddiqui, Yar Mahbub Chowdhury, Saira Afrin

**C**COVID-19 has inflicted major economic shocks to the migrants and migrant households. These unprecedented shocks stem from reduced income of the migrants and thus reduced flow of remittance to migrant households. In this context, this chapter examines the impact of COVID-19 on remittance flow and the Bangladeshi migrant households. In doing this, it draws from primary data collected from various types of migrant families. Positioning the narratives of the migrant family members and the interpretations of the statistical data, the chapter argues that high figure of flow of remittances does not match the reality of the extent of remittances received by the households. Transfer of remittances to the country has increased for many reasons and it does not mean that majority of the migrants have enough income to remit.

This chapter is divided in six sections. After this introductory one, section two provides a literature review of roles of remittances in household food and other consumptions. Section three highlights the global scenario of remittance flow during COVID-19 and predictions of multilateral bodies on flow on

remittances during the year 2020. Section four presents the national statistics of remittance flow to Bangladesh in 2020 and also discusses experience of receiving remittances of selected migrant households. Section five discusses probable impacts of reduced remittance flow on food and nutrition status of the families, education of their children, impacts on debt repayment and on pre-existing health concerns of the households. Section six tries to explain the anomalies between increased flow of remittances at the national level and decreased flow experienced by the households. Section seven draws major conclusions and provides some recommendations.

## **Section II: Literature review**

International migration and transfer of remittances cannot be separated. The outcome of international migration has significant impact on the development of both sending and receiving countries. The money and goods migrant workers send back to their households is usually known as remittances (Admas & Cuecuecha, 2010). Remittances have a range effects on at the national, local and households levels that are mostly positive.. Remittances help in the reduction of poverty of a country; it influences positively on the economic growth and development of a country as well. It also influences positively on consumption. In the context of development, migration and remittances are interlinked. These three terms have very close relationship when it comes to economic and social development of destination countries. One of the most important factors that affect economic relations between developed and developing countries is international migration (Adams & Page, 2005). Among those aspects the most important one is the economic aspect. Migration brings economic benefit to both sending and receiving countries. Remittance has become an important method of resource transfer at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Adam & Cuecuecha, 2010).

It was found that due to increased migration poverty reduced to 20 percent in Nepal between 1995 and 2004 whereas the poverty

rate was estimated to increase from 30 percent to 34 percent without migration (Lokshin, Bontch-Osmolovski & Glinskaya, 2010). This for sure is a positive impact of remittances. The same goes for various countries of South America. In Latin America, international remittances have reduced poverty by 0.4 percent (Acosta, Fajnzylber & López, 2007). Such case studies are the evidence for migration and remittances having positive impact in terms of the development of a country. Remittances may make up over 50 percent of the recipient's total domestic earnings, in some countries. A more stable source of poverty reduction is represented through remittances than other capital flows (United Nations, 2010). Poverty reduction can take place because of a number of factors but one of the top factors that contribute to the reduction of poverty is remittances.

According to the International Organization of Migrant (IOM, 2017) there were 150.3 million international labour migrants in 2013 (old Data) and the total USD 429 billion remittances were sent to developing countries in 2016. The importance of remittances in the context of labour origin countries, particularly in South Asia, is crucial. Usual trends of remittance flow in case of India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh show that these countries are significantly dependent on remittances for their GDP growth, economic stability, foreign reserve and overall development performances. Remittances constitute an important fraction of the GDP of most South Asian countries. Nepal's remittance-to-GDP ratio was 28 percent in 2017 which made the country one of the top five countries with the worldwide highest remittance-to-GDP ratio. Similarly, the remittance-to-GDP ratio is as high as 11 percent in Bangladesh, 9 percent in Sri Lanka, and 7 percent in Pakistan (World Bank, 2019). More than ten million Bangladeshis live in about 160 countries. Most of them are low-paid migrant workers in the Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries who contribute a bulk of foreign currency in the state coffer. Remittance is an important pillar of Bangladesh's economy and the second-largest source foreign currency after

exports, accounting for 5.8 percent of gross domestic product in 2019 (GoB, 2019). Not only in the form of remittances, the government of Bangladesh also believed that migration, along with health and education, contributes to the SDG goals that the UN is hoping to achieve by 2030 (Siddiqui, 2016).

Most of the time, remittance is a reliable source for increasing the capacity of the households to fulfill basic needs such as food, clothing and housing (Giuliano& Ruiz-Arranz, 2009). In this consideration, remittances significantly contribute to the financial condition of the migrant households and increase living condition of the household members. A huge sum of remittances sent by the migrants is used for consumption. It was found that more than 90 percent remittances are used for consumption purpose (Lipton, 1980). The huge amount that is being used for consumption is clearly linked with food consumption, nutrition, health care etc. of the household members. In the rural areas of Bangladesh, remittances have been a reliable source for fulfilling the daily expenses of the migrant households. Trying to calculate the differences in consumption and savings behaviours between remittance receiver and non-receiver households in rural Bangladesh, the findings of one study indicate that the monthly consumption in remittance receiving household is on average US\$32 higher than that of a remittance non-receiver family along with savings (Haider, Hossain & Siddiqui, 2016). Case studies like this provide evidence on how remittances are changing the consumption behaviour. The households that receive remittances usually spend more than those households that do not receive remittances.

Remittances are utilised for various consumption-related purposes like food, non-food items (clothing and shoes, utility bills, cosmetics and stationary goods, festivals and donations, travelling and entertainment), housing, durable goods (fridge, TV, furniture, ornaments, computer, mobile phone, solar panel and so on), medical treatment, education and investment sectors. Among these sectors, remittance is mostly utilised in consumption of

food. Beyond food sector, remittance is utilised in non-food sector and it is about 20.71 percent and remittance recipient households utilized their received remittance lowest in investment sectors and it is about 1.52 percent (Kumar, Hossain, & Osmani, 2018). The expenditure pattern of migrant households in Bangladesh also shows that a significant proportion of remittances get spent on non-durable items that require involvement of non-migrant people for production purposes. This relates to the findings of Shera and Meyer (2013) on consumptive expenses, provided that occurs locally, can have positive impacts by providing non-migrants with labour and income. This is confirmed by empirical evidence that consumption by migrant households can lead, via multiplier effects, generate incomes for non-migrant households.

The amount of remittances sent by migrants to developing countries is about three-times higher than the official development assistance and can play a significant role in the overall development and human welfare in the recipient countries (Ratha, 2016). Remittances play an important role in the economic development in the migrant workers and their families at the micro-level. One of the most common uses of remittances is enhancement of financial capacity for paying off loans of the migrant worker's family. Normally, migrant workers suffer huge debt while migrating to a new country as they borrow from relatives and neighbours to bear the cost. Castles and Miller (2009) explain that very often it's the people of intermediate social status belonging to areas that are undergoing economic and social change that migrate and not poor. It was found that 46 percent of remittances coming into the Philippines were being spent to repay debts by families who received them (Lowe, 2012). In most cases of developing countries, the migrant worker is the main income generator of the family. Even if he/she is not the main income generator, the burden of loan creates an economic crisis for the family. Remittances help clear the debt and lift off the burden from the family. The overseas employment of the migrant workers prevents his/her family members to go through sufferings in order to get rid of loans.

Moreover, remittances influence positively on the education for children around the world. According to Adams and Page (2005) found that households that receive remittances tend to spend more on education, health, and housing and that about 45-58 percent more on education than households with no remittances. A positive impact of remittance on education has been noticed in the study of Hanson and Woodruff (2003). Their study found a positive impact of remittance on 10-15 year old girls' school attendance in Mexico. The same goes for another study which was done by Lopez Cardova (2005) which found positive effect of remittance of school going children in Mexico. Because of remittances, the chances for students dropping out of school get lower with time. Many regions of the world have experience of positive effect of remittances on education. Proposing that remittances may possibly benefit the poor overcome binding resource limitations, Calero, Bedi & Sparrow (2009) found that remittances had a tendency to increase school enrolment for the poor children in Ecuador. A study based on the Philippines, found that remittances have many positive impacts on household income and investment which helps continue children's education (Yang, 2008). Based on these studies, it can be claimed that remittances do have positive impact on the education of children around the world. Remittances not only increase the attendance of students in their educational institutions, the contribution of remittances also help in decreasing the dropout of students. It has been found responsible for increasing girl's education in different parts of the world where religious rules are more strictly followed; such as the countries like Jordan (Cagatay, Mert, Koska & Artal-Tur, 2019).

Remittances can ensure better health care like maternal and child health. Securing better health care service is one of the avenues for household remittance expenditure especially in developing countries. That in turn leads to lowering infant mortality and maternal mortality, and improved nutrition status of the mother and child. Once remittances increase the household food consumption, the pregnant woman can rely on nutrient food which impacts on her health and on the fetus' growth. Since

low birth weight is one of the main factors which causes infant mortality, a proper nutrient for a pregnant mother is important to reduce child death. When government expenditure on health is insufficient, the population faces difficulties in health issues in developing countries. In this case, receiving remittances in low-income households basically increases their income distribution and raise health care expenditure easier than before.

### **Section III: Concerns over remittance flow to developing countries**

**Global scenario:** COVID-19 pandemic has seriously affected the income of the migrant workers and the inflow of remittances for their households. Many origin countries such as the Philippines, Tajikistan and Brazil have experienced double-digit drops in remittance flows since the virus outbreak (Oxford Business Group, 2020). In fact, in April 2020 the World Bank predicted that remittances to low- and middle-income countries would fall by 19.2 percent by the end of 2020 which could be the steepest decline in history. This prediction was largely based on fears that the economic downturn and health situation would leave many migrants unemployed or, in some cases, forced to return to their home countries. In this context, the South Asian countries were forecast to be the worst victims (Majumder et al 2020; Das, 2020).

**Probable impact of reduced flow on left-behind families:** It is well recognised that reduced flow of remittances will affect the national economies of many labour sending countries. Their balance of payment can become negative. More importantly, it is likely to throw left behind migrant household a major challenge. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the migrant households are still not known as there are a very few empirical studies to inform us about this. A few studies focusing on the migrant households in Nepal, the Philippines and India offer some insights on the share of remittance in family income and reduced household consumption during the pandemic.

A study undertaken by Bista et al (2020) presents the economic impacts of COVID-19 and its linkage to economy of Nepal. In this study, the authors have claimed that flow of remittances for the migrant households had reduced as the Nepalese migrant workers could not remit properly during the pandemic. Chaudhary (2020) and Koirala & Acharya (2020) have claimed similar transformations, i.e. reduced income and consumption of the migrant households, which have affected overall economic growth in Nepal. Moreover, the family members of the Indian migrant workers had experienced decline in income and reduced expenses due to changes in remittance inflow whereas COVID-19 had created a serious health concern for them (Khanna, 2020). In the Philippines, household consumption accounts for 70 percent of the GDP and with consumption, which is largely dependent upon remittances, the fall in wages and loss of employment by the Filipino migrant workers had affected household demand (Murakami, Shimizutani & Yamada, 2020). The sudden economic recession from the COVID-19 pandemic has threatened the job security and wellbeing of over 91 million international migrants from Asia and the Pacific (ADB, 2020). In South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, the reduced flow of remittances has contributed to financial instabilities for the migrant households.

#### **Section IV: Predictions and realities of remittance flow**

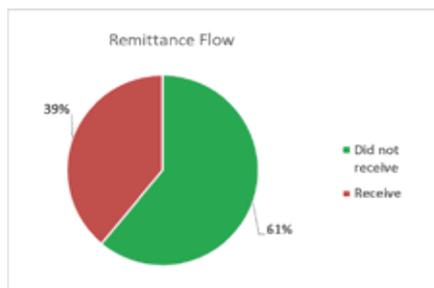
**Prediction on Bangladesh:** In April 2020, the World Bank forecast that remittance flow to Bangladesh may plunge by as much as 22 percent this year because of the ongoing pandemic (World Bank, 2020). The Asian Development Bank forecast that Bangladesh would be among the five worst hit developing Asian economies in terms of remittance inflows. In the worst-case scenario, Bangladesh's remittance will decline by 27.8 percent from its 2019 level. In 2019, Bangladesh received USD15.5 billion in remittance (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Also, the World Bank forecast in April 2020 that remittance flow to Bangladesh may plunge by as much as 20 percent decline in global remittance flows and 22 percent in Bangladesh due to the pandemic (World Bank, 2020).

**Remittance flow at National level:** As seen in chapter II, remittance flow to Bangladesh did reduce during the first few months of COVID 19. Nonetheless it started to register an increase from the month of May. It increased at such a level that by the end of 2020 the total amount of remittance to Bangladesh stood at US\$21.74 Billion. This is 18.6 percent higher than the year before. The World Bank and ADB prediction did not come true at least for the time being.

In this context, the overarching research question this chapter will respond to is while national remittance is increasing how it is reflected in case of the migrant households? Are all the migrant household receiving remittances? How about female migrant households? In answering these questions, the chapter is built upon the empirical data collected on recent remittance flow record in case of 200 Bangladeshi migrant households during COVID-19.

**Remittance flow at household level:** The figure 6.1 reveals that 61 percent migrant households under the study did not receive any remittances for three months starting from March 2020. While only 39 percent households received remittances, the average amount of remittances was Tk. 53,500. Like other countries in the region, such as India, Nepal, and the Philippines, Bangladeshi migrant households are significantly dependent on remittances and thus the reduced flow of remittances during the pandemic has led to loss of income and expenditure for them.

**Figure 6.1: Remittance flow at household**



Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

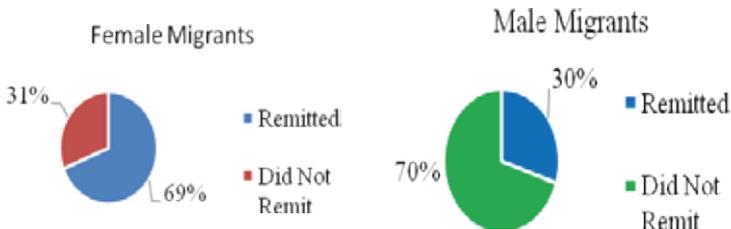
Majnu is the son of a migrant worker. His father works in Oman for more than six years. Majnu is a higher secondary student. At the time of interview, he shared that his family had six members including his grandparents, mother, a nine-year-old brother and a four-year-old sister. The remittance sent by his father was the only source of income for his family to fulfill their basic necessities and daily expenses. As he reported, 'COVID-19 has brought misery to our day to day lives. My father is now jobless for last three months and could not send remittances... It is too difficult to survive now.' This statement shows that the loss of job due to COVID-19 has caused inability of the migrant workers to remit that has pushed their family members to a substandard life. The family members not only spend less but also borrow from others to meet their daily expenses. Income depression affected their financial capabilities to afford fulfilling their basic needs such as food, clothing, health care and education.

A World Bank study on Bangladeshi migrant workers found that that the average cost of migration was US\$2300, almost five times the Bangladesh's per capita income of US\$480 (Sharma & Zaman, 2009). Since majority of the aspirant migrants come from lower income households, they tend to arrange the money by borrowing, mortgaging properties, taking loans from recruiting agencies with monthly interest rates etc. Because of the high interest rates- which might vary from 3-5 percent per month to 100 percent interest rate on their debt per year- the migrants usually have to repay the loans for several years. This arrangement results in a big deduction of their monthly income earned in destination countries for a long period. In this context, COVID-19 has added a new layer of challenge for the Bangladeshi migrant workers. This means that some of the Bangladeshi migrant workers who are still residing in the countries of destination, could be in a debt trap during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Remittance flow is gendered:** The remittance flow during the COVID-19 pandemic has a major gender implication. Figure 6.2 shows that 69 percent of female migrants were able to remit

during the pandemic whereas; only 30 percent of the male migrants had similar ability to remit. This may lead one to argue that compared to the male migrants of Bangladesh, the pandemic had less impact on the female migrants' income in destination countries. One of the main reasons attributed to this is the occupational placement of the female migrants. More than 90 percent of the Bangladeshi females work as domestic workers, particularly in the Gulf and other Arab countries. Although many male-dominated sectors halted or suspended their operations due to the pandemic, the female domestic workers' demand remained unchanged at this time. As a result, the female migrant households experienced less shock in relation to job loss or decline in income when compared with the male migrants. Of course, even among the female domestic workers, experiences of vulnerabilities vary.

**Figure 6.2: Gendered difference in remittance flow during COVID-19**



Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Job security and related ability to remit is high in case of live-in domestic workers. On the contrary, many live-out women migrant workers have lost jobs. They are facing similar situation like the male migrants who lost jobs. The finding therefore questions the notion that all women migrants are doubly oppressed. In case of COVID-19 live-in domestic workers' workload has increased, and they have been subjected to constant scrutiny. However, staying home had given them certain sense of security. For their own interest the employers would ensure that female workers do not get exposed to the virus.

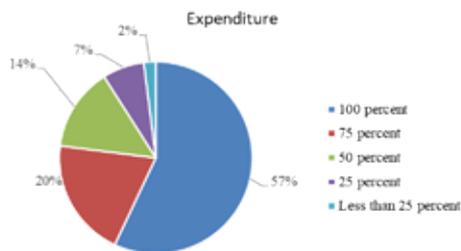
There are differences in the average amount of remittances received by male and female households. Members of left-behind family members of migrants revealed that the amount of remittances was lower in case of female migrants compared to male migrants. Although more women migrants' left-behind family members are receiving remittances compared to men, the amount of remittance is lower in case of female migrants. This again indicates women workers earn less than their male counterparts.

In fact, gender segregation in labour migration greatly differentiates the kind of job they hold in the destination country. Most Asian migrant women tend to work in 'feminine' positions such as domestic work, health, entertainment and care sectors. In comparison to males, female migrants are paid less. Studies have revealed that female migrants tend to remit more of their income to their families than male migrants (Martin, 2003; Siddiqui 2008). Since women are paid often less than male workers, the total revenue of the remittance may be lower. The earnings from the female workers are mostly spent on children's education and health services while male migrants seem to spend more on assets and investments.

## **Section V: Impact of reduced flow of remittances**

In Bangladesh, remittance is the only income source for many households. The figure 6.3 shows 57 percent families had no other source of income except remittance. Also, 18 percent households reported that remittances contributed three-fourths of their income. Remittances constituted half of the family income for 14 percent households. While the households have high dependence on remittances, their income has been significantly affected due to the pandemic. For example, Shakil's brother has been working in Qatar for more than nine years. He said, 'My brother used to work in construction sector. After COVID-19 broke out, he had no work. He could not even afford to pay for his own food. Naturally, he was unable to send us money since February. We are in misery here and my brother is also in problem abroad'.

**Figure 6.3: Dependence of left-behind migrant households on remittance**



Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Many households had to borrow due to the lack of income. It was found that 60 percent of the households having a male migrant abroad borrowed whereas 38 percent of the households that had a female migrant had to borrow for managing their daily expenses. Borrowing is the most widely resorted option for the family members of the migrant households. However, although borrowing offers temporary ease, it creates severe stress on the families.

As Shakil, the sibling of the migrant worker continued, ‘My brother is the sole bread-earner of our family and since February he has no work. We are having tough time ensuring meal three times a day. Initially, the shopkeepers gave us food items with the assurance that we will pay soon. But now they are also refusing such arrangement’.

In the absence of remittance, many migrant households are in debt. In fact, the households that already had some debts to meet the necessary costs of migration; are in worse situation due to COVID-19 as their debts have increased in the absence of remittance. They are worried to think about how they could pay their debts. In spite of all their struggles, they are worried that their debts could never be repaid if COVID-19 continues for long. Musa Miya, father of a migrant worker in Qatar reported that he endures nightmare when he ponders how would be repaying the debts that he has incurred for sending his son

overseas. As he reported, ‘I really struggled to borrow some money (from various sources) to send my son abroad. I thought I will see a bright future soon but now I am devastated. Every day those from whom I borrowed money come to our house and misbehave as I missed the deadline to pay back the loan. My son has not sent a single penny in last three months. He is so helpless now. He does not pick up my call. When he picks up, he sighs and cries only. What should I do now? ....I wish I could commit suicide...If COVID-19 continues for a long time, I will have no hopes to pay back the huge loan’.

There are elderly members in many households. They require medication for survival such as for conditions such as blood pressure and diabetes. Families are having tough time managing money for those. Inability to afford essential medicine has made it difficult to take care of the family members who have health complications such as heart disease. For example, Morjina Khatun is a wife of a migrant worker. Her husband works in a shop in the United Arab Emirates. As soon as her husband stopped sending remittances in March 2020, among other problems she was unable to buy medicines for her elderly father in law. She anxiously stated, ‘My father suffered a stroke. He is on regular medication. I am worried that from the next month I will not be able purchase the essential medicines for him’.

Financial burden is one of the main reasons for causing stress to migrant workers and members of their left behind families. Many Bangladeshi migrant workers pay high costs for going overseas for work. Migration imposes the burden of debt on the migrant households. Family income of 57 percent of these households is solely dependent on migrants’ remittances. Besides 21 percent of the migrant households having a male migrant had income from other family members whereas 38 percent of the households that had a female migrant had income from other family members. This means a financial commitment to meet daily expenses of the left behind family members adds to the pressures on the migrant workers. Taking the pressure of paying off debt and meeting daily

expenses of the households makes these migrant workers anxious and thus causes their physical as well as mental health problems.

Chapter four has shown that as soon as the pandemic started, some migrant workers became very helpless in the destination countries. Due to the lack of income, some of them had to suffer a lot to afford food. In these cases, as their family members reported, they had to seek emergency financial support from their left behind family members. To help them, their family members had to borrow and send money overseas to help the migrant workers fulfill their basic needs. Instead of sending remittances, the migrant workers had to get emergency financial support from their left behind family members which created pressures on both migrant workers and their family members. As a result, the vulnerability of the migrant community was widespread as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic starts.

Migrant families are having tough time ensuring meals three times a day. Members of the participating households reported that they had stopped buying protein items. 63 percent of all household members, reduced milk consumption, 81 percent household members could not afford fish and meat regularly. 90 percent household members have not eaten meat over the last three months. They could not afford food with high protein for their children. Out of 200 households, 65 households had children less than seven years of age. Among them, 72 percent had to settle for reduced milk consumption, 43 percent reduced egg consumption, and 74 percent reduced meat consumption. As a result, they perceived that their children's physical and mental growth might be challenged due to the lack of access to nutritious food. This made them worried about their education and overall wellbeing.

Ambia's father has been working in Saudi Arabia for years. She stated, 'Ours is a big family with 13 members. This includes my brothers, sisters, my mother, my grandparents and children of my uncle who has abandoned them. My father is the only income

earning member of the family. By the grace of the Almighty, my father is physically fine. He has not been infected by COVID-19. Unfortunately, he cannot send remittances. We are surviving on basic food items but do not have the means to ensure healthy and nutritious meals that include milk, fish and meat.'

While the day-to-day food consumption of the migrant households is dependent on remittances, the family members of migrant households are in stressful situations to meet very essential food items for the infants. Moshtari Begum is the wife of the migrant worker. Her husband works in Saudi Arabia. After losing the job, her husband has stopped sending remittances. She is unable to buy formula milk for her daughter. As she shared, 'My daughter is two years old. I cannot buy milk for her.... She is surviving with much less amount of milk for the last three months'.

While the parents are financially stressed to buy basic food for their babies, the parents of the school-going children are also in a difficult situation. As the schools are closed during the pandemic, education has become home-based. Private tutors are necessary for home-based education. In the absence of remittances, many families could not afford private tutors or online facilities for children. Moreover, some families who had the ability to afford coaching or private tuitions had to stop sending children for private tuitions or had to stop home tutoring. Mahfuza, a mother of two school-going children expressed her disappointment by saying that she was in a difficult situation to look after the children at home. In her own words, 'My husband stays in Bahrain. He has not sent remittance for last two months. I terminated the private tutor as I could not afford him. ...My elder son's school has started online teaching but I do not have money to buy a smart phone and data for running internet'.

When asked about the future plan, the family members of the migrant workers reported that they had no plan for financing household expenditure for the coming months. Their absolute

dependence of remittances has made them indebted as they had little or no option other than borrowing from their relatives and neighbours. Passing every day in untold agony and uncertainty, the family members of the migrant workers live in constant fear of becoming paupers. Moreover, they are equally concerned for their near and dear ones who are living abroad. Uncertainty of income has thus contributed enormous stresses on both migrant workers and their left behind family members.

## **Section VI: Probable explanations of anomalies of remittance flow**

The national data on increased inflow of remittance do not match with the households' record of receiving remittances. While the migrant households are frequently reporting the dire reality of not receiving remittances, national statistics are showing a huge surge in remittance inflow. In explaining the anomalies, the first step is to find out growth pattern of remittance over a longer period. Table 6.1 presents year-wise percentage increase and decrease in remittance flow to Bangladesh. It shows that from 2009-10 up to 2012-13 annually remittance grew from 6 percent and to 13 percent. In 2012-13 Bangladesh experienced 2 percent negative growth. Although, it grew by 8 percent during the fiscal year 2014-15, nonetheless, over the next two years, they again slid down by 14 percent. Less than 600,000 workers migrated during this period. Again for next three fiscal years remittances annually grew by 17 percent, 10 percent and 11 percent respectively. During these years significant number of workers also migrated. In each of these years more than 700,000 workers migrated. In 2017, 1,000,000 Bangladeshis migrated. Contrary to the above scenario, surprisingly remittance flow grew extraordinarily during the first half of the fiscal year 2020-21. The growth rate is 38 percent compared to that timeframe of the previous year. This cannot be explained by the natural growth process of remittance. This is an unnatural growth. Bangladesh Bank and other academics tried to explain this by the large return flow of migrants during COVID-19.

**Table 6.1: Year-wise percentage increase and decrease in remittance flows**

<b>FY</b>	<b>Remittance (US\$ in Millions)</b>	<b>Growth Rate</b>
2009-10	10987.4	-
2010-11	11650.32	6%
2011-12	12843.43	10%
2012-13	14461.15	13%
2013-14	14228.3	-2%
2014-15	15316.91	8%
2015-16	14931.18	-3%
2016-17	12769.45	-14%
2017-18	14981.69	17%
2018-19	16419.63	10%
2019-20	18205.01	11%
<b>2020-21 (July December 2020)</b>	<b>12944.75</b>	<b>38%</b>

Source: Prepared by CPD<sup>61</sup> based on Bangladesh Bank data

Source country-wise trend of remittance flow may shed some light. Table 6.2 shows share of different remittance source countries in respect to the flow towards Bangladesh. No significant changes have occurred in terms of source countries. Saudi Arabia still remained the highest remittance sending country. Position of UAE changed significantly. USA is still rotating between second and third. Malaysia is hovering among fifth to seventh. Oman, Qatar and Singapore's share more or less remained the same. Major return took place from UAE, yet remittances kept on falling in that country.

61 CPD organized webinar on, 'How to explain the upward flow of remittances vis-a-vis COVID-19' on 17 January 2021

**Table 6.2: Sources of remittance flows to Bangladesh and incremental share**

Country	Share in July-June FY 201515	Share (July-June)		% Share in incremental remittance
		FY2020	FY2021	
Saudi Arabia	21.8%	21.0%	23.7%	30.4%
United States of America	18.4%	11.6%	12.5%	14.8%
United Arab Emirates	15.5%	14.3%	10.8%	2.3%
Malaysia	9.0%	6.9%	9.0%	14.3%
United Kingdom	5.3%	7.8%	8.0%	8.3%
Kuwait	7.0%	7.9%	7.1%	5.2%
Oman	6.0%	6.8%	7.1%	7.6%
Qatar	2.0%	5.9%	5.2%	3.3%
Italy	1.7%	4.3%	3.2%	0.5%
Singapore	2.9%	2.4%	2.7%	3.3%
Others (n.i.e.)	10.2%	11.0%	10.7%	10.0%
<b>Total (In million USD)</b>	<b>100.0% (15316.9)</b>	<b>100.0% (7716.3)</b>	<b>100.0% (10894.1)</b>	<b>100.0% (3177.8)</b>

Source: Prepared by CPD<sup>62</sup> based on Bangladesh Bank data

There can be some changes in respect to the amount of remittances sent from these countries. It is interesting to note that the amount of remittances grew significantly only in case of a couple of countries. These are Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. Saudi Arabia accounted for 21 to 23 percent of the total flow of remittances to Bangladesh during 2015 to 2020. During the first half of this fiscal year that is June-December, 2020-21, it registered a rise and constituted 30.4 percent of the total flow. It was seen earlier that major flow of return due to COVID-19 is from Saudi Arabia. There could be some connection between large scale return and sending back their remittances before arriving. This is because one cannot hand carry more than a certain amount of money. Malaysia used to account for 9 percent of the total flow of remittances to Bangladesh. In the first half of the fiscal

62 CPD organized webinar on, 'How to explain the upward flow of remittances vis-a-vis COVID-19' on 17 January 2021

year 2020-21, its share rose up to 14 percent. The persistent fear of deportation may have forced a section of migrants to send their savings home. Many migrants have liquidated their investments in the country of destination and sent the amount home as remittances. Besides, 385,000 migrants have returned for good. They must have brought back all their savings. Share of remittance flow from all other countries including UK and USA remained somewhat the same. The flow of remittance drastically reduced from the UAE and Italy. UAE's share came down from 11 percent to 2.3percent. If remittance flow was linked to return then it should have grown in case of UAE as well.

Some issues need to be more rigorously analysed. An important issue among them is the difference of stock and flow. Although flow of migration from Bangladesh slowed down during 2020 by 71 percent compared to the last year, there remains a large stock of Bangladeshi migrants in different destination countries. It is estimated by different quarters that there are more that 2500,000 Bangladeshis currently residing in Saudi Arabia. Those who have jobs or have savings will continue to remit. Therefore return of 100,000 workers may not affect the remittance flow in a major way. Since June 2019 the Government of Bangladesh is providing two-percent cash incentive to the remittance recipients when it comes through formal channels (Bangladesh Bank, 2020). This decision was taken to curb the underground hundi market. The central bank, amid the pandemic to keep the flow constant also relaxed some of the conditions that were earlier imposed on receiving the 2 percent cash incentive. Some of the major remittance receiving banks has declared 1 percent additional incentives on top of the central bank's incentive. These cash incentives are partly responsible for the increase.

Besides, there are some informal institutions in operation. It is important to take into account that factor as well. There are some hidden costs of migration. Work visas are supposed to be free. But in reality, they are bought and sold in destination countries. In regular circumstances, around 700,000 workers would have

migrated in 2020. During the year 2020 altogether 217,669 workers were able to migrate overseas. This means this year only 217,669 visas had to be purchased. If it was a normal situation then another 482,331 visas would have to be bought. On average in 2019 each visa cost US\$ 3000. The price of the visa has to be paid in the destination country. Visa selling is an underground business; therefore it cannot be done openly. As outward remittance for this purpose is not allowed by the government the recruiting agencies cannot send the money from Bangladesh to those who sell visa. Recruiting agencies manage this with the support of the hundi operators. Migrant workers remittance is the main source of hundi operators' resources. This year the recruiting agencies did not require making demand on the hundi markets for purchasing visa. Simple math of number of visas not needed to be purchased X US\$ 3,000 per visa shows that around US\$1,447,000,000 should therefore have been available to formal money transfer institutions.

Some importers, gold and other smugglers to a great extent also rely on hundi money. First group rely on hundi to avoid tax. They under-invoice the imports. Secondly, another group access hundi to smuggle gold and other contraband items. Due to COVID-19 transactions of these businesses have slowed down and as such their demand for hundi money has diminished. Hundi operators therefore are not aggressively collecting migrants' remittances. In the absence of hundi operators migrants are sending money through formal banks and exchange houses. This helps to argue that higher flow of remittance in formal channel does not indicate that migrants are faring well. Not all of them have incomes to remit. It indicates that the flow of growth of remittances are coming through formal channels have registered an increase for a host of reasons. A thorough research is required to explain this.

In the middle of COVID-19, cyclone Amphan hit Bangladesh. Amphan was soon followed by monsoon floods. It is only natural that migrants who could gather resources and send them home for the families to withstand the difficulty they were facing. All the

above arguments are probable explanations. A thorough research is required to systematically analyse the issue and generate a robust understanding.

## **Section VII: Chapter conclusion**

This chapter shows that one-sixth of the households under this research did not receive any remittance since the breakdown of COVID 19 till the time of the interview. The rest of the households received on an average Tk. 30,000 per instalment which was 36 percent less than the usual flow. However, remittances during COVID-19 are gendered. Sixty-nine percent of female migrant households have received remittances in contrast to 30 percent of the male migrant households. The study shows that the households are extremely dependent on remittances. For 57 percent families, remittance is the only source of income. Three-fourth portion of 18 percent households' income comes from remittance. For 14 percent households, remittance constitutes half of the family income.

The recent increase in national remittances does not mean that migrant households are receiving remittance as before the pandemic. Predictions of multilateral organizations on flow of remittances are dependent on modelling which cannot take into consideration the micro level realities of individual countries. Growth in remittance flow to Bangladesh during COVID-19 could be due a whole range of factors. Some of these discussed in this chapter are: 2 percent financial incentives to the remittance senders, 1 percent additional incentive by some of the banks on top of the central bank's incentive, fear of deportation resulting in migrants sending all the savings, only a handful migrated for work since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These highlight that recruiting agencies did not require tapping into hundi market for purchasing visa. The trading sector did not require access to hundi for under invoicing and gold smugglers for smuggling gold to Bangladesh. Therefore, remittances that enter to Bangladesh through various channels, this time came

through the formal channels. A thorough research is required to understand this increased remittance flow vis-a-vis the experiences of a large number of households that did not receive remittances. It is essential to provide one-time cash grant to migrant households to address their vulnerability in the absence of remittance during the crisis situation.

The overall situation of the migrant family members during the COVID-19 pandemic is grim and alarming. This is mainly because most of the migrant families do not have alternative sources of income and a large number is absolutely dependent on remittances. As the flow of remittances has either stopped or reduced drastically, during the pandemic, they are passing their days in utter distress and uncertainty. A few family members had some small savings, but those too have depleted fast. Immediate policy actions are therefore necessary to reduce economic vulnerability of the migrant households. Since COVID-19 has changed the entire landscape of remittances for the labour sending countries; in-depth, robust, large scale and representative research studies need to be undertaken to validate the findings presented in this chapter.



## CHAPTER VII

### LEFT BEHIND MIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS: COPING WITH PARTIAL OR FULL SUSPENSION OF REMITTANCES

Motasim Billah, Tahmid Akash and Nazmul Ahsan

The outbreak of COVID-19 put left behind migrant households (left behind migrant households) in a prolonged state of emergency primarily caused by irregular remittance inflows. Like any other labour origin countries of the world, the left behind migrant households of Bangladesh also rely heavily on migrants' remittances constituting a significant part of their households' disposable income. In the wake of COVID-19, the irregular and in some cases the absence of remittances inflows, as illustrated in the previous chapters, therefore, substantially reduced households' income and consequently expenditures to meet their basic needs. The left behind migrant households followed a range of strategies to cope with new reality posed by the COVID-19. Many of these coping mechanisms, interestingly, resemble historical adjustments of left behind migrant households particularly when they face a crisis, e.g., fall of household income during financial crises and natural disasters. Coping strategies of left behind migrant households, however, were not uniform and were linked to a wide range of factors at different levels shaping eventually differential capacity of households to adjust with the COVID-19 situation.

In this context, this chapter mainly discusses how the left behind migrant households in Bangladesh coped with the advent of COVID-19 situation particularly in the absence or irregular flows of remittances to the households. Due to the lack of a well-established analytical framework of coping strategies in the context of a pandemic situation, this chapter, drawing evidence from crisis and disaster situations, adopts an interpretative model of coping strategies developed by Frade (2006). This model explains how the left behind migrant households sought to cope with financial hardship caused by the partial and/or full suspension of remittances. In light of that, this chapter first presents a global perspective of the left behind migrant households coping strategies to the pandemic situation. After that, it focuses on the left behind migrant households which are primarily located in rural areas in different parts of the country, coping mechanisms in Bangladesh. In this regard this chapter mainly relied on the first-hand experiences of 100 families that were interviewed over phone between June-July 2020. Moreover, many brief cases from the survey and anecdotal evidence were collected from newspaper reports, site reports of development organizations.

## **Section II: Conceptual framework: an interpretative model of coping strategies**

The concept of coping has been evolved mainly from the disciplines of health, psychology, and sociology of medicine to address the way individuals deal with stresses and illness in general. This concept has later been used in other spheres, for example, sociology of the family, gender studies, and to other problems e.g., unemployment, the reconciliation between professional and personal/family life, financial difficulties, and poverty. It is often defined as efforts to thwart or diminish threat, harm, and loss, or to reduce associated distress (Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010). Coping is thus usually termed as the manner in which people act within the constraints of current resources and range of expectations to achieve various outcomes. Generally, this involves no more than managing resources,

but it means how it is done in unusual, abnormal, and adverse situations. Thus, coping can include defense mechanisms, active ways of solving problems and methods for handling stresses.

This paper considers coping strategies to be the formal and informal mechanisms adopted by the left behind migrant households, in a relatively planned and deliberate way, to deal with the financial difficulties caused by the irregular flows and/or suspension of remittances that are affecting their quality of life and household well-being. Coping strategies include both strategic behaviour entailing active and generally long-term measures, and adaptive behaviour that involves basic, usually short-term adjustment.

Empirical research shows that when households face financial difficulties, they tend to combine immediate with more weighted forms of behaviour, and more pragmatic and intuitive measures with more planned and customised ones. Financial difficulties make households react by immediately cutting back on consumption. Adaptive strategies play a key role in dealing with situations involving significant income losses, since they produce immediate effects. However, they are almost always insufficient to deal with prolonged financial constraints. In such a case, a more planned and structured approach is required, in order to reconfigure the expenditure pattern to a new (more restricted) one.

This chapter adopts the interpretative model coping strategies developed by Frade (2006) in order to understand how migrants' left behind families sought to cope with financial hardship caused by the partial and/or full suspension of remittances.

**Diagram 7.1: Interpretative model of Coping Strategies**



According to the model, households resort to three different types of coping strategies: self-mobilisation, corresponding to measures adopted by household members in order to reduce spending or increase income; solidarity-based mobilisation, involving aid from friends and close family members, in the good tradition of welfare societies and institutional mobilisation, including requests by individuals to the state (claims for social protection and assistance), civil society (especially non-profit organizations) or the market, in order to overcome financial difficulties. While in self-mobilisation, coping takes place within the inner circle i.e., within the nuclear family, in solidarity-based and institutional mobilisation coping is sought outside the family. Although this is still restricted to a close circle of family members and friends in one case, and extended to the available social, economic, and legal institutional mechanisms in the other.

Categories of Strategies	Main Features
Self Mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A household first engages in dealing by themselves with the problems; downsizes consumption habits, lifestyles or seek out new resources of income or both.</li> <li>• Cut down on goods and services is the immediate strategy particularly leisure, festivals and social events</li> </ul>

Self Mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substitution strategies in food consumption, particularly certain expensive products (meat and fish, for example) and increase in purchases of good that are relatively cheaper.</li> <li>• Maintain spending on children as far as possible; adults are the first to give up certain expenses.</li> <li>• Give up certain healthcare services, such as regular visits to doctors.</li> </ul>
Solidarity-based mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual aid based on family and friendship networks</li> <li>• Family and friends alleviate the hardships faced by households by offering goods and services.</li> <li>• Offers include direct financial support (donations, loans, payment of loan instalments and certain goods and services, such as rent, public utilities, education) or indirect support (supplying food, clothing etc.). it can be also less materialistic such as (emotional comfort or advice)</li> <li>• Whereas spontaneous solidarity is accepted naturally, requested solidarity tends to be seen more emotionally problematic. In this case, the request is made only in critical situations, such as urgent needs of children, the risk of losing a major asset</li> </ul>
Institutional mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Households engage with major institutional actors – the State, the Civil Society and the Market.</li> <li>• It includes various forms of public assistance mechanisms (social policies), such as unemployment benefits, the minimum income allowance, and other forms of social support (for example, student grants, housing subsidies, children benefit, etc.).</li> <li>• Civil society plays a very important role in the aid to households, namely through various civic, social, and religious non-profit institutions.</li> </ul>

The three types of coping strategies are not mutually exclusive and are often combined. The geometry of the combinations varies and depends on several factors related both to the context in which a family lives and to psychosocial and relational aspects, including the personality traits of the individuals. There is also a temporal dimension in understanding the interaction between the three types of strategic mobilisation. As previously stated, self-mobilisation is, as a rule, the first strategy adopted by individuals

and households and it is also the one which tends to last longer, since it involves self-imposed austerity. However, the severity and the duration of financial problems may require additional forms of support. Resorting to help from informal solidarity-based networks and institutionalised mechanisms almost always occurs after households have exhausted their own resources (for example, savings) and adjusted their consumer habits as much as possible without managing to balance their finances. Moreover, a chronological path may be identified among households that combine the three types of strategies, beginning with self-mobilisation, moving on to solidarity-based mobilisation and ending with institutional mobilisation. The progressive path through the three coping strategies cannot, however, be taken as a universal fact. In order for them to function, each one must be available. Moreover, each has its own limits in terms of coping enablement. Overall, coping strategies might not follow a linear pattern. The left behind migrant households may exhaust one option before they consider the second option; alternatively, they might also opt for the available fifth option.

### **Section III: COVID-19 coping strategies: global scenario**

In many parts of the world COVID-19 left migrants' employment in a precarious situation. While many migrant workers lost their jobs, a good number of them did not receive their due wages due to temporary closure of their work. This phenomenon significantly disrupted the flows of remittances to migrants' left behind households in the countries of origin. Remittance flows many of the countries of origin dropped. In Asia and the Pacific region, the figure 7.1 demonstrates that between January-June 2020, remittances followed a negative trend between 0 to -60 percent.

**Figure 7.1: Year-on-Year Changes in remittances to selected countries in Asia and the Pacific, January-June 2020**



Source: ADB, 2020

South Asia witnessed the largest fall of remittances of US\$ 18.3 billion that was 58.3 percent of Asia’s total loss (ADB: 2020). There is a greater likelihood that the disrupted flows of remittances substantially affected left behind families of migrants particularly households for which remittance constitutes the principal source of income. For example, in Kyrgyz Republic, remittances comprise 75 percent of recipient households’ income (Gao et al., 2020). Remittance inflows to the Philippines is projected to fall by 23 percent to 32 percent in 2020 relative to levels absent the pandemic, primarily attributed to adverse macroeconomic shocks in host economies. Consequently, household spending per capita will be reduced by 2.2 percent–3.3 percent; greater concerns arise among households of older persons or households with no income earner (Murakami et al., 2020).

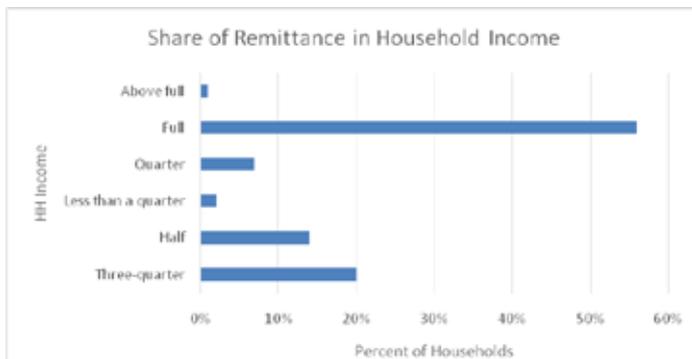
During the literature review, it was found that, there is yet to emerge any systematic and robust knowledge on the impacts of total and partial suspension of remittances on migrant sending households, and how left behind families were coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, drawing evidence of studies conducted in economic hardship and disasters (Kikkawa and Otsuka, 2020; Murakami et al., 2020; Yang, 2008), it may be

discerned that the suspension of remittance and its irregular flows could precipitate remittance-dependent households to fall into poverty or have difficulty meeting basic essential needs, loan repayment as well as access to education and health care services.

## Section IV: Coping strategies in Bangladesh

**Reduced household income:** Remittances constitute a significant part of the total household income for the left behind migrant households in Bangladesh. The BCSM and RMMRU survey (2020) findings (figure: 7.2) show that remittance is the sole source of household income for over 58 percent left behind migrant households, and another 20 percent of families' three-quarter income come from their migrant members' remittances.

**Figure 7.2: the share of remittances in Left-behind migrant households' income**

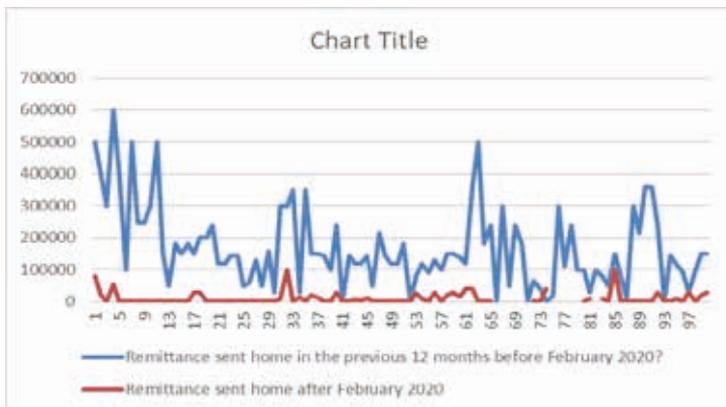


Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

The advent of COVID-19 severely affected remittances inflows to these households. Since February 2020, for 61 percent households-remittances had zeroed down, whereas only 39 percent families received remittances, however, the amount of remittances to these households significantly reduced. The comparison between (figure: 7.3) the previous 12 months before February 2020, and after February, illustrates that the amount of

monthly remittances dropped almost 60 percent for remittance recipient households. For example, the left behind household of Rafiq, a migrant worker in Qatar, from the Cumilla district, stated that before COVID-19, their migrant family member would send Tk. 30,000-40,000 per month; however, after the pandemic broke out, Rafiq only managed to send Tk. 15,000-20,000 monthly. Furthermore, before the pandemic, migrant families would receive remittances almost every month to bear their household expenses, but with the onset of COVID-19, remittance flows turned irregular.

**Figure 7.3: Comparison of remittance received by left behind migrant households before and after COVID-19**



Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

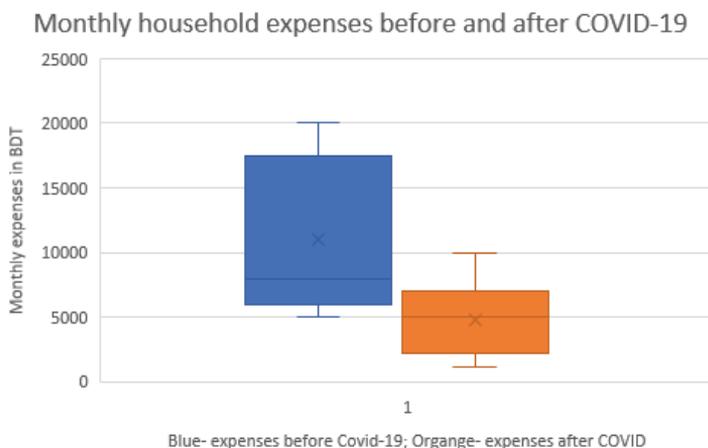
The amount of remittance for recipient households varied largely. To a large extent, this could be associated with migrants' employment status in the host countries. The survey found that 61 percent families that did not receive any remittances as because either their migrant family members lost jobs or received no wages or received wages irregularly from their employers. Many households did not receive any remittances particularly in the first three months of the pandemic. For example, Makbul, the father of Khurshed who works as a migrant worker in UAE,

reported that his son used to work in a manufacturing company and could send on average Tk. 40,000 monthly, however, COVID-19 caused a temporary closure of the factory and hard lockdown was imposed. Therefore, his son was totally relying on his savings abroad and thus could not send money home regularly as he was not receiving his salary. During that time, Makbul only received Tk. 16,000 in three months.

The survey also found that in some cases migrants came on holidays but could not return to work as flights were suspended due to the outbreak of COVID-19. A few households also reported sudden death of their migrant members caused by non-COVID-19 related illnesses. Many experienced major economic hardship as remittance was the only source of their household income. The reduced flow of remittances influenced the left behind migrant households to follow a range of coping strategies to endure the negative impacts of COVID-19. These strategies can be grouped into two major streams: expenditure reduction and income diversification strategies, which could well be explained by all three constitutive elements of the interpretative model: self-mobilisation, solidarity-based mobilisation and institutional mobilisation.

**Household expenditure reduction strategies:** The slump of remittances made the left behind migrant households to take a number of household expenditure reduction strategies that reflect their self-mobilization efforts entailing proactive measures to adjust their monthly household expenditures. The first and foremost initiative they undertook is to reduce their disposable household expenses. On average, the left behind migrant households reduced 57 percent of their household income. The figure: 7.4 demonstrate that before COVID-19, the monthly expenses of migrant families were between Tk. 7000-17000, but the pandemic forced these households to trim expenses down to Tk. 3,000-7000. Overall, MLBFs cut back their monthly household expenses between 60-80 percent.

**Figure 7.4: Monthly household expenses before and after COVID-19**

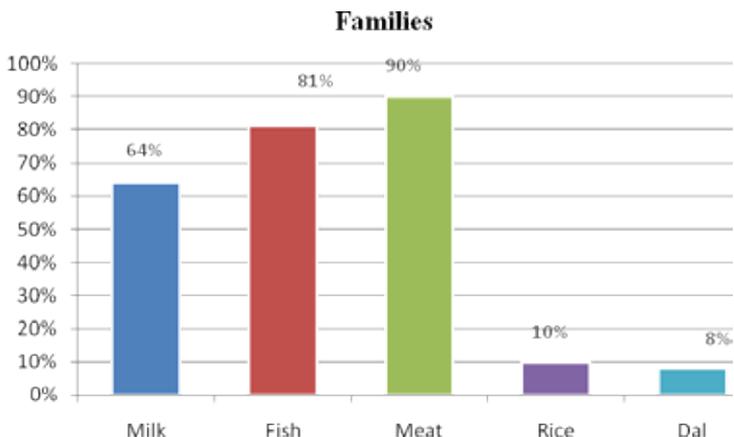


Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

**Decreasing households' food consumption:** The fall of monthly family expenses of the left behind migrant households substantially affected their expenditure on food items. The survey results found that in the last two months (April-May) 90 percent of the left behind migrant households brought down their expenses on a number of essential food items such as, vegetables, rice, lentils, milk, fish and meat which reflect their immediate self-mobilisation efforts.

In this regard, families significantly reduced their expenses on protein intake i.e., milk, fish, meats, etc., which could presumably made them less tenable to fight possible COVID-19 infections, though there was lack of systematic data from the left behind migrant households to make that assertion. According to the survey findings, 90 percent households decreased their expenses on meat, both red and white; 81 percent lowered their fish consumption and 63 percent left behind migrant households reduced their daily milk intake. Further, rice, lentils and vegetable consumptions were also reduced for 10, eight and 13 percent households, respectively (figure 7.5).

**Figure 7.5: Change in food consumption of the left behind migrant households after COVID-19**



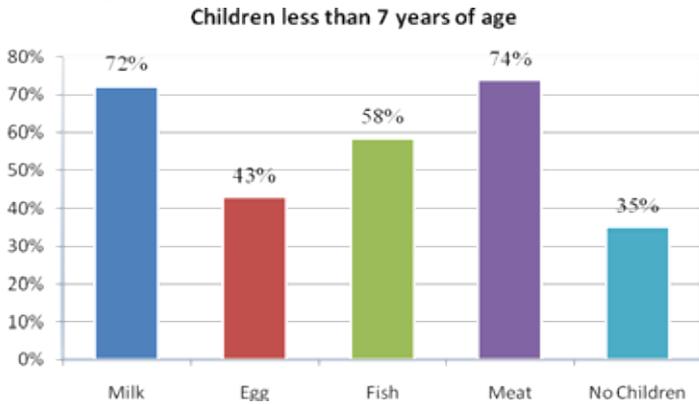
Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

The findings of the survey resemble coping strategies followed by households in a food insecure situation in different parts of the world. Earlier studies (Gupta et al., 2015) showed that households in a food insecure situation relied on less preferred and less expensive foods and consumed seasonal vegetables. In the context of a rural municipality in South Africa, Cordero-Ahimanet. al., (2018) found that relying on less preferred and/or inexpensive food was the most employed strategy (88.4 percent) for households experiencing food insecurity.

There is hardly any information on how COVID 19 had impacted on the children of the migrant households. Figure 7.6 throws some light on the situation of children in these migrant families. Sixty-seven percent of the left behind migrant households had children less than seven years of age. While households took drastic attempts to reduce their consumptions on key food items; it consequently affected children's food consumption in terms of substantially reducing their protein intake. Over half (about 55 percent) of the left behind migrant households skipped meat and milk followed by fish (44 percent), and egg (32 percent).

Compromising certain food items was particularly pervasive in the first couple of months of the pandemic when many families faced the full suspension of remittances. Similar coping strategies were documented in household food insecurity context by Shisanya and Hendriks (2011) who found in Maphephetheni uplands, South Africa, that the most used coping strategies by households were eating smaller meals than they needed (83 percent) and eating fewer meals in a day (91 percent).

**Figure 7.6: Change in food consumption of children of the left behind migrant households after COVID-19**



Some migrant households, for which remittance has been the sole source of income source, also borrowed from their neighbours and relatives; whereas a section of the left behind migrant households stocked dry food items such as rice, lentils etc. as they were anticipating irregular remittance inflows in the subsequent months and price hikes of daily essentials. For example, Rashida, a migrant wife, was informed by his husband in Bahrain that he would not be able to send money for an unforeseeable period; therefore, she was advised to borrow rice and lentils from her brother's grocery shop. Rashida sought her brother's help and stocked about four months' of food supply so that her family could survive in the absence of remittances. This case shows how the migrant's wife mobilised herself first

to activate her solidarity-based mobilization that enabled her to receive support from her brother. Similar household strategies of borrowing food from friends and relatives and food donations were also documented both in Ethiopia and South Africa in the context of household food insecurity (Cordero-Ahimanet. al., 2018; Asesefa Kisiet. al., 2018).

The pandemic situation badly disrupted the supply chain system in the market causing unavailability of certain key food items particularly during the government-imposed lockdown period. However, this research did not focus on the market system failure's impact on the left behind migrant households' food consumption, which might have an influence on households' food consumption pattern. Furthermore, the research did not find any case of households compromising on the number of meals e.g., two meals instead of three, and cases of starvation, though most of the households acknowledged that the number of food items in a specific meal was drastically reduced. Besides, it was noticed that most families hesitated to provide a direct answer to the questions of starvation and meal sacrifice. They rather indicated their hard times to ensure food for all in the family. Roshna, a mother of a migrant in Qatar, mentioned 'We did compromise quality of our food intake. However, we tried hard to ensure that children did not go to the bed with an empty stomach'.

This statement echoes the findings of previous studies conducted in the context of food insecurity. For examples, Norhasmah et al. (2010) identified that food insecure households followed strategies e.g., restricting consumption of adults to make children eat, feeding working members of households at expense of non-working members, and reducing or skipping meals eaten in a day.

Adapting education expenses: The Government of Bangladesh imposed a shutdown of educational institutions from the second week of the pandemic outbreak in March 2020. However, it did not provide a clear guidance about tuition fees payment for

students currently enrolled. Though there are no tuition fees for elementary level students in public schools and girls' education is free up to the class XII, there are scores of semi-public and private educational institutions in the country, which continue to charge tuition fees from students. A part of the private institutions introduced online classes, and the government used television channels to provide common classes to tens of thousands of public and semi-public institutions' students.

The survey found that children in the left behind migrant households were mainly enrolled in public and semi-public schools and colleges. A section of them were also studying in private institutions. Moreover, children of most of the households would receive private tuitions through house tutors and coaching centres. But, with the onset of the pandemic, over 66 percent households could not regularly pay fees of schools, colleges, coaching centres and house tutors. Many households applied for a waiver for school and colleges' fees whereas a good number of them applied for partial payment and payment at a later time. Most of the households were forced to suspend house tutors and coaching centres in the first two months of the pandemic due to the government lockdown and resumed them from the third month onwards. Households that continued private tuitions during the lockdown requested their tutors to allow them to pay their fees after they begin to receive remittances from their migrants. Some households did prioritize education over other household expenses and ensured that tuition fees were paid regularly though it brought additional economic stress for them. For example, the family of Kalam, a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia, in Jashore took a loan from a local micro credit organization during the pandemic that helped them pay Tk. 2200 per month of coaching centre's fees for their only daughter who was preparing for the higher secondary school examination. On the other hand, the family of Harun, a migrant in UAE, in Shariatpur slashed expenses on food items, transport etc., to bear private tutors and coaching centres' fees of their children. They stated, 'children's education was so important to us that we cut back our expenses

on expensive and unnecessary food and ate just basic foods such as rice, potato, lentils to survive during the COVID-19'. These examples demonstrate how the left behind migrant households, depending on the context, utilized their institutional mobilisation along with the self-mobilisation strategies.

There were a few cases in which migrant households decided to discontinue their children's education due to their failure in mobilizing resources in meeting educational expenses. Some households even opted to get rid of education expenses by marrying their daughters off during the pandemic. For example, the family of Salam, who works in UAE, in Jhenaidah stated, 'COVID-19 put us in such a financial hardship that at one point we decided to marry off our elder daughter just to save around Tk. 4,000 monthly that we used to spend for her college education. She was preparing for her higher secondary school examination this year and we were unable to pay for her private tuition, coaching centre and examination fees. Our daughter was very bright with good grades in her secondary school certificate examination. We dreamt of having her complete at least her graduation so that she could lead a good life and contribute to family income, but the dream was shattered as the COVID-19 made our only income earner- Salam, the migrant member-jobless in the UAE'. Salam who also happened to be the father of the girl child, would send around Tk. 30,000 per month before COVID-19. He could not send a single penny over the preceding three months. Instead, we sent him around Tk. 25,000 from our family savings so that he could survive the distressed period. In such a circumstance, we married off our daughter sacrificing our dream of making her well educated.

Decreasing healthcare seeking behaviour: The outbreak of COVID-19 brought a shift of healthcare seeking behaviour among the left behind migrants' households. Many households that experienced sickness among their members did not go to doctors and hospitals. The survey found that over 26 percent households underwent health related issues of their members;

they mostly suffered from cold, sore throat fever etc. Only 10 percent households sought medical treatment; a few of them were diagnosed with COVID-19 positive, but they were treated at home. The low number of healthcare seeking behaviour of migrant households could partly be linked to the perception of being infected with COVID-19 as they thought doctors' chambers and hospitals were sources of COVID-19 since many people with symptoms might have visited doctors' chambers and hospitals. Additionally, there was significant ambiguity among household members on COVID-19 symptoms as many thought they were infected with seasonal flu and cold and thus preferred not to seek medical treatment. A section of migrant households that took their members to doctors and hospitals due to major illness found it hard to meet their medical bills. Salima, the wife of a migrant in Qatar, said, 'my son had been suffering from urine infection Initially, he was being treated at home following a doctor's prescription, however, at some point his health deteriorated and I became helpless as I had no money to take him to the hospital. My husband stopped sending money as he had no work abroad. At that time, I approached one of my relatives and he lent me Tk. 10,000; it helped me bear treatment expenses of my son.' Another migrant's daughter in Chottogram suddenly felt severe abdominal pain and later was operated upon as she was suffering from appendicitis. In this regard, the migrant's household took loan from their neighbour to bear the inpatient hospital's bills.

Trimming costs on rituals: Earlier studies (Siddiqui and Ansar, 2020; Siddiqui and Mahmud, 2018) on the impact of migration found that migrants and their households contributed to local development and charities such as community clubs, religious institutions e.g., mosques. However, the partial and full suspension of remittances during the pandemic made the left behind migrant households focus to meet their immediate households needs such as food, children education and health etc.. No household was found contributing remittance money in local development and charities. Furthermore, almost 100 percent households refrained from incurring expenses in celebrating popular festivals such as

Pahela Boishak, Eid-UI Fitr and Eid Ul Azha etc. A migrant's family in Chottogram district stated, our family had a tradition to buy big animals. Last year we spent Tk. 100,000 for buying cattle that was sacrificed during the Eid Ul Azha; but this year we could not even buy a goat as the family did not receive any remittance from our two migrant members. Moreover, one of them abruptly returned from Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic creating further precarity. The deceased migrant Masud Miya's wife stated, 'we were under so much strain due to the sudden death of my husband, we all went numb and did not even realize when the Eid ul Fitr day came and went by. In the absence of my husband - the only income earner in the family-my biggest concern is how to pay off his loans that he took from a local organization when he returned home after he came back from abroad because of ill health.' Another migrant family in Tangail said this year we did not observe any special day for example, Eid and birthday of my child. We only focused on ensuring three meals a day.'

Merging households: Merging households was another strategy to defray costs. Sometime such merger took place with parents' households or those of in-laws. The survey found that some households located in urban and semi urban settings sent their women members back to their in-laws houses in rural areas to reduce monthly household expenditures. For instance, the wife of Morshed, a migrant worker in Bahrain, would live in the Gazipur Sadar area with her brother in law's (Fazal) family in a rented house. After COVID-19 broke out, Morshed and his brother Fazal decided to send back their wives to their parents' place in a village in Madaripur district for an indefinite period. After that, Fazal sublet a room to another tenant to have an extra earning. As Fazal said, 'Morshed, my migrant brother, and I used to be providers for our families. But, as soon as the pandemic started my brother lost his job abroad. With my little income, I was not able to bear the family expenses including the house rent monthly. Therefore, I decided to send back our women to their parents' houses and rented out a room for Tk. 3000 monthly that helped me stay back in town and look for income generating

activities'. Similar coping strategies of households were found during the super cyclone of 1991 in Bangladesh when many households sent their women to their parents' houses as they could not bear with the immediate financial hardship and food insecurity situations caused by the cyclone (Paul, 1998).

Many of these strategies have gender dimensions. It is the left behind wives who moved in order to cope with income loss due to the full or partial suspension of remittances. Although the study did not pursue if new types of vulnerabilities were experienced by left behind wives when they merged with in-laws' families. However, it can be said that the impact of merger on left behind wives will be different than that of the left behind husbands. On the other hand, the survey of this study did not find cases of left behind husbands' coping strategies, however, interesting findings were recorded earlier in the context of female migration where it was found that many husbands of female migrants could not manage the household in the absence of their wives, therefore, they merged their households with their parental or in law's households (Siddiqui, 2001). Again, the recent trend has been migrants' spouses and children are establishing their own nuclear households by breaking out from the extended families (Siddiqui and Ansar, 2020). In the wake of COVID-19, these families are going back to their original extended households.

Household income diversification/supplementation strategies: The left behind migrant households also adopted various strategies to fill the gaps of remittances by up taking income supplementing and diversifying at their households. Likewise, the expenditure reducing strategies, these income boosting strategies also reflect the combination of three strategies of the interpretative model: self mobilisation, solidarity-based mobilisation and institutional mobilisation.

Increased borrowing: About 55 percent households borrowed money from different local sources. In this regard, families

primarily took loans from their relatives, neighbors who were economically in a better position. A section of the left behind migrant households also borrowed money from local NGOs/microcredit organizations at higher interest rates illustrating their institutional mobilisation strategies. For example, a migrant family in Jhenaidah district was forced to borrow Tk. 50,000 from a local micro credit organization at a high interest rate as the migrant member lost his job in Saudi Arabia, and therefore could not send money for about four months. The interest rate was two times higher than that of the non-COVID-19 period that further aggravated the household's financial austerity. Similar findings were recorded in the context of natural disasters by Alam (2005) who found households coping strategies to adapt with tornado loss by taking credits due to lack of rehabilitation programmes from governmental and non-governmental Organisations.

Apart from local sources, migrant families increasingly relied on their social network primarily involving extended families, relatives, friends, and neighbors to borrow money during the distressed period induced by COVID-19. Sofia, a migrant's wife from Tangail district stated, 'it would not have been possible to survive the difficult time if my cousin brothers would not have stepped in. Without hesitation I approached my brothers to lend me money and I borrowed at least three times from them.'

Reliance on income of other family members: Having an additional earning member in the family provided a cushion to the migrant households. Eighteen percent of households under this research relied on income from other family members. Families' from whom money was borrowed had members still employed in formal sectors and continued to receive their regular salaries during the COVID-19. The income from other family members thus helped these households to cope with the loss of income due to the partial and full suspension of remittances. For example, Rayhan, a migrant from Saudi Arabia, could not send remittances for the last three months as he did not receive his salaries from his employer due to the temporary shutdown of

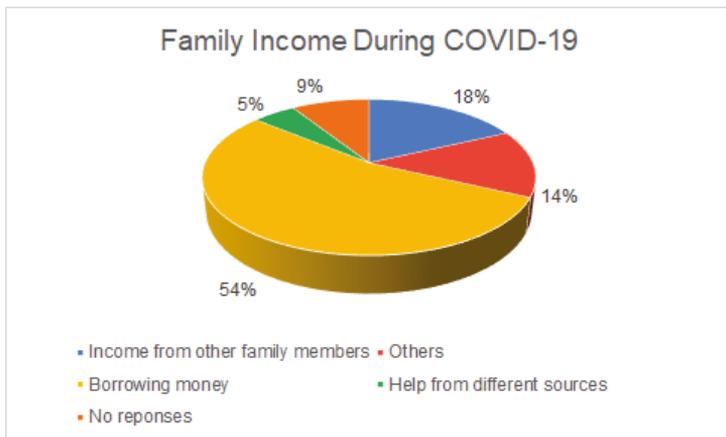
the factory. This created a financial hardship on his family back home as remittance was almost 50 percent of the total income of the household. Nevertheless, the family was able to sustain somehow as Rayhan's son (Barek) was a salaried employee at a local NGO. Barek's income was not affected by the COVID-19 as he was employed under a donor funded project. Hence the income of Barek provided a significant support for Rayhan's family during the pandemic.

Accessing formal assistance: In response to the COVID-19 induced crisis, the Government of Bangladesh provided food assistance to vulnerable populations. Food assistance most often includes staples and non-perishable items such as potatoes, rice, and oil. It was estimated that the government has subsidized food for around 50 million people and that 5 million poor households received Tk. 2,500 through mobile banking. However, the relief was not been sufficient for everyone. The government has prioritized rice procurement to assure staple food security. To this end, the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation purchased rice from farmers at high prices as a form of support. The initiative was not extended to vegetable, fish, or poultry farmers. There were many individual led initiatives. For example, under the authorization of a member of parliament in Noakhali district, thousand families in his constituency received 2-4kg of fish collected from local markets and adjacent coastal fish landing centers in addition to rice, onions and potatoes (CGIAR, 2020). The objective was to add nutrient-dense items, which are usually absent from traditional food aid packages, that helped prevent malnutrition in vulnerable households. Furthermore, many charity organizations in partnership with local NGOs also distributed food packages to the poor households in different parts of the country.

Figure 7.7 finds that 14 percent garnered assistance from government, private and charity organizations. However, many families complained that they anticipated social protection from the government, but they did not receive any assistance though many families in their localities were given relief. They

were not sure why their families were not selected for cash or food assistance. Migrant families assumed that there could be an assumption among relief distributors that as they received remittances from their migrant family members abroad, so they would not need relief assistance. Abu Bakar, the father of a migrant worker, said, ‘nobody cared for us; we could not even seek assistance from others for fear of losing our social status’.

**Figure 7.7: Sources of family income during COVID-19**



Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

**Dwindling savings and selling assets:** The suspension of remittance created immense economic hardship particularly for households relying fully on remittances. The plight was far worse for families experiencing sudden death and other shocks such as flood, loans, dowry etc. The survey found that about 20 percent of households were compelled to sell their assets to offset economic shocks that COVID-19 created. A family from the Chattogram district stated that it sold 116.6 gram of jewelry as three of their migrant family members lost their jobs. Remittance was the only source of their family income, which sustained a huge blow when one of them returned home abruptly during the pandemic, while the other two migrants were somehow surviving abroad but could

not send any remittance. In the absence of remittance, the family initially relied on their bank savings. The economic situation quickly aggravated as the family had to pay Tk. 500,000 as dowry to the groom's family to marry off one of their daughters.

Another migrant, Masud Miya from Tangail district, used to work in the construction sector in Qatar. During COVID 19 he was detained and then was sent back to Bangladesh. He was devastated as not only his family did not have any income. He borrowed from a local organization to maintain subsistence upon his sudden return. The plight of Masud Miya's family did not end there. He died within a month after returning home. His wife Salma did not know how to manage the the family. She sold two cows to survive for a few months with that money. However, she does not know how she would repay the loans or feed her children in future. Some families in Tangail district sold off their jewelry when remittance flows had stopped in the wake of COVID-19, and later a monsoon flood submerged their croplands. These findings also echoed similar phenomenon chronicled during different natural disasters in Bangladesh; for example, Paul (1998) suggested that 88 percent of households sold belongings to reduce their vulnerability to the 1994/1995 droughts in Bangladesh which included selling their livestock, land and by mortgaging out land.

## **Section V: Chapter conclusion**

The outbreak of COVID-19 impacted the left behind migrants' households in many parts of the world primarily through the partial and full suspension of remittances. Against this backdrop, based on the findings of a primary survey and news reports, this chapter found that the COVID-19 brought significant strains for the left behind migrant households in Bangladesh due to the irregular inflows and absence of remittances particularly in the first three months of the pandemic. Remittances constituted a significant part of the left behind migrants' households' income. For many left behind migrant households, a remittance is the

only source of household income; therefore, the disrupted flow of remittances caused severe financial hardship for the left behind migrant households. This in turn forced these household to adopt a plethora of coping strategies to endure the challenging times posed by the COVID-19. Interestingly, many of these coping resemble poor and vulnerable households' historical adaptation strategies recorded in the context of food insecurity, financial crisis and natural disasters in different parts of the world. Broadly, the left behind migrant households' coping strategies can be grouped into two major streams: household expenditure reducing and income supplementing/diversifying strategies, which could be well explained by an interpretative model that included: self-mobilization, solidarity- based mobilization and institutional mobilisation.

The adoption of coping strategies did not follow a linear pattern. The left behind migrant households exhausted one option before they opted for the second option; in some cases, they chose for the available fifth option instead of third or fourth. There were a number of factors that interacted in a highly complex ways and shaped the coping strategies of the left behind migrant households. These included: migrants' employment status in the countries of destinations, volume of remittance flows during the COVID-19, location of the left behind migrant households in Bangladesh in terms of rural, urban areas, household size, income sources of the households, assets, savings, education of family members, other shocks and stresses faced at the same time, status of household indebtedness, gendered dimensions of households decision making processes, social capital of households in the form of network, institutional linkage and so on and so forth.

Though it is hard to identify a general set of coping strategies for the left behind migrant households, the partial and full suspension of remittances made the left behind migrant households to adjust their households' disposable and monthly expenses by reducing expenditure significantly, which was on average a 57 percent reduction compared to the pre COVID-19 period. In

this regard, the left behind migrant households adopted a range of self-mobilization strategies in terms of proactively engaging themselves in reducing households' expenditure. Many of these strategies were spontaneous in nature that came into being as an immediate reaction to the suspension of remittances induced by the COVID-19. Hence the left behind migrant households primarily compromised their food intake particularly the protein consumption in the form of meat, fish, etc.; reduce the number of food items in a meal, prioritize food for the children. They also substantially reduced their expenses on non-food items which were considered not essential, for example, charity, festivals, and rituals. The healthcare seeking behavior of the left behind migrant households was also reduced that could be the combination of both lack and or inadequate money and the effects of the pandemic assuming health service centers were a potential source of the COVID-19. On the contrary, though the educational institutions remained closed, the left behind migrant households prioritized their children's education amid their financial hardship by ensuring that their children continued to receive tuition from private tutors and coaching centers, thus incurring expenses. To reduce the household expenditure, a section of left behind migrant households followed a few strategies that had counterproductive social and gendered implications. Some left behind migrant households merged their households with their parents or in laws particularly by sending women members back to their parents; withdrawing daughters from pursuing education and married them off at an early age. These strategies might have helped the left behind migrant households to deal with the financial austerity for the time being, but those might have also created new vulnerabilities for women and girls.

The full and partial disruption of household income derived from the remittance made many left behind migrant households to adopt various income supplementing/diversifying strategies that are mainly tied to their efforts of solidarity- based mobilization. This implied that the left behind migrant households activated their social network particularly extended families, relatives, friends,

and neighbors to receive support from them during the distressed period. In most of these cases, they self-mobilized themselves and asked help from them. In other situations, their counterpart came forward and offered generous supports. These included: borrowing money to meet the fundamental needs of the households such as food, education and health care of family members; in-kind support such as dried food from relatives, friends and neighbours, accompanying ill family members to the hospitals etc.

To fill the void of remittances and ensure household income to sustain in the wake of COVID-19, the left behind migrant households also used a combination of their self and institutional mobilization strategies. These included mainly borrowing money from local sources such as micro-credit organizations, and in a few cases receiving both cash and food assistance from the government, private and charity organizations. However, there was an utter frustration among the left behind migrant households for not being given priority in government relief and assistance programmes. Most of left behind migrant households, were not considered for the government led protection and assistance support as there was arguably a prevailing perception among the relief/assistance distributors at the local level that the left behind migrant households would receive remittances from their migrants abroad. Furthermore, some left behind migrant households refused to seek assistance from the government as they thought it would socially degrade their positions. Apart from these, the left behind migrant households also relied on the income of other family members that provided them a temporary relief during the financial hardship. However, a significant number of the left behind migrant households were also forced to deplete their existing savings and selling assets such as land and jewelry to survive the unusual and difficult times induced by the COVID-19. Many of these households were compelled to this negative coping on account of multiple non COVID-19 related shocks and stresses, for example, death in the family, chronic illness of family members, indebtedness, natural disasters-flood, dowry, and migrants' permanent return to the country and thus loss of income.

## CHAPTER VIII

# IN PURSUIT OF RESILIENCE: REVISITING MIGRATION AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Anas Ansar, Marina Sultana and Ranjit Chandra Das

**S**tudies amply reveal that gender inequalities and gender-based violence increase during every type of emergency (Sharma and Borah, 2020; Decker et al., 2013; Pellowski et al., 2013; Mukherjee, 2007). The outbreak of COVID-19 again confirms the previous results. Some of the inequalities and vulnerabilities, including women's limited access to protection and basic services, are being exacerbated in the current pandemic situation. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and deepened existing global inequalities. It is a crisis that in many ways is gendered. As emerging data suggest, the pandemic has intensified domestic and gender-based violence globally (UN Women, 2020a). In the current situation, women are particularly vulnerable as many of the policy responses fail to take into account their particular needs. In addition to social barriers they face cultural taboos in many societies.

Within such a lop-sided structure, the intersection of migration status is even more unsettling. At home, amid resource constraints, lack of remittance support and an exponential increase in movement restrictions due to abrupt lockdown,

many women in migrant households may have been trapped into situation of domestic violence. Similarly, many women migrant workers abroad are living precarious lives. Those forced to return arbitrarily, are experiencing severe distress and social stigma upon arrival. Thus, on the one hand, the pandemic has brought to the fore the lack of dignity and precarity of the female workers in the destination countries who mostly work as domestic help and are already in an exploitative situation. On the other, it triggered a severe economic, social and even personal vulnerability of left behind wives in male migrant households, as a consequence of situation of joblessness and arbitrary return to the home country of their male partners.

Yet, despite the disproportionate impact on migrant women and those left behind women in migrant households, a gender-sensitive response in this context has been largely absent in national and international policy responses to address the situation (UN Women, 2020b; CARE, 2020). Therefore, documenting the intersectional COVID-19 impacts on women in the migration context is essential to provide robust evidence to advocate for change in policies and practices.

Focusing on the nexus between pandemic and migrants' perceived vulnerabilities, this chapter revisits the question of the precarity and vulnerability of Bangladeshi migrant women, returnees and the left behind wives of male migrants. Although migrants have long underpinned the low wage, exploitative economy in the Gulf countries, this dependency has grown manifolds in recent years. In this study precarity refers to those who experience precariousness, and thus conjures life worlds that are inflicted with uncertainty and instability (Waite, 2009). In the neoliberal globalization of labour, with insecure employment and the lack of mechanism to address the hierarchy between the employers and workers, precarity goes hand in hand, as both a descriptor and a condition. In a profit driven approach, where migrants, especially women and new arrivals are seen as being hard workers, more loyal and reliable, and prepared to work longer hours due to their

lack of choice offers employers an ideal ground of maximization of profit (Mackenzie and Forde, 2009). Connections between global economic change and related transformations in the world of work form the key explanatory framework for such workplace exploitation (Lewis et al., 2015: 581). An important backdrop is the erosion in the political and industrial power of the working class under the arrangement of the Kafala system in the Gulf States as this chapter explains in the following.

Within this framework, the chapter examines how the global health crisis both amplifies existing gender dynamics and creates new gender-based outcomes that disproportionately impact on women migrants and those left behind women in migrant households. In doing so, it explores how the current situation is aggravating their (in) visible dependency on the system of coercion within the migrant households and global migration regime. The chapter informs that there has been a disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women in migration setting which includes not only gender-based violence and other physical abuses, but also economic hardship, degrading health conditions, social stigma, and above all, a phenomenon of uncertainty, helplessness and constant fear of unforeseen situation. Going beyond the immediate impacts, it also offers a much-needed reflection on how the globalization of labour and the gendered, profit-driven, exploitative and stratified nature of migration have expanded the horizon of inequalities and vulnerabilities for women in the migration context of Bangladesh.

**Objectives and methodology:** This chapter aims to inform policy and practice about how to reduce the multiple effects of COVID-19 on female migrants from Bangladesh to the Gulf and other Asian countries and those left behind women in migrant households in Bangladesh. The specific objectives include: (a) to document women's physical, psychological and public health risks associated with the effects; (b) to identify the immediate and longer-term gendered effects of COVID-19 in the migration context of Bangladesh and (c) to identify mechanisms and

strategies for mitigating the effects of the pandemic and suggest guidelines for post COVID-19 sustainable management of international migration of women.

Unlike the rest of the book, a different methodology has been applied in this chapter. It mainly relies on qualitative method of social science research. The data collection method for this research is twofold. The nature of the study requires a combination of both textual analysis and in-depth interviews which is a common phenomenon in qualitative research. Creswell (2012) argued that data collected through various sources validate research arguments. Both document analysis and in-depth interviews seek to analyse the key research question which is- how has the COVID19 health crisis affected the exposure of female migrants and those left behind to precarious conditions and subjected to gendered vulnerabilities including but not limited to sexual and gender-based violence?

The analysis is based on three different sets of sources: secondary literature, case studies and finally, interviews with key informants, i.e. activists, NGO workers, researchers and policymakers. A total of 42 case studies were collected by using the BCSM platform and its member organizations. Among them, 12 current migrants' testimonies were collected through their family members or by tracking their phone calls to the NGOs seeking help from abroad. Besides, 15 case studies for each category of returnee female migrants and left behind wives of the male migrant households were conducted through grassroots partner NGOs of the BCSM. All ethical standards have been followed while conducting the interviews and afterwards. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and its strict use in positive policy framing. For anonymity, the real names of the respondents have been changed whenever referred to in the paper. These in-depth interviews and case studies were coded relating to our theme and used in the research where needed. Later on, documents and news gathered from the secondary sources were integrated with interview finding to make a reinforce arguments.

This chapter has four sections. First, it gives a brief overview of the gendered dimension of international migration and Bangladeshi women's position in such context. Then it reviews the existing reports, scholarly works, and other documentation on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women in migration setting. The third section documents the impacts on women interviewed for this study and final section presents an analysis linking the migrants' inherently negative entanglement with the globalization of labour.

## **Section II: Feminisation of international migration and Bangladesh**

To orient our study within the broad spectrum of international migration, it is essential to see the social transformations in recent decades with a more stratified and gendered dynamics of international migration that has come to the forefront. Popularly referred as the 'feminization of international migration' (Piper, 2008: 1287), the issue of gender and the differences between male and female migrants' experiences has become an important dynamic to look into migration and its impact analysis. The gender segregation of labour and the feminization of domestic and care work also means that even when female migrants have legal rights, they are less likely to be enforced than the rights of male migrants. This is because unskilled female migrants tend to be more isolated and less aware of their rights than their male counterparts. In sum, the intersection of gender norms and market economics has three types of consequences for female migrants: (a) they are concentrated in unskilled, undervalued and low-paid sectors, often employed as domestic workers in hard-to-regulate private homes; (b) skilled and unskilled migrants often face intersecting gender and racial discrimination and have a triple burden of managing paid employment alongside unpaid domestic and reproductive responsibilities; and (c) due to their inability to join the decision making or policy processes, female migrants often struggle to advance their collective interests than male migrants (O'Neil and Domingo, 2016).

This gender lens, therefore, ‘allows us to redirect our attention to the individual and family or household level to assess the impact of migration on personal development as well as on relational changes, and thus on the social dimensions of the migration–development nexus’ (Piper, 2008:1289).

Following a similar global trend, the restructuring of the global economy has increased short-term contract female labour migration from Bangladesh. In official statistics, there is greater visibility of women as independent labour migrants, in contrast, to simply ‘accompanying spouses’ of their male migrant partners. For example, in 2019, a total of 104,786 female workers migrated from Bangladesh to work. In 2019 the female migration increased by 3.04 percent from the previous year. According to RMMRU, the average age of women workers is 27 years, 70 percent of them are married, and 30 percent are divorced or widowed (RMMRU Migration Trends Report, 2020).

There is also a gendered dimension in the labour market in destination countries which explains the increasing participation of women in migration from Bangladesh. The ever increasing demand for jobs in highly feminized sectors (health care, domestic help and manufacturing) that trigger this large scale migration of women from South and Southeast Asia to the Gulf States and other rich Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. Bangladeshi women migrants are primarily employed in jobs at the bottom ranks, for example, care work and domestic help, often characterized by underpayment and overwork, which also typically involve tasks that are culturally devalued and receive limited socio-legal recognition (Siddiqui and Anas, 2020; Rashid, 2013; Siddiqui, 2001). A persistent gender wage gap is also a significant issue, and many migrant women disproportionately work in more precarious, insecure and informal employment that receives low pay (Piper, 2008; Hennebry and Petrozziello, 2019). Women are more likely to experience violence within workplaces and often face difficulties accessing sexual and reproductive health care and have little to no social protection (Public Services International, 2018).

The gendered outcome of migration not only exclusive to women leaving their country for overseas employment, but also includes the complex experience of women and men who are left behind in the ‘transnationally split households’, with one partner working abroad the other one, taking care of the left-behind family back home (Piper, 2008). This is also an important area of investigation by migration researchers in Bangladesh in recent years (Siddiqui and Anas, 2020; Siddiqui and Mahmud, 2015; Rashid, 2013).

In this already complex setting, the inequalities, economic and social stresses caused by the pandemic, has exacerbated the situation of women in the Covid-19 pandemic context. As emerging literature suggests, migrant women are less protected from job losses and economic recession as a consequence of the pandemic (Foley and Piper, 2020). In 2019, half of an estimated 272 million migrants who live and work outside their countries of origin were women (International Migration Report, 2019).

Of these women, approximately 66.6 million were migrant workers.<sup>63</sup> Approximately 8.5 million women migrant domestic workers on insecure contracts are facing income loss and much greater risks of abuse and exploitation, particularly those who cannot return home owing to travel bans and border controls (UN Women, 2020c). Due to the nature of work, living conditions, the power imbalance between employer and workers, the language barrier and therefore, the lack of access to legal and social recourse also exposing women to gender-based violence and other forms of physical abuse.

### **Section III: Recent scholarship on experiences of women amid COVID-19**

A brief overview: There is already an unsettling amount of

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63 See, migration data portal <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/labour-migration>

information on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) occurring globally against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak<sup>64</sup>. According to UN Women, globally 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence in the previous 12 months (UN Women, 2020b). A growing stream of literature has highlighted that since the Covid-19 outbreak, this violence has intensified. The UN Women report also shows the surge in domestic violence and emphasizes a pattern that can be observed globally both in developed and developing countries (UN Women, 2020b).

Focusing on the female migrant domestic workers in the Gulf and other Arab countries, Auon (2020) and also the OECD report (2020) briefly deal about the heightened risk of Gender Based Violence (GBV) amid COVID-19 for female migrant domestic workers under the Kafala System. She explains how within the existing governance system, the workers' legal and structural dependency on the employers leads to further erosion of their capacity to bargain.

However, this is not a novel trend, and there are evidence of pandemics or such similar events, increase the rate of domestic violence and the severity of abuse (Sharma and Borah, 2020). Decker et al. (2013) investigated the potential HIV epidemic impact on female abuse; Mukherjee (2007) related structural violence and poverty to the AIDS pandemic; and Pellowski et al. (2013) showed how the US HIV pandemic led to social disadvantages for different racial and gender groups, resulting

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64 See, for example, the UNFPA briefing report accessed from [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_Preparedness\\_and\\_Response\\_-\\_UNFPA\\_Interim\\_Technical\\_Briefs\\_Gender\\_Equality\\_and\\_GBV\\_23\\_March\\_2020\\_.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_Preparedness_and_Response_-_UNFPA_Interim_Technical_Briefs_Gender_Equality_and_GBV_23_March_2020_.pdf)

UN Women report accessed from <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/impact-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-service-provision-en.pdf?la=en&vs=0>

in violence. Focusing on the global economic crisis in 2008, UNAIDS (2012) also reported the impact of this major financial crisis on women, girls and the challenges it puts on gender equality around the globe.

Nevertheless, the stream of growing literature investigating the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and violence against women is yet to focus on how the gendered effects of the current pandemic are realized through migration lens and using Bangladesh as a case study. This is what we look to investigate and contribute via our study by exposing the reasons behind such effects.

#### **Section IV: Disjuncture between migration and development**

Experiences of GBV and other challenges of women in migration: The gendered and stratified nature of migration has several implications for female labour market experience, their entitlements and rights, which has further unveiled and become ever louder amid the Corona pandemic. As the narrative of the respondents suggests, the nature of the exploitation ranges from long and tedious working hours, arbitrary dismissal from jobs and involuntary return, social stigma in the home country, lack of structural supports, lack of access to health care, exposure to risks, lower wages, poor housing conditions, the scrapping of contracts, deceit and enslavement. The following section details out the particular experiences of the current and returnee migrants as well as the left-behind wives of the male migrants.

#### **Section V: Impact on current female migrants**

Increased work pressure and caretaking responsibilities: Female migrant domestic workers often live inside the homes of their employers. They clean, cook, wash and take care of children and elderly family members. As these workers lack legal protection, there are effectively no limits to the number of hours they may be asked to work per day. They are not entitled to paid sick leave

or annual leave. With the pandemic and the presence of the most family members of the concerned households, their work pressure has undergone a substantial increase. Most of the respondents were required to take on extra duties of cleaning and disinfecting homes, leading to burns, rashes or other injuries. Among the 12 current migrants interviewed, five have been working around 18 hours per day, and three others were working for 15 hours per day. Only a single respondent stated that she has been working 10 hours, and the corona situation has not changed her work schedule much. It is also because she has been employed by an employer where she only looks after an old couple, thus unlike other domestic workers there has not been any change in the number of household members who she had to attend in the pandemic situation. Additionally, during of Ramadan, the workload for many female domestic workers increased threefold than usual because of the inability of employers to hire additional workers.

### ***Story of Jarina, a female migrant living in Saudi Arabia***

*Jarina (35), a single mother of 2 daughters, migrated to Saudi Arabia in 2007 at a cost of Tk. 30,000. She got a job of a cleaner with a salary of only Tk. 12,000. It was continuing for years. After the Covid-19 outbreak she lost her job and following a break of three months she took the job of a domestic worker in a house of a Bangladeshi migrant that ensured her accommodation and food. Soon after taking her new job Jarina suffered from paralysis as a result of the physical abuses and torture that she endured in the hands of her former employer. Since Jarina could not work, her new employer took secured Tk. 50,000 Tk. from her family and took an expensive gold chain from her purportedly to defray the cost of her treatment. After that, the employer left Jarina on the street with all the documents. Saudi police admitted Jarina in the hospital. Currently, she was under treatment at the said hospital.*

**Partial payment or no-payment:** Reduced salary and inability to send remittances back home was another primary concern for many female migrants. Almost every respondent has more

than three dependent family members in Bangladesh, and their inability to send money back home caused severe stress to them. Many are worried about the family members on how they are managing households. Eight respondents could not send money back home during the period of May-July, time of the Eid festival. Shamima Banu (37) regrets saying ‘it is the first time that I could not send money for my kids to buy new clothes for Eid since I came abroad for work in 2016’. Among the 12 current migrants interviewed, four have not received their due salary since April; three of them received only a partial payment. On top of the impact of the pandemic, female migrants in Lebanon are also bearing the brunt of the failing Lebanese economy and the devaluation of the Lebanese pound. Three out of the four respondents who have not received their salary since April are working in Beirut, Lebanon. The constant worry about salary payment not only represents a loss of income for their families but adds to the emotional and psychological strain suffered by migrant workers.

**Movement restriction and exclusion from state announced emergency services:** Travel bans and restrictions are preventing women migrant workers from returning to their countries of origin as cross-border travel becomes more challenging. This includes screening measures and health certificate requirements for entering the country. Almost all the respondents in this study were confined in their employers’ houses since April. None was allowed even to leave the work premises.

Besides, this restriction on movement also led to many migrant workers being excluded from accessing the Covid-19 support provided by some countries where they are currently working. As the confinement further disconnected them from many of the social services and state announced benefits, the domestic workers cannot access such social protection and economic stimulus packages. None of the workers interviewed in this study were able to contact social workers or even the Bangladesh embassy to seek help to address many of their challenges related

to their work. Moreover, structural barriers continue to exist which stem from immigration and employment laws that place many migrants, especially migrant women, outside of the scope of social, economic and urgent healthcare provisions.

**Sexual and gender-based violence:** While sexual and gender-based violence against migrant women in the Gulf States were also prevalent prior to Covid-19 pandemic, current home confinement of the male members of the employers' households has exacerbated the exposure of migrant women to such violence. Several international reports already documented cases of abuse towards female migrant domestic workers during the lockdown in the Arab countries (Amnesty International 2020; Anti-Racism Movement, 2020). These reports indicate that domestic workers are being subjected to physical and sexual abuse, in addition to excessive work demands. For instance, in 2008, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon were dying at a rate of one per week, with suicide and attempted escapes as the leading causes of death (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Currently, and with additional implications due to COVID-19, it is estimated that this number has doubled (Anti-Racism Movement, 2020).

Almost all the respondents pointed out some form of SGBV experience including, physical torture, and sexual abuse. They also reported misogynist and racially derogatory remarks being directed towards them. Among the 12 respondents 6 were subjected to beating more than twice during the pandemic period not only by the female members of the households but also the male employer and their sons. Aleya Khatun (45) shares her plight:

'I was beaten by my employer's son because I was in the toilet for a bit longer, and he had to wait a few minutes for his dinner to be served. I am used to getting beaten by mem sahib (female head of the household) but being beaten by her son, who is younger than my son in Bangladesh, was such a shame that I felt I should commit suicide. But then I thought, what will happen to my family back home if I did so'.

**The nexus between the Kafala system and migrants access to protection:** In the Middle East, the relationship between employers and migrant workers is regulated by the Kafala system: a restrictive sponsorship system binding a worker's immigration status to her/his employer. The Kafala system is criticized by many scholars for producing a readily exploitable workforce, as it creates an unbalanced power relationship between employers (Kafeel) and migrants (Siddiqui and Anas, 2020; Pande 2013; Mahdavi 2013). Lack of legal protection and the power imbalance between employer and worker put women migrant domestic workers at risk in many ways, including in terms of exposure to gender-based violence (Khan, A. and Harroff Tavel, 2011).

From the findings it appears that the exploitation experiences are frequent and ongoing, including deprivation of food and rest, overwork, confinement, servitude to other households, beating and sexual assault. For many women migrant workers, it is nearly impossible to reach out to any legal bodies or agency as the workers are in constant surveillance by the employers and their family members. Emerging data suggests that conditions for female migrant workers within the framework of the Kafala system have further deteriorated as a result of COVID-19 (OECD, 2020). Reinforcing lockdowns and curfews in many of the Gulf countries has severe implications for female migrant domestic workers, not only related to their essential health and safety, but also in terms of their lack of access to the service system. Several respondents in our study claim that despite having some symptoms of Corona virus, they were not allowed by their employer to go to the health clinic and do the test. Usually, it is the employer who is responsible for medical bills and other treatment costs. Laila Arjuman (33), working unpaid in Lebanon, claims that she was informed by her employer about the termination of her job in July. Still, she was not allowed to leave the house and continue doing the household work without any salary. Several other women migrants also informed about their passports being confiscated by the employers, which restricted them to escape route from the abusive working conditions.

## **Section VI: Impact on involuntarily returned female migrants**

**Statistics on arbitrary return:** A record number of 17,182 women migrant workers have come back to Bangladesh between April 1 and October 3, 2020, according to the Wage Earners Welfare Board (WEWB) under the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry, Bangladesh. Of them, 6,025 have come back home from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 3,269 from the United Arab Emirates, 1,887 from Lebanon, 1,789 from Jordan, 1,362 from Qatar and 1,241 from Oman (Bhuyan, 2020). Female migrants in the Gulf States have been hit hard by the impact of COVID-19. Many of them have lost their jobs and were forced to return home without wages. Many of these workers have been abused in diverse forms before their return, and it continuous upon return.

There is no clear information on how many of them were deported and how many have voluntarily returned. But the returnees that this study was in touch with, none returned voluntarily; instead, they didn't have any other alternative but to take the homebound flight.

**Overworked, unpaid and helplessness:** Among the 15 case studies of returnee migrant workers, all of the respondents were overworked in varied forms. While the confinement and lockdown reduced the work pressure for labour force employed in various sectors, it was not the case for the female domestic workers. Several respondents stated that they had to work for more than 20 hours daily as the number of residents in the employers' places increased during the pandemic. Rather than being paid for the additional hours of work, many were not even paid the agreed salaries in the contract. Shirin Sultana (28) who worked in Jordan for five years claims that her employer did not pay her for the last four months. The unpaid dues amount to USD 1,200. She further explains:

‘I met every demand of my employer and his family members, yet they did not pay my wages. Each time I asked for my salary, I was beaten up and tortured them’.

None of them were given their due salary prior to return. Ten respondents returned home empty-handed, and five others got the partial payment of the wage. Hardly any support was provided to them when they approached the responsible agencies. Khuki Akter (30), another involuntarily returned female migrant from Lebanon returned home without any payment, where she migrated eight years ago paying Tk. 45,000 (US\$530). Her monthly wage, when it was paid, was US\$ 150.

‘Over the last two years, I have not been paid regular wages. Since January of this year, the employer asked me to work at his relative’s home. I got no wage during these eight months. Sometimes there was no food to eat’, she said.

‘Whenever I asked for wages, I would be tortured physically’, Bilkis Banu (40) another involuntarily returned female migrant from Jordan recalls claiming her total unpaid wages would come to US\$ 4,000.

### **Social stigma and psychosocial problems upon arrival:**

Returned migrants were among the first to be singled out when Bangladesh reported its first COVID-19 infection case in March 2020. Panic spread as local governments struggled to keep track of where returnees were and how many were quarantined, leading to hurried, ad-hoc measures to ‘contain’ them. At the height of the pandemic, national media also reported on how the returnee migrants have been subjected to the ordeal of stigmatization and discrimination in their communities. For the female returnees, it was an addition to the already existing stigma attached to their migration. Combating the stigma, fighting the accusation of bringing Covid-19 diseases from abroad, have put many of them into a traumatic experience. While returning home was a better

option for almost every returned female migrant, it was never an easy process, particularly amid the pandemic and the unofficial countrywide lockdown when they arrived in Bangladesh.

**Munni Begum (26) shares her experience as:** ‘After I lost my job in Kuwait, I thought returning home is the best option. At least even if I die due to Corona, I will be able to spend the last few days with my family members and relatives. But returning home, which I perceived as an easy process, turned to be a nightmare once I landed at the airport’. Sharing the distressing experiences upon return, Gita Chakma (32), an involuntarily returned female migrant from Hong Kong, states that she had to hide for more than a month inside her house.

### *Story of Gita Chakma*

*Gita Chakma (32) from Khagrachari district used to work in Hong Kong in a clothing store until the Covid-19 pandemic hit hurt the Hong Kong economy and her employer had to shut down the store. Instead of moving to China which was an offer from her employer, she decided to come back to Bangladesh during this critical time. Upon arrival, she was in quarantine without sufficient food and sleeping arrangements in the Hajj camp, near the airport. After 14 days, when she arrived in her hometown, the neighbours started complaining as if she had brought the virus with her in the neighbourhood. There was a red flag put in front of her house. On the second night, the neighbours started gathering near her home and anticipating the potential threat of vandalism of their house, her father called the police and local leaders. At midnight the police came and rescued her from the house. She was taken to a local hospital and was subjected to repeated corona tests and additional health check-up. After ten days, she was discharged. Still most of the time, she remained inside the house. Never in her worst nightmare had she thought of receiving such treatment from her neighbours whom she always considered an extended family.*

According to the respondents, while they leave the country to support their struggling families, they come back only to be humiliated further with feelings of hopelessness and failure. This immediate shock upon arrival, contributes to psychological distress in various degrees, especially among those with deteriorating social support networks. Among the 15 respondents, five were denied treatment in the local hospital and in seven cases, neighbours complained against their ‘homecoming’ to the local police station which led to police harassment and incitement to hatred.

**Lack of access to legal grievance and compensation:** One of the key challenges for the returnee female migrants is access to information and justice upon return. As regular services by different migration agencies in Bangladesh were curtailed during the months-long lockdown, it was nearly impossible for the returnee migrants to lodge complaints or file their grievances to the authorities, against the employer in the destination countries or against the agency that facilitated their migration.

Wage theft - non-payment of due wages and other entitlements including end service benefits has been rampant among returnee migrants. In most of the cases, such theft went unreported. The complex structure of the service agencies, lack in accountability by the responsible functionaries, and the individual and structural barriers (i.e. language barrier, lack of family support, absence of male member to accompany, disruption in public transportation, inefficiency of bureaucracy) for the women to come to Dhaka and file their complaints are some of the key reasons behind this, as reported by the respondents. The centralization of the migration governance and lack of authority of District Manpower and Employment Offices (DEMOS) and other service agencies at the grassroots have also been pointed out as some of the critical obstacles to seeking grievances.

**Sexual and gender-based violence:** Despite being a taboo topic 6 out of 15 respondents informed that they experienced sexual

and physical harassment in the hands of their employers during the confinement and three respondents had the same experience upon return in Dhaka airport. Munni Begum (26) shares her experience:

‘It was late night when our flight landed at Dhaka airport. I requested the airport authority whether I can stay until the morning inside the airport. They immediately rejected citing the corona situation. So I was outside the airport with my luggage alone. A few hours later, one of the security guards came towards me and sat next to me. He whispered that he had a place to stay near the airport. I saw two other colleagues of him were laughing at each other, seeing my situation. I said nothing and moved to the other side of the airport’.

The precarious nature of the return migration with inadequate arrangement for the female returnees upon arrival increased their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation. Almost all respondents in this study had to go through the quarantine in Hajj camp, upon their arrival in Bangladesh and for many of them, the situation inside the camp resembled of what they experienced in their employers’ house. Moyna Khatun (29) an involuntarily returned migrant from Saudi Arabia explains:

‘I asked the authority more than ten times that the flush of the toilet where we were staying was not working. After this repeated intimation, one of them responded to me saying the condition (of camp) is a five-star hotel for us, compared to where we stayed and where we will go. It was devastating hearing that response from your fellow countrymen. We have no respect there (in the Gulf) and here (Bangladesh) is no exception’.

The arbitrary and in many ways, the unwelcome return of the female migrants also led to interpersonal violence within their family. Several respondents felt like they become a burden for the family amid the post lockdown poverty.

**Mental wellbeing:** The arbitrary return has profoundly affected the mental health of the returnee female migrants, the majority of whom have already suffered multi-layered trauma. The pandemic restrictions compounded their existing mental health disorders through triggering bad memories, curbing critical social support and creating another layer of trauma. The ongoing crisis and the lack of support system halted their plans for rebuilding their lives, and as many explained, it ‘imprisoned’ them in unwanted locations. Nargis Akhter (35) recalls:

‘I feel as if I were inside a jail because of Corona...As If I were tied with a chain. On the one hand, I have lost my job, and on the other, I am being treated as an unwanted guest! I feel exhausted...I hate my life...sometimes there are days I hardly talk to anyone, I don’t like to see anyone as it brings the same repeated discussion about my migration and the ultimate failure as it has become, apparently’.

Almost all the respondents considered the crisis as the worst thing that could happen to them after all the efforts they put into leaving their families to work abroad and return empty-handed.

**Financial and family pressure:** For many involuntarily returned female migrants, being without resources and outside of any social protection fold, losing income opportunities increased their economic hardship. The existing social stigma often makes it extremely difficult for them to reintegrate both financially and socially. Tuhina Khatun (28) states:

‘I don’t know what people think, but I was just working in someone’s home, but for many people, they see nothing except I was involved in a cheap, disposable and sub-standard job. It makes me nervous, with that preconceived notion about my experience, how and where shall I approach to restart my life. I am helpless, but the only option I see is to fly again, if at all possible, one day, hopefully soon’.

Shanti Chakma (35) goes further, 'I feel like I am just a money maker in this household. This crisis appears to be a life learning experience for me. Those whom I always felt as my blood (close family members), they are simply profiteer of the remittances that I have sent back home (Bangladesh) until now. I am not really welcomed here'.

Three respondents applied for a small loan from the Expatriates' Welfare Bank, but they are awaiting the final decision since May.

## **Section VII: Impact on left-behind women in migrant households**

While the context of migration experience of the left behind wives are different than those of the current and returnee female migrants, the Covid-19 situation, nevertheless, has impacted their lives in a great deal. From what the respondents reveal in our study, a number of issues came up strongly from their narratives including additional care work, the conflict between husbands and wives, physical abuses by the extended family members, financial pressure in running households, control by in-laws, physical, mental and sexual insecurity and mental agony of being left alone in this time of crisis.

**Increased work pressure and helplessness:** As a result of the closure of schools, offices, business and other public and social services, the Covid-19 has increased the burden of unpaid care work on the left behind wives in male migrant households. All of the 15 respondents claimed to be overburdened with the increasing household and care work. The pandemic and the compulsory home stay have led to significant stress on many women who had to take care of almost all the family members. While previous studies show that there is a changing gender dimension in performing household duties (Siddiqui and Anas, 2020), it was nevertheless, the experience of the interviewees in this study. Several respondents say that they had to work for

more than 18 hours a day as most of the household members were always at home. They had to perform not only the cooking and cleaning responsibilities, but also care work for elderly and sick family members. Five respondents had to take care of their elderly family members, including the in-laws. Shukrana (40) explains how the pandemic situation complicated the situation:

‘We tried to take my mother-in-law to the hospital, but none of the hospitals in the city allowed her in. Finally, one doctor agreed to see her in his clinic, where we paid three times higher fees than usual. She needed a hospital bed, proper nursing and regular medication. We brought her home, and all those nursing responsibilities were on my shoulder as I am the only female member of the family besides my mother-in-law’.

On top of the regular household responsibilities, these additional nursing pressure and lack of support from the rest of the male members of the household put many of the left behind wives in a situation of a complete distress and fatigue.

**Economic crisis and reduced access to livelihood opportunities:** The drastic fall in remittance flow and joblessness of many male migrants in the destination countries has triggered significant financial insecurity and economic pressure on their left-behind wives. Several respondents in our study experienced reduced access to livelihood opportunities due to the reduced flow of remittance from abroad, the lack of labour market access for left-behind women and the restrictions on movement. As for many left-behind women, the livelihood options are often limited to a mix of remittance support and irregular income from local investment or farming; Covid-19 have impeded the functioning of both of these economies.

## Story of Shilpi Begum

*Shilpi Begum (27) sent her husband Mehedi Hasan to Saudi Arabia in 2019 with the support from her parents, relatives and some loan from a local NGO. They have two daughters and a son. She hoped that her husband would send money from Saudi Arabia, which will help to run the household of 5 members, including her in-laws. But she could realise her dream. Mehedi was working only part-time and was even struggling to cover the cost of living in Saudi Arabia, let alone send remittance back home. After more than a year, instead of receiving money from abroad, Shilpi has been seeking support from her parents to run the household and take care of the kids. Besides, there are constant pressures from relatives and the NGO to return the migration loans. With the pandemic, the situation in Saudi Arabia took turn for the worse and her husband became jobless. Each time she calls her, he shouts at her and the last month, he asked Shilpi not to call her anymore. She does not know what to do with the financial pressure amid the pandemic and where to seek support.*

**Domestic violence:** Forced coexistence, cramped living conditions and economic stress triggered an increase in domestic violence against the left-behind women. There appears to be a direct relationship between violence and when families spend more time together—a dynamic that can be attributed to human psychology (Booth 2017; Nofziger and Kurtz 2005). Scholars have also suggested that low income is related to increase in domestic violence (Peprah and Koomson, 2017).

In some households, pre-existing abusive conditions has been amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Nilufer Yasmin (35) whose husband has been working in Bahrain since 2012 always had problems with her in-laws regarding the remittance she receives from her husband. Since the Corona situation, she wasn't receiving the remittance frequently, but none of the family members in her in-laws trusted her. They

accuse her of hiding or sending it to her parents' home. Many times these allegations transform into physical violence as the respondent states.

Alarming statistics appeared in a recent study by RMMRU where more than 100 cases of violence in migrant HHs were recorded. The arbitrary return of their migrant husbands, coupled with economic pressure exposed many women into physical and sexual abuse. It happens not only by the returnee husbands but also from the extended family members where the wives live. Incidents of rape, torture, physical abuse, sexual harassments were reported in the RMMRU study, and it also emerged during the in-depth interviews for this paper. One of the respondents, whose husband is currently working in the Maldives, was raped by her neighbour keeping her son hostage. When her family confronted the perpetrator, the neighbour apologized but later released a video of the rape in the social media. She has since moved to her parent's place with her.

Besides, the overwhelming focus on corona prevention led to a complete halt on many other regular activities by many government agencies, including the police force's action against the complaint of family violence and other related issues. This lack of access to grievances redress was also another major challenge identified in this study.

There were also cases of homicide reported where a returnee male migrant participated in killing his wife along with her mother in law and sister-in-law. The family was dependent on her husband and brother-in-law for remittance. Following the lockdown in Qatar, both of them lost their jobs and had to return to Bangladesh. As many such violence takes place behind closed doors restrictions on movement bars the victims to escape or seek help.

**Mental pressure and attempted suicide:** Not only the physical and sexual violence, but mental stress manifested by the

pandemic also has a severe consequence on the life of women. Several cases have been found where constant pressure coupled with tension derived from the fact that the husband being jobless abroad and the mental torture inflicted by the in-laws push to attempted suicide of left behind wives.

### ***Story of Ayesha Akhter***

*Ayesha Akhter (31) was married to Mamun Miah of Tangail district in 2010. In 2011, Ayesha's parents provided Tk. 200,000 as loan to facilitate the migration of their son-in-law Mamun Miah to Dubai with the hope that their daughter will have a prosperous future. In 2012 Ayesha gave birth to their only child, a daughter. Since 2013, she started to live with her in-laws. Her in-laws, a family of 6 members, were wholly dependent on the remittance from Dubai. However, since 2015, Mamun was struggling in Dubai with his job and was unable to send money regularly. Her in-laws started victimizing Ayesha for the apparent failure of their son in Dubai. Seeing the condition of their daughter, Ayesha's parents again decided to help Mamun with an additional amount of Tk. 600,000 This time he moved to Greece for better prospects of Europe. But Mamun couldn't do any better. This financial crisis became the bone of tension between the husband and wife. On September 22, 2020, Mamun also lost the temporary job that he managed in Athens, Greece due to the Corona situation. That night he called Ayesha and suddenly started complaining how his life became miserable since he was married to her, as if all his failure abroad, was the fault of being Ayesha in his life. On one side, being a burden at her parent's place, on the other, the constant pressure from her husband from abroad, pushed Ayesha to commit suicide the same night.*

The lack of social support mechanism and the absence of counselling amid the pandemic also caused severe mental stress among the left behind wives. It may be noted that many of these cases often go unreported as many women fear the backlash of such personal discussion with anyone beyond the close infinity.

## **Section VIII: Are the migrants abandoned?**

**Nexus between globalisation and growing migrant labour precarity:** Through a gender lens, the study attempts to closely observe the gendered impact of the current pandemic on the female migrants and the left behind wives of the male migrants in Bangladesh. The findings are in sync with the growing volume of literature that suggests that fallout of the pandemic on migrants is often not gender-neutral because societies and labour markets are not gender-neutral (Foley and Piper, 2020: 9).

In many ways, the pandemic has revealed pre-existing fault-lines in the recruitment, employment and living conditions of workers abroad and emerges as one of the major setbacks to gender equality in recent decades. What this study presents is nothing new about the vulnerabilities often faced by female migrant workers. Instead, by addressing the arbitrary return of the workers, wage-theft, physical and sexual violence, at the destination and upon arrival, it reveals the gap and lack of preparedness to address the emergency within the already fragile migration governance system. Women of all categories, be they migrants or left behind spouses, bear the brunt of the pandemic. In the case of the involuntarily returned female migrants in the Gulf countries, the extreme power and control exercised by the employer under the Kafala system exacerbated their vulnerabilities. Due to its exclusion from the national labour legislation in the Gulf countries (Amnesty International, 2019), the welfare of the women migrants, and the extent to which their fundamental human rights are protected, is mostly left up to the benevolence of employers (Huda. 2006). Given the lack of legal protections for domestic migrant workers, these violations are often committed with impunity.

The arbitrary return of the female migrants also exposed the vacuum in migration management and the lack of coordination among the agencies involved in the process. As many migrant workers are coming back home, it is incumbent on the government

to examine if they are returning voluntarily or are being forced to leave destination countries in violation of their contracts. There is was no such figure available with the authority. Experts suggest that Bangladesh should not facilitate repatriation unless all the lawful claims such as wage, end-service benefit and other entitlements are cleared before repatriation.

‘Bangladeshi workers have gone to work abroad following international rules and regulations. So they cannot be arbitrarily deported or deprived of their due wages. They should be duly compensated if their jobs are terminated arbitrarily.’- Professor C R Abrar, Executive Director of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit.

For the left behind wives, the disruption of livelihoods and the ability to earn a living, including the disruption in remittance flow from abroad by their migrant husbands has increased the stress on families, which also expose, d them to violence. Suppressing women physically and sexually has become the outlet to express anger and frustration by many returnee husbands who lost their job and returned empty-handed.

As the findings show, women are less likely than men to have power over decision making, a reality that did not change after the outbreak of the. Consequently, their general needs and health concerns, including sexual and reproductive health, are mainly going unattended. Furthermore, other services, such as hotlines, crisis centres, shelter homes, legal aid, and protection services have been scaled back, further reducing access to the few sources of help women in an abusive situation in their household. As the allocated resources and efforts have been diverted from violence against women’s response to immediate Covid-19 relief, the already limited support mechanism has come under severe pressure.

As the findings reveal, in destination countries, numerous

barriers continue to exist which stem from immigration and employment laws that place many migrant workers, especially migrant women, outside of the scope of healthcare and other social support provisions. In such a backdrop, global crises such as the current health emergency quickly become an opportunity to discard labour and human rights, amplifying a situation that is exposing severe structural inequalities. These discrepancies in the laws and the existing disparities subscribe many of the characteristics of what is known as ‘modern forms of slavery’.

Profit maximization at the cost of fundamental human rights has become a salient feature of the age of globalisation that we are currently living in. The migrant workers, who are at the forefront of this global movement are paying the price of the system, which not only excludes them from their due rights and entitlements but also reject their rights within the framework of globalization and development. Thus, this pandemic has provided an opportunity to retrospect and to rethink many of the policies around international migration, particularly in the South-South migration corridors.

Bangladesh provides a vivid example of how, during the neoliberal era, outsourcing and migration have become two aspects of the same wage-differential-driven transformation of global production. But the pandemic triggers the question, development at what expense and how inclusive is such a mechanism where, due to the labour arbitrage, an expansion of labour exploitation becomes the hallmark of such development. The problem with the arbitrary dismissal, involuntary deportation without the last pay cheque is an issue not just of work and exploitation of labour; the Covid-19 situation and the aftermath suggest, there is instead a broader cycle of inequality and injustice that functions and prevails within the framework of the globalization of production, which needs to restructure.

The pandemic has underlined that migrant workers, especially

women, do essential jobs in our societies. Yet, these workers are also most likely to be denied human rights and prevented from accessing critical services. There is a need to rethink what – and who – constitutes an ‘essential’ worker, a category marred by political connotations and expediency (Foley and Piper, 2020). While some have heralded the turbulence created by Covid-19 as an opportunity to carve out more equal and transformative gender relations, others have suggested that it will exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Migrant women facing gender-based violence and uncertain immigration status, in particular, fall under the latter – unless urgent action is taken (McIlwaine, 2020).

We need to take a careful note that the response to Covid-19 both in terms of controlling the spread of the virus and recovering national and global economies provides an opportunity to address systemic gender inequalities and to include migrant worker populations in countries’ responses in the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (‘leave no one behind’) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (Foley and Piper, 2020).

## **Section X: Chapter conclusion**

Like every emergency, the COVID-19 health crisis collides with existing health and socio-economic inequalities which means that people across the globe are now weathering the same storm, albeit, they are doing so in very different boats. In the context of migration from Bangladesh, this chapter sets out the significant gendered impacts of the pandemic on current and involuntarily returned female migrants and the left behind wives of the male migrants. As the findings suggest, there has been a disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on women in migration setting which includes not only gender-based violence and other physical abuses, but also economic hardship, degrading health conditions, stigmatisation, and above all, a phenomenon of uncertainty, helplessness and of constant fear. Focusing on

the unemployment and wider socio-economic consequences, it provides recommendations to both the Bangladesh government and global stakeholders as to how to ensure and extend economic inclusion for female migrants, both in the short- and long-term, and create a condition for women in the migration context that is inclusive and brings positive changes.

As the above analysis presents, there remain some considerable gaps in the already introduced general responses which are primarily due to the lack of understanding about how gender positions men and women differently within the economy, livelihood, household management and above all, in an emergency like the current pandemic. To address these gaps, this chapter highlights the immediate issues that need to be addressed and long term strategies that have to be developed, both as an instant and effective response to this specific emergency. It also asserts that the Covid-19 crisis is a watershed moment for gender equality within the migration context and an opportunity to rethink women's role in the economy and society. It is, in many ways, a reckoning of our socio-economic systems, demonstrating that our priorities are upside down and back to front. We now have a responsibility to ensure that we do not go back to normal if normal means the continuation of existing inequalities in earnings and employment, in labour rights and social protection, both at home and abroad. It's high time that we take lessons from the fractured globalization of migration and restart by doing things differently and by not leaving anyone behind.



## CHAPTER IX

# SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Tasneem Siddiqui

**Summary:** This study attempted to highlight the plight of Bangladeshi migrants, both male and female as well as their left-behind families during COVID-19 pandemic. Aim of the research is to help policy makers with evidence to frame systematic policies and strategies to help the Bangladeshi migrants working in different destination countries during the crisis. The book begins with identifying major research questions, developing a conceptual framework to be followed and methodology required to pursue the research questions. The research questions have involved migrants and their households' experience of COVID-19 both in destination as well as in the origin. While understanding situation of migrants in destination, major indicators used are exposure to infection, access to treatment, job and income status, nature of social protection available, extent of securitization of the migrants and access to government stimulus packages. Indicators used in respect to involuntarily returned migrants include: jobs and income situation upon return, perception of migrants as health risks in Bangladesh and government measures for reintegration. Situation of left-behind households are analyzed on: dependence on remittance as major source of family income, access to remittances, challenges of maintaining subsistence in the absence of remittances and access to government stimulus programmes.

Chapter II provides the broader migration scenario of Bangladesh in the context of COVID-19. It shows that 2,330 Bangladeshis have died due to COVID-19 in different parts of the world up to December 27, 2020. The country has witnessed massive return of its migrants mostly from the Gulf and other Arab countries. During COVID-19 period, 326,758 migrants returned (mostly involuntarily) to Bangladesh. The major flow of return took place since October 2020. Even now more than 2,500 workers are returning every day. In a usual year, on an average 700,000 workers annually migrate from Bangladesh to take up overseas employment. Before COVID-19 during the first two and a half months of 2020, a total of 181,280 workers migrated overseas for work. After the outbreak of COVID-19, outward migration came to a complete stand still for the first six months. Since October, only 2,464 workers have gone overseas for employment. In comparison to the last year, migration reduced by 71.4 percent.

Chapter III introduces the involuntarily returned migrants and left-behind current migrant households. It shows that out of 100 involuntarily returned migrants only 2 were female. In case of the 100 left-behind families of current migrant households, 74 had male migrants in different destination countries and 26 of them had female migrants. These male and female migrants originated from 21 districts and they migrated to 17 countries. 72 percent migrated to the Gulf and other Arab countries. Average age of the involuntarily returned and currently residing male migrants in destination is 36 years and the average age of female migrants is 32 years. The household size of both returned and current migrants are respectively 5.6 and 5.5. Average income of these households used to be Tk. 17,855 (US\$210) per months. From May to July 2020, it came down to Tk. 7,300 (US\$86) per month.

Chapter IV reveals that Bangladeshi male migrants were highly exposed to health risks when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Call for lockdown without ensuring food for the migrants made them more vulnerable, because they had to search for work informally, which exposed them to health risks. In their living spaces, maintaining prescribed social distance was difficult.

Different labour receiving countries did declare that healthcare services for COVID-19 would be provided to all migrants, irrespective of their legal status. In reality, migrants in irregular status did not avail COVID-19 testing and other services due to fears of arrest, detention and subsequent deportation.

Involuntarily returned migrants and the left-behind households of current migrants have been going through major trauma and anxiety. However, the sources of anxiety between male and female migrants vary significantly. Male migrants expressed more concern about fear of loss of jobs, expiry of visas, loss of capital, etc. Live-in female domestic migrant workers anxieties are related to physical strain faced due to significant increase in workload, delayed or partial payment of salary and inability to maintain families back home. Live-out female workers and those working as cleaners and factory workers have been worried about uncertainties arising from job loss, like their male counterparts. Female migrants be it live-in or live-out, have all faced anxiousness, as their level of communication with the family reduced significantly. Earlier almost all the female migrants used to talk with the family every day. After the break out of COVID-19, many were unable to communicate even once in 10 days. Decreased communication affected the left-behind children of female migrants in a major way. However, none of the male migrants treated lack of communication or reduced communication as a source of anxiety.

Only 40 percent of the male workers could retain their jobs during COVID-19. The live-in female domestic workers, however, did not lose their jobs. Like any other crisis situation of the past, the destination countries used forced return of migrants as one of the methods of tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in their countries. Negotiation with the government of Bangladesh; arrest, detention and deportation of irregular migrants; declaration of general amnesty to those who over-stayed their visas; and pardon of the convicted and jailed migrants are some of the mechanisms through which the migrants were sent back to Bangladesh.

None of the involuntarily returned migrants belong to the groups who have been in jail due to conviction. The interviewed migrants were picked up from stores, roads, food stalls, etc. and sent to detention, in the destination countries. Except a few, all the interviewees have experienced dehumanizing treatment while they were detained. On an average they spent 20 days in detention where sleeping arrangements, toilets and shower facilities were extremely inadequate. Most of them stayed in the same set of cloths during this period.

Due to abrupt nature of the return, many of the migrants left behind a portion of their hard-earned income in the destination countries. 67 percent of the migrants left a portion of their salaries/wages, while 62 percent left some of their assets, belongings and materials. Money in local currency, mobiles, watches, etc. were confiscated by the law enforcing agencies when arresting them. 19 percent did not get back those possessions from the law enforcing agencies when they were deported. 7 percent had to forego a substantial amount of money which they paid to the intermediaries for the annual renewal of their visas. Few have lent money to their friends, who were in distress. There is no way to recover those either.

This chapter highlights that in this age of globalization, labour-receiving countries still do not have adequate protection measures that can prevent health risk of migrants. Some countries have officially kept migrants outside the healthcare and other safety nets, deporting them without respecting their job contract or clearing their due wages and other entitlements. The international standards and normative guidelines have not been able to ensure protection of the migrants in destination countries during this crisis.

Chapter V highlights securitization of Bangladeshi migrants during COVID-19 period both in destination and in Bangladesh. It also shows the grave consequences of securitization manifested in lower levels of human security of the migrants and their household

members. Media, employers, different government bodies, etc. of destination countries portrayed migrants as one of super-spreaders of COVID-19. Migrants were identified as residents who are not abiding by the strict instructions during lockdown. Desperate acts of migrants to gather food were highlighted as actions which have made the citizens of destination countries insecure. Media reports on migrants causing health insecurities has supported the authorities to decide for sending back more than 325,000 workers to Bangladesh, during COVID-19.

Unfortunately, the securitization of the migrants did not end when they left countries of destination. They faced new waves of securitization of speech in their homeland. Government functionaries provided their service to the migrants at the airport, with great suspicion. It was clear on the government functionaries faces, that the return of the migrants has put the country into great insecurity, as they were suspected to bring back the virus with them.

When the migrant returned to their villages, the local community did not treat them well either. During the initial stages, they were verbally abused, and their household members were denied access to local markets. After a few months, the attitude of local population changed to some extent. Migrants who came since June did not face the hostility of the local population with same rigor as their predecessors.

In some cases, migrants have been deeply troubled with treatment they received from their household members. Household members of some of the migrants have expressed their dissatisfaction either verbally or through their body language, primarily about financial insecurity. Nonetheless, migrants have felt that their family members could not comprehend the psychological trauma that they were undergoing upon their return.

COVID-19 has severely affected the human security of the migrants. Lack of job and income are the major sources of

human insecurity for the migrant households. Maintain day-to-day subsistence have become problematic for majority of the migrants. Borrowing money has become their major source for ensuring subsistence. Along with food intake, education of the school-going children has also been compromised. A section of the migrant households discontinued with the private tutors. Health care of the families, particularly with elderly members, had also suffered. Purchasing medicine has become a challenge for some. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment has initiated reintegration loan programme. The migrants who have participated in this research did not feel comfortable to take loan at that stage. The business environment under the COVID-19 situation has not been congenial.

This chapter demonstrates that migrants are the most voiceless group in the countries of destination, and it is quite easy to securitise them. Successful securitisation of the migrants did result in implementation of anti-migrant policies. Global development partners or countries of origin could hardly curb the unlawful involuntary return of the migrants that took place after securitisation. Human insecurities of the returned migrants and left-behind members of migrant households who are not receiving remittances remained a big challenge for the policy makers of Bangladesh. Spread of COVID-19 has provided the strong justification for having a national strategy on how to support the migrants both in destination and upon their return during any crisis.

Chapter VI deals with the confusion that surfaced from higher flow of remittances to Bangladesh during COVID-19 period vis-a-vis micro data of BCSM and RMMRU survey which shows a large number of families are going through hard time because of not receiving remittances. BCSM and RMMRU survey shows that one sixth of the households did not receive any remittances since the outbreak of COVID-19 till the time of interview. The rest of the households received on an average Tk. 28,000 (US\$329) over a period of three months which was 38 percent

less than usual flow. The households which are not receiving remittances during COVID-19 are extremely vulnerable. 57 percent of the households solely depend on remittances for their household expenditure. For 18 percent of the households, three quarters of their expenditure comes from remittance, while for another 14 percent households, remittance accounts for half of the family expenditure. The chapter also highlights the challenges that the returnee migrants and the left-behind family members of current migrants are facing. Managing a decent meal became problematic for some of these families. Many of them are surviving through borrowing.

This chapter also shows that remittances during COVID-19 have a significant gender twist. Interestingly, 69 percent of female migrant households have received remittances whereas; only 30 percent of the male migrant households received the same. This reflects the complexity of migration in globalized world. Women migrants in general are more exploited compared to men in the context of labour migration. It seems during COVID-19 live-in female domestic workers were less vulnerable to income loss compared to their male counterparts.

Given the loss of jobs and shut down of work places, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) predicted that remittance to Bangladesh would reduce significantly in the year 2020. In May 2020, The World Bank projected that remittance flow to Bangladesh will be 22 percent less than the previous year. ADB has projected that it will be 28 percent lower than the previous year. However, since August, Bangladesh witnessed a major upward inflow of remittances. During the year 2020, it increased 18.6 percent compared to that of 2019 (US\$18.33 billion). Again, From August till December 2020, remittances grew by 31 percent. Bangladeshi migrants have remitted US\$21.74 billion in the calendar year 2020.

These disparities were explained in this chapter by establishing the fact that remittances are increasing due to many complex

factors. Increase in remittances at the national level does not mean that all migrants are remitting. In fact, many of the migrants are not remitting and their household are facing the dire consequences. Some of the important reasons for increased remittances are: more stable workers sending back their savings due to uncertainty of jobs in the aftermath of COVID-19; workers sending back all the savings due to fear of deportation; arbitrary return at a massive scale also means that migrants are likely to bring back whatever resources they have in the countries of destination; and two percent financial incentives to the remittance senders by the central bank and 1 percent additional incentives by some of the banks on top have made the official channels more attractive. Another interesting phenomenon that might have contributed to the increased flow of remittances through formal channels is related to the operation of hundi. During COVID-19 many business groups did not need to take the support of hundi. Recruiting agencies depend on hundi for paying the cost of work permit purchase. During this year 217,669 new migrants have been engaged in overseas employment. This means the recruiting agencies did not require taking money from on the hundi market. The manufacturing sectors did not require access to hundi for under invoicing and gold smugglers for smuggling gold to Bangladesh. Hundi is also used in organising accommodation, logistics and other facilities during haj (which did not take place in 2020). Therefore, whatever resources usually enter to Bangladesh through formal and informal channels, this time came through the official channel. Predictions of multilateral organizations on flow of remittances are dependent on modelling which cannot take in consideration the micro level realities of individual countries. That is why there is this anomaly between larger flow of remittances to the country whereas, a large number of migrant households not receiving remittances.

Chapter VII explores the coping mechanisms and strategies used by the left-behind migrant households in coping with partial or full suspension of remittances. The strategies include self-mobilization, solidarity based mobilization and institutional

mobilization methods. Self-mobilization includes downsize of consumption habits, cut down on goods and services, reduced food intake of relatively expensive food items, etc. Solidarity based mobilization included mutual aid based on family and friendship networks, direct financial support, requested solidarity, etc. Institutional mobilization included support from the state, the civil society and the market. The chapter also shows that adoption of the above coping strategies did not follow a linear process. Moreover, the process is spontaneous and some of the strategies were found to be having counter-productive social implications.

The government of Bangladesh has come up with a loan programme to help the economic reintegration of the returnees. It seems that migrants have not been keen on taking investment loans developed by the government at 4 percent interest. A section of the involuntarily returned migrants thought that COVID-19 situation has not passed and the business environment is not stable enough for starting a business by taking loans; some others did not think that they had the skill to become an entrepreneur.

Gender inequalities and gender-based violence usually increase during any emergency; whether it is economic crisis or war, conflict or disease outbreaks. Chapter VIII has shed light on implications of COVID-19 in this respect. It showed that the current health crisis has exposed and deepened pre-existing gender based inequalities. Emerging statistics suggest that the pandemic had intensified domestic and gender-based violence globally. Gendered outcome of COVID-19, in the context of Bangladesh had been studied, for current and returnee female migrants as well as, for left behind wives of male migrants. The chapter demonstrates global health crisis amplified existing gender based inequalities and violence. It also created new forms of discrimination and abuse that disproportionately impacts women of the migrant households be it as principal migrants or as spouses.

## Major conclusions

- Norms and standards of ethical globalization in case of migrant workers are yet to emerge. The international standards and normative guidelines are unable to provide protection to the migrant workers during emergency from a political, environmental, financial or health perspective.
- Origin and destination countries addressed the COVID-19 bilaterally; multilateral initiatives may have resulted in better protection of migrant rights.
- No mechanism is available to document migrant workers grievances during the crisis.
- The complexities of remittance flow during crisis are still not fully understood.
- Securitisation of the migrant workers in both origin and destination countries has compromised the human security of the migrants.
- A national reintegration strategy that incorporates the needs of all types returnees including arbitrarily return migrant is still absent.
- Gender based violence increases during crisis and women (as migrant as well as left behind spouse) experience both physical and mental stress and torture.

## Section II: Recommendations

For the Government of Bangladesh

- Learning from the exercise of data generation on returnee migrants during COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment in collaboration with the emigration department of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism should continue generating data on return of workers on annual basis.
- GoB needs to develop a common guideline for case

evaluation of those whom the countries of destination have involuntarily returned. It should look if the visas of workers were expired and if all the due have been cleared in case of involuntary returnee. With such data the government and civil society can launch international campaign for compensation and payment of due wage.

- Registration process following due diligence needs to be conducted by Bangladesh missions before the workers are repatriated. If any unpaid wages and other benefits remain pending then the missions can take the power of attorney from the migrants and pursue settlements of claims subsequently.
- In the aftermath of return of Bangladeshi migrants from Libya during 2014, the government provided one-time cash grants to the migrants. This crisis also requires allocation of cash grant to the distressed returnee migrants. Unfortunately, this did not happen. It was also essential to provide one-time cash grant to left-behind migrant households to address their vulnerability in the absence of remittance during the crisis. Provisions for providing such cash grant should be made a part of government's future guideline to provide assistance during emergency period.
- Along with the current practice of migrants' self-mobilisation of resources for coping during crisis, institutional support mechanism has to be developed. Distressed migrant families should be effectively included in public assistance schemes that allow them to mitigate the risks.
- In order to make the government's reintegration programme of TK. 700 crore targeted towards the involuntarily returnee migrants a success, it needs to develop innovative partnership with credit and training NGOs and business advisory service providing private sectors. In other words, access to credit alone will not encourage the migrants to take loans.
- Media should be sensitized to not securitize migration. The government should also advocate at the global forums for desecuritisation of migration.
- A clear, coherent and inclusive policy planning is required

to reintegrate the physically, mentally or sexually abused returned female migrants. Governments and policymakers must include essential services to address violence against women in preparedness and responses plans for Covid-19, resource them, and identify ways to make them accessible with social distancing measures.

- The 8th Five-Year Plan has been launched at a time when along with other workers, vulnerable situation of international migrants has been unfolded before the public eye. Given the potential of migrant households in achieving the goals of the 8th Five-Year Plan, all the sections of the document should be inclusive to the migrant workers and their left-behind family members.

## **For the Civil Society and Research Organisations of Bangladesh**

- Civil society organisations should maintain pressure on multilateral bodies to pursue advocacy with the destination countries to suspend repatriation of migrant workers during global or regional crisis.
- The civil society organisations and their regional and global networks should continue to uphold the demand to the destination countries for settlement of due wages and other entitlements of involuntarily returned migrants. International human rights and development organisations should also be placing this demand during GFMD, Abu Dhabi Dialogue and Colombo Process.
- Civil society should continue to frame global as well as national campaigns against securitisation of migration. They should ensure voices of migrants in different forums through development of migrant workers' own association.
- Thorough research is required to understand the dichotomy between increased remittance flow and the experiences of suspension of remittance flow among a large number of households.

## **For International Communities**

- Multilateral bodies should push for enactment of emergency protection guidelines mandatory for all labour receiving and sending countries. The emergency guideline should cover all types of crisis including natural disasters, economic depressions, financial crisis, health disasters etc. The guideline should support creation of a special fund to pursue its actions during emergency.
- The health policies of destination countries should formally integrate equal access of migrants in receiving services to fulfil their commitments to SDG 3.
- A thorough review of international labour standards, normative guidelines needs to be conducted to understand why these documents cannot provide protection to the vulnerable migrants during crisis situations.



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## **Annex 1**

### **FIRST ESYMPOSIUM ON COVID-19 OF RMMRU**

Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) with the support of Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) arranged the first e-Symposium under the Build Back Better Series on Covid-19 and Migration. The eSymposium was titled The other face of globalization: Arbitrary return of Bangladeshi migrants and their unpaid dues and focused on how the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic exposed the special vulnerabilities of migrant work force. RMMRU conducted the research under the SEEM project supported by MJF and interviewed fifty migrants, who returned after the outbreak of the pandemic. It organised the eSymposium in order to inform policymakers and practitioners about the outcome of the research.

Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui presented the findings of the research. Mr. Israfil Alam, MP (Chair, Parliamentary Caucus on Migration), Ms. Shirin Akhter, MP, Ms. Aroma Dutta, MP, Dr. Ahmed Munirus Saleheen, Secretary, MoEWOE, Mr. Md. Nazrul Islam, Director General, MoFA, Ms. Shaheen Anam (Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation) and Mr. William Gois (Coordinator, Migrant Forum in Asia) were the distinguished panelists who reflected on the policy needs to face the challenge.

## Annex 2

### **FIFTH ESYMPOSIUM ON COVID-19 OF BCSM AND RMMRU**

Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM), Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and Prokas jointly organised the 5th eSymposium under the Build Back Better Series on COVID-19 and Migration to present the findings of a BCSM research to the policymakers, civil society stakeholders, and development partners. The research was based on the interview of 200 households in twelve districts of Bangladesh. The major research questions pursued in this study were nature and extent of flow of remittances to the migrant households after COVID-19, effect of the pandemic on household income, expenditure, health and nutrition. It also explored experiences of the left behind female members particularly in the context to gender based violence during COVID-19.

Mr. Imran Ahmad, MP, Hon'ble Minister, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. Dr. Kamal Uddin Ahmed, Full Time Member, National Human Rights Commission, chaired the eSymposium. Mr. Ali Reza Mazid, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief was present as the Special Guest and Mr. Barrister Shameem H. Patwary, MP, Chair, Parliamentarians' Caucus on Migration attended the programme as the Guest of Honour.



## About the Book

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There is no doubt on anyone's mind that integration of global labour market created scope for marginal people of the global South to benefit from globalisation. At the same time it is also well recognised that globalisation has its other face as well. The very nature of current form of globalisation exposes international labour migrants to various types of decent work deficit. It is also well established that when the global economy is in crisis, the migrant workers bear the brunt disproportionately more compared to the nationals. Outbreak of COVID-19 is no exception.

This book examines the vulnerabilities of low skilled Bangladeshi migrants in different destination countries after the outbreak of COVID-19. It takes the readers through experiences of termination of jobs, non-payment of wages, forced return of some migrants during the pandemic and securitisation and arrest of others in their own homeland. The book also brings forward the harsh reality of drastic cuts in food intake, day-to-day expenditure, increasing dependence on borrowing of left behind distressed migrant households due to disruption in flow of remittances. It is based on a survey of 100 involuntarily returned migrants and 100 members of migrant households whose family members are still working abroad, 25 in depth interviews of returnees and detailed case studies of 30 left behind women members of migrant households who endured violence during COVID-19. The research was conducted by 9 member organizations of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) led by RMMRU.



Bangladesh Civil Society  
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**PROKAS**

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