

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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First published 2021

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ISBN: 978-984-34-9977-6

Published by C R Abrar, Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), Dhaka. This book has been set in Times New Roman. IT support and the cover design by Md. Parvez Alam. Printed at PATHWAY (www.pathway.com.bd), 117/1 Shantinagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

*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

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
ARAMCO	Arabian American Oil Company
BCSM	Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BMET	Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training
CIDRAP	Centre for Infectious Disease Research & Policy
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 19
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFMD	Global Forum on Migration and Development
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
MDP	Migration Data Portal
MFA	Migrant Forum in Asia
MoEWOE	Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment

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

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 one's fast/grand festival celebrated by the Muslim Community to mark the end of the month of Ramadan
<i>Forontaine</i>	A sarcastic and ironic term for 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>	Small town
<i>Upazila</i>	Sub-district

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 the protection of international migrant workers is recognised as a complex global challenge. The crisis situation exacerbates the pre-existing challenges further. In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 virus a pandemic, which became the greatest worldwide health hazard of the last 100 years, leading to an unprecedented rate of deaths.

Unfortunately, among the various sectors of the population, it is migrant workers who have been worst hit by the pandemic, with both the infection and death rates being the highest among the migrant group. Along with bearing a heavy death toll, migrants have been identified by different quarters as the source of the spread of the infection. Many of the labour-receiving countries announced the equal treatment of both migrants and their nationals in respect to receiving healthcare and other essential services, and some countries included migrants in their subsidy packages. Nonetheless, in pursuing policies to control the pandemic, other countries bypassed migrants. The mainstream labour-receiving countries deported a large number of migrants back to their country of origin. Multilateral bodies, including the UN, made various attempts to dissuade the destination countries from doing so, but with little success.

Members of the Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) felt that it was important to document the experiences of Bangladeshi

migrants during the pandemic. On behalf of BCSM and RMMRU, Tasneem Siddiqui and her team have vividly sketched the plight of both male and female Bangladeshi migrants in their various destination countries and after their return to their country of origin. They have also examined the hardship faced by the migrants' left-behind households due to the absence or partial absence of remittances. The research dealt with issues such as the securitisation process, anomalies between the increased flows of remittances at the national level, the partial or full suspension of remittances at the household level and experience of gender-based violence among both female migrants and the left-behind female members of the migrants' households.

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



Dr. C R Abrar
Chair, BCSM



Syed Saiful Haque
Co-chair, BCSM

Preface

No rights activist can remain unmoved by the sight of the suffering of migrant workers and their left-behind families during the COVID-19 outbreak. What they have been experiencing exposes the dark side of globalisation, but this new challenge also creates opportunities for transformation. The situation of both internal and international labour migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic is one such challenge that the global community must address. Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) is a platform of Bangladeshi organisations who work to uphold the rights of international migrants. Since the very beginning of the pandemic, its members have jointly provided a voice for migrants and demanded their inclusion in all national actions undertaken by both their destination countries and the government of Bangladesh. While providing emergency services at the airport, the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) compiled information about fifty migrants who had to return involuntarily from various Gulf, other Arab and a few Southeast Asian countries. Their accounts depicted the stark reality to which they had been exposed, including health shocks and risks, a lack of access to healthcare services, partial or full loss of employment, food scarcity, a fear of arrest, detention and deportation, etc. We at RMMRU feel that swift, realistic policy-targeted research is needed immediately to inform both the policy-makers of Bangladesh and also the global audience.

On 22 June 2020, RMMRU organised a webinar and provided a preliminary analysis based on the experiences of the fifty migrants who had returned home involuntarily. Policy-makers, civil society representatives, government functionaries and the media all welcomed these findings and proposed that the findings should be

placed before the authorities concerned in order to help them to chart their next course of action for alleviating the suffering of migrants. Although this research was necessary, from where would we find funding for it? At a BCSM meeting, I proposed that the member organisations might conduct interviews with the returnee migrants in their project areas, based on the same questionnaire that RMMRU used, in order to gather the stories of a large cohort of workers. All of the BCSM members responded positively and nine organisations that have field level programmes in place (WARBE DF, BOMSA, BASTOB, Rights Jashore, ASK, BASUG, YPSA, BOAF and RMMRU) joined hands to take the research forward. Those who were unable to participate directly offered to support the research in other ways. A training session was arranged for the organisations that conducted the interviews. The interviews were completed by 20 July. I offer my sincere thanks to all of the BCSM members for championing the cause of migrants.

The interviews were conducted by phone, using the KoBo Toolbox application. Parvez Alam, a Senior IT Officer, managed the data. Trishita Saleem and Saira Afrin, also from RMMRU, conducted 25 qualitative interviews and collected extra information through making repeated phone calls to the migrants and their left-behind family members. Rabab Ahmed and Arifa As Alam of RMMRU provided their assistance in checking and rechecking the press output. I express my deep appreciation to them for their sterling efforts.

Another webinar was organised on 27 July 2020 jointly by BCSM and RMMRU, where the plight of the left behind family members was discussed. 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 of the General, Economic Affairs Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ms. Saheen Anam, MJF and Mr. William Gois of the Migrant Forum in Asia provided valuable input on the findings that were explored during the first webinar.

Mr. 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 Chair of the 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 relevance of the results in terms of policy. We warmly thank all of these for generously sharing their insights.

Once the data had been processed, I invited the RMMRU general body members to lead the writing of individual chapters. I gratefully acknowledge that, despite being busy with other matters, all of them responded favourably to my request. I wish to thank Dr. Syeda Rozana Rashid, Dr. Md. Jalal Uddin Sikder, Dr. Selim Reza, Mr. Motasim Billah, and Mr. Anas Ansar for displaying their immense commitment to migrants, who are their principal research subjects. I also wish to 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, Nusrat Mahmood and Mohammad Inzamul Haque, who kindly devoted a huge amount of time and effort to writing different parts of this book. My deep appreciation goes to them all.

I wish also to thank the Manusher Jonno Foundation and PROKAS for being our partners in SEEM and FLM projects, respectively, which provided us with an opportunity to work at the grassroots level and identify concerns that have major policy relevance.

My special thanks go to Hossain Mohammad Fazle Jahid, Sr. Programme Officer (Legal Support) of RMMRU, who, over the past six months, has patiently assisted me with many different types of activities, ranging from coordinating the survey, writing sections, organising meetings,

collecting chapters from authors and, on top of all that, spending long hours with me finalising the draft chapters.

A very important lesson that arises from this research project is that, when a cause is worthy, then everyone participates spontaneously. The BCSM member organisations proved that, if the commitment is there, initiatives do not have to wait for the resources required to fulfil them to materialise. I have committed the last three months wholly to this book, of course at the cost of neglecting many of my other commitments and deadlines, yet there remain many shortcomings in the book. The data analysis could have been more in-depth regarding many issues. I hope that the readers will understand the urgency regarding publishing the outcome, appreciate the results and overlook the omissions.

Professor Tasneem Siddiqui

20 March 2021

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Tasneem Siddiqui

This research focuses on the situation of both male and female Bangladeshi short-term contract labour migrants and their left-behind family members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bangladesh is one of the major labour surplus countries in the world and it participates in the supply side of the labour market. Each year, 7-800,000 Bangladeshis migrate overseas to engage in foreign employment. Twelve percent of them are women. Annually, Bangladesh receives more than US\$ 18billion in the form of remittances. Remittances constitute the highest net foreign exchange earning source of the country and equate to six percent of its national gross domestic product. More importantly, the migrant sending households are heavily dependent on the earnings of their family members who work overseas. On average, remittances constitute eighty percent of the household income of these families.

COVID-19 has exposed these migrants to health as well as economic risks. In the absence of a regular flow of remittances, migrant households also face major challenges regarding maintaining their expenditure related to health, education, food and other types of consumption. This research explores the nature of the challenges that these migrants may have faced in their country of destination as well as the situation in Bangladesh for those who have been compelled to return to their country of origin abruptly due to the spread of COVID-19. It also explores the circumstances of the left-behind migrant households, who are not receiving remittances.

The integration of the global labour market created scope for marginalised people to benefit from globalisation by accessing employment in both their own country as well as overseas. Globalisation has significantly contributed towards increasing the level of international migration in terms of its volume, diversity, geographical scope, etc. (Czaika and Haas, 2018). However, it is generally accepted that the link between migration and globalisation is extremely complex. Along with the economic, social and cultural gains experienced by the destination countries, migration also enables labour surplus origin countries to manage their economy more effectively through providing access to foreign exchange sent back by its international migrant workforce in the form of remittance. At the same time, the current form of the globalisation of the labour market has exposed international labour migrants to challenges related to accessing decent working conditions. Their rights at work, social protection and bargaining capacity can be severely curtailed, particularly in the case of low-skilled workers. Migrants with an irregular status are even worse off.

The violation of rights, particularly those of low-skilled workers, is a common occurrence under the current form of globalisation. Migrant workers earn significantly less than nationals working in the same occupations (ILO June, 2020).¹ The 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)². Moreover, during crisis situations, the violation of decent working conditions and other rights is exacerbated to such an extent that a number of migrants are exposed to life-threatening situations; some of them fully or partially lose their job while others are forced to return without having an opportunity to reap the benefits of the investment they made to migrate in the first place. History indicates that international migrants bear the brunt of any crisis disproportionately more than the local population. The great depression of the 1930s, the 1973

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

oil crisis, the Asian financial crises of 1997 and 1999 and the global financial crisis of 2009 -10 all demonstrate that migrants

are used as safety valves to reduce the negative outcomes of the crisis (Castles and Vezzoli 2018). The United States, for example, placed an embargo on movement between the US and Mexico to reduce unemployment during the great depression, while the British government, Taiwan, and South Korea limited migration during the 1973 oil crisis. Thailand failed to renew the registration of migrants to overcome the oil crisis. During the Asian financial crisis, South East Asian countries expelled foreign workers, such as plantation workers from Malaysia and fishing workers from Thailand.

Since early 2020, the world has been facing COVID-19, the largest health crisis of recent times. By March, the World Health Organisation had declared the situation as a pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 is again showing us the other face of globalisation in respect to labour migration. The past trends regarding migration during a global crisis are again visible. As in the previous situations, the return of migrants to their country of origin, a drastic reduction in immigration, pressure on migrants to leave their destination country without completing their contract, a reduced flow of remittances and increased hostility towards migrants have surfaced in many of the destination countries. The unique characteristics of COVID-19 compared to previous crises have created an even greater risk to health. The infection rate among the migrant community is far higher compared to the nationals. In Saudi Arabia, where migrants account for 38 percent of the population, the Ministry of Health reported, on 5th May 2020, that 76 percent of new confirmed cases were foreigners (MPI 2020, Migration Data Portal November 2020)³. Singapore is one of the best examples of non-discrimination in respect to treating persons infected by COVID-19. The country has also experienced a downward trend in the number of new cases in that country, where dormitory residents, all of whom are migrants, account for nearly 94 percent of the cumulative number of infections in Singapore⁴.

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

4 Upto 4 November 2020

The Migration Data Portal (2020) states that migrants constitute around four and a half percent of the total population in 20 developed countries whereas, in eight of these countries, ten percent of the cases of COVID-19 infections are migrant workers. Unfortunately, discrimination regarding the ability to access health services is also clearly observed. The destination countries have developed stimulus packages to control the COVID-19 crisis, but migrants are mostly excluded from such packages, owing to their pre-existing precarious working conditions. The government of Malaysia provided financial support to employers so that they might pay their workers' wages, but excluded employers who employed foreign workers from this programme. Low-skilled workers, migrants working in informal sectors, and migrants with an irregular status fail to benefit from packages of this kind.

As in previous crises, the destination countries have encouraged migrants to return to their country of origin as one of the mechanisms for addressing COVID-19. Most of the South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, experienced the large-scale return of their nationals from various labour receiving countries. As early as May 2020, Nikkei Asia reported that at least 900,000 South Asians, mostly migrants, were awaiting repatriation from the Middle East (Nikkei Asia, 2020)⁵. In response to this crisis, a number of host countries, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Maldives, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, put pressure on the countries of origin to repatriate their citizens. It is estimated that at least 1,500,000 migrant workers of Indian nationality and 400,000 Nepalese workers returned home due to the pandemic⁶.

Banulescu-Bogdan et al (2020) and ISD (2020) show that COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to certain quarters anti-migrant narratives and call for stricter migration regimes. The

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>

xenophobic stances have largely mirrored the pre-existing patterns of discrimination. Unfortunately, migrants face stigmatisation in their home community after they return, which leads to occasional confrontations and violence.

When migrants face a 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. The income-generating activities of the family members also depend on access to remittances as capital. Children's education and healthcare services for the elderly as well as other members also suffer if access to remittances is not assured.

Various research projects are emerging that demonstrate that, similar to earlier crises, 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 the confinement measures (ILO,2020)⁷. Very little research highlights the implications of a lack of income, due to the absence of remittances, for the female members of the left-behind migrant households. Nonetheless, in the South-Asian context, the empirical research that highlights the hardship of the female members of the left-behind migrant households is fairly low.

This research attempts to conduct an in-depth analysis of the concerns expressed in the global literature by employing Bangladesh as a case study. It looks into all three stages of hardship: that faced by the migrants in their destination countries shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19; that faced by those migrants who were forced to return; and that faced by the left-behind households who have one or more migrant still residing abroad from whom they are not receiving anything in terms of remittances.

Section II: Rationale for the research

The hardship faced by Bangladeshi migrants in their destination

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

country and the arbitrary return of a proportion of them, particularly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Maldives, etc., have been continuously reported in the newspapers. Between the outbreak of COVID-19 and December 2020, a total of 2,330 Bangladeshis have died in various parts of the world⁸. The highest death toll is reported in Saudi Arabia (959)⁹. Four hundred thousand migrants have been forced to return, mostly from the Gulf and other Arab countries. The government has also implemented various measures, such as providing emergency assistance to migrants during the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in various destination countries, repatriating some workers from different destination countries by sending charter planes, announcing a reintegration loan programme at a lower interest rate, etc. There is, however, a lack of systematic research that documents the experience of both male and female migrants when facing the COVID-19 crisis in their destination country and after their return, as well as its effects on the left-behind members of the migrants' households. The study attempts to collate the first-hand experiences of the migrants themselves and their family members.

Section III: Objectives

The main objective of this research is to provide policy-makers with evidence, based on which the government can develop systematic policies to support and protect migrants during future crisis situations. A further aim is to provide a country- specific experience to global and national civil societies that are campaigning to raise the voice of both male and female migrants via forums such as the 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 a perspective that identifies the challenges associated with these documents with regard to ensuring the protection of migrants during crisis situations. The other significant objective is to contribute to the global research pool on migrants in crisis situations.

8 Prothom alo, 28 December 2020

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

Section IV: Major research questions

How did the outbreak of COVID-19 affect migrants in respect to decent working conditions in their country of destination? Compared to the total migrant population, what proportion of migrants are facing job-related problems? Are there any specific types of jobs that increase the vulnerability of migrants? Which group of migrants is experiencing job contract termination? How effective are the job contracts in ensuring access to healthcare during COVID 19? Does access to healthcare depend on the migrants' type of visa status? What about food security? How did the migrants whose contracts were terminated or put on hold manage their food consumption? How have migrants managed their stress?

Did the migrants return to their country of origin? Were these returns voluntary or forced? Who organised their return and who paid for it? What role did the government of Bangladesh play in facilitating their return? Did the migrants experience securitisation in the destination country? Who were the securitising actors? After returning to Bangladesh, what type of security concerns did they face? Did they observe quarantine? Why were they seen as a security threat by the members of their local community? How are these returnee migrants surviving? Do they receive any assistance from the government or any other sources?

How are the left-behind migrant households being affected by COVID-19? Can the families maintain regular contact with their migrant members who were still residing in their destination country? What type of anxiety do the family members experience with regard to their migrant members? Can they maintain regular communication with their migrant offspring/parent/spouse? Do they have information on the work and payment status of their migrant members in the destination country?

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

How have the left-behind households been coping in the absence of remittances? How have they been managing their day-to-day costs? How do these families plan to cover their household costs in the future? Is there any formal system of assistance? Do the migrant households fall within any social safety network?

Does COVID-19 contribute towards increasing the level of gender-based violence in the destination countries? What are the experiences of the female members of the left-behind migrant households? Do they face violence committed by the involuntarily-returned migrants? Is there any evidence of women committing violence against other family members?

Section V: Methodology of the research

The research followed a mixed method approach. The primary data include a survey (of 200 households in 21 districts of Bangladesh), in-depth interviews (with 25 involuntarily-returned migrants) and case studies (42 case studies of gender-based violence in five districts during the month of May to June 2020). Secondary information was gathered from newspaper reports, transcripts prepared from the e-symposium series of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) on COVID-19 and Migration, and Webinars on the South Asian Experience organised by Forum Asia, the Indira Gandhi University of Delhi and Migrant Forum Asia. The webinars were particularly effective in gathering the reflections of policy-makers and global experts on relevant issues.

The survey of 200 households of returnee migrants, as well as left-behind migrant households, was conducted by nine member organisations of BCSM. A training day was organised for those who conducted the interviews. The interviews were conducted online using the Kobo tool programme. The survey did not follow rigorous methodological techniques, for obvious reasons. Conducting such rigorous methodological research would entail a reasonable length of time and funding. This research was conducted voluntarily by migrant rights activist organisations to understand the lived reality of the arbitrarily-returned migrants as well as the left-behind members

of migrants' households. The aim was to create evidence to convince the policy-makers to offer support initiatives targeted towards different groups of stakeholders among the migrant community itself. Therefore, this research is limited by the fact that its results may not be representative of the national scenario. Moreover, some of the questions raised above remained unanswered.

Section VI: Conceptual framework

The research is conceptualised based on two streams of literature: globalisation and labour migration (Czaika and Haas, 2018, Castles and Miller, 2003, 2009, Arango 2000, Faist, 2000, Held et al, 1999), as well as the implications of different global crisis on migrants both in their destination country and in their community of origin (Castles and Vezzoli 2009). The framework starts from the premise that globalisation affects labour migration both positively and negatively. It has increased access among people from the remote areas of various countries of origin to the global labour market, and created scope for employment for all types of workers, including unskilled and low-skilled workers. Due to a lack of implementation of the labour standards, the rights of migrants in respect to a minimum wage, maximum working hours, overtime, holidays, compensation, a pension, etc., are compromised in various destination countries. A large number of migrants experience contract substitution, precarious working conditions, exploitation, fraudulence, torture, abuse, etc. Female migrants face all of these and, in addition, experience sexual abuse. Any crisis situation exacerbates these types of vulnerability in many ways, but the experience of enduring crises varies on the basis of certain indicators. Important among these are migration status, the nature of the job performed by the migrants, their skills level, and their gender. Based on their immigration status at a general level, migrants are classified as regular or irregular. Migrants with an irregular status are more exposed to harm compared to those with a regular status. Again, on the basis of their skills, migrants are divided into different categories, ranging from highly skilled to unskilled. Unskilled workers are more likely to face discrimination in terms of accessing healthcare and other services compared to skilled and professional workers. Migrants' employment sectors also

affect their treatment during crises. Those working in the informal sector are more likely to remain excluded from the social protection measures compared to those working in the formal sector. Both males and females become vulnerable during a crisis, yet the type of vulnerability that they experience may vary between the sexes.

This study divided the vulnerability of migrants and their households under three broad headings: the vulnerability of migrants in their destination country, their vulnerability after they return and, finally, the vulnerability of the left-behind households. Regarding migrants' vulnerability in their destination country, exposure to infection, access to treatment, job and income status, the nature of the social protection, security perceptions and access to government stimulus are important areas for investigation.

The issues that have been identified as relating to the situation of the involuntarily-returned migrants include their job and income status after their return, their perceptions of health risks, the government reintegration policies and civil society. The issues selected to evaluate the situation of the left-behind household members include income source, access to remittances, coping mechanisms in the absence of remittances, access to government stimulus programmes and the role of civil society. Each chapter deals with one of the above factors, using this framework.

VII: Structure of the book

The book is divided into nine chapters. Chapter I outlines the major research problem, identifies the objective of the research, develops the conceptual framework and describes the methodology used. Chapter II presents an overview of the labour migration scenario in Bangladesh during COVID-19. Chapter III presents the socio-demographic profile of the migrants and left-behind household members. Chapter IV highlights the concerns of Bangladeshi migrants in their destination country during COVID-19. Chapter V depicts the experience of returnee migrants within the framework of securitisation. Chapter VI focuses on the flow of remittances during COVID-19 and seeks to explain the gap between the households' experience of receiving remittances and the national remittance

figures. Chapter VII assesses the coping mechanisms of the left-behind migrant households in the absence of remittances or in the aftermath of the untimely return of their migrant member(s). Chapter VIII focuses on the extent to which gender-based violence is occurring in migrant households during the difficult COVID-19 period. Chapter IX offers the major conclusions and makes some modest recommendations.

CHAPTER II

MIGRATION SCENARIO OF BANGLADESH DURING COVID-19

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

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

This chapter is divided into seven sections. Following this brief introduction, section II presents the extent of labour migration from Bangladesh in 2020. Section III highlights the major concerns about Bangladeshi migrants in various destination countries during COVID-19. Section IV highlights how migrants are being identified as security risks. Section V elaborates on the government initiatives that seek to address the plight of migrants both at home and abroad. Section VI outlines the roles of civil society in respect to migrants

since the outbreak of COVID-19. Section VII offers the major conclusions.

Section II: Labour migration from Bangladesh in 2020

Flow: In 2020, a total of 217,669 Bangladeshi migrant workers migrated in order to work in various countries around the world, including the Gulf, other Arab countries and South-East Asian countries.¹⁰ 10 Among them, 181,218 workers migrated between January and March 2020¹¹. Due to lockdown, migration from Bangladesh came to standstill from April to June 2020. In the period from July to December 2020, only 36,413¹² migrants were able to migrate in order to take up overseas employment. In 2020 as a whole, the flow of migration decreased by about 69 percent in comparison to the previous year, as a result of COVID-19, even though, had the migration trend of the first three months of 2020 continued, migration would have increased 3.52 percent that year. Approximately 100,000 new workers, who had completed all of the procedures prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, could not migrate due to the pandemic.

A total of 21,934 female workers migrated from Bangladesh to work in 2020¹³. In 2019, the total number of female workers who migrated from Bangladesh was 104,786. Female migration also halted from April to June and again from July to December, and only 3,121 female workers migrated in 2020. Female migration from Bangladesh fell by 79 percent compared with the previous year.

Number of returnee migrants: During the COVID-19 outbreak, the focus is on the return rather than the flow of out-migration. According to the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, in 2020 a total of 408,000 migrant workers returned to Bangladesh¹⁴. The rate at which migrants lost their job and returned

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>)

14 Statistics for returning migrants from 1 April to 31 December 2020, Welfare Desk, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka

home increased during the last four months (September to December) of 2020. On average, about 2,000 workers were returning every day. The ministry also announced, on 27 August 2020, that around 85,790 migrant workers had returned from 26 countries for various reasons, including losing their job from 1 April to 27 August¹⁵. This means that, during the last four months of 2020, the rate of return among migrants almost quadrupled compared to the previous five months. In previous years, on average, around 50,000 workers returned to Bangladesh per annum, so the return migration rate in 2020 was eight times higher than in previous years.

More than 46,000 female migrants returned to Bangladesh between 1 April and 17 December 2020:¹⁶ 20,238 returned from Saudi Arabia, 10,461 from the United Arab Emirates, 4,328 from Qatar, 2,916 from Oman, 2,803 from Lebanon, and 1,876 from Jordan during this period¹⁷. In the case of female migrants as well, the majority of returns occurred between September and December.

Stranded in Bangladesh: Due to COVID-19, a large number of Bangladeshis who had returned home for a holiday were unable to go back and resume their work in various destination countries. In Saudi Arabia alone, 150,000 migrants were stranded during the initial months of the COVID-19 outbreak. Since the beginning of October 2020, migrants who were stranded in Bangladesh have started to return overseas. By the end of December, 284,000 Bangladeshi migrants had returned to their destination country and resumed their jobs.

Destination countries: Clearly, very few people were able to migrate during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. From July to December, 2020 labour migration resumed on a very low scale. As the discussion above shows, in 2020, a total of 217,669 male and female workers migrated from Bangladesh to engage in foreign employment. This includes both those migrants who migrated prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and those who migrated during the last few

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

16 Figures from 1 April to 30 November from different countries

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

months of 2020, but not those who were stranded and later returned to their work place as the situation improved. The highest number of Bangladeshi workers (161,726, about 74.30 percent of the total flow) migrated to Saudi Arabia. The second-largest number (21,071, about 9.68 percent of the total flow) migrated to Oman. Singapore was the third-largest destination country for Bangladeshi workers, receiving 10,085 (4.63 percent of all migrants). Jordan, in fourth position, received 3,769 (1.73 percent), while Qatar was ranked fifth, receiving 3,608 (about 1.65 percent). During COVID-19, as in any other year, Saudi Arabia represented the major destination for female migrants. About 58 percent of the female migrants (12,735) went to Saudi Arabia during this period, 3,661 to Jordan and 3,358 to Oman¹⁸ At the far end of the year, a number of Bangladeshis also migrated to some non-traditional countries, such as Uzbekistan and Albania.¹⁹

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

Remittances: The World Bank forecast that the remittances to Bangladesh could fall to US\$ 1,400 crore in 2020. This meant that the remittance flow that year would be 25 percent less than in the previous year.²⁰ However, such a fall failed to materialize, and even more remittances were received in 2020 compared with the previous two years. Bangladeshi migrants remitted US\$ 21.74 billion in 2020,²¹ which was 18.60 percent higher compared to 2019 (US\$ 18.33 billion). The economy of Bangladesh did not face any major hurdles as its foreign exchange reserve remained satisfactory. In 2020, the total reserve of Bangladesh Bank stood at US\$ 43.95

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>

20 <https://www.prothomalo.com/business> করোনায় কোপে কমবে ২৫% প্রবাসী আয়, published on 27 June 2020

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

billion, compared with US\$ 38.50 billion the previous year.²²

In respect to the percentage share of the Bangladesh's various remittance source countries, data are available up to November 2020. As in previous years, the largest amount of remittances came from Saudi Arabia. Bangladesh received 4.186 billion from that country, which constitutes 21.26 percent of the total flow. United States ranks second highest, with 13.22 percent (2.603 billion), then the United Arab Emirates, with 10.91 percent (2.147 billion), Malaysia, with 7.06 percent (1.389 billion), the United Kingdom, with 6.98 percent (1.374 billion), and, finally, Oman, with 6.43 percent (1.266 billion). According to the Bangladesh Bank, the largest share of remittances (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).²³

The flow of remittances declined from February to April, but rose steadily thereafter. There are many reasons for the increase in remittances. Firstly, since 1 July 2019, the government has offered a 2 percent incentive to encourage migrants to send remittances through formal channels. Migrants receive 2 taka per 100 taka remitted. The government allocated 3,060 crore taka for this purpose in the budget for the 2019-20 fiscal years. In addition, some of the banks have been offering an additional 1 percent on top of the government incentive to attract migrants to send their remittances through them.

Secondly, in an ideal situation, work permits for labour migrants would be free of charge but, in reality, long-term work visas are sold by the employers, which the recruitment agencies purchase at high cost. Sharma and Zaman (2009) found that, as early as 2009, an individual visa cost \$2,300, on average. The recruitment agencies then sell these visas on to the migrant workers for a higher price. The recruitment agencies must purchase these visas unofficially, as sending outward remittances for visa purchases are not allowed by the government of Bangladesh. Therefore, the recruitment

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

23 https://www.bb.org.bd/econdata/bop/bop_remittance.php

agencies of Bangladesh and also their counterparts in the destination countries receive assistance from the *hundi* operators. They generate the finance from the informal *hundi* market. The *hundi* operators, on the other hand, collect the remittances of the migrants in the destination countries and pay the migrants' left-behind families in the local Bangladeshi currency. In a normal year, 700,000 visas are purchased. A recent study by BBS shows that, currently, migrants pay around US\$ 5000 for a visa in order to migrate abroad. The recruitment agencies and their intermediaries in the destination countries have to pay around US\$ 3,000 per visa, on average, and both parties share the profit. In 2020, only around 217,669 workers migrated, so around 482,331 visas did not need to be purchased. This resource was not required by the recruitment agencies, as they did not need to purchase these visas. Therefore, US\$ 1,446,993,000 was not required from the *hundi* operators²⁴. The recruitment agencies in Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi sub-agents in the destination countries did not need the money to pay for the work permits.

In 2020, the amount of business and commerce was drastically reduced compared with normal years when, in order to avoid paying taxes, a large section of the business owners under invoiced for the imports they made. They pay a large portion of the cost of the raw materials in the countries from where they purchase them by managing the payments with the help of the *hundi* operators. In 2020, as there were fewer was less, the business owners also had less demand for the resources of the *hundi* operators. In Bangladesh, the majority of gold is smuggled. The gold smugglers depend completely on the *hundi* operators when conducting their payments. In 2020, there was hardly any demand for gold jewellery, so the gold smugglers also had no need for the *hundi* operation. All of these resources were, therefore, available as formal sources of remittance transfer.

Since a large number of migrants had to return to Bangladesh because of COVID-19, they, together with those migrants who thought they might have to return, sent their savings back to the country because there are restrictions on the amount of cash that can be carried in person. Some migrants, who did not have to return but

24 517,000 who could not migrate x \$3,000 per visa purchase = \$1,551,000,000

felt insecure, also transferred their savings to Bangladesh. Migrants also sent money to help the families during the COVID-19 crisis, cyclone Amphan and the severe flood that affected Bangladesh during the monsoon.

The above discussion further highlights that the increased flow of remittances to Bangladesh does not mean that the migrants were flourishing, as it was due to many complex factors. Remittances are always cumulative in nature. Migrants unusually start remitting the year after they migrate. Since the migration flow was significantly lower in 2020, the remittance flow in 2021 may be reduced. Again it may not be affected as the stalk of Bangladeshi migrant abroad is quite high.

Section III: COVID-19 and migrants in their destination countries

Health risks for migrant workers: In the first four months of the pandemic, 70,000 Bangladeshi migrants in 186 countries were infected with the COVID-19 virus. In Singapore alone, 23,000 Bangladeshis had been infected by COVID-19 by the end of November 2020. By 28 December, more than 2,330 Bangladeshis had died of COVID-19 while abroad. In Saudi Arabia alone, 979 migrants have died. The death toll of Bangladeshis is far higher compared with that of migrants from other countries. By July 2020, 327 migrants had died in the United Arab Emirates. 122 of whom were Bangladeshi citizens and, in Kuwait, 382 migrants died, 70 of whom were Bangladeshis. The death rate in Singapore is, however, relatively low. Due to timely treatment and other safety measures, only two Bangladeshi migrants died. Maldives has a large number of Bangladeshis working in the tourism sector, most of whom are irregular workers. Although 1,000 Bangladeshi migrants were infected, no one lost their life.

Access to healthcare: Any international labour standard or decent working conditions entail that, during any crisis situation, be it a natural disaster or health emergency, the responsibility for ensuring that healthcare is provided lies with the destination

countries. The governments of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Singapore announced the equal treatment of migrant workers and nationals in respect to accessing COVID-19 tests. This access is assured, irrespective of the legal status of the migrants. Except for Singapore, accessing such services was not straightforward. The RMMRU (2020) study found that only 46 percent of those who were involuntarily-returned during the COVID-19 period were tested in their destination country prior to arriving back in Bangladesh. The rest returned without being tested. Singapore can be regarded as illustrating best practice with regards to providing treatment for COVID-19 infected migrants, as infected migrants were taken from the camps to hotels or shelters for medical treatment and isolation.

Section IV: Identification of involuntarily-returned migrants as a security risk

Securitisation: During any disaster, there is a tendency to identify migrants as a security threat in both the origin and destination countries. Certain sections of the destination countries usually securitise migration to send migrants back to their home country. Unfortunately, the Bangladeshi migrants were subjected to a securitisation process even upon their return to their by country of origin by different actors, including the media, government authorities and local community. They were considered a health security threat to their neighbours. During the initial COVID-19 period, an unintended outcome of the government's announcements that were intended to control the spread of the pandemic resulted in the identification of migrants as the source of infection. The government decided to monitor the strict observance of quarantine by placing red flags at their residences. This also generated an anti-migrant psyche in various rural areas.

The arrest of involuntarily-returned migrants: The arrest and detention of a number of involuntarily-returned migrants by the Ministry of Home Affairs of Bangladesh can be treated as a unique example of action that followed securitisation by the actors of an country of origin. On 16 August 2020, 107 migrants, who had returned to Bangladesh from Vietnam, were arrested. These returnee

migrants were initially taken to formal quarantine centres. After completing their 14 days of quarantine, 61 of them were arrested under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure of Bangladesh. These migrants complied with all of the necessary legal procedures when they migrated to Vietnam to work. They received clearance for departure from the relevant authority, which is the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training. Upon arriving in Vietnam, these migrants found themselves in slave-like working conditions. Many of them were not given a job or were offered work only occasionally. In order to receive assistance from the Bangladeshi embassy in Vietnam, these migrants held a demonstration in front of the embassy. After lacking work for a long time, these migrants demanded repatriation. They were repatriated but then arrested, accused of having “conspired against the government and the state”, the “disruption of public order” and “tarnishing the image of the country”. Alongside those who returned from Vietnam, a number of migrants from the Gulf and other Arab countries were also arrested. A total of 219 migrants were arrested. None of the arrested migrants were brought back under a restoration contract. It is the civil society bodies that ensured their release from jail through formal litigation.

Section V: Government initiatives

The Wage Earners' Welfare Board of the Ministry of MoEWOE has launched a special scheme of offering Tk. 200 crore (US\$ 23,529,412) for the reintegration of involuntarily-returned migrants. Under this scheme, returnee migrants or their family members are able to take out a loan from the Migrant Welfare Bank of between Tk. 100,000 and 500,000, at a maximum interest rate of 4 percent²⁵. An online registration system²⁶ has been developed to collect information about the returnee migrants as well as to provide short-term training based on their work experiences abroad. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has allocated a budget of Taka 500 crore (US\$ 58,823,529) to support further the reintegration programme for distressed returnee migrants. Bangladesh Bank has launched an initiative to provide loans to migrants, who have been forced to

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

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

return due to COVID-19, of up to 500,000 taka without any proof that remittances had been sent through formal channels. In order to receive a higher amount, the returnee migrants must demonstrate that they sent remittances or invested in different Wage Earners' Schemes.

The Wage Earners' Welfare Board has an ongoing programme of providing Tk. 3,00,000 (US\$ 3,530) to the family members of migrants who die while working abroad²⁷. In normal circumstances, this support is provided only to those who have migrated through the formal channels. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the Board extended this support to the family members of migrants with an irregular status as well.

About 6,000 workers, who returned to the country between 29 April 29 and 31 May, received immediate assistance of Tk. 5,000 each to pay for their journey from the airport to their home²⁸. Moreover, via this fund, 207 female migrants received their airfare to be repatriated from the deportation centre in Saudi Arabia, as did 95 workers from Lebanon and 105 from Vietnam. In addition, Tk. 422,873 from this fund was paid as goodwill assistance to the Maldives government according to the directive of the Prime Minister.

The Wage Earners Welfare Board has introduced a project to reintegrate returnee migrants through World Bank funding that entails enhancing the skills of expatriate workers and strengthening the welfare services for migrant workers. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment distributed medicine, relief and emergency items worth around Tk. 11 crore among 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 of compulsory subscriptions paid by migrant workers.

By July 2020, BMET had provided pre-departure briefings to a total of 11,736 workers. In 2020, a total of 2,884 dead bodies

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

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

were brought back to the country, excluding migrants who died of COVID-19, who were buried immediately in their destination country. To provide shelter for female migrant workers who face torture, harassment, insecurity and similar problems, five safe homes are provided in three countries (three in Saudi Arabia and one each in Oman and Lebanon). All of these services are funded by the resources of WEF.

Section VI: COVID-19 and civil society

The civil society organisations of Bangladesh played a significant role in upholding the rights of Bangladeshi migrants during the COVID-19 crisis. They strongly demanded that the government should allocate a budget to support the migrants and their left-behind households to overcome the hardships caused by the pandemic. Individually, each organisation has launched various programmes to support migrants and also worked jointly with other organisations under the umbrella of the Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM).

BCSM appealed to the Prime Minister (PM) to allocate resources for distressed migrants and their left-behind family members. It also requested an increase in the incentive to keep the flow of remittances steady and mobilize the administration to reduce the scope of human trafficking in the post-COVID-19 era. BCSM's members also suggested that the Prime Minister should forcefully present the concerns of migrants at various multilateral forums and take the initiative in creating a positive mindset about migrants to ensure that they are treated with dignity. Twenty days after this appeal, the Prime Minister declared a stimulus package of Tk. 500 crore (US\$ 58,823,530)²⁹.

BCSM submitted a memorandum to the United Nations Secretary General highlighting the plight of Bangladeshi migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. It appealed to the Secretary General to ensure that appropriate accommodation was available to migrants

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>

where they can live safely in accordance with the WHO guidelines. It requested the Secretary General to use the goodwill of his office to deter the destination countries from pursuing the arbitrary return of migrants, clear due wages during involuntary returns and also declare remittance transfer an essential service³⁰.

BCSM, Migrant Forum Asia, and the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) jointly organised a one-minute silence for migrant workers who lost their life due to COVID-19. BCSM articulated a demand for the immediate and unconditional release of 219 Bangladeshi involuntarily-returned migrants who were arrested by the law enforcement agencies upon their return³¹.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the situation regarding migration in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 crisis. It shows that migration fell by 69 percent compared with the previous year due to the extraordinary situation created by the pandemic. The country experienced a massive return flow of migrants. Almost 400,000 migrants returned from different parts of the world, mainly the Gulf and other Arab countries. The complexity of present day migration is exposed by the fact that the flow of remittances, instead of diminishing, has increased by 18.60 percent, in contrast with the World Bank's prediction. The pandemic has again demonstrated that migrant workers are the least protected workforce in the world, and 2,330 migrants had died of COVID-19 in different parts of the world by December 2020. The spread of infection among Bangladeshi migrants has also been very high. The chapter also shows that migrants were securitised not only in various destination countries but also in their country of origin as well. Unfortunately, the migrants also experienced unlawful arrests in their own country upon their return.

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

31 http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Detainee- Migrants_ BCSM-statement-Bangla.pdf

The government of Bangladesh has launched various initiatives to support migrants, ranging from providing food in the destination country to helping to reintegrate the forced returnees through loan programmes. The civil society organisations of Bangladesh, under the umbrella of BCSM, have also played an important role in respect to upholding the dignity of migrants as well as providing assistance at the grassroots level. The following chapters provide a detailed account of the experience of COVID-19 as told by 100 involuntarily-returned migrants and 100 members of left-behind households with family members still residing overseas as migrant workers.

CHAPTER III

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE AND MIGRATION TRAJECTORY

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

This chapter introduces the survey respondents. The survey directly interviewed 100 involuntarily-returned migrants and assessed a further 100 migrants who were still residing in their destination country by interviewing their household members. It presents the socio-economic profiles of both groups of migrants (the involuntarily-returned migrants and those still residing in their destination country), side by side, including their sex, age, family size and district of origin. The chapter also throws some light on their migration experiences. It gives an idea of the countries to which they migrated, the type of occupation they have been engaged in their destination countries, the amount of remittances they used to send before COVID-19 and how long they have spent living abroad.

Section II: The socio-economic profiles

Sex: Table 3.1 shows the distribution of male and female migrants. Of the 200 households surveyed, 100 contained one or more involuntarily-returned migrant whom the study team directly interviewed, and a further 100 were left-behind households with members residing in various destination countries as the time of the interview, in which case the household head was interviewed. Fourteen percent of the total 200 households were female migrants’

households and the rest (86 percent) were male migrants' households. Ninety-eight percent of the migrants who had returned involuntarily were male, and only two percent were female. This indicates that the experience of involuntary return was faced predominantly by male migrants. Seventy-four percent of the migrant workers who were, at the time of the interview, residing in their destination country was male and 26 percent were female.

Table 3.1: Percentages of male and female migrants interviewed by migration status

Nature	Male in %	Female in %	Total in %
Involuntarily-returned migrants	98.00	2.00	100.00
Migrants in their destination country	74.00	26.00	100.00
Total	86 (172)	14 (28)	100 (200)

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Note: The figures in parentheses indicate the total number of respondents

Age group of the migrants: Table 3.2 displays the age groups of the migrants. Eighty-three percent of the migrants are below the age of 45. This shows that migrants devote their best working years to different employers abroad. The data are divided in two sub-groups (involuntarily-returned and migrants who are currently in their destination country). It is striking that the population below the age of 45 contains more involuntarily- returned migrants (89 percent), while 77 percent of the current migrants' households belong to this age group. Among the involuntarily-returned migrants, only 11 percent are over 45 years of age. Among the current migrants, 23 percent are over 45 years of age. The average age of the involuntarily-returned migrants is 34 years, with 36 years for the current migrants. The combined average age of the male migrants is 36 years, with 32 years for the female migrants.

Table 3.2: Age groups of the involuntarily-returned migrants and current migrants

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

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
Other	30	54	41

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Size of household: This study defines a family as household members who eat meals together, cooked in the same kitchen. A household may consist of more than one family or a nuclear family, and also includes any staff who eat meals cooked in the same kitchen. Table 3.4 shows that the average family size of the involuntarily-returned migrants was 5.5 members with 5.6 members for the migrants currently overseas. Sixty-six percent of the households have two to five members, and only a handful (less than 3.5 percent) have more than ten members.

Table 3.4: Household Size

Family members	Involuntarily-returned migrant HHs as a %	Current migrant HHs as a %	Grand Total as a %
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
Average HH size	5.50	5.60	5.55

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Household income and remittances: The average family income of both types of household was Tk. 17,900. No significant difference was observed among the involuntarily-returned and current migrant households in respect of their household income. For 56 percent of the households, remittances are the sole source of income (Table 3.5). Three quarters (25 percent) of the households' income comes from remittances while, for 13 percent of the households, remittances constitute half of the family income.

Table 3.5: Dependence on remittances for expenditure among the involuntarily-returned and current migrant HHs

Share of remittance	Involuntarily-returned migrants as a %			Current migrant HHs as a %			Grand Total as a %
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	
Fully dependent	0.00	54.60	53.50	80.80	50.00	58.00	55.75
Three quarters of expenditure	100.00	26.80	28.30	11.50	21.60	19.00	23.65
Half of expenditure	0.00	11.30	11.10	0.00	18.90	14.00	12.55
A quarter of expenditure	0.00	5.20	5.10	7.70	6.80	7.00	6.05
Less than a quarter of expenditure	0.00	2.10	2.00	0.00	2.70	2.00	2.00
Total No.	2	98	100	26	74	100	200

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Table 3.6 shows the amount of remittances sent during the three months leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, all of the migrants remitted. On average, the involuntarily-returned migrants remitted Tk. 54,000 (US\$ 635) while the left-behind households received around Tk. 45,000 (US\$ 529) during the three months immediately preceding the COVID-19 outbreak. The highest remittance, of Tk. 210,000 (US\$ 2471), was received by an involuntarily-returned migrant's household.

Table 3.6: Remittances sent during the three months prior to the COVID-19 outbreak by the status of the migrants (in Tk.)

Amount	Involuntarily- returned migrants	Current Migrants	All Groups
Maximum	210,000	150,000	180,000
Minimum	5,000	25,000	15,000
Average	54,284	45,050	49,667

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Table 3.7 displays a comparison of the remittance flow to the left-behind migrant households both before and during the COVID-19 outbreak. It gathers information about remittances transfer in

between November 2019 to January 2020 and compares this with the remittance figures for May to July, 2020. It shows that these households received 38 percent less during the COVID-19 period compared to months immediately preceding the COVID-19 outbreak.

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

Amount	Current Migrants		Reduction in flow as a %
	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 RMMRU Survey 2020

Section III: Migration trajectory

District of origin of the involuntarily-returned and current migrants: The returnee migrants whom the study interviewed originated from 21 districts, shown in Table 3.8. Twenty-six percent of the involuntarily-returned migrants are from Dhaka, 14 percent from Jashore, 10 percent from Tangail and Chattogram, respectively, 6 percent from Narail, 5 percent from Jhenaidah, Cumilla, and Narsingdi, respectively, 4 percent from Natore and Kishoreganj, respectively, 2 percent from Barisal, and 1 percent from Rajshahi and Shariatpur, respectively. Other districts include Jhalokati, Pirojpur, Chandpur, Madaripur, Meherpur, Gazipur and Feni.

The households of the current migrants are located across 11 districts. Around 50 percent of them are in Dhaka and Chattogram followed by Tangail, Jashore and Cumilla. Five percent of the migrants originated from Narail, Jhenaidah and Cox's Bazar, and the remainder from Shariatpur, Rajshahi and Narsingdi.

Table 3.8: The districts of origin

Name of District	Involuntarily-returned migrants as a %	Current Migrants as a %	Total as a %
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
Jhenaidah	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
Barisal	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
Total No.	100	100	200

Source: BCSM and RMMRU 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 the involuntarily-returned and current migrants. Around half of them have been migrant workers for up to five years. The migration experience of more than 22 percent of them ranges between six to ten years, while a further 17 percent have eleven to fifteen years of migration experience. One migrant has been working abroad for more than 30 years. There are two female involuntary returnees, who have been working abroad for around nine years. The current female migrants have been working overseas for around six years. On average, the involuntarily-returned male migrants have 7.30 years of migration experience, while the current male migrants have nine.

Table 3.9: Duration of migration by sex

Duration in years	Involuntarily-returned migrants as a %			Current Migrants as a %			Grand Total as a %
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	
Less than 1	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
Total	02	98	100	26	74	100	200
Average number of years	9.5	7.30	7.34	5.81	9.07	8.22	7.78

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Destination countries: Both the involuntarily-returned and current migrants 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 migrants as a %	Current Migrants as a %	Total as a %
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
Total No.	100	100	200

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

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

Chapter conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the migrants' basic socio-economic characteristics and also throws light on their migration trajectory. Eight-six percent of these study respondents are male migrants and 14 percent female migrants. The migrants have devoted their best working years to serving their destination country. Eighty-three percent of them are below the age of 45 years. The average household size of these migrants is around 5.5. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, their average household income was around Tk. 18,000 (US\$ 212). The interviewees originated from 21 districts of Bangladesh, but were predominantly from Dhaka and Chattogram. It is striking that the female migrants had worked abroad for an average of six years, with nine years for male migrants stayed. Saudi Arabia is the major destination. The destination countries of half of the current and involuntarily-returned migrants were Saudi Arabia and UAE. It is also noteworthy that some migrants, particularly those who returned during the COVID-19 outbreak, were working in

non-traditional destination countries; namely, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Somalia, which may be the destination countries of irregular migrants.

CHAPTER IV

FACING COVID-19 IN THE DESTINATION COUNTRIES: HEALTH SHOCKS, INCOME RISKS, DETENTION, DEPORTATION AND WAGE THEFT

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This chapter explores the vulnerability of Bangladeshi migrant workers in their destination countries during the spread of Covid-19. It particularly focuses on 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 the constrained access to healthcare, hazardous living conditions and low wages, coupled with the lack of preparedness and willingness of the destination countries to treat migrants equally to their nationals, resulted in pandemic-related problems for migrants.

The major research questions explored in this chapter are: How has COVID-19 affected Bangladeshi migrant workers in various destination countries? What types of vulnerability and risks did migrants encounter when COVID-19 broke out? How did they counter the health risks and shocks caused by COVID-19? Did the Bangladeshi migrants experience? arrest and detention in their destination country during COVID-19? Was there any push for the

arbitrary return of the Bangladeshi migrants by their destination countries? If so, how did the destination countries facilitate their return? What are the experiences of returning of both the male and female migrants? In the 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 their health, income and job. Secondary data were gathered from a review of the literature available at both the global and regional levels, newspaper clippings and national and international webinars organised between March and November 2020.

This chapter contains eight sections. Section I sets out the context. Section II underpins the conceptual understanding of the challenges faced by migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The third section deals with Bangladeshi migrants' health risks and shocks. Section IV explores the situation regarding the income and employment of migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sections V and VI focus on detention and deportation. Section VII assesses the extent of unpaid wages and other dues that the migrants have left behind in their destination country. The concluding section summarises the major findings and provides some recommendations.

Section II: Conceptual understanding

Several studies have demonstrated that, during any public health emergency, migrant workers suffer disproportionately more than nationals. Wickramage and Agampodi (2013) show how the 2005 avian influenza viral outbreak severely impacted on Asian migrants working in the poultry and animal husbandry sectors. West African seasonal migrant workers were considered both the cause and victims of the Ebola virus (CIDRAP, 2014). Numerous studies have been undertaken in different parts of the world to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants (Beech, 2020; Guadagno, 2020; ILO 2020a). They highlight the various types of vulnerability that international migrants face during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Health risks and shocks: Almost every recent study concludes that the spread of COVID-19 is higher among migrants compared to nationals in all of the destination countries, irrespective of their 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 those testing positive for COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia and Singapore show that migrant workers were more exposed to the virus in comparison to the nationals. In Qatar, one in four people tested positive, the majority of who were migrant workers³². By May 2020, 25,000 of the 150,000 Bangladeshi workers in Singapore had tested positive for COVID-19, with 40,969 cases nationwide by that point³³.

In the majority of the destination countries, migrants do not enjoy equal access to healthcare compared with citizens, and hence automatically became ineligible for COVID-19 treatment (Vearey et al, 2020). Guadagno (2020) finds that, even when entitled to access relevant services, many migrants fail to do so due to language barriers, a limited knowledge of the host country's context, an overreliance on informal communication channels, or the prioritisation of citizens. Bauomy (2020), on the other hand, shows that accessing services becomes more problematic for migrants because of the spread of fake news, misinformation and politicisation³⁴.

Siddiqui (2020) shows that the extent to which migrants is exposed and vulnerable to COVID-19 depended largely on the type of work in which they were engaged³⁵. Migrants involved in agriculture, construction work, logistics and deliveries, personal and health-care and cleaning services were more exposed to COVID-19 than others. An inability to work remotely, limited access to private

32 The Business Standard, Infections among Bangladeshi migrants on the rise, 6 May 2020a. www.tbsnews.net/COVID-19-chronicle/infections-among-bangladeshi-migrants-rise-78109

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

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

transport, physical proximity to co-workers and customers and a lack of adequate protective equipment and hygiene options made these occupations particularly risky (Gelatt, 2020). Although these migrants were praised for providing essential services, their security was not ensured in the way it should have been. Migrants are over-represented in some of the industries and sectors which are 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 regular ones (ILO 2016, 2020a). They fear being reported to the immigration authorities and deported if they seek assistance, which reduces their willingness to come forward for screening, testing, contact tracing or treatment (Jordan, 2020).

Living arrangements: The outbreak of COVID-19 led to closures, quarantine, and mobility restrictions (Ng, 2020). Segregation and confinement at both ends became common results of the pandemic for migrants (ibid). The lockdowns and relocations, aimed to contain the risk of infection, restricted their ability to move, access food and basic services and earn an income (Pattisson, 2020). The Business and Human Rights Resource Center (BHRC) (2020) stated that, for migrants working in Malaysia, a lack of food posed a greater 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 measures. Even self-isolation became impossible in the case of illness. In the absence of systematic screening and tracing, the risk of the disease spreading 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 the closure of borders and restriction on movement.

Income and jobs: COVID-19 pushed relatively unprotected workers into underemployment and unemployment, making a series of impacts, such as sudden income loss, the reduced consumption of essential items and products and impoverishment (ILO, 2020b; Crawford et al., 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, entertainment, and street vending (Sorker, 2020). Regardless of their legal status, a proportion of migrants were laid off by their company.

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

Detention, deportation and wage theft: Many of the host countries deported workers back to their own country even those who with many years of work experience faced cancelled work permits and, consequently, a large number of migrants returned home. In most cases, prior to their departure, they did not receive any financial compensation or support from their employer in the destination country.

For irregular migrants, making the decision to 'return' is even harder, since travelling within the strict policies governing cross-border mobility requires availability, capacity and affordability (İçduygu, 2020). For them, a 'return due to the COVID-19 situation' also implies losing their opportunity to gain employment, earn their livelihood abroad and support the day-to-day subsistence of their left-behind families.

A proportion of South Asian female workers were also compelled to return home (UN Women, 2020b). Female migrants face challenges related to ensuring regular food intake, facing health risks and also being exposed to gender-based violence³⁵. Upon their return, the

35 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>

female migrants also experienced social stigma³⁶.

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

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

Section III: The health risks and shocks of Bangladeshi migrants

Exposure to COVID-19: By December, 2020, more than 2,330 Bangladeshis had died from COVID-19 in 19 countries across the world³⁸. Among the 200 involuntarily-returned and current migrant households studied, two households reported the death of the migrants during COVID-19. One migrant died of the COVID-19 virus and the other, Abdul (38), from a stroke. Before he passed away, Abdul informed his family that he had caught a cold but could not go out to access safe treatment due to his status as an irregular migrant. His co-workers informed his family that he had all the symptoms of COVID-19. Abdul might not have been infected by COVID-19 but passed away without treatment due to his fear of being arrested and deported.

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

Table 4.1 The spread of COVID-19 among migrants and their co-workers (each column represents 100 percent of the response)

COVID-19 infection among migrants				COVID-19 infection among co-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
Total	2(1%)	198(99%)	200	7(3.5%)	193(96.5%)	200

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Table 4.1 reveals that, among the involuntarily-returned migrants, 7 percent stated that their co-workers had been infected with COVID-19. During the in-depth interviews, the migrants revealed that, if someone became infected in a residence, the whole premises were placed under strict quarantine. It became difficult for other migrants to go out to work, and shopping for food also became difficult. Maintaining a physical distance was tough in their congested, shared accommodation. However, there were positive examples as well. The Singapore authorities evacuated the infected migrants if they tested positive for COVID-19. Fazlur Rahman, who returned from Singapore, where he had been working as a construction worker for seven years, stated, ‘Singapore took good care of those who were infected with COVID-19. If a migrant tested positive for COVID-19, he was evacuated from the dormitory and usually placed in a hotel’.

Table 4.2: Experience of COVID-19 testing of the current and involuntarily-returned migrants

Responses	Involuntarily-returned as a %			Current Migrants HHs as a %		
	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
Total No.	98	2	100	74	26	100

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 employer. In reality the employers place the burden for this on the migrants through making deductions from their wages. Low-skilled workers lack both the power and knowledge to access such entitlements (Yara, 2020). Migrants who went abroad on a so-called free visa as well as those who are in irregular status are not covered by any healthcare programs. COVID-19 has exacerbated these pre-existing precarities of work in respect to healthcare.

Only one of the current migrants' families revealed that their migrant member, who at the time of the interview was residing in Saudi Arabia, had tested positive for COVID-19. The remaining families stated that their migrant members residing abroad had never been tested for COVID-19 test, or did not have information about that. It is understood that migrants who went abroad on a so-called 'free visa' as well as those with an irregular status will not volunteer to be tested for COVID-19, even if they feel ill, due to a fear of being caught and deported. A number of involuntarily-returned migrants, however, had been tested for COVID-19. Table 4.2 shows that forty-six percent of the returned migrants had to take a COVID-19 test before being deported. None of these tests were positive.

It seems that the migrants who are still residing in their destination country are not normally tested for COVID-19, while more than half of the migrants who were forced to return, were not tested for COVID-19. Mohon Ali, who returned from UAE, stated that a standard certificate was provided to those who were traveling, stating that they did not have COVID-19.

Female domestic workers who lived-in enjoyed relatively better access to healthcare compared to those who lived outside their employer's home, as those living-in were covered by their employer's safety measures in the home and could not go out. A couple of the live-in domestic workers required medical treatment during the COVID-19 outbreak. Shahnaz (32), a live-in domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, for instance, broke her hand, and her employer arranged treatment for her. Shahnaz was upset, however, and told her family that her

employer had informed her that they would deduct the cost of the treatment from her salary. Live-out female migrants, on the contrary, have to bear the cost of being tested for COVID-19 themselves.

Stress and anxiety: Eighty-seven percent (Table 4.3) of the current migrants, both male and female, mentioned various types of anxiety to their left-behind family members. Some of the sources of fear are common among both male and female migrants, while others varied according to their sex. The types of stress that the male migrants mentioned can be divided into three types; health-, mental- and financial-related stress. Health-related stress includes an inability to access normal health services, while mental stress arises from being confined in a single room since March 2020 and a feeling of isolation and suffocation.

Nafiz stated that ‘if one person in a camp tests positive, the whole camp is placed in isolation, after which many of us faced a shortage of work, wages and food, so you can imagine what type of stress we go through’. Most of the workers who had migrated recently had borrowed money to cover their migration costs. They expressed concern about how to clear these loans. Almost all of them were worried about their uncertain future in their destination country. For some, their visa would expire soon. They could have taken the initiative to renew these, in normal circumstances. The irregular migrants, meanwhile, were predominantly concerned about the possibility of their detention and arrest. They spent an agonising time, fearing that the police would discover them at any moment and send them back home. Financial worries include a current lack of income or the possibility of losing one’s job. Due to their irregular status, a proportion of these migrants were unable to go out to look for work. Those who experienced a salary cut were worried about securing enough food during remaining COVID-19 period in their destination country. Some of them survived by borrowing money from their co-workers, and were worried about how they could repay this. Those who were involved in the grocery business incurred major losses. Many of their products could no longer be sold, as they were past their expiry date.

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

Stress	Involuntarily-returned as a %			Current Migrants HHs as a %		
	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
Total in No.	2	98	100	26	74	100

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Female workers also told their family about their concerns regarding the possibility of being infected with COVID-19, the non-payment of their salary, etc. (81%), yet some stresses were only felt by females, which varied according to their job type and place of residence.

Live-in domestic workers were concerned about the delayed or non-payment of their wages, an increased workload and a reduced communication level with their left-behind family. Live-out domestic and other female workers experienced job losses too, just like their male counterparts. Shahnaz is a live-in domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. Her employer did not pay her salary and she was worried about how her mother would feed her two children whom Shahnaz had left behind with her. Her mother did not have any other source of income. Her children were stressed as they could only speak to her rarely. Previously, she used to call daily. Now, these calls reduced down to once a week. Due to COVID-19, she was not allowed to go out to recharge the talk time balance of her mobile as frequently as before. Besides, she also does not have enough money to do the recharging. The migrants' left-behind family members also experienced various types of anxiety, partly due to their migrant members' hardships and also due to the difficulties related to trying to run a household without remittances.

Section IV: Income and job loss

COVID-19 affected the jobs of the migrant workers in many ways. Some lost their job completely (34 percent of the males and 8 percent of the females), while others were offered reduced hours (26 percent of the males and 27 percent of the females). Forty

percent of the males and 65 percent of the females kept their job but were paid a lower or delayed salary (Table 4.4). They worked for various companies, some on a so-called free visa. Working for cleaning companies and construction firms sounds formal in nature, yet the workers were mostly informally recruited through supply companies, and they also lost their job. These workers suffered the most since they often relied on short-term or casual work. They did not have a regular employer to provide them with food and housing, so had to spend their savings and/or borrow money from friends and relatives to pay for their subsistence and rent.

Interestingly, the migrants received both good and bad treatment from their employer in this situation. Although the government allocated stimulus packages so that employers could continue to provide their workers with food and accommodation, some employers kept the migrants outside this safety net, as shown by the following statements by involuntarily-returnee migrants.

Table 4.4: Employment status in the destination country 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
Total	26	74	100

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Twenty-two-year-old Showkat migrated to Qatar, only a year before COVID-19 hit the world, to work for a construction firm. When all construction work was halted, 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 greengrocer near my camp. At the end of the day, I would receive a little income with which I could barely purchase enough food’.

Thirty-two-year-old Ashraf was involuntarily-returned from UAE. He could have continued working but was a victim of wrongdoing

by a law enforcement agency and sent back arbitrarily. He said, sorrowfully, ‘My employer was good. During COVID-19, I was working half-time and receiving half payment. My office maintained strict regulations on wearing masks and hand washing’.

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

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

Gender	Full payment as a %	Partial payment as a %	Non payment as a %	Total No.
Male	24.00	36.00	40.00	74
Female	58.00	34.00	8.00	26
Total No. respondent	33	35	32	100

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

The left-behind family members stated that 40 percent of the male and eight percent of the female migrants had not received any salary since the pandemic began (Table 4.5). Irrespective of their gender, 34-36 percent of the migrants received partial payment. Fifty-eight percent of the female and 24 percent of the male migrants either received their payment or secured a commitment that they would be paid their full salary once the situation improves.

Some of the migrants with an irregular status could not go out to seek work. Shajal (38) from UAE stated, ‘I didn’t have any work and had look for work desperately during the COVID-19 situation. I found 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 so that I could pay my rent’.

The above cases indicate that major financial sufferings arose due to job losses, reduced working hours, the non-payment of salaries,

etc. Female Bangladeshi migrants are predominantly engaged as domestic workers. Live-in domestic workers did not lose their due to COVID-19. They suffered from the non-payment of their wages, increased workload and reduced communication with their left-behind family. Nazneen Akhtar, a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia, informed her family that, since the start of the pandemic, her workload had increased manifold especially the duties of washing and cleaning. Due to touching soap so frequently, she had developed a skin condition. Her employer was sympathetic and bought ointment for her. The employer of Shahnaz, another live-in worker, however, deducted the cost of her medical treatment from her salary.

The live-out female domestic workers did suffer job losses. To maintain safety, the employers of live-out domestic workers refused their services. Any decent working conditions would indicate that, even if an employer decides not to allow female migrants inside their home, they should continue to pay their salary, but this was rarely the case.

Live-out domestic workers usually work in more than one house. For example, Saima (28) is a live-out domestic worker in Saudi Arabia who lost both her jobs. The company forced her to sign a paper stating it was no longer able to pay her salary. She was practically on her own outside any healthcare coverage. She was also unable to come back because of the lockdown. Thirty-five years old Shumi Khatun was also employed as a live-out domestic worker. She was working three jobs in three different houses in Dubai. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, two employers refused her services and so she struggled to pay for her food and accommodation on her reduced earnings. Her family stated that she was in distress. Before the pandemic, she would ring home fairly frequently, but could now only do so every ten days.

Section V: Detention

Experience of detention: In the past, when facing a crisis, the destination countries have used migrants as a safety valve. In order to convince their citizens that they are taking decisive steps to reduce the hardship experienced by the people of the country, the policy-

makers of those countries usually identify migrants as ‘others’, and deporting migrants to their country of origin becomes a popular measure (Asian Financial Crisis 1997 and 1999, Global Financial Crisis 2009-10). The same method is employed by many of the labour receiving countries of Bangladesh. From early April 2020, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Maldives started negotiating with the government of Bangladesh to take back irregular Bangladeshi migrant workers. They also offered pardons to convicted migrants if Bangladesh agreed to take them back. The law enforcers in the destination countries also arrest and detain migrants on the pretext of strictly implementing lockdown and combating irregular migrants in order to gather migrants together and subsequently deport them to their country of origin.

Table 4.6 shows that fifty-five percent of the migrants experienced detention/jail³⁷. However, a majority of them were detained during COVID-19. Only a few of them were already serving jail time from before. Chapter 2 showed that 46,000 female migrants returned from various parts of the world during COVID-19, however, the women were not subjected to detention. The interviews took place during June-July, and the female migrants mostly started to return from September onwards. Neither of the two female returnees experienced detention nor had heard of any other female migrants being detained. The highest numbers of interviewees were from UAE, 67 percent of whom experienced detention. Twenty-seven of the involuntarily-returned migrants came from Malaysia and 19 from Saudi Arabia, of whom 33 percent and 56 percent experienced detention, respectively.

37 The percentage of migrants who were detained is over-represented in the data as a large number of the interviews were conducted with migrants who received emergency services at Dhaka Airport. Had the data been collected by following a rigorous methodology of sampling at the village level, then the number of detained migrants would have been lower.

Table 4.6: Experience of detention prior to their involuntary return

Country	No (%)	Yes (%)	Clim. %	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
Bahrain	0.00	100.00	100.00	1
Singapore	100.00	0.00	100.00	2
Others	100.00	0.00	100.00	5
Total No.	45	55	100.00	100

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Migrants who had been detained during COVID-19 in various countries were picked up from different sites, such as shops, on roadside and outside their residence. Twenty-two-year-old Tota Miya, a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia, stated, ‘I was returning home from work after finishing my shift. Police officers in plain clothes stopped me. I produced all of my papers, but they detained me’. Forty-three-year-old Mohan Ali described his experience of being a migrant worker in Qatar as follows, ‘My job did not bring in enough so I sold cigarettes on the side. One of my customers ordered several packets of cigarettes and I was waiting with a packet of cigarettes at a roadside. All of a sudden, the police came and put me in a police car. I tried my best to convince him that I had a valid visa but they put me in jail anyway’. The story of Mohammad Ashraf is even sadder. He said, ‘For a few days, I had nothing to eat. It was Eid. Although it was lockdown, I went out to a local area, and stood in front of a tea stall in the hope that someone might give me something to eat. When the police arrived, everyone else ran away. Assuming that I owned the tea stall, they arrested me’.

Two migrants who returned from Kuwait voluntarily experienced detention. The Kuwaiti government announced a general amnesty for migrants whose visa had expired, stating that, rather than being penalised for remaining in the country illegally, they would be assisted to return to their country of origin. Those who returned from Kuwait explained that, as there was no work and their savings were also disappearing, they had no choice but to go back to Bangladesh. Salam stated, 'For months, I didn't have any work. Every year, we need to save some money to renew our visa. Since I didn't have any work, I was meeting my day-to-day expenditure from my savings, which were starting to run out. Then, the Kuwaiti government declared a general amnesty and, as they advised, we went to our embassy to apply to return to Bangladesh. Once the Bangladesh embassy issued us with a certificate, we submitted it to Kuwaiti authorities and they put us in a detention camp'.

Treatment in the detention camps: After being picked up from different places, the migrants were sent to jail/ detention centres. In the case of Kuwait, once the migrants opted to participate in the general amnesty, they were taken to a detention camp, where the conditions were very poor, with around 200 migrants sharing one toilet. In some cases, they were left to spend the night under the open sky. The majority of migrants who were detained overseas spoke of inhumane treatment, and only a proportion of them felt that they were treated well. Some were subjected to physical assault, the toilet and shower facilities were inadequate, and health issues were ignored. Two to three people had to share a single bed, and the food was very poor quality.

Kajol had few complaints about the food and other facilities in the detention centre. He said, 'I didn't face any major problems in jail. Food was available. What else do you expect? You aren't a guest there, so naturally the food will be poor quality. Nonetheless, I received a piece of bread in the morning, with rice and lentils for dinner and lunch. I was upset because, when they put me in jail, they took my money and cell phone away from me and never returned them'.

Some migrants observed that health and hygiene were severely

compromised in the detention camps. Thirty-eight-year-old Rashid, who was detained in Dubai, stated that, before being arrested, ‘I was told by my office to maintain cleanliness but, while in jail, I wore the same clothes for 28 days. I wore a plastic bag when having a shower. They had one rule for themselves and another for us’.

Thirty-nine-year-old Iqbal remains traumatised by his experience of detention. He revealed that, ‘For four hours, the police wouldn’t give me a glass of water. I had 180 Dirham (US\$ 50) on me. The police took that money. I was then sent to a detention camp. It wasn’t a detention camp per se. I, along with others, was under the open sky, under the scorching sun in the daytime and shivering with cold at night. They did not bother to give me a blanket. I was later transferred to another jail. Altogether I was there for 22 days, wearing the same clothes. If I requested anything I was beaten by the security guards. I was subjected to all of this, despite having a valid visa. Instead of coming to my rescue, my employer handed over my passport to the police, who then sent me back home’.

Section VI: Involuntary return

Chapter two of the book revealed that around 400,000 Bangladeshi workers returned home between 1 April and 27 December 2020 (MoEWOE, 2020)³⁸. At the beginning of November, the Ministry published a nationwide breakdown of returnee migrants. By that point, a total of 227,000 41 had returned, from Saudi Arabia (76,922), followed by UAE (71,903).

The involuntarily-retuned migrants interviewed in this research came from seventeen countries. Table 4.7 shows that the two females returned to Bangladesh immediately prior to lockdown. Of the rest, 98 male migrants (67.34 percent) were forced to return, 9.18 percent were back for a holiday in Bangladesh immediately prior to lockdown and 25.51 percent either opted to return or their employer helped them to do so, some based on a commitment that they might take them back when the situation changes. The returnee migrants

38 Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), 2020, [http://www. old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statistical Data Action](http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statistical>Data>Action)

consist of four types. One group was collected from various places, detained and then deported; another group opted to participate in general amnesty; another group served time in jail and returned with ‘out passes’³⁹; and another group (25.51 percent) opted to return voluntarily from the USA, Uzbekistan, Ukraine and Somalia.

Table 4.7: The nature of the return of the 98 male migrants

Type of return	Male %
Involuntary return	67.34
Opted to return immediately prior to lockdown	7.14
Opted to return	25.51
Percentage and total number	100.00 (98)

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Note: Only two female migrants were interviewed, who returned immediately prior to lockdown.

Although the destination countries vary, the migrants’ experiences of a forced return to Bangladesh are similar. Both Tota Miya and Mohon Ali were deported from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, while Wasim was deported from UAE. His story is similar to that of Tota Miya and Mohan Ali. He said, ‘On 10 June 2020, I was walking near my residence after finishing work for the day. Suddenly, the police came and arrested me. I told them that I had all of the necessary, valid documents but they refused to listen to me. The police remained silent about the reason for my arrest and later threatened to beat me, as I was trying to argue with them. I was thrown into jail, where I stayed for three days. After testing negative for COVID-19, 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 (as high as sixty-eight percent) claimed that their visa had not expired. Many still had a few months on their visa and knew that, in normal circumstances, they would have been able to extend it. The case of Selim illustrates this well. He had been a migrant worker in Kuwait for five years and renewed his visa annually. Usually, migrants in Kuwait save a portion of their income to pay for

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

their visa. When lockdown was imposed, Selim was unable to work and was compelled to spend the money he had saved for a visa on food and accommodation. His savings were almost gone so, when the Kuwaiti government announced a general amnesty, he opted to participate in it. He commented, ‘Although I voluntarily decided to return through participating in the general amnesty, in normal circumstances, I would not have decided to return. Therefore, I would say that my visa did not expire. Knowing that the government would not renew, I was forced to return’.

Table 4.8: Visa status of the involuntarily-returned migrants

Gender	Expired	Not expired	Total No.
Male	31.63	68.37	98
Female	0.00	100.00	2
Total No.	31	69	100

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Section VII: Unpaid wages and other dues

The experiences of Asian migrants who were forced to return during COVID-19 revealed that a large number of them left behind some financial and other assets in their destination country. A substantial majority of these migrants were owed money, including wages in some cases, and some had paid subcontractors or middlemen to renew their visa. Unfortunately, that money is lost as the migrants were unable to obtain a refund from the middlemen. It is common practice among migrants to lend money to each other during times of hardship, based on an assurance that the lender will receive similar assistance if required. Several of the migrants lent money to their co-workers from other countries and failed to recover their money before returning. Almost all of them also left behind some of their belongings in the destination country.

Table 4.9: Unpaid wages and other dues of the involuntarily-returned migrants (each column represents 100 percent response of the migrants)

Resources left	Left resources behind as a %	Did not leave anything behind as a %	Total
Unpaid wages	67.00	33.00	100
Assets	62.00	38.00	100
Payment for visa renewal	7.00	93.00	100
Loans to friends	5.00	95.00	100
Confiscated by the law enforcement agencies	19.00	81.00	100

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Table 4.9 shows that 67 percent of the involuntarily-returned migrants left a portion of their hard-earned income behind in their destination country in the form of unpaid wages/salary, and that a further sixty-two percent behind belongings and assets. Nineteen percent of the migrants had had money confiscated by the law enforcement agencies when they were arrested. Seven percent lost money that they spent renewing their visa and five percent lost money that they lent money to their co-workers.

Fifty-five-year-old Atiq was forced to return from the UAE. In many of the Gulf countries, in certain types of job, full salaries are not paid regularly. Migrant workers are paid a lump sum for subsistence and later, at the end of the year or before they go for holiday, the payments are cleared. Atiq commented, ‘I had been working in a steel factory for 14 years. As part of my payment procedure, I used to receive a small amount every month and, at the end of the year, the owner cleared my dues. I was planning to visit Bangladesh. My employer was supposed to clear of all my dues before I left. It was bad luck that I was arrested and deported. I am still owed around Tk. 500,000, including my last two months’ salary’.

Forty-one-year-old Belal worked in Saudi Arabia for quite some time. He knew a Pakistani who used to be a migrant, and had a connection with the visa renewal authorities. Belal accepted his Pakistani friend’s help with renewing his visa. He commented, ‘My visa would have expired in June 2020. Just before COVID-19, I paid

3,000 Dirham (US\$ 824) to a Pakistani friend of mine to renew my visa. As I was suddenly arrested, I couldn't contact my Pakistani friend so, for all practical purposes, I lost that money'.

Twenty-four-year-old Sabuj was working in Qatar, and lost money that he lent to a friend. He said, 'One of my camp mates from India had a financial emergency back home. He borrowed the equivalent of US\$ 295 from me. There is no way I will get that money back'.

On average, the affected migrants lost US\$ 2060. The highest loss was experienced by Atiq, who lost US\$ 5882 in unpaid wages. The minimum loss was reported by Kalam, who was forced to return from UAE. He had a few Dirham in his pocket, equivalent to US\$ 112, which the law enforcement agencies took when they arrested him.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter contributes to the literature on migrants in crisis situations by examining the pandemic experiences of overseas Bangladeshi workers. Drawing on involuntarily-returned and current migrants' survey data and a secondary analysis of the literature and media reports, the chapter examined Bangladeshi migrants' vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The chapter begins by exploring the health risks and shocks that the migrants faced. It reveals that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladeshi migrants, like all other migrants around the world, were widely exposed to health risks. Data at the national level show that 2,330 Bangladeshis had died worldwide due to COVID-19 by 27 December 2020. The highest number of deaths occurred in Saudi Arabia. Of the two hundred migrants interviewed for this study, one tested positive for COVID-19. Two of the migrants died, one of them in their destination country and the other in Bangladesh within a month of his return. Most of the governments of the destination countries officially included all migrants, irrespective of their visa status, in their healthcare system, but the access of Bangladeshi migrants was hindered for various reasons. Professional and highly-skilled workers clearly did not face any obstacles regarding

accessing healthcare, but migrants with an irregular status did not access healthcare due to a fear of being arrested and deported. One of the deceased might have lived had he emerged from hiding and gone to a hospital. Those who were on a free visa in the Gulf could have accessed healthcare if needed but many of them lacked access to information on the services available. It seems that live-in female migrants were able to access healthcare but that live-out female domestic workers as well as those working in the cleaning industry could not. To be more precise, they were unable to access COVID-19 tests due to a lack of financial resources, as they would have been required to pay for these.

Both the involuntarily-returned migrants and the current migrants, who remained in their destination country, both male and female, experienced various types of anxiety. However, the nature of this anxiety varied between the sexes as well as based on their location and type of work. The male migrants referred to anxiety related to health and finance. Being confined to a room, the prospect of defaulting on loan repayments, distress and a feeling of helplessness due to their inability to send remittances to their left-behind family members, the possibility of their visa expiring, the shutting down of businesses and loss of capital, etc., were highlighted by the male migrants. The live-out female migrants also mentioned similar sources of stress but the sources of the stress experienced by the live-in domestic workers were different, including reduced communication with their family, non- or partial payment of their salary, and an increased workload. Their families at home also felt the migrant workers' COVID-19-related stress when communicating with them.

Short-term migrants, both male and female, experienced job losses, and reduced working hours and income. Only 47 percent of the workers retained their job. Twenty-six percent of these migrants were partially employed and the rest (27 percent) were fully unemployed. The live-in domestic workers retained their jobs, unlike the live-out domestic workers and their male counterparts, who experienced job termination. These women were so vulnerable that they lacked food. The workload of the live-in domestic workers increased and the payment of their wages was delayed.

A very significant finding of the study is that, as during other crisis situations of the past, the destination countries used the forced return of migrants to their country of origin as one method for tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. None of the international normative frameworks or standards were respected by the destination countries when it came to the issue of returning workers to their country of origin as they have not signed many of them. Arrest and detention were two instruments used by some of the Gulf countries to gather migrants for future deportation. A declaration of a general amnesty for those whose visa had expired was another way of promoting deportation. Fifty-five percent of the returnee migrants experienced detention. Arrest and detention were mostly experienced by the male migrants, who were collected from public places, roads or in front of their residence. On average, the male migrants were detained for around 20 days. The majority of them experienced inhuman, degrading treatment while in jail or a detention centres. Some of them were physically assaulted. Most of the detainees wore the same clothing throughout their incarceration. These migrants were subsequently sent back to Bangladesh.

Due to the abrupt nature of their return, many of the migrants left behind a portion of their hard-earned income in their destination country. Sixty-seven percent of the migrants were owed wages, while sixty-two percent left behind assets and belongings in their destination country. Nineteen percent of the migrants had money, a mobile phone, a watch, etc., confiscated by the law enforcement agencies during their arbitrary arrest, while seven percent lost large sums of money which they paid to intermediaries for the annual renewal of their visa.

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 regarding the treatment of migrants during emergency situations. A lack of policy in the host countries created a situation whereby, during the crisis period, migrants suffered great insecurity in respect to their food, accommodation, health and wages.

The experiences of migrants in the destination countries during the COVID-19 pandemic have clearly demonstrated the need for the effective implementation of global labour standards. They also indicate that all of the destination and labour-sending countries need to put emergency guidelines in place that protect the basic rights of migrants. These emergency guidelines need to be sensitive to both male and female migrants and also both regular migrants and those with an irregular status.

CHAPTER V

SECURITY AND INSECURITY IN DESTINATION AND ORIGIN

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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 conflict (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 securitising migration. Migrant workers are depicted as a 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 the diaspora returned to Bangladesh. From 1 April to 30 December 2020, a total of 400,000 migrants returned to Bangladesh from different countries (WEWD, 2020).⁴⁰ This chapter investigates-

(i) the securitisation of migrations in their destination country, (ii) the insecurity and vulnerability of migrants upon their return to Bangladesh (iii) the securitising acts of the state and society in Bangladesh and (iv) the personal insecurity of migrants due to securitisation.

40 According to a report by the Bangladesh Wage Earners’ Welfare Desk at Shahjalal International Airport.

Barry Busan et al. (1998) provided a concrete conceptual framework of securitisation. He defined securitisation as a deliberate action of purposeful actors who framed new or previously ignored challenges as existential threat to the survival and wellbeing of people, state and international communities. Interested actors through speech act create justification for requiring emergency measures and state actions outside the normal bounds of political process. The outcomes of securitisation are greater resource allocation, legal reform and militarization of the issue. This book follows Barry Busan's definition of securitisation.

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

Section II: The conceptual framework

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 have been added to the security discourse under the broad heading of non-traditional security (NTS). In some parts of the world, non-military threats are considered to exceed the military strength of certain prospective enemy states. The discourse on NTS, therefore, calls for the widening of the field of security studies to include economic, environmental, health and social problems (Booth, 1991, Wæver, 1995, Ayoob, 1997). It is within this emerging discourse that population movement (specifically cross- border migration, the spread of infectious diseases, transnational organised crime, such as the smuggling of

weapons and narcotics and human trafficking, natural disasters, etc.) has been treated as a security concern.

Teitelbaum (2002) first systematically added migration to the security discourse. He perceived migration to be an existential threat to the communities of origin, arguing that the large scale- trans-border population movements of refugees and other migrants affect the stability of the destination societies and generate political and social conflict. Movements is associated with a risk of facilitating

terrorism and international criminal activities between the countries of origin and the destination countries. Therefore, he prescribed 'securitisation' measures that transgress the usual political boundaries and also emergency measures, such as border control or introducing tighter immigration policies, to deal with the insecurity arising due to migration. d'Appollonia (2015: 37) and Farny (2016: 4) stated that migration might lead to disintegration and potential radicalization. Buzan, Wæver and Japp de Wilde (1998) examined migration as a non-traditional issue from the perspective of social cohesion. They argue that population influxes from another community with distinct characteristics can change the identity of the receiving community by altering the population's composition and can, therefore, be viewed as a threat to the latter's identity. However, Buzan et al (1998) showed that the challenge of migration can not be met by securitising it and that, rather, such initiatives will merely result in increased exploitation, discrimination, injustice and even harassment and abuse regarding migrants. When migration is securitised, this can create a new threat to the personal security of migrants. The interpretation of migrants as a threat to social stability or economic opportunities contributes to a coercive response on the part of the host community and migrants may fall prey to abuse and unequal treatment. Such treatment will breach all seven elements of personal security (economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security), thereby making the migrant community a highly vulnerable group. Migrants with an irregular status 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 the emerging drug-resistant Tuberculosis (TB) strains and Ebola has also attracted significant policy attention. This has led to growing interest among academics working in the fields of international relations and security studies regarding the securitization of infectious diseases to protect both the state and individuals (Caballero-Anthony, 2006: 106). However, given the rapid shifts in the global environment and dynamic interplay between various pandemic-related hazards, it is possible that the securitisation of infectious diseases may no longer constitute an effective response to these threats. Addressing a pandemic requires the participation of a large range of actors. Therefore, while securitising infectious diseases may offer a decisive approach for responding to such serious threats, other approaches must be added if such complex problems are to be handled in a systematic, coordinated manner (*ibid*, 106).

A complex relationship exists between cross-border movement 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 take the virus with them (Skeldon, 2000, UNDP, 2004, Sikder, 2008, Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011). In a paper on HIV/AIDS and migration, IOM (2002:2) states that population mobility and HIV/AIDS are linked to the conditions and structures of the migration process, including in the communities of origin, during transit, in the destination country and upon 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 spouse, to whom they return at periodic intervals.

It is unsurprising 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 towards 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 increased the xenophobia regarding migrants in their destination countries. Several states have created a paradoxical ‘quasi-quarantine’ which

leads to a regime of segregation. Therefore, it seems that the longer-term implication for migration policy is a move towards the tighter control of mobility, and social inclusion (*ibid*). During crises, the securitisation of a certain group is not new. From terrorism to disease outbreaks, migrants have often been made the scapegoat and perceived as placing the native population at risk (UN, 2020).

The securitisation of migration after the COVID-19 outbreak has resulted in increased health risks for migrants, a lack of access to healthcare, a loss of job and income, etc. Involuntary return is one of the most important outcomes of the securitisation of migration during the pandemic. Venezuelan migrants living in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru have been forced to return. Unfortunately, they found it difficult 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 might potentially spread COVID-19 in their country of origin (UN, 2020). As potential virus carriers, migrants also face growing hostility. Many Ethiopian, Indian and Nepalese returnee migrants reported that, on their return, their family 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 have been forced to return home face a high risk of unemployment. The prospect of finding work appeared especially grim within the first few months after the pandemic broke out. A lack of jobs and uncertainty made individuals vulnerable to self-harm and depression (Bhattacharya, Banerjee and Rao, 2020). Since returning to their country of origin, without any money or savings, they became the victims of economic stigma⁴¹. There are also reports of increasing gender-based domestic violence being committed against female returnee migrants (IOM, 2020b, UN Women, 2020 and HRW, 2020).

41 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 of the labour sending 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 affect the migrants' ability to integrate into their own society. This not only threatens migrants and their families' well-being, but also weakens individuals and their families' social resilience, thus increasing their insecurity and vulnerability.

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 the absence of strategies for coping with emergency situations increase the vulnerability of the migrants during their return journey, starting from their destination country to their place of origin.

Section III: Methodology

In order to meet the objectives of the research, the paper primarily employs 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 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 to 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 participants' circumstances. The case profiles were based on data obtained from the interviews with the returnee migrants and the current migrants' household members, together with other sources.

Section IV: Treating migrants as a security threat in their destination country

When the major migrant-receiving countries' economies were directly affected by the rapid outbreak of COVID-19, they introduced multilevel restrictive measures (i.e., mass COVID-19 testing, temporary lockdowns, amnesties, market closures, sanctions, involuntary deportations, etc.) to monitor and prevent the spread of COVID-19 among both local and foreign migrant workers. These state policies threatened major sectors that employ huge numbers foreign migrant workers, who were unable to return to their country of origin, even if they wished to, due to the restricted movement in both their destination country as well as their country of origin (İçduygu, 2020: 1-3). Many of the receiving countries identified migrants as a security threat and used involuntarily return as a response to COVID-19 (UNNM, 2020). For example, Saudi Arabia struggled to contain the COVID-19 outbreak and so deported migrant workers as one solution. By mid-April, due to the pandemic, Saudi Arabia had deported nearly 2,900 Ethiopians. In May, Saudi Arabia was accused by the Houthi Authorities of Yemen of deporting and abandoning 800 Somali Migrants on the desert frontier against their will. As a result of the growing concerns about the virus in Yemen, these migrants suffered both verbal and physical abuse⁴².

Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Maldives urged the Government of Bangladesh to repatriate tens of thousands of undocumented workers, officials from the Ministry of Home and Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment stated at a press conference on 5 April 2020.⁴³ The government of UAE threatened to end labour relations with countries that refused to receive their citizens back. It also considered placing strict quotas on work visas for citizens of states which did not comply with the

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

43 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#>

repatriation policy.⁴⁴ Subsequently, the government of Bangladesh agreed to receive its workers back⁴⁵.

Four hundred thousand Bangladesh workers were involuntarily repatriated between March and December 2020. Of the 100 returnee migrants who participated in this study, 18 reported being arrested by the police while going out to work or shop. These migrant workers used to work in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and Malaysia. On the other hand, of the 100 migrants' households who participated in this study, 48 also stated that their migrant workers in their destination country were insecure because of the COVID-19 situation. The migrants informed their left-behind household members that they could be arrested and repatriated at any moment, as they were regarded as a threat in terms of spreading COVID-19.

Khalilur Rahman (30) worked for a welding company in Dubai for four years. When the authorities announced the lockdown, all work ceased. Under these dire conditions, he found work in a nearby fruit shop, which operated during breaks in the curfew. The police raided his workplace, arrested him and confiscated his passport. He was jailed for 22 days, then sent back to his country of origin. The misery of the returnee migrant workers appears to be a shared experience during the pandemic, no matter in which country they were. Twenty-four-year-old Abdur Rahim had a job repairing roads in Malaysia, and described how he visited the local market to buy essentials. A police officer came up to him and said that he had to take a COVID-19 test. He was asked to get into the police car. He assumed that he would be taken to a hospital but was instead taken to a jail. He was detained for five days before being sent back home, empty-handed. He stated, 'The police sent me back even though I had a work permit and my visa was valid. I begged them, but they wouldn't listen.'

44 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>

45 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).

Their hearts couldn't be melted. I was treated unfairly, despite the fact that all of my papers were up to date. The majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers faced a similar situation. In fact, no one could see us, neither the government of our country nor the government of Malaysia'.

Subramaniam (2020) found that migrant workers faced persistent prejudice and discrimination in the Gulf and Southeast Asian countries during COVID-19. He documented that, across the Gulf countries, certain media figures and actors made xenophobic statements. A South Asian migrant worker, who worked at the Saudi oil giant company named 'ARAMCO', was seen wearing a surgical mask and a human-sized hand sanitiser dispenser and seemed to be walking around offering sanitising services to staff members inside and outside one of its buildings⁴⁶. Subramaniam also provided examples of similar xenophobic acts in Malaysia, including a senior minister declaring that the responsibility for feeding migrants during COVID-19 should lie with the embassies of their country of origin. The Malaysian authorities did, in fact, supply food to migrants in some locations but there were xenophobic outcries on social media questioning why the government should supply these workers with food (Subramaniam, 2020).

Hayat Al-Fahad, a well-known actress, informed a broadcaster that Kuwait should expel migrants (who make up two-thirds of the Kuwaiti population) 'into the desert', to free up hospital beds for Kuwaitis⁴⁸. Safaa Al-Hashem, a Kuwaiti MP, made similar statements, and called for the expulsion of migrants in order to 'purify' the country (Batta, 2020). In Saudi Arabia, some blamed migrants for spreading the virus due to a failure to observe social distancing.⁴⁷ Al Yourm newspaper reported that Saudi nationals living

46 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>

47 The picture went viral on social media and attracted fierce criticism and considered act as "racist" and "classist" and the ARAMACO later apologised for their action. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/11/saudi-aramco-slammed-over-migrant-worker-dressed-as-sanitiser> 49 Yee, V. (2020, *ibid*).

in Al Khobar province felt resentful towards 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 sanitisation. Saudis are urging the government officials to take action, including the deportation of migrants’⁴⁸. The incidence of hate speech also grew during the initial months of the pandemic.

Section V: Migrants’ treatment upon their arrival in Bangladesh Airport:

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has past experience of dealing with the emergency return of Bangladeshi migrants during the Iraq/Kuwait war of 1990, during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002-2003, and the Libyan civil war (from 2014 to date). Nevertheless, the Coronavirus outbreak revealed that a new form of preparedness is required from the authorities with regard to handling health crises. As per the instructions of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), involuntarily-returned migrants are expected to 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, the poor implementation of self-quarantine and fear generated by the media led to the more stringent application of self-quarantine.

When migrant workers returned to Bangladesh, in dire straits, they faced mixed experiences at their country of origin’s airport, and had to wait for a long time. Of the 100 returnee migrants, 87 percent reported that they had to spend an average of 5.5 hours at the airport, with some spending up to nine hours. The airport authorities provided only bread and bananas. Even drinking water was unavailable. Since

48 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://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/deport-illegal-migrant-workers-spreading-covid-19-in-saudi-arabia-say-angry-residents-1.73505961>

they felt hungry, some had to buy food from the shops inside the airport, which was very expensive. Thus, while waiting, the migrants were in need of a proper meal. Forty-four-year-old Monir, who returned from Qatar, stated, 'Our plane landed in Bangladesh at 4am. At around 9am, we were offered bread and bananas. We were kept at the airport for examination. I couldn't leave the airport until 4pm, feeling famished. I heard that others, who arrived earlier, received Tk. 5000 to reach home. We were not that lucky'. Nurul Alam, a returnee migrant from UAE, stated that there was much room for improvement regarding the conducting of the official formalities with migrants at the airport. Khalilur Rahman was disappointed by the officials' attitude and body language at the airport. He said, 'They looked at us as if returnee migrants could infect them with the virus'. At the airport, the migrants did not take a COVID-19 test. A number of migrants stated that the scanner which was used to measure their body temperature was not working, although the majority of the migrants reported that their body temperature was checked. Twenty-eight-year-old Hasanuz Zaman, a returnee migrant from Malaysia, reported that his body temperature was slightly raised, so the airport authorities secluded him in a separate room, then later released him. He was not instructed to remain at the Haji camp for the mandatory 14-day quarantine. Most of the returnee migrants also reported that, for their own safety, they were asked to remain in quarantine at home for 14 days. The contact number of Upazila Health Complex was provided in case of any health problems.

Twenty-five-year-old Saiful Islam, a returnee migrant from Saudi Arabia, reported that, as the doctor at the airport suspected that he had Coronavirus, he was immediately transferred to the Haji camp. Mosquitoes and flies were everywhere and he had to spend 14 days in agony. He further claimed that a few returnees at the Haji camp did not stay longer than two days and bribed the guards to allow them to leave the camp. Since he had returned to Bangladesh empty-handed, he could not escape the 14-day quarantine like some others did.

Migrants who returned to Bangladesh during April and May received Tk. 5,000 (US\$ 60) from the government. The involuntarily-returned migrants who were interviewed for this study returned after

the government scheme ended. Twenty-six of them were given food packages and Tk. 2,000 (US\$ 23) to cover their journey home by non-government organisations.

When migrant workers return to their country of origin, their family usually comes to the airport to welcome them, but this was impossible during lockdown. The main problem for the returnee migrants was that they had to arrange transport to their village of origin because, due to lockdown, transport facilities were unavailable. They also did not receive any assistance from the government in this regard. They had to pay an exorbitant charge to a vehicle operator. One respondent, Latif, who returned from UAE was drugged on his way home and reached home two days later. He said that he found himself lying at the roadside, with all of his belongings gone.

Once arriving in their village, the migrants observed that their family members appeared hugely anxious. Twenty-six-year-old Sagor Hossain, a returnee migrant from Malaysia, stated that his family behaved strangely when he arrived, fearing that he might be infected with COVID-19, which made him feel emotionally vulnerable.

Involuntary repatriation is often a source of distress for migrants. In addition, it has a detrimental influence on the emotional well-being of their community (Virupaksha, Kumar and Nirmala, 2014: 233). The provision for psychological assistance, incorporating local knowledge of mental health and wellbeing, can enable the affected individuals and communities to cope with challenging situations of this kind. It helps to transform 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 community level, which the migrants initially needed for stress management to reduce their shock and stress. Only eight of the returnee migrants, including two female migrants, reported that they received counseling from a Non- government Organisation (NGO). Shumi Khatun stated that she felt more positive after receiving the counseling but later became depressed again due to her uncertain future.

Section VI: The process and outcome of securitisation

Media: Shortly after the COVID-19 outbreak, the electronic and print media carried reports that migrants were spreading COVID-19. They were increasingly accused of transferring the virus from overseas. Both the electronic and print media, without realising the negative consequences of securitisation for 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 flown above their home to identify their household as containing migrants and, therefore, the virus⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰.

After the COVID-19 outbreak, in order to contain the virus, the radio/TV announcements issued by the authorities asked the general public to report if they encountered any person who had recently arrived from abroad. This created panic among the locals, who then regarded migrants as carriers of the virus. Migrants were branded ‘dangerously infected people’ in certain areas and communities. In order to enforce quarantine, the authorities marked migrant houses with red flags. This resulted in outlasting those families by service providers, such as shops and restaurants. Seeking medical treatment became very difficult for the households whose migrant member had returned. A few involuntarily-returned migrants experienced abuse and discrimination. RMMRU (2020)⁵¹ mentioned incidents whereby migrants experienced physical attacks and extortion. The Migrant Rights Organisations brought the issue before the policymakers and the authorities swiftly changed the TV/radio/public service announcements which were creating such prejudice against migrants.

Harassment at the local level: The interviews with the involuntarily-returned migrants took place between May and July. By then,

49 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](http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Open-Letter-to-PM- in-English.pdf)

50 The Daily Star (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>

51 RMMRU (2020), Situation Report, 2020

the negative speech-acts which securitised the migrants has been reduced significantly. This is reflected in the survey data. A total of 88 respondents did not face any harassment in their locality, and only 12 respondents faced verbal and other forms of abuse. A few of them were asked by shopkeepers not to enter their shops. Mohon Ali stated that, even after observing quarantine, he could not go anywhere, such as shopping. When he went out after 25 days, the people in his neighbourhood threatened him. Later, he had to inform the police to protect his safety. After a final check by the doctor, he could 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.

Forty-year-old Shimul Hossain, a 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 refused to abide by this instruction, the local political leaders and activists threatened him. Fifty-seven-year-old Kazi Mansur Khaiaam, a returnee migrant from the USA, reported that one of his neighbours behaved negatively when he went to visit his sister. He was told to leave the house as fast as possible. He added, '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 imply that there was a lack of reliable information about how to reduce the discrimination and stigmatisation experienced by migrant workers. The RMMRU Report highlights that the media did not address this issue sensitively. Initially, both the electronic and print media reported numerous times that returnee migrants were the source of the spread of the virus throughout the country⁵².

The interview data also reveal that, of the involuntarily-returned migrants who were instructed to observe quarantine for 14 days, 85 complied. Selim stated, 'I personally felt the need to observe quarantine for the safety of my family members. A person from

52 RMMRU. (2020, *ibid*).

UNO⁵³ visited my house to check whether I was following the government order or not. Not out of embarrassment or fear, I obeyed because of my own family's safety'. Some migrants could not always follow the government's safety advice, however, due to being in dire need of an income to survive. Sabour Miah stated, 'If I'd stayed at home, there was no way to provide food for my family. The important thing for me at that time was to an income to ensure the survival of my family members. He explained during the interview, 'How can I maintain quarantine if there's no income? Where would the food come from, if I stay at home doing nothing? This quarantine and forantaine⁵⁴ are funny words and useless to me'. In this context, Sabour Miah's 'forantaine' is significant; it implies a recognition that, without a social protection policy, it would be difficult to convince any helpless, negatively-affected person, like a returnee migrant, to obey the law. Providing subsistence for their family members outweighs all other issues. This brings us to the next section, that discusses the threats to the migrants' personal security.

Section VII: Threats to the migrants' personal security

Two types of insecurity were highlighted by the involuntarily-returned migrants: psychological insecurity and income insecurity. Eighty-four percent of the involuntarily-returned migrants and also the left-behind members of the current migrants' households faced social and income insecurity. A large number of the involuntarily-returned migrant workers were the sole income earner in their family. Since their income had disappeared, the tension in the family had heightened. During the COVID-19 period, local jobs are scarce, which 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 reported that they had been running their household by borrowing money from relatives and the local *mohajons*⁵⁵. Only a few had been living on

53 UpazilaNirbahi (Executive) Officer

54 Forantaine(ফরেন্টাইনে)- an ironic term.

55 Local moneylenders.

their savings. It is difficult to find a job during lockdown. Migrants are also status conscious. Karan stated, 'I can not just take any job that's available. After living in Saudi Arabia for four years, I have developed a certain status in society. I can not compromise that'. The migrants were reluctant to take out a bank loan to start a business. Sobur said that he had been informed by WARBE⁵⁶ about an option to take out a loan with Probashi Kallyan Bank⁵⁷ to start a business. He was not keen to start a new business from scratch since he had been overseas for a long time and had little idea about the current agricultural and non-agricultural enterprises. Since most migrants worked in the construction and manufacturing industries abroad, it would be challenging for them to start a business. Moreover, 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 returns to normal again.

Children's education and the household members' healthcare also suffered due to a lack of income. Shumi Khatun's son, Ismot, was in class 4 but his school was closed. Her mother, who looked after Ismot, stated that she had to cancel his private tutor as her daughter could not send any remittances. Omor Siddiqui's father needs blood pressure tablets. He also has some more health complications. He does not know how to buy his father's medicine in the coming months. It is clear that migrants are not a security threat but that, rather, their security is under threat.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter found that Bangladeshi migrants were securitised both in their destination country as well as following their return to Bangladesh. It also identified the grave consequences of securitization, manifested in the personal security among the migrants and their household members.

This chapter demonstrates that migrants lack a voice in their destination country, and that it is relatively easy to securitise

56 Welfare Association of Repatriated of Bangladeshi Employees

57 The Expatriates Welfare Bank.

them. In the destination countries, the media securitised migrants by reporting that they are one of the major sources of the spread of COVID-19. The media highlighted that migrants were failing to observe the strict rules regarding lockdown. Some of them left their residence in order to seek work, food or medicine. All of these survival activities were seen as making the citizens of the destination countries vulnerable to the virus. The media reports also helped the authorities to justify their decision to send more than 400,000 workers back to Bangladesh during COVID-19.

Unfortunately, the securitisation of the migrants did not end when they left their destination country, as they faced the same kind of securitisation by speech acts in their homeland as well. The government functionaries provided their services to the migrants at the airport with great fear and suspicion of contamination. Some of the airport officials even went so far as to remark, for example, that these less educated migrants, who did not care about the safety of others, were placing the government functionaries at risk, demonstrating by their expressions that the migrants' return had placed the country in great danger.

When the migrants returned to their village, the local population treated them badly. At first, the migrants were verbally abused, and their household members were even denied access to the local market. After a few months, the attitude of the local population changed slightly. The migrants who returned after June faced less hostility from their community compared with those who returned earlier. Nonetheless, the local population, politicians and government functionaries abused their power and authority over some of these migrant families. Accessing day-to-day consumables was problematic for some because of the unnecessarily strict supervision, to the extent that one migrant was asked to go into quarantine again 25 days after he returned.

In some cases, the migrants were saddened by how they were treated by their household members, who expressed their dissatisfaction, either verbally or through their body language. The major concern was, naturally, financial insecurity, but nonetheless most of the family members displayed limited awareness of the psychological

trauma that the migrants experienced upon their return.

COVID-19 was severely affecting the personal security of the migrants during the interview period. A lack of jobs and income were the major sources of human insecurity for the migrant households. Maintaining their day-to-day subsistence became problematic for the majority of those migrants. Borrowing money became their major source for meeting their day-to-day needs. Along with food intake, children's education was compromised. The migrant households cancelled their private tutors, and the family's healthcare also suffered, particularly that of the elderly members. Purchasing medicine became challenging for a few families.

CHAPTER VI

UNDERSTANDING THE GAPS: THE NATIONAL STATISTICS AND THE HOUSEHOLD REMITTANCE FLOW

Selim Reza, Tasneem Siddiqui, Yar Mahbub Chowdhury
Saira Afrin

COVERID-19 inflicted major, unprecedented economic shocks on migrants and their households, due to migrants' reduced remittance flow to their households. In this context, this chapter examines the impact of COVID-19 on the remittance flow and Bangladeshi migrants' households by drawing on the primary data collected from various types of migrants' families. By comparing the narratives of the migrants' family members with the interpretation of the statistical data, the chapter argues that the high figure for the remittance flow does not match the actual amount of remittances received by the households. The transfer of remittances to Bangladesh has increased for many reasons, and does not necessarily mean that the majority of migrants possess sufficient income to remit.

This chapter is divided into six sections. After this introductory one, section two provides a literature review of the role of remittances in household food and other types of consumption. Section three highlights the global scenario regarding the remittance flow during COVID-19 and the flow predicted by multilateral bodies during 2020. Section four presents the national statistics on the remittance flow to Bangladesh in 2020 and also discusses selected migrant households'

experience of receiving remittances. Section five discusses the probable impact of the reduced remittance flow on the food and nutritional status of the families, their children's education, any debts repayments and the pre-existing health concerns of the households. Section six attempts to find out the reasons behind the gaps between the increased flow of remittances at the national level and the decreased flow of remittances at the household level. Section seven draws the major conclusions and provides several recommendations.

Section II: Literature review

International migration and the transfer of remittances are inseparable. The outcome of international migration has a significant impact on the development of both the sending and receiving countries. The money and goods that migrant workers send back to their household is usually called remittances (Adams and Cuecuecha, 2010). Remittances have a range of effects at the national, local and household levels, that are generally positive. Remittances help to reduce the poverty of a country, enhance its economic growth and development level, and promote consumption. In the context of development, migration and remittances are interlinked. These three terms share a very close relationship regarding the economic and social development of the destination countries. One of the most important factors that affect the economic relations between developed and developing countries is international migration (Adams & Page, 2005). Migration has economic benefits for both the sending and receiving countries. Remittances have become an important method for resource transfer at the start of the 21st century (Adam & Cuecuecha, 2010).

It was found that, due to increased migration, poverty reduced to 20 percent in Nepal between 1995 and 2004, even though the poverty rate was estimated to increase from 30 to 34 percent without migration (Lokshin, Bontch-Osmolovski & Glinskaya, 2010). This clearly represents a positive impact of remittances. The same applies to various South American countries. In Latin America, international remittances have reduced poverty by 0.4 percent (Acosta, Fajnzylber & López, 2007). Such case studies provide evidence of migration and remittances having a positive impact regarding a country's national

development. In some countries, remittances may constitute over 50 percent of the recipient's total domestic earnings. Remittances represent a more stable source of poverty reduction than do other capital flows (United Nations, 2010). Poverty reduction can occur for several reasons, but remittances are a major factor in reducing poverty.

According to the International Organisation of Migration (IOM, 2017), there were 150.3 million international labour migrants in 2013 (old Data) and a total of USD 429 billion remittances was sent to developing countries in 2016. The importance of remittances in the context of the labour sending countries, particularly in South Asia, is crucial. The usual trends in 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. Remittances constitute an important proportion of the GDP of the majority of South Asian countries. Nepal's remittance-to-GDP ratio was 28 percent in 2017, which made the country one of the top five countries worldwide regarding the 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 East and Southeast Asian countries, who contribute the bulk of foreign currency to the state coffers. Remittances are an important pillar of Bangladesh's economy and the second-largest source of foreign currency after exports, accounting for 5.8 percent of GDP in 2019 (GoB, 2019). In addition to remittances, the government of Bangladesh also believes that migration, along with health and education, will contribute to the SDG goals that the UN is hoping to achieve by 2030 (Siddiqui, 2016).

Generally, remittances are a reliable source of finance for increasing the capacity of households to meet their basic needs, such as food, clothing and housing (Giuliano & Ruiz-Arranz, 2009). In this sense, remittances significantly contribute to the finances of migrants' households and increase the household members' standard of living. A huge amount of the remittances, over ninety percent (Lipton, 1980), sent by migrants, is used for consumption, mainly related to

the food, nutrition, healthcare, etc., of the household members. In the rural areas of Bangladesh, remittances are a reliable source for covering the daily expenses of the migrants' households. Regarding the differences in consumption and saving behaviour between the remittance receiving and non-receiving households in rural Bangladesh, Haider, Hossain and Siddiqui (2016) found that the monthly consumption of the former is, on average, US\$ 32 higher than that of the latter. Case studies like this provide evidence of how remittances are changing consumption behaviour, as households that receive remittances usually spend more than households that do not.

Remittances are used for various consumption-related purposes, like food, non-food items (clothing, shoes, utilities, cosmetics, stationary, festivals, donations, travel and entertainment), housing, durable goods (fridges, TVs, furniture, ornaments, computers, mobile phones, solar panels, etc.), medical treatment, education and investment. Among these different purposes, remittances are mainly spent on food.

After food, about 20.71 percent of remittances are spent on non-food items. Investment is the least popular choice, with about 1.52 percent of remittances being invested (Kumar, Hossain, & Osmani, 2018). The expenditure pattern of migrant households in Bangladesh also shows that a significant proportion of remittances is spent on non-durable items that require the involvement of non-migrant people for production purposes. Shera and Meyer (2013) found that consumption that occurs locally can have a positive impact on the community by providing non-migrants with jobs and income. This is confirmed by empirical evidence that consumption by migrant households can, via multiplier effects, generate income 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 of and human welfare in the recipient countries (Ratha, 2016). Remittances play an important role in the economic development of migrant workers and their family at the micro-level. One of the most common uses of remittances is to enhance the capacity of the migrant worker's family to repay loans. Usually, migrant workers suffer huge debt

while migrating to a new country as they borrow from relatives and neighbours to meet the cost of migration. Castles and Miller (2009) explain that, frequently, it is members of the middle class living in areas that are undergoing economic and social change that migrate rather than the poor. It was found that 46 percent of remittances sent to the Philippines were being used to repay the receiving family's debts (Lowe, 2012). In most cases from developing countries, the migrant worker is the main income generator in the family but, even if this is not the case, repaying the loan to migrate creates an economic crisis for the family. Remittances help to clear this debt and remove the burden from the family. The overseas employment of the migrant workers prevents their family members from struggling to repay the migration loan.

Moreover, remittances positively influence children's education around the world. According to Adams and Page (2005), households that receive remittances tend to spend more on health, and housing and also about 45-58 percent more on education than households that do not receive remittances. In Mexico, Lopez Cardova (2005) found that remittances positively affected children's school attendance, as did Hanson and Woodruff (2003) specifically in the case of 10-15-year-girls. Due to remittances, the chance of students dropping out of school falls over time. Many regions of the world have experienced the positive effects of remittances on education. Proposing that remittances may possibly benefit the poor to overcome resource limitations, Calero, Bedi and Sparrow (2009) found that remittances tended to increase school enrolment among poor children in Ecuador. Meanwhile, Yang (2008) found that remittances have many positive impacts on household income and investment in the Philippines, which helps children to continue with their education). Based on these studies, it can be claimed that remittances have a positive impact on children's education around the world. Remittances not only increase the attendance of students at educational institutions, but also reduce the dropout rate among students. They have been found to be responsible for increasing girls' education in different parts of the world where religious rules are more strictly followed, such as in countries like Jordan (Cagatay, Mert, Koska & Artal-Tur, 2019).

Remittances can also ensure better healthcare, such as maternal and child health. In developing countries, remittances are often used to securing better healthcare for the household which, in turn, lowers infant and maternal mortality, and improves the nutritional status of both mother and child. Once remittances are used to increase the household's food consumption, pregnant woman can access more nutritious food, which impacts on both their own health and their fetus' growth. Since a low birth weight is one of the main factors associated with infant mortality, good nutrition for pregnant women is important in reducing the number of infant deaths. When the government expenditure on health is insufficient, the population faces difficulties regarding health issues in developing countries. In this case, if low-income households can receive remittances, this basically increases their income distribution and makes it easier for them to access healthcare services.

Section III: Concerns over the remittance flow to developing countries

Global scenario: The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously affected the income of migrant workers and the flow of remittances to their household. Many labour sending countries, such as the Philippines, Tajikistan and Brazil, have experienced double-digit drops in remittance flows since the outbreak of the virus (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 would be the steepest decline in history. This prediction was largely based on a fear that the economic downturn and health situation would leave many migrants unemployed or, in some cases, force them to return to their country or origin. In this context, the South Asian countries were forecast to be the worst victims (Majumder et al, 2020; Das, 2020).

Probable impact of the reduced flow on the left-behind families: It is well recognised that a reduced flow of remittances will affect the national economies of many labour sending countries. Their balance of payments may become negative. More importantly, it is likely to pose a major challenge to the migrants' left-behind household. The

impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants' households are still not fully known as very few empirical studies have focused on this area. A few studies of migrant households in Nepal, the Philippines and India offer some insights into the proportion of remittances in the family income and the reduced household consumption during the pandemic.

Bista et al (2020) assessed the economic impact of COVID-19 and its link to the economy of Nepal, and found that the remittance flow had reduced since the Nepalese migrant workers were unable to remit as normal during the pandemic. Chaudhary (2020) and Koirala and Acharya (2020) noted similar changes, i.e., reduced income and consumption among migrants' households, which have affected Nepal's overall economic growth in Nepal. Moreover, the family members of the Indian migrant workers had experienced a decline in their income and consumption due to changes in the remittance flow, whereby COVID-19 had created a serious health concern for them (Khanna, 2020). In the Philippines, household consumption accounts for 70 percent of GDP. The fall in wages and loss of employment among Filipino migrant workers have affected household consumption as it is heavily dependent on remittance (Murakami, Shimizutani & Yamada, 2020). The sudden economic recession due to 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 instability among migrants' households.

Section IV: The predicted and actual remittance flow

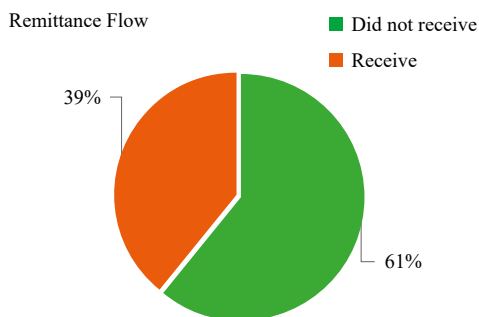
Prediction regarding Bangladesh: In April 2020, the World Bank forecast that, due to the pandemic, the remittance flow to Bangladesh might fall by as much as 22 percent that year, with a predicted 20 percent decline in the remittance flow worldwide (World Bank, 2020). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) forecast that Bangladesh would be among the five worst hit developing Asian economies in terms of remittance flow. In the worst-case scenario, Bangladesh's remittances were predicted to decline by 27.8 percent from the 2019 level (USD15.5 billion; ADB, 2020).

Remittance flow at the national level: As seen in chapter II, the remittance flow to Bangladesh did reduce during the first few months of the year 2020, but then began to increase from May onwards. It increased at such a rate that, by the end of 2020, the total amount of remittances to Bangladesh stood at US\$ 21.74 Billion, which was 18.6 percent higher than the previous year. The World Bank and ADB prediction has proved incorrect, at least to date.

In this context, the overarching research question that this chapter will address is that, while the national remittance rate is increasing, why is this not being reflected in the migrants' households? Are all of the migrants' households receiving remittances? What about female migrants' households? To answer these questions, this chapter is built upon the empirical data collected on the recent remittance flow received by 200 Bangladeshi migrant households during COVID-19.

Remittance flow at the household level: Figure 6.1 shows that 61 percent of the migrants' households studied did not receive any remittances for the three months from March 2020. While only 39 percent of the households received remittances, the average amount remitted was Tk. 53,500. As in its neighbouring countries, such as India, Nepal, and the Philippines, Bangladesh's migrant households are significantly dependent on remittances and thus the reduced flow of remittances during the pandemic has led to a loss of income and expenditure for them.

Figure 6.1: Remittance flow at the household level



Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

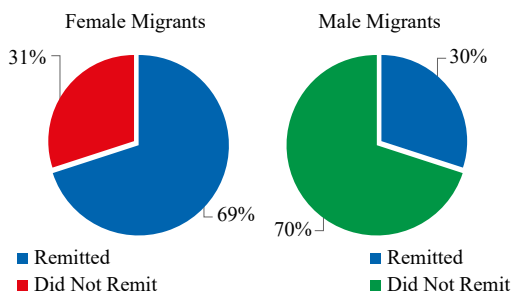
Majnu is an secondary school student, whose father has been a migrant worker in Oman for over six years. During the interview, he stated that his family had six members, including his grandparents, mother, nine-year-old brother and four-year-old sister. The remittances sent by his father were the family's sole source of income, which they spent on basic necessities and their day-to-day living costs. Majnu stated, 'COVID-19 has brought misery to our daily life. My father has been unemployed for the last three months and can not send remittances. It is too difficult to survive now'. This statement shows that the loss of a job due to COVID-19 has meant that a migrant worker can no longer send remittances to his family, which has severely affected their standard of living. The family members not only spend less but also borrow from others to meet their daily expenses. This loss of income has affected their ability to cover their basic needs, such as food, clothing, healthcare and education.

A World Bank study on Bangladeshi migrant workers found that that the average cost of migration was US\$ 2300, which is almost five times Bangladesh's per capita income of US\$ 480 (Sharma & Zaman, 2009). Since the majority of aspirant migrants come from lower income households, they tend to finance their migration by borrowing money, mortgaging their property, taking out a loan from the recruitment agencies with monthly interest rates etc. Because of the high interest rates on their loans (ranging from 3-5 percent per month to 100 percent per year), the migrants usually have to repay the loan over several years. This arrangement results in a huge reduction in their monthly earnings in the destination country over a long period. In this context, COVID-19 has added a fresh challenge for Bangladeshi migrant workers, and means that some of the Bangladeshi migrant workers who are still residing in their destination country could face 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 could do so. This suggests that, compared to the male Bangladeshi migrants, the pandemic had had less impact on the female migrants' income

in their destination country. One of the main factors to which this is attributed is the occupational placement of the female migrants. More than 90 percent of the Bangladeshi female migrants are 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 that time. As a result, the female migrants' households experienced less shock in relation to job loss or reduced income compared with the male migrants although, naturally, even among the female domestic workers, their experience of vulnerability varies.

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



Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

While the job security and the related ability to remit is high among live-in female domestic workers, many live-out female migrant workers have lost their job and face a similar situation to the male migrants. This finding therefore questions the notion that all women migrants are doubly oppressed. During COVID-19, live-in domestic workers' workload has increased, and they have been subjected to constant scrutiny. However, staying at home had provided them with some sense of security and it is in their employers' interests to ensure that these female workers are not exposed to the virus.

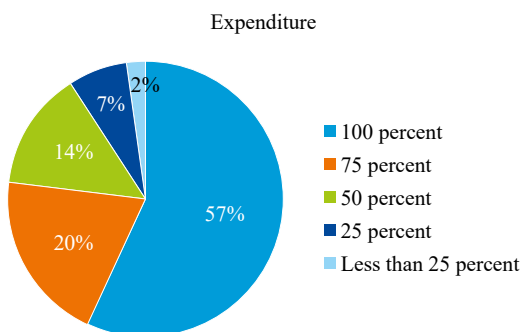
There are differences regarding the average amount of remittances received by the male and female migrants' households. The migrants' left-behind family members revealed that the amount of remittances was lower in the case of female migrants compared to male migrants.

Although more women migrants' left-behind family members are receiving remittances compared to male migrants, the amount of remittances sent by the female migrants is lower, which again indicates that women workers earn less than their male counterparts.

In fact, gender segregation in labour migration greatly differentiates between the kinds of jobs that migrants do in their destination country. Most Asian migrant women tend to work in 'feminine' sectors, such as domestic work, health, entertainment and care. In comparison to males, female migrants are paid less. Several studies have revealed that female migrants tend to remit more of their income to their family than do male migrants (Martin, 2003; Siddiqui 2008). Since women are often paid less than male workers, the total revenue from their remittances may be lower. The earnings of the female workers tend to be spent on children's education and health services, while those of the male migrants tend to be spent on assets and investments.

Section V: Impact of the reduced remittance flow

In Bangladesh, remittances are the only income source for many households. Figure 6.3 shows that 57 percent of the families had no other source of income apart from remittances. Also, 20 percent of the households reported that remittances constituted three quarters of their income, and half for 14 percent of the households. Since the households depend highly on remittances, their income has been significantly affected due to the pandemic. For example, Shakil, whose brother had been working in Qatar for over nine years, said, 'My brother used to work in the construction sector. After COVID-19 broke out, he had no work. He couldn't even afford to buy food. Naturally, he has been unable to send us any money since February. We are living in misery here and my brother also faces problems abroad'.

Figure 6.3: Dependence of the left-behind migrant households on remittances

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Many households have been forced to borrow money due to their lack of income. It was found that 60 and 38 percent of the households with a male or female migrant member abroad, respectively, had been forced to borrow money to cover their daily expenses. Borrowing is the usual resort for the left-behind households but, although this offers temporary relief, it also creates severe stress for the migrants' families.

Shakil continued, 'My brother's the sole bread-winner in our family and, since February, he has had no work. We are having a tough time finding three meals a day. Initially, the shopkeepers gave us food on the assurance that we would pay soon, but now they reject such an arrangement'.

In the absence of remittances, many migrant households have fallen into debt. In fact, those households that were already in debt due to the migration cost now find themselves in an even worse situation due to COVID-19, as their debts have increased in the absence of remittances. They are worried about how they will ever repay their debt, if the COVID-19 situation persists. Musa Miya, whose son is a migrant worker in Qatar, reported that he has nightmares about repaying the debt that he incurred in order to send his son overseas. He reported, 'I really struggled to borrow some money (from various sources) to send my son abroad. I thought that I would see a bright

future soon but now I'm devastated. Every day, my creditors visit our house and behave badly, as I missed the deadline for repaying the loan. My son has not sent a single penny in the last three months. He's so helpless now. He won't answer my telephone calls. When he does, he simply sighs and cries. What should I do now? I wish I could commit suicide...If COVID-19 continues for a long time, I will have no hope of repaying this huge loan'.

Many of the households have elderly members, who require essential medication for conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes. The families are finding it difficult to afford this medication, which is having a negative impact on the elderly members. For example, Morjina Khatun's 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 became unable to buy medicine for her elderly father-in-law. She anxiously stated, 'My father suffered a stroke. He is on regular medication. I'm worried that, from next month, I won't be able purchase essential medicines for him'.

The lack of money is one of the main causes of stress among both the migrant workers and their left-behind family members. Many Bangladeshi migrant workers pay a huge amount to travel overseas to find work, so migration imposes a debt burden on their households. The family income of 57 percent of these households depends solely on the migrants' remittances, while 21 and 38 percent of the migrant households with a male and female migrant, respectively, received income from other family members. This means that a financial commitment to meeting the daily expenses of their left-behind family members adds to the pressure on the migrant workers to repay their debts, making them feel anxious and leading to physical as well as mental health problems.

Chapter four has shown that, when the pandemic began, some migrant workers felt extremely helpless in their destination country. Due to their lack of income, some of them struggled to buy food. In these cases, their family members reported that the migrants had to seek emergency financial support from their left-behind family

members. To help the migrants overseas to cover their basic daily needs, their family members had to borrow money and send it to them. Instead of sending remittances, the migrant workers needed emergency financial support from their left-behind family members, which created pressure for both the migrant workers and their family members. As a result, the migrant community immediately became highly vulnerable as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic started.

Migrants' families are struggling to afford three meals a day. Some members of the households that were assessed reported that they had stopped buying protein-containing items; 63 percent had reduced their milk consumption, 81 could not afford to buy fish and meat regularly, and 90 percent have not eaten meat for the last three months. They also could not afford to buy food high in protein for their children. Out of the 200 households, 65 contained children under seven years of age. Among them, 72 percent reduced their milk consumption, 43 percent their egg consumption, and 74 percent their 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, which led to concern regarding their children's education and overall wellbeing.

Ambia, whose father has been working in Saudi Arabia for several years, stated, 'Ours is a big family, with 13 members. This includes my brothers, sisters, mother, grandparents as well as my uncle's children, who has abandoned them. My father is the only income earner in the family. By the grace of the Almighty, my father is physically well. He hasn't been infected by COVID-19. Unfortunately, he can not send remittances. We're surviving on basic food items but do not have the means to buy healthy, nutritious meals that include milk, fish and meat'.

Where the day-to-day food consumption of the migrant households depends on remittances, the members of the migrants' left-behind households are struggling to afford essential food for the infants. Moshtari Begum's husband lost his job in Saudi Arabia so stopped sending her remittances. She can not afford to buy to buy formula milk for her daughter. She stated, 'My daughter's two-years-old.

I can not buy milk for her. She has been surviving on far less milk during the last three months’.

While some parents are struggling to afford to buy basic food for their babies, the parents of school-age children also face a difficult situation. As the schools are closed during the pandemic, education is now home-based. This requires private tutors but, in the absence of remittances, many families can not afford to pay for private tutors or online facilities for their children. Moreover, some families who used to pay for coaching or private tuition at home for their children have had to cancel this. Mahfuza, a mother of two school-age children expressed her disappointment about this and stated that she was struggling to look after her children at home. She said, ‘My husband’s still in Bahrain. He hasn’t sent remittances for last two months. I cancelled the private tutor as I couldn’t afford him ... My elder son’s school has started online teaching but I can not afford to buy a smart phone and data to access the internet’.

When asked about their future plans, the family members of the migrant workers reported that they had no plans regarding how to cover their household expenditure in the coming months. Their complete dependence on remittances has left them in debt, as they had little option but to borrow money 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. Their uncertain income has thus created enormous stress for both the migrant workers and their left-behind family members.

Section VI: Probable explanations for the gap in the remittance flow

The national data on the increased flow of remittance do not match the households’ experience of receiving remittances. While the migrant households are frequently reporting the dire reality that they are not receiving any remittances, the national statistics are indicating a huge surge in remittance inflow. To explain this anomaly,

the first step is to identify the growth pattern in remittances over a longer period. Table 6.1 presents the annual percentage increase and decrease in remittance flow to Bangladesh. It shows that, between 2009-10 and 2012-13, annual remittances grew from 6 percent to 13 percent. In 2012-13, Bangladesh experienced 2 percent negative growth. Although they grew by 8 percent during the fiscal year 2014-15, nonetheless, over the next two years, they fell again by 14 percent. Fewer than 600,000 workers migrated during this period. Again, for next three fiscal years, remittances grew annually by 17 percent, 10 percent and 11 percent, respectively. During these years, a significant number of workers migrated (over 700,000 per year). In 2017, a million Bangladeshis migrated. Contrary to the above scenario, however, surprisingly, the remittance flow grew extraordinarily during the first half of the 2020-21 fiscal year. The growth rate was 38 percent compared to the same timeframe in the previous year. This can not be explained by the natural growth process of remittances, but is unnatural growth. Bangladesh Bank and other academics tried to explain this by the large return flow of migrants during COVID-19.

Table 6.1: Annual percentage increase and decrease in the remittance flow

FY	Remittance (in million US\$)	Growth Rate
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%
2020-21 (July December 2020)	12944.75	38%

Source: Prepared by CPD⁵⁸ based on Bangladesh Bank data

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

Trends from different source countries in terms of remittance flow may shed some light here. Table 6.2 shows the share of the various remittance source countries in respect to the flow to Bangladesh. No significant changes have occurred in the case of a majority of the source countries. Saudi Arabia remained the highest remittance-sending country. Only the position of UAE has changed significantly. The USA is still rotating around second and third place, and Malaysia is hovering among fifth to seventh place. Oman, Qatar and Singapore's share remained almost the same. A large number of migrants returned from Saudi Arabia, that may have contributed to the higher growth of remittance flow from that country. On the contrary, UAE also experienced a large return of migrants but the remittance flow did not increase like Saudi Arabia or Malaysia. Therefore, it can not be conclusively said that a large return of migrants automatically contributes to a larger flow of remittance.

Table 6.2: Sources of remittance flow to Bangladesh together with their incremental share

Country	Share July June FY 201515	Share (July-June)		Share in incremental remittances as a %
		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%
Total (In million \$US)	100.0% (15316.9)	100.0% (7716.3)	100.0% (10894.1)	100.0% (3177.8)

Source: Prepared by CPD,⁵⁹ based on Bangladesh Bank data

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

There may 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 with regards to a couple of countries: Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. Saudi Arabia accounted for 21-23 percent of the total flow of remittances to Bangladesh from 2015 to 2020. During the first half of the 2020-21 fiscal year, that is June-December, remittance registered a rise and constituted 30.4 percent of the total flow in respect to Bangladesh. It was seen earlier that the major flow of migrants returning due to COVID-19 was from Saudi Arabia. There could be some connection between this large-scale return and sending back their remittances before arriving in Bangladesh, since Bangladeshis are permitted to carry only a certain amount of money in person. Malaysia, meanwhile, used to account for 9 percent of the total flow of remittances to Bangladesh. In the first half of the 2020-21 fiscal year, however,

its share rose to 14 percent. The persistent fear of deportation may have forced a proportion of migrants to send their savings home. Many migrants liquidated their investments in their destination country and sent the amount home in the form of remittances. Moreover, 385,000 migrants have returned to Bangladesh for good, so must have brought their entire savings with them. The share of the remittance flow from all other countries, including the UK and USA, remained more or less the same. The flow of remittances drastically reduced from the UAE and Italy, with the former's share falling from 11 percent to 2.3 percent. If the remittance flow was linked to the migrants' return, then it should have grown in the case of UAE as well.

Some issues require a more rigorous analysis, including the mismatch between stock and flow. Although the flow of migration from Bangladesh slowed by 69 percent in 2020 compared with the previous year, there remains a large stock of Bangladeshi migrants in various destination countries. It is estimated by different quarters that there are more than 2,500,000 Bangladeshis currently residing in Saudi Arabia. Those who have a job or savings will continue to remit. Therefore, the return of 100,000 workers may not affect the remittance flow to any great extent. Since June 2019, the Government of Bangladesh has been providing a two-percent cash incentive to

those who receive remittances through formal channels (Bangladesh Bank, 2020). This decision was taken to curb the underground *hundi* market. During the pandemic, the Central Bank, in order to keep the flow constant, also relaxed some of the conditions that were earlier imposed regarding receiving the 2 percent cash incentive. Some of the major remittance-receiving banks offered an additional 1 percent on top of the Central Bank's incentive. These cash incentives are partly responsible for the increase.

Moreover, there are some informal institutions in operation, so it is important to take into account this factor as well. There are some hidden costs associated with migration. Work visas are supposed to be free but, in reality, are bought and sold in the destination countries. In regular circumstances, around 700,000 workers would have migrated overseas in 2020 but, in the event, only 217,669 workers were able to do so, which meant that only this lower number of visas needed to be purchased. Normally, an additional 482,331 visas would have had to be purchased. On average, in 2019, a visa cost US\$ 3000, to be paid in the destination country. Selling visas is an underground business and so can not be done openly. As outward remittance for this purpose is not allowed by the government, and the recruitment agencies can not send the money from Bangladesh to those selling visas overseas. The recruitment agencies manage this through the support of the *hundi* operators. Migrant workers' remittances are the major resource of the *hundi* operators but, in 2020, the recruitment agencies did not need to contact the *hundi* markets to purchase visas, leading to a shortfall for the *hundi* operators of US\$ 1,447,000,000 ($482,331 \times \text{US\$ } 3,000$ per visa), which should then have been available to the formal money transfer institutions.

Some importers and those who smuggle gold and other contraband items, to a great extent, also rely on *hundi* money. The first group relies on *hundi* to avoid tax, and under-invoice for imports. Meanwhile, smuggling has reduced due to COVID-19, so smugglers' demand for *hundi* money has diminished. The *Hundi* operators, therefore, are not aggressively collecting migrants' remittances. In the absence of *hundi* operators, migrants are sending money through the formal banks and exchange houses, which shows that the higher remittance

flow within the formal channels does not indicate that migrants are faring well, and not all of them have incomes to remit, so further research is required to explain the growth in the flow of remittances arriving in Bangladesh through the formal channels.

Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, cyclone Amphan hit Bangladesh, followed by monsoon flooding. It is only natural that the migrants who were able to gathered their resources and sent them to their left-behind families to ease the difficulties that they were facing. All of the above arguments may help to explain the increased remittance flow, but further research is required to analyse this issue systematically and generate a more robust understanding of it.

Chapter conclusion

This chapter shows that 61 percent of the households assessed had not received any remittances between the outbreak of COVID-19 and their interview. The rest of the households received an average of Tk. 53,500 per instalment. However, the remittances sent during COVID-19 are gendered. Sixty-nine percent of the female migrants' households have received remittances compared to only 30 percent of the male ones. The study shows that the households are extremely dependent on remittances. For 57 percent of the families, remittances are their sole source of income. For 20 percent of the households, three quarters of their income comes from remittances and, for 14 percent, remittances constitute half of the family income.

The recent increase in national remittances does not mean that migrant households are receiving remittances as before the pandemic. The predictions by multilateral organisations regarding remittance flow are based on modeling, which can not incorporate the micro level reality of individual countries. The growth in the remittance flow to Bangladesh during COVID-19 could be due to a whole range of factors. Some of these, as discussed in this chapter, are: the 2 percent financial incentive to the remittance senders, the 1 percent additional incentive by some banks, a fear of deportation resulting in migrants sending all of their savings to their country of origin, and the fact that only a handful of people have migrated for work since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These

highlight that the recruitment agencies did not need to tap into the *hundi* market in order to purchase visas, the trading sector did not require access to *hundi* for under-invoicing and gold smugglers did not require assistance from *hundi* to smuggle gold into Bangladesh. Therefore, the remittances that used to enter Bangladesh through various channels now arrive via the formal channels. Thorough research is required to understand this increased remittance flow *vis-a-vis* the experiences of a large number of households that do not receive any remittances. It is essential to provide a one-off cash grant to migrant households to address their vulnerability in the absence of remittances during the crisis situation.

The overall situation of the migrants' family members during the COVID-19 pandemic is grim and alarming, mainly because most of them lack alternative sources of income but depend solely on remittances. As the flow of remittances has either stopped or reduced drastically during the pandemic, these households are passing their days in utter distress and uncertainty. A few family members a small amount of savings, but those have been depleted quickly. Immediate policy action is, therefore, necessary in order to reduce economic vulnerability of migrants' 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

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

Motasim Billah, Tahmid Akash and Nazmul Ahsan

The outbreak of COVID-19 has placed migrants' left-behind households in a prolonged state of emergency, primarily caused by an irregular remittance in flow. As in all other labour sending countries around the world, the Bangladeshi migrants' left-behind households also rely heavily on migrants' remittances, which constitute a significant proportion of their disposable income. In the wake of COVID-19, the irregular and, in some cases, absence of remittances inflows, as illustrated in the previous chapters, have substantially reduced the households' income and, consequently, their ability to meet their basic needs. The left-behind migrant households adopt a range of strategies to cope with the new reality imposed by COVID-19. Many of these coping mechanisms, interestingly, resemble the historical adjustments made by left-behind migrant households, particularly when they face a fall in income due to, e.g., a financial crisis or natural disaster. The coping strategies of the migrants' left-behind households, however, were not uniform and linked to a wide range of factors at different levels, shaping eventually a differential capacity among households to adjust to the COVID-19 situation.

In this context, this chapter mainly discusses how the migrants' left-behind households in Bangladesh coped with the advent of the COVID-19 situation, particularly in the absence or irregular flow 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 migrants' left-behind 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 migrants' left-behind households' coping strategies with regard to the pandemic situation, before focusing on the coping mechanisms of the migrants' left-behind households which are primarily located in rural areas across Bangladesh. In this regard, this chapter mainly relied on the first-hand experiences of 100 families that were interviewed by phone between June and July 2020, together with many brief cases drawn from the survey and anecdotal evidence collected from newspaper reports and the site reports of the development organisations.

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

The concept of coping evolved mainly from the disciplines of health, psychology, and the sociology of medicine to address the ways in which individuals deal with stress and illness in general. This concept has later been used in other spheres, for example, sociology of the family and gender studies, and applied to other problems e.g., unemployment, work/life balance, financial difficulties, and poverty. It is often defined as efforts to thwart or diminish threat, harm, and loss, or to reduce the associated distress (Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010). Coping is thus usually defined as the manner in which people act within the constraints of their current resources and range of expectations to achieve various outcomes. Generally, this involves no more than managing resources, but means how this is achieved in unusual, abnormal, and adverse situations. Thus, coping can include defense mechanisms, active ways of solving problems

and techniques for handling stress.

This paper considers coping strategies to be the formal and informal mechanisms adopted by the migrants' left-behind households, in a relatively planned and deliberate way, to deal with the financial difficulties caused by the irregular flow 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 a 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, customised ones. Financial difficulties lead households to react by immediately reducing their consumption. Adaptive strategies play a key role in dealing with situations involving a significant income loss, since they produce immediate effects. However, they are almost always insufficient to deal with prolonged financial constraints. In such a case, a more planned, structured approach is required, in order to reconfigure the expenditure pattern as 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 seek to cope with the 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 strategy: self-mobilisation, corresponding to the measures adopted by household members in order to reduce their spending or increase their income; solidarity-based mobilisation, involving aid from friends and close family members in the established 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 organisations) or the market, in order to overcome financial difficulties. While, in the case of self-mobilisation, coping takes place within the inner circle i.e., within the nuclear family, in solidarity-based and institutional mobilization, assistance is sought from 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"> • A household first engages in solving problems by themselves, by reducing their consumption habits and/or lifestyle, seeking new resources of income or both. • Cutting down on goods and services is the immediate strategy, particularly leisure, festivals and social events • Substitution strategies regarding food consumption. particularly certain expensive products (meat and fish, for example) and the increased purchase of relatively cheaper goods • Maintaining spending on children as far as possible; adults are the first to give up certain items • Foregoing certain healthcare services, such as regular visits to the doctor

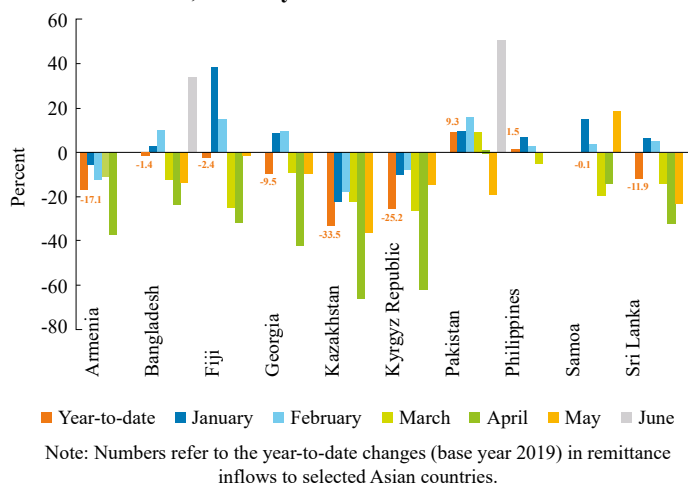
Solidarity- based mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual aid based on family and friendship networks • Family and friends alleviate the hardships faced by households by offering goods and services • Offers include direct financial support (donations, loans, and the payment of loan instalments and certain goods and services, such as rent, public utilities, education) or indirect support (supplying food, clothing etc.). It may also be less materialistic (such as offering emotional comfort or advice) • Whereas spontaneous solidarity is accepted naturally, requested solidarity tends to be seen as more emotionally problematic. In this case, the request is made only in critical situations, such as when children are in urgent need or there is a risk of losing a major asset
Institutional mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Households engage with major institutional actors – the State, Civil Society and the Market • It includes various forms of public assistance mechanisms (social policies), such as unemployment benefit, the minimum income allowance, and other forms of social support (for example, student grants, housing subsidies, child benefits, etc.) • Civil society plays a very important role in aiding households, namely through various civic, social, and religious non-profit institutions

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 as well as the 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 also the one which tends to last longer, since it involves self-imposed austerity. However, the severity and duration of the financial problems may require additional forms of support. Resorting to assistance 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 can not, 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 migrants' left-behind 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: the 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 the temporary closure of their workplace. This phenomenon significantly disrupted the flow of remittances to the migrants' left-behind households in their country of origin. The remittance flow in many of the countries of origin dropped. Figure 7.1 demonstrates how, in Asia and the Pacific region, between January and June 2020, remittances followed a negative trend of falling by 0-60 percent.

Figure 7.1: Annual changes in the remittances to selected countries in Asia and the Pacific, January-June 2020



Source: ADB, 2020

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

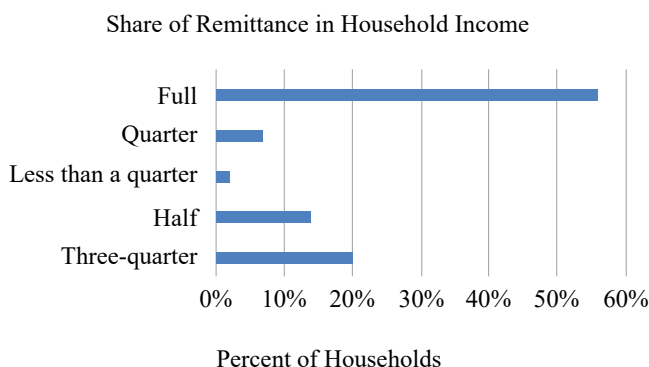
During the literature review, it was found that systematic, robust knowledge is required concerning the impact of the total and partial suspension of remittances on the migrant sending households, and how the left-behind families are coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, studies conducted on economic hardship and disasters (Kikkawa and Otsuka, 2020; Murakami et al., 2020; Yang,

2008a) suggest that the suspension and irregular flow of remittances may precipitate remittance-dependent households to fall into poverty or face difficulty affording to pay for their basic needs, loan repayments as well as access to education and healthcare services.

Section IV: Coping strategies in Bangladesh

Reduced household income: Remittances constitute a significant proportion of the total household income of the migrants' left-behind households in Bangladesh. The BCSM and RMMRU survey (2020) findings (figure: 7.2) show that remittances are the sole source of household income for over 57 percent of migrants' left-behind households, and also constitute three-quarters of the income of a further 20 percent.

Figure 7.2: The proportion of remittances within the migrants' left-behind household income

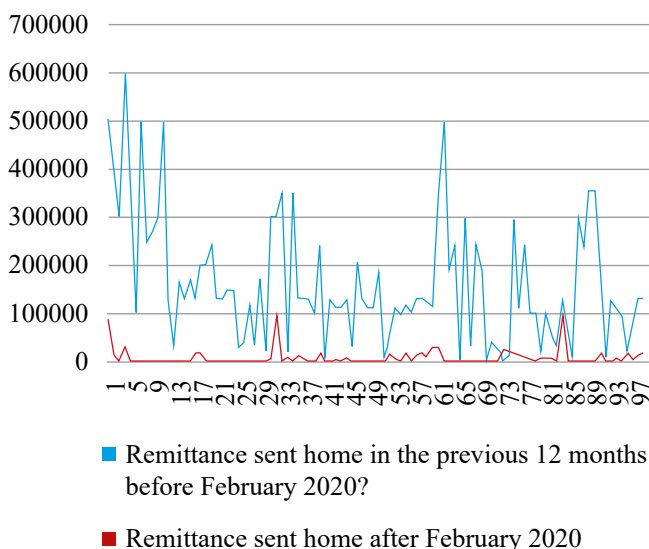


Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

The advent of COVID-19 severely affected the remittance flow to these households. Since February 2020, remittances have disappeared for 61 percent of households, while the remaining 39 percent families have received significantly reduced amounts of remittances. The comparison shown in Figure 7.3 between the 12-month period prior to and after February 2020, respectively, illustrates that the amount of monthly remittances dropped almost 60 percent for the remittance-receiving households. For example, the

left-behind household of Rafiq, a migrant worker in Qatar, from the Cumilla district, stated that he used to send Tk. 30-40,000 per month but, after the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, he only managed to send Tk. 15-20,000 monthly. Furthermore, the migrant families used to receive remittances almost every month to cover their household expenses but, with the onset of COVID-19, the remittance flow had become irregular.

Figure 7.3: Comparison of the remittances received by the migrants' left-behind households before and after COVID-19



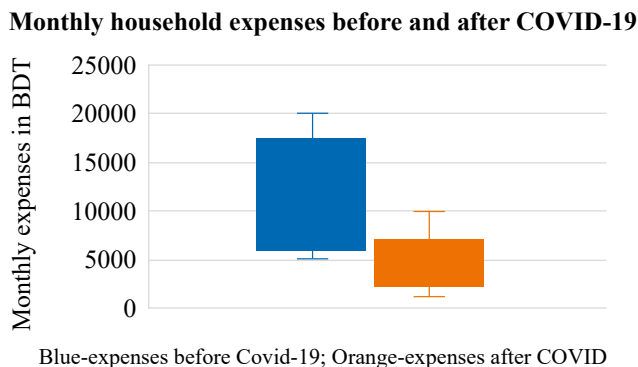
Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

The amount of remittances received by the households varied largely. To a large extent, this might be associated with the migrants' employment status in the host country. The survey found that 61 percent of the families did not receive any remittances was due to the fact that either their migrant family member had lost job their job or was receiving no or irregular wages from their employer. Many households did not receive any remittances particularly in the first three months of the pandemic. For example, Makbul, whose son, Khurshed, is a migrant worker in UAE, reported that his son used

to work in a manufacturing company and could remit an average of Tk. 40,000 monthly, until COVID-19 caused his factory to be closed temporarily and a harsh lockdown was imposed. Therefore, his son was totally relying on his savings to survive abroad and thus could not send money home regularly, as he was not receiving any salary. During that time, Makbul only received Tk. 16,000 in three months.

The survey also found that, in some cases, the migrants were back in Bangladesh for a holiday and could not return to their job overseas as all flights were suspended due to the COVID-19 outbreak. A few households also reported the sudden death of their migrant member due to non-COVID-19-related illnesses. Many experienced major economic hardship as remittances were their only source of household income. The reduced flow of remittances leads the migrants' left-behind households to adopt a range of coping strategies to combat 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 in remittances lead the migrants' left-behind households to adopt a number of household expenditure reduction strategies that reflect their self-mobilisation efforts, entailing the taking of proactive measures to adjust their monthly household expenditure. The first initiative they undertook was to reduce their disposable household expenses. On average, the migrants' left-behind households reduced their household income by 57 percent. Figure 7.4 demonstrates that, before COVID-19, the monthly expenses of the migrant families were Tk. 7-17,000, but the pandemic forced these households to trim these down to Tk. 3-7,000. Overall, migrant left-behind families (MLBS) cut their monthly household expenses by 60-80 percent.

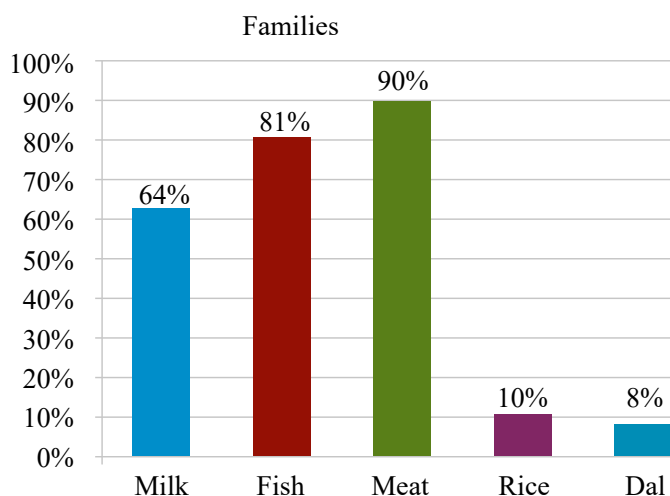
Figure 7.4: Monthly household expenses before and after COVID-19

Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

Decreasing the households' food consumption: The fall in the monthly expenses of the migrants' left-behind households substantially affected their expenditure on food items. The survey results show that, in the last two months (April-May), 90 percent of the migrants' left-behind households reduced their expenditure on several essential food items, such as, vegetables, rice, lentils, milk, fish and meat, which reflects their immediate self-mobilisation efforts.

In this regard, the families significantly reduced their expenditure on protein intake i.e., milk, fish, meat, etc., which would presumably have made them less able to fight possible COVID-19 infection, although there was lack of systematic data about the migrants' left-behind households to make that assertion. According to the survey findings, 90 percent of the migrants' left-behind households decreased their expenditure on meat, both red and white, 81 percent lowered their fish consumption, and 63 percent reduced their daily milk intake. Further, their rice, lentils and vegetable consumption was also reduced by 10, eight and 13 percent of the households, respectively (figure 7.5).

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



Source: BCSM and RMMRU Survey 2020

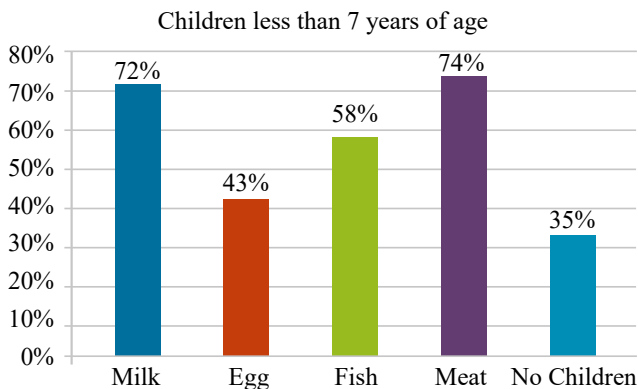
The findings of the survey identified coping strategies followed by households living in a food insecure situation in different parts of the world. Earlier studies (Gupta et al., 2015) showed that households in a food insecure situation relied on less preferred and less expensive foods and also consumed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

There is little information on how COVID-19 had impacted on the children of the migrant households. Figure 7.6 throws some light on the situation of the children of these migrant families. Sixty-seven percent of the migrants' left-behind households contained children under the age of seven years. When the households took drastic steps to reduce their consumption of key food items, this consequently affected the children's food consumption also in terms of substantially reducing their protein intake. Over half (about 55 percent) of the migrants' left-behind households went without meat

and milk, followed by fish (44 percent), and egg (32 percent).

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

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



Some of the migrant households, for whom remittances had been their sole source of income, also borrowed from their neighbours and relatives, while some stocked up on dry food items, such as rice, lentils etc., as they were anticipating both an irregular remittance flows over the subsequent months and price hikes for daily essentials. For example, Rashida was informed by her husband, a migrant in Bahrain, that he would be unable to send any 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 up on about a four-month food supply so that her family could survive in the absence of remittances. This case

shows how this migrant's wife mobilised herself first to activate her solidarity- based mobilisation, that enabled her to receive support from her brother. Similar household strategies of borrowing food from friends and relatives and accessing food donations were also documented in both Ethiopia and South Africa in the context of household food insecurity (Cordero-Ahiman et al., 2018; Aseseffa Kisi et al., 2018).

The pandemic situation badly disrupted the supply chain system in the market, causing a lack of certain key food items, particularly during the government-imposed lockdown period. However, this research did not focus on the impact of the failure of the market system on the migrants' left-behind households' food consumption, which might have influenced the households' food consumption patterns. Furthermore, the research did not find any case of households reducing their number of meals eaten, e.g., two meals a day instead of three, or cases of starvation, although most of the households acknowledged that the number of food items employed for a specific meal was drastically reduced. Moreover, it was noticed that most families hesitated to provide a direct answer to the questions about starvation and reduced meals, merely hinting instead at their struggle to feed their family. Roshna, whose son is a migrant in Qatar, said, 'We did compromise on the quality of our food intake. However, we tried hard to ensure that the 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 example, Norhasmah et al (2010) identified that food insecure households followed strategies such as restricting the food consumption of adults to enable children to eat, feeding the working members of the household at the expense of the non-working members, and skipping or reducing the number of meals eaten in a day.

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

currently enrolled. Although there are no tuition fees for elementary level students in public schools and girls' education is free up to class XII, there are scores of semi-public and private educational institutions in Bangladesh, which continue to charge students tuition fees. Some 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 the children in the migrants' left-behind households were mainly enrolled in public and semi-public schools and colleges. Some of them were also studying at private institutions. Moreover, the children of most of the households used to receive private tuition from house tutors and coaching centres but, with the onset of the pandemic, over 66 percent of the households became unable to pay the fees for schools, colleges, coaching centres and house tutors on a regular basis. Many households applied for a waiver for school and college fees, a good number of whom applied for partial or deferred payment. Most of the households were forced to cancel the house tutors and coaching centres in the first two months of the pandemic due to the government lockdown and then reinstated them from the third month onwards. Households that continued the private tuition during lockdown requested their tutors to allow them to pay their fees after they began to receive remittances from their migrant members again.

Some households prioritised education over other household expenses and ensured that the tuition fees were paid regularly, even though this caused 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 organisation during the pandemic that helped them to pay Tk. 2200 per month in coaching centre fees for their only daughter who was preparing for her higher secondary school examination. On the other hand, the family of Harun, a migrant in UAE, in Shariatpur, slashed their expenditure on food items, transport etc., in order to pay the private tutor and coaching centres' fees for their children. They stated, 'The children's education was so important to us that we cut back our expenditure on expensive and unnecessary food and ate just basic food such as rice,

potato and lentils to survive during COVID-19'. These examples demonstrate how the migrants' left-behind households, depending on the context, utilised their institutional mobilisation along with the self-mobilisation strategies.

There were a few cases in which the migrant households decided to discontinue their children's education due to their failure to mobilise resources to meet the education fees. Some households even opted to remove the need to pay education fees by marrying off their daughters during the pandemic. For example, the family of Salam, who works in UAE, in Jhenaidah, stated, 'COVID-19 put us in such 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 on 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 at least graduate so that she could lead a good life and contribute to the family income, but that dream was shattered as the COVID-19 meant that our only income earner (Salam, the migrant member) lost his job in the UAE'. Salam used to send around Tk. 30,000 per month before COVID-19, but had been unable to send a single penny over the preceding three months. Salam's wife continued, 'Instead, we sent him around Tk. 25,000 from our family savings so that he could survive the distressing period. In such a circumstance, we married off our daughter, sacrificing our dream of giving her a good education'.

Decreasing healthcare-seeking behaviour: The COVID-19 outbreak brought about a shift in the healthcare-seeking behaviour among the migrants' left-behind households. Many households that experienced illness among their members did not go to doctors or hospitals. The survey found that over 26 percent of the households experienced health-related issues among their members, such as cold, sore throats, fevers, etc.

Only 10 percent of these households sought medical treatment; a few of the households' members were diagnosed as having COVID-19,

but they were treated at home. This low degree of healthcare-seeking behaviour among the migrant households could partly be linked to a fear of being infected with COVID-19 as they thought that doctors' surgeries and hospitals were sources of COVID-19, since many people with symptoms might have visited these places. Additionally, there was significant ambiguity among the household members regarding the COVID-19 symptoms, as many thought that they had caught seasonal flu or a cold and thus preferred to avoid seeking medical treatment. A proportion of the migrant households who took their member to a doctor and hospitals due to major illness found it hard to pay their medical bills. Salima, the wife of a migrant in Qatar, said, 'My son had been suffering from a urine infection. Initially, he was being treated at home following a doctor's prescription, however, at one 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; this helped me to pay for my son's medical treatment'. Another migrant's daughter in Chattogram suddenly experienced severe abdominal pain and was later operated upon for appendicitis. In this instance, the migrant's household borrowed money from their neighbour to pay the hospital bill.

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 and religious institutions, such as mosques. However, the partial and full suspension of remittances during the pandemic lead the migrants' left-behind households to focus on meeting their immediate needs, such as food, children's education, healthcare, etc. No household was found to be contributing remittance money to local development and charities. Furthermore, almost 100 percent of the households saved money by avoiding celebrating popular festivals, such as *Pahela Boishakh*, Eid-ul Fitr, Eid ul Azha, etc. One migrant's family in Chattogram district stated, 'Our family had a tradition of buying large animals. Last year, we spent Tk. 100,000 on cattle that were sacrificed during Eid ul Azha but, this year, we couldn't even buy a goat, as the family did not receive any remittances from our two migrant members.

Moreover, one of them abruptly returned from Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating further precarity. The widow of the deceased migrant, Masud Miya, stated, 'We were under so much strain due to the sudden death of my husband. We all felt numb and did not even realise when the day of Eid ul Fitr came and went. 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 out with a local organisation after he returned from abroad because of ill health'. Another migrant family member in Tangail said, 'This year, we didn't observe any special day' for example, Eid and the birthday of my child. We only focused on ensuring we got three meals a day'.

Merging households: Merging households was another strategy undertaken to defray costs. Sometimes, such mergers took place with parents or in-laws' households. The survey found that some households, that were located in urban and semi-urban settings, sent their female members back to their in-laws' house situated in the rural areas to reduce the monthly household expenditure. For instance, the wife of Morshed, a migrant worker in Bahrain, used to 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 their wives back to their parents' house in a village in Madaripur district for an indefinite period. After that, Fazal sublet a room to another tenant to earn extra income. As Fazal said, 'Morshed, my migrant brother, and I used to provide for our families but, as soon as the pandemic started, my brother lost his job abroad. With my little income, I was unable to bear the family expenses, including the monthly house rent. Therefore, I decided to send our wives back to their parents' house and rented out a room for Tk. 3000 per month that helped me stay in town and seek income-generating activities'. Similar coping strategies by households were found during the super cyclone of 1991 in Bangladesh when many households sent their female members back to their parents' house as they could not bear the immediate financial hardship and food insecurity situation caused by the cyclone (Paul, 1998).

Many of these strategies have gender dimensions. It is the left-behind wives who moved their residence in order to manage the income

lost due to the full or partial suspension of remittances. Although the study did not assess whether new types of vulnerability were experienced by the left-behind wives when they merged with their in-laws' families, however, it can be said that the impact of mergers on left-behind wives will differ from that on left-behind husbands. On the other hand, our survey did not find cases of left-behind husbands' coping strategies, although 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 wife, and so merged their household with that of their parents or in laws (Siddiqui, 2001). Again, the recent trend has been for migrants' spouses and children to establish their own nuclear household by breaking away from their extended family (Siddiqui and Ansar, 2020). In the wake of COVID-19, these families are now returning to their original extended household.

Household income diversification/supplementation strategies:

The migrants' left-behind households also adopted various strategies to fill the gap left by absence of remittances by engaging in income supplementation and diversification within their household. Like 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 of the households borrowed money from different local sources. In this regard, the families primarily took out loans from their relatives and neighbours who were economically better-off. Some of the migrants' left-behind households also borrowed money from local NGOs microcredit organisations at higher interest rates, illustrating their institutional mobilisation strategies. For example, one migrant family in Jhenaidah district was forced to borrow Tk. 50,000 from a local micro credit organisation at a high interest rate, as the migrant member had lost his job in Saudi Arabia, and therefore could not send money for about four months. The interest rate was double that during the non-COVID-19 period, which further aggravated the household's financial austerity. Similar findings were recorded in the context

of natural disasters by Alam (2005), who found that households attempted to cope with tornado-related losses by borrowing. This was due to a lack of availability of rehabilitation programmes offered by the governmental and non-governmental organisations.

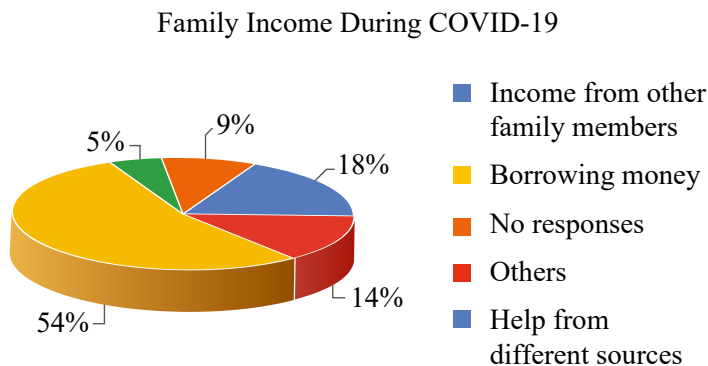
Apart from local sources, the migrants' left-behind families increasingly relied on their social network, primarily consisting of their extended family, relatives, friends, and neighbours, to borrow money during the distressing period induced by COVID-19. Sofia, a migrant's wife from Tangail district said, 'It'd have been impossible to survive this difficult time if my cousins had not stepped in. Without hesitation, I approached my brothers to lend me money and I borrowed at least three times from them'.

Reliance on the income of other family members: Having an additional earner in the family provided a cushion for some of the migrants' left-behind households. Eighteen percent of the households studied relied on income from other family members. Families from whom money was borrowed had members still employed in the formal sector, who continued to receive their regular salary during COVID-19. The income from these 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, had been unable to send remittances for the last three months as he did not receive any salary from his employer due to the temporary shutdown of his factory. This created financial hardship for his left-behind family, as remittances constituted almost 50 percent of the household's total income. Nevertheless, the family was able to survive, as Rayhan's son (Barek) was a salaried employee of a local NGO. Barek's income was unaffected by COVID-19 as he was employed under a donor-funded project, and so he was able to provide significant support for the family during the pandemic.

Accessing formal assistance: In response to the COVID-19-induced crisis, the Government of Bangladesh provided food assistance to vulnerable citizens. Food assistance usually includes staples and non-perishable items, such as potatoes, rice and oil. It

was estimated that the government has subsidised food for around 50 million people and that 5 million poor households received Tk. 2,500 through mobile banking. However, the relief was insufficient to cover everyone. The government prioritised rice procurement to ensure staple food security. To this end, the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation purchased rice from farmers at a high price, 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 authorisation of an MP from district, a thousand families in his constituency received 2-4kg of fish collected from local markets and the adjacent coastal fish landing centres, 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 to prevent malnutrition in vulnerable households. Furthermore, many charity organisations, in partnership with local NGOs, also distributed food packages to poor households in different parts of the country.

Figure 7.7 shows that 14 percent of the migrants' left-behind households garnered assistance from the government, as well as private and charitable organisations. However, many families complained that, while they anticipated social protection from the government, they did not receive any assistance although many families in their locality were given relief. They were unsure why their family had not been selected for cash or food assistance. The migrants' left-behind families stated that there may exist an assumption among the relief distributors that, as they received remittances from their migrant family members abroad, they would not need relief assistance. Abu Bakar, the father of a migrant worker, said, 'Nobody cared about us; we couldn't even seek assistance from others due to a 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 remittances created immense economic hardship, particularly for those households who rely completely on remittances. The plight was far worse for families experiencing a sudden death and other shocks, such as flooding, loans, dowries etc. The survey found that about 20 percent of the households were compelled to sell their assets to offset the economic shocks caused by COVID-19. One family from the Chattogram district stated that it sold 116.6 grams of jewellery, as three of their migrant family members lost their job. Remittances were the only source of their family's 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 remittances. In the absence of remittances, the family initially relied on their bank savings. The economic situation was quickly aggravated as the family had to pay Tk. 500,000 as a 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 sent back to Bangladesh. He felt devastated, as his family did not have any income. He borrowed from a local organisation to maintain subsistence upon his sudden return. The plight of Masud Miya's family did not end there. He died within a month of returning

home. His wife, Salma, did not know how to manage the family. She sold two cows in order to survive for a few months on the proceeds, but has no idea how she will repay the loan or feed her children in the future. Some families in Tangail district sold off their jewellery when the remittance flow stopped due to COVID-19, and later a monsoon flood submerged their crop fields. These findings also echoed similar phenomena chronicled during different natural disasters in Bangladesh; for example, Paul (1998) suggested that 88 percent of households sold assets, such as livestock and land, to reduce their vulnerability to the 1994/1995 droughts in Bangladesh and also mortgaged their land.

Chapter conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 impacted migrants' left-behind 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 situation placed a significant strain on migrants' left-behind households in Bangladesh due to the irregular and absence of remittance flow, particularly during the first three months of the pandemic. Remittances constituted a significant proportion of the left-behind migrants' households' income. For many migrants' left-behind households, remittances were their sole source of income; therefore, the disrupted flow of remittances caused severe financial hardship for the migrants' left-behind households, which forced them to adopt a plethora of coping strategies to endure the challenges posed by COVID-19. Interestingly, many of these coping strategies resemble poor and vulnerable households' historical adaptation strategies recorded in the context of food insecurity, financial crises and natural disasters in different parts of the world. Broadly, the migrants' left-behind households' coping strategies can be grouped into two major streams: household expenditure reduction and income supplementation/diversification strategies, which could be well-explained by an interpretative model that included: self-mobilisation, solidarity-based mobilisation and institutional mobilisation.

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

Although it is hard to identify a general set of coping strategies for the migrants' left-behind households, the partial and full suspension of remittances caused them to adjust their disposable and monthly expenses by reducing their expenditure significantly, constituting an average 57 percent reduction compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. In this regard, the migrants' left-behind households adopted a range of self-mobilisation strategies in terms of proactively engaging themselves in reducing their household expenditure. Many of these strategies were spontaneous in nature, emerging as an immediate reaction to the suspension of remittances induced by COVID-19. Hence, the migrants' left-behind households primarily compromised their food intake, particularly their protein consumption in the form of meat, fish, etc., reduced the number of food items included per meal, and prioritised food for children. They also substantially reduced their expenditure on non-food items which were not considered essential; for example, charities, festivals, and rituals. The healthcare-seeking behaviour of the migrants' left-behind households was also reduced, possibly due to a combination of both a lack of or insufficient money and the effects of the pandemic leading to the assumption that health centres were a potential source of COVID-19 infection. On the contrary, although the educational institutions remained closed, the migrants' left-behind households prioritised their children's education, despite their financial hardship,

by ensuring that their children continued to receive tuition from private tutors and coaching centres, thus incurring expenses. To reduce the household expenditure, some of the migrants' left-behind households followed a few strategies that had counter-productive social and gendered implications. Some of the migrants' left-behind households merged their household with that of their parents or in-laws, particularly by sending female members back to live with their parents, terminating daughters' education and marrying girls off at an early age. These strategies might have helped the migrants' left-behind households to deal with the financial austerity for the time being, but might also have created new types of vulnerability for women and girls.

The full and partial disruption of household income derived from remittances caused many of the migrants' left-behind households to adopt various income supplementation/diversification strategies that are mainly tied to their efforts to engage in solidarity-based mobilisation. This implied that the migrants' left-behind households activated their social network, particularly their extended family and friends, and neighbours in order to receive support from them during the distressing period. In most of these cases, they self-mobilised and asked help from them. In other situations, their counterpart came forward and offered generous support. This included borrowing money to meet the fundamental needs of the households, such as the food, education and healthcare of the family members; in-kind support, such as dried food from relatives, friends and neighbours; accompanying ill family members to hospital, etc.

To fill the void left by remittances and ensure that the household income was sustained in the wake of COVID-19, the migrants' left-behind households also used a combination of self- and institutional-mobilisation strategies. These included mainly borrowing money from local sources, such as micro-credit organisations, and in a few cases receiving both cash and food assistance from the government, as well as private and charitable organisations. However, the migrants' left-behind households felt frustrated about not being given priority regarding the government relief and assistance programmes. Most of the migrants' left-behind households were not

considered for the government's protection and assistance support, as there was arguably a prevailing perception among the relief/assistance distributors at the local level that the migrants' left-behind households would receive remittances from their migrant members abroad. Furthermore, some of the migrants' left-behind households refused to seek assistance from the government as they thought this would socially degrade their position. Apart from this, the migrants' left-behind households also relied on the income of other family members, which provided them with temporary relief from financial hardship. However, a significant number of the migrants' left-behind households were also forced to use their savings and sell assets, such as land and jewellery in order to survive the unprecedented, difficult period induced by COVID-19. Many of these households were compelled to engage in negative coping strategies on account of multiple non-COVID-19-related shocks and stresses; for example, a death in the family, the chronic illness of family members, debt, natural disasters such as floods, dowries, and migrants' permanent return to the country and thus a loss of income.

CHAPTER VIII

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

Anas Ansar, Marina Sultana and Ranjit Chandra Das

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, 2020d). 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 globalisation 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 maximisation 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 globalisation 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 organisations. 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 globalisation 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 ‘feminisation 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 feminisation 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 feminised sectors (healthcare, 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 characterised 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 healthcare 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 workers⁶⁰. 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 can not 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 the experiences of women amid COVID-19

A brief overview: There is already an unsettling amount of information on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) occurring globally against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak⁶¹. 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)⁶². 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 emphasises a pattern that can be observed globally both in developed and developing countries (UN Women, 2020b).

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

61 See, for example, the UNFPA briefing report accessed from 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

62 UN Women report accessed from 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

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 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 realised 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 healthcare,

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 can not 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 criticised 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 stigmatisation 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 centralisation 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 the 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 apologised but later released a video of the rape in the social media. She has since moved to her parent's place with her son.

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 lives 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 victimising 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 in search of better prospects in 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 counseling 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 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 can not 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 exposed 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 COVID-19 virus. 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 maximisation 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 globalisation 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 arbitrage⁶³, 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 globalisation 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

63 Global labour arbitrage is broadly understood as an economic phenomenon/ practice of searching for and then using the lowest-cost workforce to produce products or goods.

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).

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 globalisation of migration and restart by doing things differently and by not leaving anyone behind.

CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Tasneem Siddiqui

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.

Section I: Summary

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 were exposure to infection, access to treatment, job and income status, nature of social protection available, extent of securitisation 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 analysed 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 more than 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, almost 400,000 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 July to December 2020 only 36,413 migrants 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.

Chapter III introduces the involuntarily-returned migrants and current migrants of left-behind 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 172 involuntarily-returned and current male migrants 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 month. 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 fear of arrest, detention and subsequent deportation.

Involuntarily-returned migrants and the left-behind households of current migrants had been going through major trauma and anxiety. However, the sources of anxiety between male and female migrants varied 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 were 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 had 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 outbreak 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 were 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 dehumanising 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 had 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 globalisation, 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 as a majority of the destination countries has not ratified them.

Chapter V highlights securitisation of Bangladeshi migrants during COVID-19 period both in destination and in Bangladesh. It also shows the grave consequences of securitisation 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 400,000 workers to Bangladesh, during COVID-19.

Unfortunately, the securitisation of the migrants did not end when they left countries of destination. They faced new waves of securitisation 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 had 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 had been deeply troubled with treatment they received from their household members. Household members of some of the migrants 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 had severely affected the human security of the migrants. Lack of job and income were 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 had become their major source for ensuring subsistence. Along with food intake, education of the school-going children had also been compromised. A section of the migrant households discontinued with the private tutors. Healthcare of the families, particularly

with elderly members, had also suffered. Purchasing medicine had become a challenge for some. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment 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 had not been congenial.

This chapter demonstrates that migrants were the most voiceless group in the countries of destination, and it was 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 were not receiving remittances remained a big challenge for the policy makers of Bangladesh. Spread of COVID-19 had 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 were going through hard time because of not receiving remittances. BCSM and RMMRU survey shows that sixty one percent 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. 53,500 (US\$ 630) over a period of three months.

The households which were not receiving remittances during COVID-19 were 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 were facing. Managing

a decent meal became problematic for some of these families. Many of them were 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 globalised 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 remittances 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 were not remitting and their household were facing the dire consequences. Some of the important reasons for increased remittances were: 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 were likely to bring back whatever resources they had 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 was 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* was 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 organisations on flow of remittances were dependent on modeling which can not take in consideration the micro level realities of individual countries. That is why there is this explanation gaps 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- mobilisation, solidarity based mobilisation and institutional mobilisation methods. Self-mobilisation includes downsize of consumption habits, cut down on goods and services, reduced food intake of relatively expensive food items, etc. Solidarity based mobilisation included mutual aid based on family and friendship networks, direct financial support, requested solidarity, etc. Institutional mobilisation 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 had not passed and the business environment was 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.

Section II: Major conclusions

- Norms and standards of ethical globalisation 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, and 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 III: 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 sensitised to not securitise 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 fulfill their commitments to SDG 3.
- A thorough review of international normative guidelines, in respect to migrants, needs to be conducted to understand why these documents can not provide protection to the vulnerable migrants during crisis situations.

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Annex 1

FIRST E-SYMPOSIUM ON COVID-19 OF RMMRU

“The other face of globalization” on 22 June 2020

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 e-Symposium 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 e-Symposium 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 Munir 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 E-SYMPOSIUM ON COVID-19 OF BCSM AND RMMRU

**Impact of Covid-19 on Left behind Migrant Families
on 27 July 2020**

Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM), Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and Prokas jointly organised the 5th e-Symposium 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 e-Symposium. 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.

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About the Book

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, involuntary 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 organisations of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) led by RMMRU.

“Congratulations to BCSM and RMMRU for accomplishing such a great task in such a short time. I commend this book as a real time research for real time problem.”

- Hossain Zillur Rahman

Former Advisor of Care Taker Government of Bangladesh and Chair, PPRC

“As the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Caucus, I treat this book as evidence in advocating for the migrants in parliamentary sessions.”

- Barrister Shameem Haider Patwary, MP

Chairperson, Bangladesh Parliamentarians' Caucus on Migration & Development, GoB

“It is a magnificent piece of work; I will definitely feed this rich local knowledge into my global advocacy.”

- Colin Rajah,

Civil Society Action Committee Coordinator, ICMC

“The book provides a compelling account of what it means to be a migrant during the COVID-19 under current form of globalisation!”

- Ignacio Packer

Executive Director, ICVA and Former GFMD Civil Society Coordinator

“A remarkable achievement - full of practical recommendations to support positive change. This is a must read for policy makers and practitioners alike.”

- Gerry Fox

Team Leader, PROKAS, British Council, Bangladesh



978-984-34-9977-6



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