

# **MFA and RMMRU Study on COVID-19 and Experiences of Return of Bangladeshi Migrants from the Middle East**

**Refugee and Migratory Movements  
Research Unit (RMMRU)**

**21 March 2021**



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*Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) is a network of grassroots organizations, trade unions, faith-based groups, migrants and their families and individual advocates in Asia working together for social justice for migrant workers and members of their families. Since 1994, MFA has thrived into a formidable migrants' rights advocacy network in Asia affecting significant influence to other networks and processes on the globe. To date, MFA is represented in membership in the region close to 260, and growing each year. Lawyers Beyond Borders is an international network of legal experts interested in advocating for the rights of migrant workers, brought together by Migrant Forum in Asia.*

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*RMMRU a center for evidence-based research and grassroots action. Since its inception in 1995, RMMRU has worked diligently to illuminate the potential of migration to initiate pro-poor growth and poverty reduction in South Asia. By cooperating with regional and global organizations, RMMRU continues to facilitate collaborative research that effectively integrates and links global migration discourse with regional grassroots programs in order to identify and eradicate the key issues affecting Bangladeshi migrants.*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bangladesh has a large migrant population serving in various countries of the world including the Middle East. Like other migrant groups Bangladeshi migrants have also been adversely affected by the pandemic. In destination countries many suffered from food insecurity, lack of hygienic shelter and lack of income. A large segment was deprived of their due wages and other entitlements. A section was forced to work for longer hours or was given the unfair choice of accepting lower wages or return home. They lacked access to COVID-19 test and treatment. There have been instances in which despite having valid work permit and visa, a number of them were involuntarily returned to Bangladesh.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic many returned home, some on own accord, others involuntarily. With a view to explore their repatriation process, this study assesses the situation of Bangladeshi migrants in the Gulf countries during the COVID-19 crisis and examines the repatriation process including immediate reasons for return and the factors that led to the repatriation of workers. The report analyses the factors that played a role in facilitating the return of the Bangladeshi migrant workers from the Gulf states, their visa and job status and work and living conditions prior to their return in the post-Covid 19 situation. It also deals with support they received from countries of destination and Bangladesh missions, the process of repatriation, and experiences in the post-repatriation phase in their home country. The study assesses the immediate response of the governments in the countries of destination as well as of Bangladesh.

This study involved a mixed methods approach that substantiated the quantitative data with qualitative information. In doing this, a questionnaire survey among the 300 returnee migrant workers (292 male and 8 female) was conducted. It was followed by in-depth personal interviews of 30 returnee migrants. The survey participants were reached through RMMRU's partners in four districts: Tangail, Dhaka, Cumilla and Faridpur. A quantitative overview using the survey was connected to qualitative information collected through narratives and personal interviews.

Migrants covered in this study returned from almost all Middle Eastern countries. 29 percent returned from Saudi Arabia, 23 percent from Kuwait, 19 percent from Qatar, 14 percent from the United Arab Emirates, 4 percent from Oman, 2 percent from Bahrain, 2 percent from Lebanon, 1 percent from Jordan and 7 percent from other countries in the Middle East. The demographic profile of Bangladeshi returnee migrants from the Middle East reveals that the most of the returnees were below 40 years of age. 86 percent returnee migrants were married at the survey time. Except one returnee migrant, all had left their family members in Bangladesh. They did not have strong formal educational background. Only 14 percent had higher secondary education, 38 percent had secondary education, 33 percent had primary education, and 15 percent did not have any formal education at all.

The highest number of returnees worked in the construction sector, followed by those who were employed in hotels and restaurants and driving. More than half lived in accommodation provided by the employer. A sizeable number of migrants had to return home as they lost their job. Another major group were those who came on annual leave, but did not have much hope to return. An important finding was the vast majority had to return despite having valid visas.

The returnee migrants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in the country of destination reveal that they were substantially dependent on their employer /Kafeel for accessing quarantine and sanitisation facilities and completing the reparation process. Almost half of the respondents stated that they would approach the employer if they experienced any COVID-19 symptoms. Fearing likely backlash from fellow migrants and also of employers, almost one-fifth of the participants stated that they would refrain from approaching anyone if they had experienced such symptoms. A very small segment reported that they would be in touch with the appropriate authority such as hospitals or police in such cases. More than half of the migrant workers did not have any access to protective items.

An important finding of the study is that as many as three-quarters of respondents did not receive wages regularly after the outbreak of the pandemic. Non-payment or irregular payment of wages became pervasive. COVID-19 had disrupted the employment opportunities of the workers. Three-quarters of the respondents informed that they could not continue with their work and a quarter of those who did had to settle for reduced wages. Almost half of the returnee migrants were involuntarily returned or deported. Of this cohort, more than half were deprived of their due wages and other entitlements. The returnee migrants also expressed mixed feelings about their employers' treatment during COVID-19 period. They also expressed disappointment about the Bangladesh embassy's services while registering the migrants.

The post-arrival experiences of the returnee migrants in Bangladesh inform that more than two-thirds had not received any protective item such as mask, sanitiser or gloves upon arrival in Bangladesh or in the flight. The health screening system at the airport was not functioning properly. Even the scanner was out of order for a certain duration. Almost a third reported not having to go through any screening at all. They also resented insensitive treatment of officials who were staffing customs and immigration desks. Only a little more than a tenth of the returnees were provided with some basic guidance about protection measures from COVID-19 and the need for staying at home quarantine for a 14-day period. A section of those who were provided with the guidance adhered to it, the rest did not pay heed. The small number of migrants who had to attend institutional quarantine informed the facility to be far from hygienic and clean. Poor quality of food and services, and lack of maintenance of toilets, became sources of major discomfort for the inmates. The disrespectful treatment of the facility staff was pointed out by most returnee respondents who had to endure institutional

quarantine. Almost all returnees stated that they did not receive support from any quarter after they arrived back home. The lack of work opportunities at home and other forms of support to re-integrate in Bangladesh has been the prime reason for four-fifths of the respondents to consider to re-migrate.

This report concludes by offering some policy recommendations. The findings of this study are expected to help policy makers and other stakeholders to initiate dialogues and take meaningful actions for better protection of migrant workers. Although this study is not statistically representative, the qualitative interpretation of the findings may help reduce the migrant workers' vulnerability in case of future pandemic situations.



## 1. BACKGROUND

Since the mid 1970s more than 77 percent of Bangladeshi migrants headed to the GCC states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which are heavily reliant on foreign labour. Bangladeshi migrants are believed to be the second largest group in the GCC region, behind migrants from India. The migrant workers sent \$19.69 billion dollar remittance from January to November 2020 (RMMRU, 2020; The Financial Express, 2020).

The impact of COVID 19 pandemic has been far reaching. It has adversely impacted all nations and peoples across the socio-economic divide. Bangladesh's large population serving in various countries of the world both as short-term temporary workers and long-term immigrants. has also been adversely affected by the pandemic.

The public-health emergency has thrown major challenges to the Bangladeshis working overseas, particularly those in low skilled categories in various Gulf and other Arab countries. It has resulted in migrants losing jobs in a vast array of sectors including construction, tourism, transportation, retail, hospitality, and entertainment. A large number migrant workers has been laid off by their employers. Loss of employment coupled with non-payment of wages and other entitlements such as end service benefits and involuntary repatriation have exacerbated the plight of these migrants. Migrants in irregular status have been particularly hard hit.

Media reports inform about 200,000 Bangladeshi migrants returned home between the beginning of January and March 21, when Bangladesh's government suspended flights. The migrants confronted isolation and confinement at both ends.

In destination countries many of those migrant workers suffered from food insecurity, lack of hygienic shelter and lack of income. Many were deprived of their due wages and other entitlements. Many were forced to work for longer hours or were given the choice of accepting lower wages or return home. They lacked access to COVID19 test and treatment. In addition, despite having valid work permit and visa, a good number of them were involuntarily returned to Bangladesh.

For some migrants availing ticket became a major problem. The cost of air ticket was high. Their experience after return was far from satisfactory. They endured long hours and often ill treatment in processing immigration. Those sent to institutionalized quarantine also had problems. After reaching their home a good section of returnee migrants

faced stigmatization, including those who completed institutionalised quarantine. Many migrants came empty handed but little support was available from government and non-government quarters. The migrant workers' sudden loss of income and associated precarity has had significant impacts on their families and communities.

Wage Earners' Welfare Board sources inform that over 327,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers, mostly from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have returned home from April to November. Of them, 287,000 were male and 40,000 were female migrants. Apart from KSA and UAE, Bangladeshi migrants have also come back home from Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Iraq, Maldives, Malaysia, Jordan and Lebanon (Bhuyan, 2020).


### **1. Forced Return from the Middle East**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic is a recent phenomenon, there is hardly any study on specific contexts of Bangladeshi migrants in the Middle East. Sorkar (2020) has studied the challenges and concerns relating to forced return of the Bangladeshi migrant workers from the Middle East. As he reports, low-paid contract migrants in the Gulf often live in squalid, overcrowded, and unhygienic dormitories with inadequate access to sanitation. These sorts of conditions have long been the target of criticism by human-rights groups and are particularly ripe for spreading the novel coronavirus. In Saudi Arabia, where migrants account for 38 percent of the population, the Ministry of Health reported in May 2020 that 76 percent of new confirmed cases were among foreigners. Saudis have lower rates of infection in part because they have better living conditions and a stronger safety net.

### **2. Existing knowledge on returnee migrants**

Three surveys highlight the state of migrant workers returning to Bangladesh during the pandemic. In August 2020 the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) noted that 70 percent of those who had returned were facing a livelihood crisis (IOM (2020b)). In May, a survey run by BRAC showed that 87 percent of the migrants who had returned home had no source of income. In most cases the returnee migrants did not find any employment after coming to Bangladesh and as such have little option but to look for means to go abroad again, even if they have to take loans. In their desperation to go abroad many fall victims to human traffickers (Bhuyan, 2019).


IOM (2020a) conducted a survey between May and July 2020 in 12 high migration-prone districts, seven of which share border with India. The survey report based on the interviews with a total of 2,765 return migrants including 1,486 international return migrants and 1,279 internal



return migrants highlights how the loss of remittances and severe lack of employment opportunities contribute to significant drop in income, challenges related to debt repayment, and social and personal impairments. The study found that 70 percent of Bangladeshi returnee migrants were struggling to find employment as they returned from abroad between February and June 2020, were unemployed. The report noted returnee migrants experienced reintegration challenges which included difficulties in securing employment, financial problems (lack of income and accumulating debt), and health-related issues. Unplanned, large-scale returns of unemployed migrant workers affect remittance-dependent communities across the country where each migrant worker supports three members of his/her household on average.

The IOM report also revealed that Bangladeshi migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, and since March 2020, hundreds of thousands of international migrant workers were compelled to return to their home districts in Bangladesh due to limited access to income-generating activities, social services, healthcare systems and social support networks in the countries in which they were working prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. A total of 64 percent of international migrants indicated that following the COVID-19 outbreak they struggled to access information and health services in the countries in which they were working in. Twenty-nine percent of respondents indicated they had returned to Bangladesh because they were asked to leave the country they were in, and 23 percent reported that they were worried about COVID-19 and wished to return to their families. Moreover, 26 percent of respondents reported that they had returned because their families had asked them to, and 09 percent returned because they were told that the borders were going to be closed and they were worried that they would be left stranded. The IOM (2020a) study further informs that a total of 55 percent of the respondents who had returned from abroad had accumulated unpaid debt. The respondents owed debt to family and friends (55 percent) and to micro-finance institutions (MFIs), Self Help Groups and NGOs (44 percent) and moneylenders (15 percent). In total, 86 percent of debt owed to family and friends was charged at zero interest, while over 65 percent of debt owed to MFIs, NGOs and private banks carried an interest rate of between 10 to 15 percent, and the interest on 62 percent of debt owed to money lenders was charged between 50 to 150 percent, as the IOM report revealed.

The respondents of the IOM study were asked about their future aspirations. Almost 75 percent of respondents reported that they wanted to re-migrate and 97 percent would choose to go back to the same country in which they were working prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Sixty percent of respondents were interested in upgrading their skill set to secure better paid jobs.




BRAC (2020) conducted another important survey titled “The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Life and Livelihoods of Returnee Migrants”. The survey was conducted among 558 immigrant workers in 13 districts, who have returned home from different countries. Among the survey respondents, 45 percent workers returned from Saudi Arab, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Kuwait in the Middle East while the other 65 percent workers returned from Malaysia, Singapore, Italy, The Maldives and other countries. Additionally, 86 percent of the survey respondents returned home in March. It revealed that 87 percent of Bangladeshi returnee migrants were struggling without any source of income in their changed circumstances amid the coronavirus pandemic. The survey found that 52 percent of the returnees needed financial assistance on an emergency basis.

The BRAC survey noted that 40 percent returnees were forced to come back home due to the COVID pandemic and 35 percent returned on holidays while 18 percent of them came home for family affairs. Thirty-four percent returnees had no savings at all, 33 percent stated that they could afford sustaining or three months and a bit more with their savings, while 19 percent were able to afford two months’ sustenance. Ten percent informed that they had to borrow money to meet the daily needs. The survey also revealed that 74 percent returnees were in mental pressure and fear. As many as 84 percent returnees confirmed that they had not planned for any livelihood while 6 percent said that they were planning to go abroad again. Rest of the 10 percent of the survey attendants said they have been planning to get involved in agriculture-based small business, grocery shops or something else. However, the survey revealed that 91 percent of the returnees received no help from government or private organization. The rest 9 percent received some help from government and private institutions.

Both IOM and BRAC studies on Bangladeshi returnee migrants had predominantly focused on economic hardship and socio-economic challenges for the returnee migrants. While those studies covered returnee migrants in general, there is a need to study the Middle East-specific experience of the returnee migrants. In order to fill this gap this study examines the experience of the Bangladeshi returnee migrants from the Middle East. In doing so this study will not only add context-specific evidence (i.e. responses from the employers in the repatriation process in the Middle East) but also present emic perspectives of the returnee migrants who have returned from the Middle East very recently, even in December 2020.

Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) and Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) conducted a study between May to



August, 2020. The study was based on interviews of 100 returnee migrants and 100 members of households that had at least one migrant member serving in the countries of destination. Findings of the study inform that 47 percent of the migrants were employed after the outbreak of COVID 19, another 26 percent were partially unemployed. The amounts the latter group earned were insufficient to maintain their own subsistence, let alone remit home. The rest 27 percent stated they became fully unemployed after the outbreak of COVID 19. 67 percent of the returnee migrants claimed that they were involuntarily returned. The study further reveals that almost two-thirds of those who returned (66 percent) from the UAE and 57 percent from Saudi Arabia were in detention. 67 percent of returnee migrants claimed that they were deprived of their due wages. Another 62 percent stated that having been subjected to forced repatriation they failed to collect their belongings, 7 percent reported that they had already made payment for renewal of visa and now that the money has been wasted. In 5 percent cases migrants were owed money by their friends to whom they had advanced loan. As many 19 percent of the returnees stated that their money, jewellery or cell phone were seized by the members of law enforcement agencies in the destination country before they were sent back. The study also shed important light on the securitization of migrants in the destination countries.

The report further noted that 57 percent of 200 households were fully dependent on remittances of migrants while 34 percent were dependent from 50 to 75%. The outbreak of the pandemic has taken a severe toll on the remittance flow to these households as 61 percent of the receiving households reported that cessation of flow of remittance. This had taken an adverse toll on the family expenditure pattern, particularly on food consumption, schooling and accessing health care. It also revealed that 67 percent of women migrant households continued to receive remittance while only 30 percent of male migrant households did so.

While conducting the RMMRU-BCSM study, (the findings of which were published in January 2021 as a volume titled *The other Face of Globalisation: Covid 19, International Labour Migrants and Left Behind Families in Bangladesh*) RMMRU realised the need to conduct a detailed study on repatriation process of the migrant workers. It felt that a context-specific study will help understand the realities and challenges involved in the repatriation process. This led to a partnership between MFA and RMMRU for undertaking the present study that aims to examine the repatriation experience of the Bangladeshi migrant workers from the Middle East.

### 3. Objectives

The present study assesses the situation of Bangladeshi migrants in the Gulf countries during the COVID-9 crisis and examines the repatriation process carried out by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), immediate reasons for return and the socio-economic factors that led to repatriation of workers. Using quantitative surveys and individual interviews carried out in Bangladesh, this report analyses the factors which forced the workers to return from the Gulf states, their decision to stay back, their job status, support they received from countries of destination (CoD) and Bangladesh missions, process of repatriation, support systems during the repatriation and post-repatriation phase. The main objective of this study is to understand the first-hand experience of repatriation of Bangladeshi returnee migrants from the Middle East. It also assesses the immediate response of the governments in the countries of destination as well as Bangladesh. To fulfill the main objective, the study had the following goals:

- To understand the condition of workers and responses of the countries of destination, employers and the Government of Bangladesh during the COVID-19 crisis in the Gulf countries;
- To analyse the process of repatriation of workers who are forced or have decided to come back on their own volition due to COVID-19-led crisis,
- To understand the support provided by the government of countries of destination and Bangladesh government during the repatriation process; and
- To examine the life of migrant workers in the immediate post-repatriation period and to understand the measures taken by the Government of Bangladesh and other agencies in Bangladesh to facilitate the repatriation process.

The next section will explain the research methods that this study followed. It will explain a mixed-methods approach combining a survey and in-depth interviews. In doing this, the section will outline the methods of data collection.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study followed the ‘mixed research methods in migration policy’<sup>1</sup>. Mixed methods can be defined as research in which the investigator collects and analyse data, integrates the findings, and draw inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in a single study or a program of inquiry (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007). Among several mixed research methods, studies on migration policy usually follow ‘Sequential explanatory’ research design. This method tends to begin with and place greater weight on quantitative research, which is then connected to the design of follow-up qualitative research.

This mixed methods design followed for this study ensured the strengths of both descriptive and exploratory research designs. Descriptive research, also known as statistical research, describes data and characteristics about the population or phenomenon being studied. It aims to answer the questions who, what, where, when and how (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, exploratory research provides insights into, and comprehension of, an issue or situation. It helps to better understand a problem that has not been clearly defined (Stebbins, 2001). Embracing strengths of the two research designs, this study aimed to measure migrant workers’ first-hand experiences of deportation and/or forced return from the Middle East countries. Mixing two research designs allowed this study to examine the policy gaps through exploring the responses of the concerned state authorities throughout the repatriation process of Bangladeshi migrant workers.

As per the key objectives of this study, a quantitative analysis alone should not reflect the ground-level situation and responses from the stakeholders. Therefore, the study aimed to substantiate the quantitative research with qualitative information. In doing this, a questionnaire survey among the 300 returnee migrant workers was conducted and it was followed by in-depth personal interviews of 30 returnee migrants. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for conducting the in-depth interviews. Thus a quantitative overview using the survey was connected to qualitative information collected through narratives and personal interviews.

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<sup>1</sup>Creswell (2009) identified some major mixed research methods based on four factors influencing the design of mixed method studies. They are Timing, weighting, mixing and theorising. Based on different combinations of these four factors, Creswell identified several types of mixed methods strategy. Among those strategies, most of the policy-based researchers follows both sequential exploratory and sequential explanatory research designs. Due to lack of concrete data on migration, migration policy research follows sequential explanatory method.



## 2.1. Quantitative method

The study involved telephone survey of 300 Bangladeshi returnee migrant workers who were repatriated from the Gulf countries. In order to stick to the purpose of this study, only those returnee migrants were interviewed who returned in February 2020 and later. A structured questionnaire was used to complete the telephone survey. The respondents were reached through RMMRU's partners in four districts: Tangail, Dhaka, Cumilla and Faridpur. While RMMRU already has a strong database (i.e. panel data) and telephone numbers of some returnee migrants, the research team followed a snowball sampling technique to reach out migrants having diverse experiences of deportation. In doing this, the research teams asked the respondents to share contact details of their fellows or acquaintances who forcedly returned from the Middle Eastern countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. This technique allowed the research team to combine convenience-based random sampling technique with snowball technique.

The ratio of male and female respondents was not even. 292 male and 8 female returnee migrants were surveyed. This is reflective of a very low rate of deportation of women from the Middle East countries. In addition, the study was not able to determine the impact of the pandemic on female migrants in Middle Eastern countries of destination given that at the time of the study, women migrants had not yet begun to return home. One of the main reasons attributed to this is the occupational placement of the female migrants. Many Bangladeshi female migrants work as domestic workers in the Middle Eastern houses. Although many male-dominated sectors halted or suspended their operation due to the pandemic, the cleaning and sensitization-related tasks of the female domestic workers demand remained unchanged at this time. Bangladeshi female migrants serving as domestic workers in Middle East did not lose jobs. As a result, they did not experience forced return from Middle East at a large scale.

SPSS software was used to analyse survey data. The research team counted the frequency of responses and prepared simple frequency tables with the help of SPSS. The tables provided the number of people and the percentage belonging to each of the categories for the variable in the question asked. Thus the frequency tables offered descriptive statistics to measure variability of responses from the entire sample. The tables allowed the research team to compare the participants and determine the relationship among their responses.



## 2.2. Qualitative method

The second component of the sequential explanatory research designed followed for the study is in-depth personal interviews with the workers who are repatriated to Bangladesh. In-depth interviewing is the key technique and probably the most commonly used in qualitative research. Enabling a thorough examination of experiences, feelings or opinions, it allows the researcher to produce a rich, in-depth and varied data set in an informal setting (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). The respondents for in-depth interviewing were selected using a non-random purposive sampling by considering their countries of destination, occupation, gender and the reasons for return. In-depth interviews were conducted immediately after the preliminary analysis of the data collected using the primary survey. The qualitative interview participants were drawn from the overall survey sample. A sub-sample of 30 participants was selected for in-depth interviewing. Purposeful sampling strategy was used to select them with preference to rich cases.

The in-depth interviews of returnee migrants were conducted in order to gain rich insights on the repatriation process and the responses from the governments by exploring their original knowledge in how they experienced the repatriation process in both Middle East and Bangladesh. The research team members utilised their subjective preference and selected those who were able to share diverse experiences and had better capabilities to articulate their personal experiences and perspectives. The basis for recruitment was the participants' self-identification of willingness to participate in the in-depth interview process, as indicated by completion of the relevant question on the survey questionnaire. In doing this, the main aim was to select the information-rich cases, even very low in number, which can provide in-depth insights into people's first-hand experience.

As in quantitative survey, the in-depth interviews were conducted over telephone in Bangla. The interviews were audio recorded and later translated to thematically match with the contents of this report. The research team transcribed the in-depth interviews and produced a verbatim account of all verbal utterances. The process of transcription was laborious but it did offer the research team an excellent opportunity to thoroughly familiarise themselves with the qualitative data.

The next section will present empirical data on demographic profile of the returnee migrant workers. Data on demographic background of the returnee migrant workers will help understand the practical contexts of the migrant workers and the reasons for their migration to the Middle

East. The data will also help understand their COVID-19 related experience and its relations to their backgrounds.

### 3. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This section presents the demographic profile and the basic information on the participants of the study. The information on the research participants not only introduces the participants but also helps understand their demographic, social and economic contexts of migration and return. A wide range of background information was collected from the participants to match with the overall objectives of this study. In most cases, the collected information has been presented in tables which help building a comparative perspective on background of the participants.

#### 3.1. Origin districts

Three hundred Bangladeshi returnee migrants were surveyed for this study. All of them returned from the Middle East countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, starting from February 2020. For the convenience of reaching the returnee migrants, four districts were chosen: Dhaka, Cumilla, Tangail and Faridpur. These districts are known as important origin areas of Bangladeshi migrants in the Middle East. As the table below shows, 135 returnees in Tangail, 108 returnees in Dhaka, 53 in Cumilla and 4 in Faridpur were surveyed over phone for this study.

District	Number of participants	Percentage
Tangail	135	45
Dhaka	108	36
Cumilla	53	17.67
Faridpur	4	1.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 3.2. Age

Almost half of the returnees (n=148) were in the age group of 31-40 years and 26 percent of returnees (n=78) were in the age group of 20-30 years. On an average, the returnee migrants were 36 years old.. As most of the tasks performed by the low skilled migrant workers in the Middle Eastern countries are physically demanding, there is a huge demand for young Bangladeshi migrant workers in these countries. This finding supports findings of previous studies including Amnesty International's report on

physically demanding jobs for migrant workers in the Middle East (Amnesty International, 2014).

Age	Number of participants	Percentage
Below 20 years	1	0.3
20-30 years	78	26.0
31-40 years	148	49.3
40+ years	73	24.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### 3.3. Gender

Out of the total 300 participants, 292 were men and 8 were women. It was not possible to reach and survey female returnee migrants proportionate to male migrants. This is because female migrant workers did not return from the Middle East in a large scale during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Since most of Bangladeshi female migrant workers work as domestic workers in the Middle East, their home-based jobs continued even after the outbreak of the pandemic. The demand for female migrant domestic workers for cleaning and sanitising related tasks had actually risen in such context.

### 3.4. Marital status

Most of the migrant workers from Bangladesh migrate overseas leaving their family members behind. Eighty-six percent (n=258) returnee migrants reported that they were married at the survey time whereas the rest 14 percent (n=42) returnee migrants were unmarried. Except one returnee migrant, all had left their family members in Bangladesh. Out of the 258 married migrants, only one was living with his family members in the Middle East. He brought his family members with him while returning home.

Marital status	Number of participants	Percentage
Married	258	86
Unmarried	42	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.5. Country of destination in Middle East

Returnee migrants covered in this study returned from almost all Middle Eastern countries. Out of 300 returnees, 29 percent (n=88) returned from Saudi Arabia, 23 percent (n=68) from Kuwait, 17 percent (n=56) from Qatar, 14 percent (n=42) from the United Arab Emirates, 11 from Oman, 6 from Bahrain, 5 from Lebanon, 3 from Jordan and 7 percent (n=21) from other countries in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has been the most common destination country for Bangladeshi migrant workers. It is estimated that more than 40 million Bangladeshi migrant workers stay and work in Saudi Arabia which makes the Middle Eastern country the largest destination country of Bangladeshi migrants. Every year the country employs thousands of Bangladeshi migrants in a wide range of sectors including cleaning, driving, construction etc.

Country of destination in Middle East	Number of participants	Percentage
Saudi Arabia	88	29.33
Kuwait	68	22.67
Qatar	56	18.67
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	42	14
Oman	11	3.67
Bahrain	6	2
Lebanon	5	1.66
Jordan	3	1
Other countries in Middle East	21	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.6. Education

The returnee migrants surveyed for this study did not have strong formal education background. Only 14 percent (n=35) had higher secondary education, 38 percent (n=120) had secondary education, 33 percent (n=100) had primary education, and 15 percent (n=45) did not have any formal education at all. The analysis of educational background of the returnee migrants shows that most of the Bangladeshi migrant workers in Middle East had low formal or no formal technical education background.

Education	Number of participants	Percentage
Higher secondary	35	14
Secondary	120	38
Primary	100	33
No literacy skills	45	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.7. Occupation in destination country

Bangladeshi migrant workers were engaged in a wide range of occupations in the Middle East. The table below presents that 27 percent (n=82) returnee migrants were construction workers in the Middle East, 13 percent (n=38) were hotel and restaurant workers, and 11 percent (n=32) were drivers. Some other occupations that the returnee migrants pursued were: domestic work, cleaning, sales, gardening, farming, small business etc.

Occupation in destination country	Number of participants	Percentage
Job in government office	1	0.33
Construction Worker	82	27.33
Hotel Restaurant	38	12.67
Driver	32	10.67
Other unskilled worker/labourer	34	11.33
Domestic Worker	19	6.33
Cleaner	19	6.33
Sales Person	11	3.67
Small Business Owner	6	2.00
Foreman	6	2.00
Gardener	6	2.00
Farm assistant	4	1.33
Manager and other HR Staffs	3	1.00
Engineer	2	0.67
Tourism and Hotel/Motel Worker	1	0.33

Nurse	1	0.33
Cook	3	1.00
Others	32	10.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>

### 3.8. Accommodation

Most of the workers interviewed were living in employer provided housing facilities. Nearly half (46 percent) were living in labour camps, 10 percent (n=30) lived in houses, and 32 percent (n=96) in shared apartments where other migrant workers lived and 6 percent (n=18) in single rooms in labour camps. Two percent arranged their own housing. Of the rest 4 percent many stayed in their work places, including hotel and restarants, and in their kafeel's houses.

Accommodation in destination country	Number of participants	Percentage
Employer provided dormitory bed in labour camp	138	46
Employer provided housing	30	10
Shared apartment with multiple persons	96	32
Single room in labour camp	18	6
Shared apartment with another person	5	1.67
Individual rental studio apartment	2	0.66
Others	11	3.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.9. Reason for return during pandemic

All returnee migrants surveyed for this study returned home after February 2020. Thirty-eight percent (n=114) of the cohort reported that their employer had sent them on forced leave. Initially the migrants perceived it to be re-scheduled annual leave as adjustment to COVID 19 situation. Eventually upon return they realised they had little hope to return to their work at least in the foreseeable future. Annual leave for some returnees was due within the next few months but their employers forced them to avail it sooner. Thus the returnees who came home on

annual leave eventually realised that they were actually sent back by their employers due to the pandemic. In such context they viewed the act of their employer as deceitful. So for all practical purposes their return was not the outcome of informed choice. Moreover, 41 percent migrants (n=123) were forced to return home as they lost their jobs due to prevailing economic condition triggered by COVID 19. Six percent participants(n=18) reported that they returned home because their work visa had expired. Eight percent (n=23)migrants returned home because their family members had passed away, some contracting the virus. Also, 3 percent (n=9) returned home realizing that they should stay close to their families and take care of them during the pandemic and 2 percent participants (n=3) reported that they had returned home for their failing health condition.

<b>Reason for return during lockdown</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Annual leave	114	38
Loss of job	123	41
Death/other immediate emergency to family members	23	8
Employment visa expired/cancelled	19	6
To be close to the family in crisis situation	9	3
Health concerns	6	2
Released from prison	6	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### **3.10. Length of Stay in Destination Countries**

Sixty-five percent of the returnee migrants (n=194) surveyed for this study migrated after 2010. This finding validates the increasing trend of short-term labour migration from Bangladesh. Relevant to this study, it further indicates that many migrants had to return after staying for a short period of time in the countries of destination in the Middle East. While their return has been commonly associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, returning home after a short stint abroad creates financial risks and socio-economic stresses for the migrants which will be discussed later in this report. Some returnees stated that they had to return within a very short time



due to the pandemic. Scores of cases have been found in which returnees had to come back within months after they had gone abroad to take up employment, spending huge sums of money.

Year of migration	Number of participants	Percentage
1984-2000	22	7.33
2001-2010	84	28.00
2011-2020	194	64.67
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 3.11. Visa validity at the time of returning

92 percent (n=275) returnee migrants reported that they had valid visa at the time of returning from the Middle East. The rest did not have a valid visa. Either they were waiting for renewal of their visa or were in irregular status.

### 3.12. COVID-19 diagnosis related experience

While the migrants were forced to return home in the context of unprecedented health risks created by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to know about their own experience regarding COVID-19 tests and quarantine in the countries of destination. Except 2 returnees, none had reported contracting corona virus. The two returnees that contracted corona virus were in the Middle East when they contracted the virus. This shows that almost all returnees were in good health at the time of returning home.

Eighty-seven percent returnees (n=261) did not experience quarantine at all whereas 13 percent had to stay in quarantine after returning home. Two thirds of the total who had to stay in quarantine did so at their own homes only a few had to stay at government quarantine facilities.

The handful of migrants who stayed in government quarantine facilities reported encountering a number of problems. Included among those were mismanagement at the airport while transferring them to the facility, poor quality of utility services such as bath, toilet and water supply, low quality and untimely serving of food, lack of access to recreation for children (of other residents), ill and hostile attitude of the staff and the like. The migrants also reported if they complained or reported poor services then they could be subjected to threats of extending the

quarantine period and of assault by the staff members. They also complained that exchange of words between them and the facility the former was subjected to physical assault and snatching away of gold chain and wrist watch that they were wearing. The migrants also alleged that some of those in quarantine bought their way out before the expiration of their quarantine tenure by paying bribe to facility operators.

### **3.13. Section conclusion**

This section has presented information about the background of the returnee migrant workers surveyed for this study. It informs that Tangail constituted the source district of the largest segment of the cohort of respondents followed by Dhaka and Cumilla. Only a handful of migrants were from Faridpur district. Their average age was 26 years. More than half of the migrants covered under the study had secondary or higher secondary education. Men constituted the overwhelming bulk. This is because under COVID 19 condition the demand for live-in women domestic workers remained high and as such they could retain their employment. It was also found that a large proportion of the stock was married. The highest number of migrants came back from Saudi Arabia. Other important countries from where the migrants returned were Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. Amply representing the ground reality the highest number of returnees worked in the construction sector, followed by those who were employed in hotels and restaurants and driving. More than half of them lived in accommodation provided by the employer. A sizeable number of the migrants had to return home as they lost their job. Another major group were those who came on annual leave, but did not have much hope to return. An important finding was the vast majority had to return despite having valid visas. The next section will present data on the migrant workers' experiences, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the country of destination.

## 4. EXPERIENCE IN THE COUNTRY OF DESTINATION

This section deals with the responses of the employers and governments in the Middle Eastern countries and Bangladesh. In order to cover the broad spectrum of responses, this section will discuss (a) quarantine and sanitisation facilities, (b) responses of the employer, (c) repatriation process, and (d) responses from Bangladesh government.

### 4.1. Quarantine and sanitisation facilities

#### 4.1.1. Quarantine facility in the Middle East

Sixty percent returnee migrants (n=179) reported that their company or employer did not have any quarantine provision available. The rest 40 percent (n=121) had access to a quarantine facility in their country of destination. When a follow-up question was asked on this, 39 percent (n=47) reported that the quarantine facility was available at a building near their workplace, 28 percent (n=34) said such a facility was at quite a bit of distance from their living quarters., 17 percent (n=21) informed that the facility was located in their labour camp and 11 percent (n=13) stated that the facility was placed at their workplace.

Quarantine facility	Number of participants	Percentage
A building near workplace	47	38.84
A building distant from the labour camp	34	28.10
Labour camp	21	17.36
At workplace	13	10.74
Others	6	4.96
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.1.2. Dealing with COVID-19 symptoms

When asked about the how the returnees dealt with any COVID-19 symptoms, 48 percent (n=143) reported that they had approached their employer in such a situation. 18 percent returnees (n=55) informed that they did not take any action and thus remained put in their rooms even if they suspected experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. Only 7 percent respondents (n=22) said they would approach hospital/health service/

police. However, 22 percent of the respondents (n=66) could not give any opinion on this issue as they said they did not experience such conditions before returning home. Dependence on the employers during sickness is understandable as it is in sync with the pervasiveness of the kafala system.

Managing COVID-19 symptoms	Number of participants	Percentage
Approached the employer	143	47.67
Remained in the room	55	18.33
Approached the hospital/health service/police	22	7.33
Remained in the labour camp	13	4.33
Moved to a friend's place	1	0.33
Not applicable	66	22.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.1.3. Access to PPE

Fifty one percent of total respondents (n=154) reported that they did not have access to masks, gloves, hand sanitisers or personal protective equipment while they were in the countries of destination. The rest 49 percent (n=146) confirmed that they had access to some of these items. The migrants who did receive such items in the country of destination also confirmed that the quality of the protective gears was standard and they had no complaints.

## 4.2. Treatment of the employer

### 4.2.1. Payment of salary/wages

Securing wages regularly sometimes become a challenge for migrant workers in normal situations. COVID-19 has exacerbated incidences of non-payment and irregular payment of wages. In other words, a section of migrant workers who used to receive remuneration regularly under normal condition were deprived of regular payment of wages. Seventy-three percent of total respondents (n=220) informed that they had not received their wages regularly since February 2020. Out of them, sixty-four percent (n=141) reported that they received remuneration on a regular basis till January 2020 only. The rest of them had a diverse range of experiences regarding receipt of salary/wage. Some received partial

payment of wages till February, some till March and some till April. Since this study was undertaken in December 2020, the research team received a wide range of responses from the returnees that revealed non-payment or delayed payment of wages were rampant. Many returnees had to forego their remuneration due to unplanned rush return that in many instances were involuntarily imposed. Further discussion on pending wages and other entitlements has been included in a later section.

#### **4.2.2. Continuation of employment during COVID-19 pandemic**

Migrant workers in different sectors were adversely and disproportionately affected soon after the outbreak of the pandemic. This has resulted in major disruption in their employment arrangements. Seventy-five percent of total participants (n=225) reported that they were not able to continue their work during the lockdown. Only 25 percent participants (n=75) were able to work during the lockdown. Sixty five percent respondents (n=49) of the workers who were able to continue their employment during the lockdown claimed that they experienced reduction in their wages. Of this group of 75 workers, 45 percent (n=34) reported that their number of working days or working hours per day was reduced. These findings suggest that the Bangladeshi migrant workers were being deported from the Middle East soon after the onset of the pandemic. A large proportion of the migrants did not have any experience to share on reduction of hours or days of work as their employment was already disrupted and forced to return home immediately after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **4.2.3. Termination and forced leave**

The participants for this study shared their experience in relation to their termination of employment and forced leave. Eighteen percent of the participants (n=53) reported that their employer suggested them to travel back home as work had stopped due to outbreak of the COVID-19. The employers cleared the dues of the workers. “When my employer asked me to take leave that had not fallen due I did not ever think that he was terminating me for good. After coming back to Bangladesh I realised that I was duped”, observed Abdul Latif, a returnee from the UAE. Sixteen percent participants (n=47) stated their employers forced them to resign but cleared their dues. For another 10 percent migrants (n=30) the employers simply expelled them without clearing their dues. The rest of the participants (54 percent) stated that they were jobless and seeing no hope to secure employment in the foreseeable future they chose to return home. “With the lockdown the opportunity to work from time to

time in shopping malls or car parks shrunk. Since there was little hope to earn, I decided to return”, said Motaleb, a returnee migrant in irregular status from Saudi Arabia.

Resignation and forced leave option	Number of participants	Percentage
Suggested by employer to travel back home after clearing their salary	53	17.67
Forced to resign by employer without clearing dues	47	15.67
Was expelled by employers without clearing dues	38	12.66
Others	162	54.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

The above table informs that as many as 46 percent of returnees (n=138) were involuntarily returned or deported. An important element related to involuntary repatriation was settlement of dues. Of those involuntarily returned 62 percent were deprived of their due wages and other entitlements. Only about 6 percent of them (n=8) were provided documentation pertaining to the amount owed to them. The rest 94 percent (n=130) were not given any document related to amount they had to forego. Moreover, 16 percent participants (n=22) reported that they were made to sign documents when they were being involuntarily repatriated, they were not informed about the contents. Some were made to sign blank papers.

#### 4.2.4. Support from the employer during the COVID crisis

The respondents were asked if they were happy with the support that they received from the employers during the COVID19 crisis. About a third of the respondents (32 percent, numbering 97) stated that they were reasonably happy with their employers. They referred to a host of reasons for holding such positive opinion. Foremost among those were employers providing food and other forms of critical support when the workers needed them. Paying migrants full wages regularly as per the contract despite factories remained shut was another major reason for appreciation of the employers. A migrant from Saudi Arabia said given the experience of many others he was apprehensive if his employer would settle a big outstanding amount. He was happy that the employer

reimbursed him the entire amount of entitlements and end of service benefits of the last ten years without any hesitation.

Many respondents informed that employers supplied them with protective gears such masks, hand sanitisers and soaps. Some migrants appreciated that their companies ensured that their work and residential quarters were thoroughly maintained and cleaned to prevent the spread of the virus. A very important consideration of migrants was that despite the shutdown their employers continued to maintain contact with them, provided them with critical information about visa status, repatriation arrangements and the like, which was not the case for many other workers. In other words, the employers tried to address the problems that the migrants reported from time to time. This was a big support at time of distress.

Support extended by the employers in effecting return of migrants was yet an additional reason for the positive assessment. Many employers provided them air-tickets, which they considered was a big support. Some returnee migrants said their employers promised to take them back when situation improves. A few migrants who had retained their jobs informed that they deeply appreciated their employers granting them leave even though it had not fallen due. They expected to go back as soon as regular flights resumed.

Not many migrants were lucky to have received the type of support and cooperation that the above cohort of migrants enjoyed. More than two-thirds (68 percent) reported that they were unhappy with the performance of the employers. Failure of the employers to provide protective gear and materials has been the foremost complaint. The insensitivity of the employers about personal safety pitted them against the employers. One of the returnee workers from Oman said he was appalled by the apathy of the employer adding “If someone was sick, we could not get the help of the employer to arrange to get permission to go to the hospital”. “The fact that we the workers were living in cramped condition with risk to our lives did not appear to bother our employer a bit. He didn’t do anything to ease congestion in dormitories nor taken any special measure for its cleanliness”, observed Kayet Ali, a returnee from Saudi Arabia. Another respondent added that the employer shifted from my regular accommodation to the camp only on suspicion that I could be COVID positive”.

Non-payment of wages and other entitlement was another reason of grievance against the employer. Many migrants were distraught that huge sums of pending wages and other benefits remained with the

employer. “I used to work in a hotel for eight months. The business was not good, so the owner decided to close down the facility. I was summarily terminated and most of my salaries remained pending. I do not know if ever I will get that money back”, cited Aftab, a returnee from UAE. “The employer left us at Allah’s mercy. Almost overnight my fortune changed and we were turned into paupers by our employer”, shared Saudi returnee Abu Ala. Those who were fortunate to retain their job, did so at a cost. They had to endure drastic salary cut from 25 to 50 percent. “Even in normal times we had difficulty in making our ends meet, with 50 percent drop in income, how could we survive? That’s why I had little choice but to repatriate”, notes Yusuf, a UAE returnee.

Lack of communication with the employer during and after the lockdown was particularly disturbing for the migrants. “Through a notification posted on the gate of the company complex I learnt that the owner fired us without any compensation. The management did not have the courage to face us”, stated Shafiul, another returnee from UAE. “For the lockdown we could not go to the factory premises now the company management didn’t pick up the phone” informed Bayes a Qatar returnee. He claimed that he tried to contact the company from Bangladesh but did not get anyone to entertain his queries. Another returnee stated that some of them thought the company had blocked their number so that they could not reach the company with their claims.

Some resented they were made to sign blank papers before the employer returned their passports. “We had little choice but to sign the document they provided. Otherwise, they would not release our passports and we could not avail the flight back home. What else could we do?” Ariful, a returnee migrant from Saudi posted the question. Another returnee from Qatar Mushtaq said his employer took money for renewal of visa for two years, but after he got back the passport he noted the validity was extended by only a year and that meant he had to return by April 2021.

Several other workers blamed ill treatment and degrading conditions of work for their decision to return home. “The pressure of work was high but the pay was low. With COVID there was a drop in the existing pay. So I was left with no choice but return”, stated Atiqul, another returnee from Saudi Arabia. While they understood the constraints faced by the companies in being able to retain them these workers held the employers responsible for not treating them well and for not paying them compensation and making proper plans to ensure their return. “They simply didn’t care for us”, noted Shakib, a returnee from the UAE.



#### 4.2.5. Wages and service benefits and other benefits before repatriation

Respondents were asked if they had any dues (wages or end-service and other benefits) that the employers owed them. Since a good number of the returnees had either finished their contract or the contract was terminated after discussion as many as 56 percent (n= 168) reported that their employers did not owe them anything. In other words, these workers had no claims against their employers. In contrast 142 of the 300 respondents (44 percent) informed that their employers owed dues to them. It ranged from a month's wages to equivalent amount of eight months' wages.

Payment of dues	Number of participants	Percentage
Written promise	4	3.00
Oral promise	65	46.00
No arrangement	73	51.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>100.00</b>

In several instances aggrieved workers stated they were deprived of their end of service benefits. This amount varied from Taka 30,000 to Taka 800,000. In a few cases the workers were deprived of money that they voluntarily left with the employer to collect it at a later date. Under the arrangement the workers used to collect a certain portion of their wages to maintain subsistence at the country of destination and send amounts to the family, keeping the rest with the employer. They could withdraw the amount as and when they needed, such as for meeting emergency expenditure at home or while coming back to Bangladesh on holidays. Unfortunately, inability of the workers to contact the companies during the lockdown deprived them from accessing the large amounts of outstanding resource.

### 4.3. Repatriation procedures

#### 4.3.1. Source of information on the repatriation process

The respondents were asked the medium through which they learnt about the repatriation process. In two-thirds cases it was their employer who informed them about the repatriation arrangement. Friends and relatives at the destination constituted the next important source. About 21 percent (n=64) of returnees secured information from this source. The newspapers, television and the social media and friends and relatives at home were other sources of information for 5.33 percent and 3.67

percent (n= 16 and 11) respectively. Bangladesh embassy and non-government sources (presumably, diaspora associations) were the other two sources identified by the migrants.

Source of information	Number of participants	Percentage
Employer	200	66.67
Friend/relative in destination	64	21.33
Media and social media	16	5.33
Friends and relatives at home	11	3.67
Embassy	7	2.33
NGOs	2	0.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.3.2. Inquiry to the embassy during the crisis about possibilities of repatriation

The respondents were asked if they had enquired with the embassy about the possibility of repatriation. Only 14 percent (n=42) said they did contact the embassy but a staggering 86 percent (n=258) informed they did not do so. Based on their own and their friends' past experience, they felt such an exercise would not yield any meaningful result. A detailed discussion on migrants' experiences at the Bangladesh embassies has been included later in this report.

#### 4.3.3. Registration with the embassy

Thirteen percent of the respondents (n=39) stated that it was compulsory to register with the embassy, while 87 percent (n=261) informed that registration was not mandatory. It is likely that either the registration process was introduced by the embassies at a later date (by that time most of the returnees might have returned) or the registration process was discontinued after initial introduction. Many returnees reported that they were not interested in the registration process as they might be required to present valid documents to complete the registration process. Fearing complications in such cases they stayed away from the registration process. Moreover, the embassy stipulation to come in person to the embassy premises and that of finger printing might have

worked as a deterring factor. In general, the long distance and difficulty in travelling in COVID situation made the migrants reluctant to participate in the registration process. Many migrants have also stressed that their financial condition, due to joblessness and non-payment of wages immediately after the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, was not conducive to pay for travel and other related expenses that might have been incurred to register with the embassy. On top, some feared that they may have to pay speed money to process their registration.

Of the 39 workers who registered with the embassy 11 stated that they registered on their own. 21 said their company helped them register, 5 took the help of colleagues and 2 of family members who were living in the same city.

Twenty-nine of the 39 persons who registered was okay with services they received from the embassy. However, the ten who were not happy with the services assigned a few reasons. Prominent among those were the registration process had taken a lot of time, the behaviour of the embassy staff was not respectful and the embassy staff lacked professionalism.

#### **4.3.4. Airfare or ticket charge**

A little more than 42 percent (n=127) of the respondents felt that ticket prices were higher than normal. The workers felt that reduced number of flights in the COVID 19 situation has been one of the prime reasons for the hike in ticket price. Others felt as they had depended on their employers or agents to buy the ticket, the latter might have overcharged them. A few returnee workers felt that in their haste to get back home they had purchased ticket that involved travelling by two airlines that resulted in hike in price in air tickets. In one instance a returnee migrant from Saudi Arabia claimed that “I had to pay the same fare for a single way ticket as I had to pay for double way earlier”. Quite a few of the respondents stated that they had paid two to three times more than what they had paid during their earlier returns to home. In contrast, there have been cases in which migrants said that they could not make any comparison as this was first time they were returning home after they took up employment overseas. While various excuses in normal time have been frequently reported by the migrants, COVID has exacerbated those excuses. General perception of the migrants on corruptive practices of airlines authority have indicated ticket black marketing and overpricing the tickets at the time of their return.

Ticket was overpriced	Number of participants	Percentage
No	173	57.67
Yes	127	42.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100.00</b>

A little more than half (51.33 percent, n= 122) of the respondents stated that they had to pay for their own tickets. Among the rest 146 returnees in almost 84 percent cases (n=122) it was the employer who covered for the costs of the ticket. In about 8 percent cases (n=11) families from home paid for the ticket. The Bangladesh embassy took care of the tickets of 3.43 percent (n=5) cases. In a couple of instances the cost was borne by friends of the migrants. The government of Kuwait paid for the return of 6 Bangladesh migrants (4.10 percent). The source of money for the ticket of 2.67 percent (n=5) migrant could not be known.

Payment for return ticket	Number of participants	Percentage
Company / employer	122	83.56
Family from home	11	7.54
Govt of Kuwait	6	4.10
Embassy	5	3.43
Friend	2	1.37
<b>Total</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.4. Treatment by Bangladesh government at Destination Countries

##### 4.4.1. Role of the Bangladesh Embassy

There was mixed reaction about the role of the embassy. A section of migrants had positive experience and were satisfied with the quality of service rendered. While a few of them stated that as they could not afford to pay for the airfare it was embassy that bore the expenses. In addition, although none of the migrants received the food, they heard that embassy supplied food to the needy migrants in different camps. One returnee appreciated the fact that the embassy gave priority to facilitate the return of sick migrants.

However, a good number of migrants (80 percent) stated that they had no contact or communication with the embassy. Some stated that the

embassy was not courteous in extending their services. Others reported that the embassy staff was not respectful to labour migrants. Another group informed based on their previous experience they had little to hope for from the embassy and thus did not approach it.

When asked what type of services that they had expected from the embassy, the respondents noted that during COVID-19 period a large number of Bangladeshi migrants led distressful lives and thus needed food and other kinds of support. They stated although the embassy provided some support, the amount was paltry and much lower than the needs of the migrants. They also felt that embassy officials should have been proactive in providing information. This was particularly important as migrant workers were stranded under the lock down condition and did not have access to reliable information. They further explained though embassy to an extent provided messages about health, safety and the importance of social distancing, the information that the workers needed at that critical time was information about their visa status, the likelihood of visa extension during the lock down, the embassy’s role in negotiating such extension and in cases where workers faced arbitrary termination, opportunities and procedure for repatriation and the like. There was little information from the embassy on these pertinent issues. “We were randomly picked up from road and reported to the embassy but they did not do anything in this regard”, noted Saiful a returnee from Dahrn.

Expected services	Number of participants	Percentage
Regular contact	153	51
Financial and food	52	17.33
Financial support	33	11
Food support	2	0.87
Medical support	3	1
Others	57	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

Some returnees expressed their ignorance about the services that the embassies are meant to render and thus had little urge to contact them. One of the major demands of the returnees was that the Bangladesh embassies in respective countries should ensure that those who were forced to return home should be given priority when

those countries start re-hiring of workers from overseas. “The embassies should ensure that we are not dispensed in the crisis situation and the contracts are duly honoured”, demanded a Latifur, a returnee from Kuwait. A number of other migrants also articulated the demand.

A section of the Bangladeshi workers were of the opinion that the performance of the Bangladesh missions was much wanting compared to the Lebanese, Indian, Pakistani and Nepali embassies. The Lebanese embassy was very active and well looked after their nationals, also embassies of India, Pakistan and Nepal were quite forthcoming in providing food and cash support to the distressed migrants and information and protective health gear particularly masks to other migrants. They also disseminated information about dos and don’ts during the COVID 19 period. The representatives of those embassies appeared to be more visible and engaged in dealing with their workers. In many instances they contacted the employers and succeeded in securing outstanding wages.

The respondents further informed that in addition to the embassies, the diaspora groups, such as the local Indian association and the Organization of Non-resident Nepalis mobilised food, support and information and in some instances medical support for the very sick migrants.

#### 4.4.2. COVID-19 test before repatriation

When the returnees were asked if they had to undergo a COVID-19 test before repatriation, 50 percent of them responded that they had not. The rest half confirmed that they had to undergo a COVID-19 test prior to repatriation. Of them, 16 percent reported that they had to undergo the test as soon as they decided to return. Forty-two percent (n=63) stated that they had to undergo the test soon after the flight was confirmed, 33 percent (n=49) a few days before the repatriation and 9 percent (n=13) said that they had to undergo the test just a few hours before their travel.

COVID-19 test before repatriation	Number of participants	Percentage
As soon as they decided to return	24	16.11
Soon after the flight was confirmed	63	42.28
Few days before the repatriation	49	32.89

Others	13	8.72
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>100.00</b>

As the table below shows, when the returnees were asked about the time they had to wait to receive the COVID-19 test result, 70 percent (n=104) replied that they had received the test result within 24 hours, 16 percent (n=23) received the test result within 72 hours. The rest of the returnees received the test result after seven days.

<b>Time to get test result</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
24 hours	104	69.80
48 hours	4	2.68
72 hours	19	12.75
4-7 days	18	12.08
Above 7 days	4	2.68
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>100.00</b>

#### 4.4.3. Payment for COVID-19 test

Most of the returnees reported that their employer paid for their COVID test. Only 21 percent (n=31) of the respondents stated that they themselves had to cover for the payment for the COVID-19 test. However, some of them (20 participants) reported that they did not have money to pay for the test. They had to seek financial support from their left behind family members, friends and employers to pay for the test. Furthermore, 97 percent (n=290) respondents reported that they had to undergo no other medical tests except COVID-19. The rest 3 percent (n=10) claimed that their employer organized a health checkup for them.

#### 4.4.4. Starvation and food scarcity in the country of destination

11 percent of the respondents (n=32) reported that they had to face starvation/food scarcity in the country of destination during the time of COVID. Their food scarcity lasted for as long as six weeks. Most of those who faced food scarcity reported that Bangladesh embassy did not take any step during the time of food scarcity or starvation. Only a few respondents stated that the embassy provided some basic foods but the quality of the foods was very poor and the quantity was inadequate. As one returnee Abdul Wahab from Saudi Arabia reported: “Sometimes we

had to survive by having meal for once a day. We had lots of sufferings. No one helped us.”

#### **4.4.5. Physical harassment in the country of destination**

Except five respondents, no one reported physical harassment in the country of destination during the COVID period. The harassed migrants stated that they were harassed by their employers or their representatives. One such migrant confirmed that he was physically harassed because he lodged a complaint for getting his dues paid. When he raised the issue of outstanding wages his employer got upset and he physically assaulted the complainant. However, the assaulted migrants expressed their disappointment as the embassy of Bangladesh did not take any step regarding the incident of physical harassment.

In general, the returnees surveyed for this study expressed their deep frustrations with the embassy of Bangladesh that they contacted in the country of destination. As one returnee from Kuwait Aftab Sheikh reported, “I went to Bangladesh embassy. No one helped me at all. They misbehaved with me. They were so rude, so mean. People do not misbehave even with cattle the way they did with me.”

While the returnees from Saudi Arabia shared that their sufferings, they repeatedly noted that the Embassy of Bangladesh in Saudi Arabia had not helped them at all. Rather some returnees were threatened. One returnee Masud Khan reported, “In Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh Embassy did not help us at all. Rather they threatened us by saying that they would store our fingerprints so that we do not get a visa for working in that country.”

Inertia and inefficiency of the embassy staff made some returnees to state that there was no reason to have an embassy of Bangladesh in Saudi Arabia as it did not have effective and sincere staff to serve the migrants. As one Rafi Sawdagr pointed out, “Why did Bangladesh government keep an embassy in Saudi Arabia? All staff in the embassy should be replaced. Only those people should be recruited who have genuine desire to serve the workers”.

#### **4.4.6. Economic hardship during the COVID period**

More than one-third of the respondents (35 percent or 106 respondents) reported that they had faced immense economic difficulties in the countries of destination during the COVID-19 period. The reasons for their economic hardship were mainly due to loss of their employment,



reduction in working hours and wages which have been discussed above. Of these adversely impacted migrant workers, 87 percent participants (n=92) had to borrow money from various sources to deal with their hardship. The table below shows sources of borrowing.

Sources of borrowing	Number of participants	Percentage
Family member/Relative/Friend in home country	65	70.65
Friend and colleague in the country of destination	23	25.0
Others	4	4.35
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>100</b>

The sources of borrowing, as reported by the returnee migrants, included relatives and friends in the home country, family members in the home country, friends in the country of destination, colleagues, and other sources such as employer, acquaintances in the country of destination etc. While the migrants were asked if they had to pay interest on the borrowed money, 87 percent confirmed that they had to pay interest at rates ranging 5 to 15 percent.

#### 4.4.7. Prison experience in the country of destination

7 respondents informed that they were in prison before they were repatriated home. Out of these 7 respondents, 5 were held for not having valid visa. 1 was accused of physical assault of his colleague, and seventh respondent was apprehending for working for someone else other than his sponsor. The average time they had to spend in prison ranged from one week to three weeks. Among 7 respondents, 4 returned to home country under the general amnesty announced for the prisoners.

#### 4.4.8. Travel support to reach the airport in the destination country

As the table below shows, in order to return home 54 percent of the returnees (n=162) had to pay from their own pocket to reach the airport in the country of destination. For 31 percent returnees (n=94), the employer offered travel support to reach the airport. The rest 15 percent (n=44) reached the airport with the support from their friends, diaspora organisations or individuals, relatives, government of the destination country and non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh.

Travel support provider	Number of participants	Percentage
Self paid	162	54
Employer	94	31.33
Friends	17	5.67
Diaspora organisations/Individuals	8	2.67
Relatives	7	2.33
Government of the destination country	7	2.33
Embassy	4	1.33
NGOs in Bangladesh	1	0.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.4.9. Written guidelines before repatriation

75 percent respondents (n=226) reported that they had not received any written guidelines before repatriation. The rest 25 percent returnee migrants (n=74) had received such guidelines but 50 percent of these participants stated that the guideline was written in English. 28 percent (n=21) and 18 percent (n=13) returnees stated the guideline was in Bangla and multi-language. Abdul Hafiz, a returnee migrant from Saudi Arabia stated “How am I to understand the guideline as it was written in English?”, His sentiment was echoed by a quite a few of the migrants.

Language	Number of participants	Percentage
English	37	50.00
Bangla	21	28.38
Arabic	1	1.35
Multilingual	13	17.57
Others	2	2.70
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>100.00</b>

#### 4.4.10. Social distancing in flight

90 percent of the returnee migrants (n=271) noted that the airlines did not follow strict social distancing. They mentioned that due to limited availability of flights amid travel restrictions many migrants were trying to return home. This led to a huge demand for air ticket. Although the migrants were promised strict social distancing at the time of buying air ticket, the flight was full. As Mohammad Hasan, a returnee from the UAE stated “When buying the air ticket, I was told that I should pay for two seats in order to maintain social distance. The airlines staff asserted that the seat next to be would remain vacant. After entering into the aircraft, I found all the seats full.”

#### 4.4.11. Health check up at the departure airport

While 35 percent of participants (n=105) did not report any experience in relation to health check up at the departure airport, 65 percent (n=195) reported that they were tested at the departure airport. Half of these returnees mentioned stated they were tested through thermal screening only. 31 percent (n=61) said they had to undergo body temperature check only. Rest of the participants (18 percent) mentioned that they were tested through thermal screening and body temperature check together.

Type of test	Number of participants	Percentage
Thermal screening	98	50.26
Body temperature alone	61	31.28
Thermal screening and body temperature test	36	18.46
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100.00</b>

#### 4.4.12. Section conclusion

This section has presented empirical data including the emic perspectives of the return workers on their experience in the country of destination. The section underscored the dependence of workers on the sponsors (Kafeels). Almost half of the respondents stated that they would approach the employer if they experienced any COVID 19 symptoms. Fearing likely backlash from fellow migrants and also of employers almost one-fifth of the participants stated that they would refrain from approaching anyone if they had experienced such symptoms. A meagre segment reported that it would be in touch with the appropriate authority

such as hospitals or police in such cases. It is also revealing to note that more than half of the migrant workers did not have any access to protective items. No less important is the fact that three-quarters did not receive wages regularly after the outbreak of the pandemic. Non-payment or irregular payment of wages became pervasive. The section also laid bare the fact that COVID 19 has disrupted the employment opportunities of the workers. Three-quarters of the respondents informed that they could not continue with their work and a quarter of those who did had to settle for reduced wages. It also revealed that almost half of the returnee migrants were involuntarily returned or deported. Of this cohort more than half were deprived of their due wages and other entitlements. The workers also expressed mixed feelings about their employers' treatment during COVID 19 period. They also expressed disappointment about the Bangladesh embassy's services while registering the migrants. The next section will present empirical data and discuss the post-arrival responses in their home country i.e. Bangladesh.

## **5. POST-ARRIVAL EXPERIENCE IN THE HOME COUNTRY**

This section discusses the post-arrival experiences of the returnee migrants in Bangladesh. Starting from immediate support on arrival, the returnees had to go through several processes to complete the repatriation process. In this context, it is very important to understand what kind of formalities they had to follow after returning to their home country. The information collected through the interviews provide important insights on the role and responses of Bangladesh government functionaries at the airport and quarantine centres and policy of the government on the returnee migrants.

### **5.1. Protective equipment upon arrival in Bangladesh**

71 percent returnees (n=212) reported they had not received any protective item such as mask, sanitiser or gloves upon arrival in Bangladesh or in the flight. 29 percent (n=88) returnees who received protective equipment, they mentioned that some of them received one mask only. Some received mask, sanitiser and gloves all together.

### **5.2. Health screening at the airport**

Upon arrival, 41 percent of the respondents (n=124) had to undergo thermal screening, Eight percent (n=24) had to undergo thermal screening as well as body temperature check and 20 percent (n=61) had to undergo body temperature check only. Thirty percent of respondents (n=91) mentioned that they did not have to undergo any screening process after arriving at the airport in Bangladesh. Press reports of February and March informed that the screening device at the Dhaka airport was dysfunctional and it took several weeks time to bring in new equipment. This finding suggests that the returnees were not screened properly after arriving in Bangladesh. Some returnees stated that the airport treated them with contempt. Abul Hossain, a returnee from Kuwait stated, “Their (their airport staff’s) body language suggested that as if they were dealing

with infected people. I was appalled by the treatment”. Validating such statement Nur Mohammad, a returnee migrant from the UAE stated, “The way they dealt with us made feel we were suffering leprosy”. All the respondents asserted that they did not show any COVID-related symptoms during the tests at the airport.

Screening at the airport	Number of participants	Percentage
Thermal screening	124	41.33
Thermal screening and body temperature check	24	8
Body temperature check Alone	61	20.33
No screening	91	30.33
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 5.3. Counselling/awareness session upon arrival

89 percent of the respondents (n=268) stated that they had not experienced any counseling/awareness session upon their arrival in Bangladesh. The rest 11 percent of the respondents (n=32) reported that they received a short brief about the COVID-19 related health risks and benefits of home quarantine upon their arrival at the airport. “I think it was good for me to attend the short briefing. It made me conscious that I should follow the instruction of home quarantine for my and my family’s safety” stated Tushar Khan, a returnee from Kuwait. However, not everyone appreciated the briefing session at the airport. Abdus Sabur, a returnee from Qatar stated, “Thanks God, we did not have any such session. It took four hours for us clear the regular formalities at the airport. If we had another such session who knows how many more hours would that have taken.” It appears from the responses that in all likelihood the briefing sessions were introduced after the bulk of the cohort of respondents had already arrived back in Bangladesh.

### 5.4. Compulsory quarantine after arrival

87 percent respondents(n=262) stated that they were not put in compulsory quarantine after arrival. The rest (13 percent, n=38) had to go to compulsory quarantine upon their arrival. The compulsory quarantine was set for 14 days. Except one returnee migrant, no one

reported payment of money at the government’s mandatory isolation camp. He said he had to pay Taka 2000 at the camp. However, 7 respondents were aware of irregular financial transactions at the government isolation camps while 31 were unaware of such thing. The irregular financial transactions were made to get better food, medical assistance and better living arrangement to live in. Some participants who went to compulsory isolation camps reported that they saw returnee migrants leaving the camps early (before completing 14 days) by paying bribes.

### 5.5. Transportation from airport

Ninety-eight percent of the participants (n=295) had to pay from their own pocket the transport cost from airport to the quarantine home.

Type of service	Number of participants	Percentage
Self payment	295	98.33
Government support	5	1.66
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 5.6. Self-quarantine

59 percent of 271 respondents (n=177) reported that at the airport they were advised self-quarantine. The rest 41 percent (n=123) stated that they did not receive any instruction at the airport to stay in self quarantine. Except three all those who received instruction to stay in self quarantine stayed at home to observe self-quarantine. However, only a handful among them informed that they stayed in isolation, maintaining social distance from the member of their families.

Out of 177 respondents who received instructions to stay in self-quarantine, 68 percent of them (n=121) stayed in self quarantine for 14 days, 22 percent (n=39) for 7 days and 4 percent (n=15) stayed in self-quarantine only for upto 4 days.

Self-quarantine period	Number of participants	Percentage
14 days	121	68.36
Upto7 days	39	22.03
Upto4 days	15	8.47
Others	2	1.13
<b>Total</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>100.00</b>

More than half of the participants mentioned that they did not undergo testing after the self-quarantine period whereas 24 participants had undergone testing for once after the self-quarantine period. 30 participants stated that they were looked down with suspicion as possible virus carriers by their family members, friends or neighbours even after finishing the self-quarantine period. A few of the participants mentioned that their neighbours avoided them.

### **5.7. Financial support and other support from the government during and after quarantine**

Almost all participants (98 percent) reported that they had not received any form of financial support from the government after the arrival back in Bangladesh. The rest 2 percent reported that they received Taka 4000 at the airport. Two of these returnee migrants stated that although they were meant to receive Taka 5000 they were given Taka 1000 less. “In all likelihood the disburser pocketed the amount”, observed Nasirul, a returnee from Saudi Arabia.


Ninety-six percent respondents (n=288) reported that they had not received any food and grocery packets or other support from the government or any other sources. Only 4 percent (n=12) received such packets. The packets contained rice, potatoes, cooking oil and lentil. Only one participant mentioned that he received Taka 3000 in cash.

Discussions with the returnee migrants revealed that due to economic difficulties they were unable to mobilise funds to investment even in small trading activities. Returning from overseas, they were under social pressure as they were perceived as failed migrants. Constant distress and financial hardship created sever psychological toll for them that in some cases affected their family harmony. Many returnees expressed their anxiety and fear for their children’s future. In absence of any support from the government, they perceived that their overall future plan had been adversely affected due to status degradation.

### **5.8. Plan for going back to the Middle East countries for work**

When asked about the future migration plan, 80 percent respondents reported that they were keen to go back to the Middle East countries for work. The rest were not interested to go back as they were planning to stay in Bangladesh. Some of these migrants had a plan to start business in Bangladesh and some were thinking about going to a non-Middle East country in the future. While most of the returnees are keen to go back to their country of destination, due to lack of financial






support, they are facing economic hurdles to meet their basic needs. At the time of survey, many returnees earnestly requested the research team to help them get financial support from the government. Referring to a miserable life, they reiterated that they were really struggling to meet daily expenses for their family members. As Mahbub Morshed returnee from the UAE stated: “After returning home, my financial condition is too bad to afford buying some fruit for my pregnant wife. I can’t even afford to buy some essential clothes for her... I am really in a beggar-like situation”.

Like him another returnee from Saudi Arabia Abdul Mostafa reported that he had no options other than borrowing. Although initially his relatives showed empathy to him and lent money to help him, after a few months he was not in a position to borrow further from their relatives who started to think that he would never be able to pay off his debts. As he disappointedly noted “Now I can neither afford my children’s education-related expenses, nor meet daily family expenses. For the last few months, I have survived on borrowing from others. Now no one wants to lend me thinking that I might not be able to repay the money”.

Frustration related to joblessness and increasing debts had led some returnees to think that migrating abroad will never be beneficial for them. As a result, they had developed an aversion to go abroad. As Mabud Mia, a returnee from Kuwait reported “If you ask me about my future plan, I would never be interested to go overseas again even if you offer me a wonderful opportunity.”

### **5.9. Responses from recruiting agents/dalals**

81 percent of respondents (n=242) reported that they took support of intermediaries or middlemen (dalal) to migrate to the Middle East for work. These intermediaries were from their locality or neighbouring village and had contacts with recruiting agencies and travel agencies. The rest (19 percent numbering 58) did not secure any help of intermediaries before migration. The returnees were asked if they had solicited any support from recruiting agents and/or intermediaries (dalals) before their repatriation. 23 percent returnees (n=69) said they contacted them but to no avail. Others said they did not approach them as they knew that recruiting agents and/or dalals only facilitators of migration and they would not be able to offer any assistance in completing the repatriation process.



The returnees were asked if they had sought support from that recruiting agent and/or intermediaries after they came to Bangladesh. Out of 242 participants 79 percent (n=190) replied in the negative. They said they were of the opinion that the recruiting agents or the intermediaries could not come to their assistance and hence there was no urge to contact them. However, 21 percent (n=52) stated that they were in touch with them to seek their help to go overseas again. Some of these migrants further informed that they were interested to go countries other than the Middle East.

### **5.10. Section conclusion**

This section has presented a wide range of information on the post-arrival responses in the returnee migrant workers' home country. They informed that the health screening system at the airport was not functioning properly. Even the scanner was out of order for certain duration. Almost a third reported not having to go through any screening at all. They also resented insensitive treatment of the officials who were staffing customs and immigration desks. Only a little more than a tenth of the returnees were provided with some basic guidance about protection measures from COVID 19 and the need for staying at home quarantine for a 14 day period. A section of those who were provided with the guidance adhered to it, the rest failed pay heed. The small number of migrants who had to attend institutional quarantine informed the facility to be far from hygienic and hospitable. Poor quality of food and services and lack of maintenance of toilets, have become sources of major discomfort for the inmates. The disrespectful treatment of the facility staff was pointed out by most of the returnee who had to endure institutional quarantine. Almost all returnees stated that they did not receive support from any quarter. The lack of work opportunities at home and other forms of support to re-integrate in Bangladesh has been the prime reason for four-fifths of the respondents to consider to re-migrate.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examines the experience of the Bangladeshi migrant workers who were repatriated from the Middle East during COVID-19 both in the countries of destination and upon their return to their home country. In doing so this the study involved a survey of 300 Bangladeshi returnee migrants and 30 in-depth interviews of returnee migrants. The findings of this study add to the existing knowledge by offering detailed insights on the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers serving in the Middle East. While a few studies conducted earlier have focused mainly on the livelihood aspects of the returnee migrants, this study is unique as it produces new knowledge on how the migrant workers fared in the countries of destination, the problems they encountered, the support they had received and experience they endured upon return during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study presents pathways to effective management of migrant workers in emergency situations. It therefore offers some empirical evidence-based policy suggestions to reduce the vulnerability of the migrant workers during such situations. It calls for effective actions from employers, authorities in the countries of destination, civil aviation authorities, international organizations, CSOs both in countries of destination and countries of origin and government authorities. Thus it calls for comprehensive policy actions so that migrant workers could be protected in future emergency situations.

Emphasizing the complexities involved in the repatriation of the Bangladeshi migrant workers findings of this study are expected to help policy makers and other stakeholders to initiate dialogues and take meaningful actions for better protection of migrant workers. Although this study is not statistically representative, the qualitative interpretation of the findings may help reduce the migrant workers' vulnerability in case of future pandemic situations.

Considering the vulnerability and experience of the Bangladeshi migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Middle East, the specific recommendations call for better protection of the workers in emergency situations both in the countries of destination and upon return in home country. Moreover, some general recommendations are offered for establishing an effective mechanism for treatment of migrant workers both under national policy frameworks and international standards.

## Specific Recommendations:

### At the countries of destination

- **Informed Choice by Migrants:**The employers must maintain transparency so that the migrant workers can make an informed choice in facing emergency situations.
- **Emergency Provisions in Contracts:**Contracts should have provisions to deal with emergency situations including those for ensuring compensation in cases of premature termination of contract and clearance of all dues before the worker is repatriated. Migrant workers whose jobs are terminated within a year of their employment and are involuntarily returned to the country of origin should be provided with special compensation packages that should include the opportunity to re-migrate on a priority basis to the concerned country.
- **Access to Treatment and Healthcare:**
  - In health emergencies, all migrant workers irrespective of their status should be accorded with quick and easy access to tests and treatment to the extent of that nationals of the country enjoy. It should not be a matter of discretion on the part of authorities of the host countries. Destination countries should establish a dedicated hotline to serve the migrant workers in their own language.
  - The authorities in the host countries should ensure that the migrants who are put in quarantine facilities are treated with respect and dignity.
- **Access to Protective Gear:** All employers should be responsible for providing protective items and equipment and health safety materials to minimise the workers' health risks during an emergency.
- **Access to Employers:**In emergency situation (i.e. lockdown), measures should be taken so that the migrant workers can contact their employers/their representative with relative ease to access health care.
- **Opportunity to Switch Employment:**Kafala system must be reviewed so that migrant workers facing termination in emergency situations enjoy the option to get an opportunity to find new employer. Concerned embassies must be engaged into that process.
- **Protection from Unlawful Termination and Unauthorised Documentation:**
  - Workers should be protected from any deceitful termination and forced leave in emergency situations. In

such cases, embassies should play an active role in taking up these cases with respective employers and if need be with the authorities.

- If migrant workers are forced to sign any documents or forms that are not in their own language and/or against their wishes, such documents should be deemed as void. Embassies should disseminate information to discourage workers from signing any document that are not in their language or in blank sheets.
- Settlement of Outstanding Dues: All dues must be cleared before repatriation. In case of inability of the employers to clear such dues before the return of the workers, documents should be issued by the employers that can be presented in courts for settlement. Provisions should be kept so that the embassies can make claims on behalf of the workers who are repatriated to the countries of origin.
- Employer Pay for Involuntary Repatriation: In case of involuntary repatriation of workers with valid contracts onus lies on the employer to bear the full cost of repatriation including medical test.
- Bangladesh Embassy Role:
  - Services of Missions: Embassies should ensure migrant-friendly services to ensure efficient and respectful treatment of the migrant workers. In emergency situations when migrant workers' mobility is restricted embassies should offer services that require minimal travel of migrant workers. Embassies should also have facilities so that migrant workers can secure information over telephone and online about visa extension, repatriation and the like. They need to be abreast with the laws, regulations, customs and tradition and if possible, language of the host country.
  - Resourcing Embassy: In emergency situations when the migrant workers are in distress, the embassies are to be provided with adequate resources to extend emergency assistance to the migrant workers. Also, embassies should have motivated personnel to mitigate the plight of the migrant workers in a professional way.
  - Registration by Missions: 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.

- **Ensuring Migrants Rights, Accessing Justice and Accountability:** Sending back workers who violate lockdown rules and regulations despite having valid visa and work permit is a disproportionate punishment. Under no circumstances, migrants with valid visa and work permit should be deported to the country of origin for the breach of lockdown rules and regulations.
- **Ensure Fair Pricing of Air-tickets:** Both origin and destination countries should ensure that their national carriers ensure fair pricing of air tickets and not take unfair advantage of the crisis situation.

## **After return to country of origin**

### **At airport and quarantine facilities**

- **Respect and Dignity:** Returnee migrants should be treated by the Bangladesh airport authority (civil aviation, immigration and customs) with respect and dignity instead of treating them as 'untouchables' particularly in health emergency situations when the risks of infection might be high. The airport authority should also ensure that the returnees are processed within a minimum time. They should also ensure that the migrants are provided with proper food and basic services in case it takes time to process their cases.
- **Non-discrimination:** Bangladesh authorities should ensure that there is no discrimination between migrant workers and other incoming passengers with regard to institutional quarantine. The authorities should also ensure that the quarantine facilities should be of certain standard that ensures reasonable comfort and protection of the residents including proper food, basic bath and toilet facilities and recreation opportunities for children. They should also ensure that the staff members adhere to ethical standards and do not extend special treatment to certain category of returnees who can afford to pay.
- **Efficient Processing:** Bangladesh civil aviation authority should ensure that proper equipment are installed at the airports so that those minimise the time to complete health check up at the airports.

### **Framing Policies on Returnee Reintegration**

- **Stigmatization:** Bangladesh authorities should refrain from any actions that stigmatises the returnee migrants and make them vulnerable to ridicule verbal and physical abuse.

- Households in Distress: Returnee migrants and the remittance dependent-families who are in distress should be provided with financial grants to tide over the crisis for a certain duration.
- Prematurely Returned: The returnee migrants who came back prematurely should be given preference to re-migrate and be provided with migration loan from Probashi Kallyan Bank (Migrant Welfare Bank). The provision to secure migration loan should be made more accessible by easing the existing conditions of extending loans.
- Linking with Labour Market: Bangladesh government should acknowledge the fact that not all returnee migrants are potential entrepreneurs. Therefore it should think of measures and policy actions that create opportunities for returnee migrants to link with the local labour market by creating a database of migrants who came back with specialised skills.
- Preferential Treatment to Migrate and Re-migrate: The migrants who have not been able to migrate despite completing all formalities due to the outbreak of COVID 19 and those migrants who had to return involuntarily within a year of their migration to the Middle East should be given priority by Bangladesh government to re-migrate when opportunities for fresh employment arise in the countries of destination. In order to do so, Bangladesh government should engage with the countries of destination. The recruiting agencies who took advance money from the migrants before the outbreak of COVID 19 should give priority in processing cases of migration of those migrants who had already made payments. In case recruiting agencies are unable to process such migration then they have to ensure return of the full amount to the migrants.
- National Database: The COVID 19 has proven the urgency to set up a national database of returnee migrants. Such a database encompassing personal profile of migrants including age, gender, education and skill level will help developing appropriate re-integration policies for returnee migrants including extending emergency support, socio-psychological counseling, loans, skill up-gradation and the like. Learning from the exercise of data generation on returnee migrants during COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of EWOE in collaboration with the emigration department of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism may continue generating data on return of workers on annual basis.



## General Recommendations:

- **Cross-country Collaboration:** The COVID situation has necessitated that countries of origin and destination need to have specific provisions specifying the modalities under which migrant workers irrespective of their status are to be treated in emergency situations in the MOUs and bilateral agreements.
- **Engagement of Diaspora and CSOs:** COVID-19 has exposed the reality of vulnerability of migrant workers in the countries of destination. There is an urgent need for the engagement of diaspora organisations of concerned countries and civil society organisations of countries of destination to provide information, support and services to the migrant workers. Likewise, there is also the need for CSOs in the countries of origin to uphold the rights and dignity of returnee migrants who on occasions are subjected to stigmatization, harassment and rent seeking by different quarters. The situation also demands that the CSOs collectively engage to protect the migrant workers and members of their families.
- **Regional and Global Processes:** In view of the experiences of COVID-19, regional processes such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue and Colombo Process and international forums such as the HighLevel Dialogues and Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) need to take into cognizance that the current provisions are not adequate to meet the challenges of emergency situations. This has led to conditions in which migrant workers are faced with uncertainties, economic vulnerabilities and lack of protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to avoid repetition of similar conditions in the future, immediate policy actions should be taken without any further delay for protecting the migrant workers.
- **Ending Corporate Immunity:** Global civil society should conduct campaign against corporate immunity for failing to protect workers and require employers to pay into a 'special emergency fund' to insure against wage theft.
- **Review of International Labour Standards and Guidelines:** A thorough review of international labour standards and normative guidelines needs to be conducted to understand why these documents cannot provide adequate protection to the vulnerable migrants during crisis situations.
- **New Social Contract for Emergency Situation:** Global civil society should pursue for a new social contract for migrant workers with no exclusions. It should push for framing of emergency protection mechanism mandatory for all labour receiving and sending



countries. This mechanism should cover all types of crisis including natural disasters, economic depressions, financial crisis and health disasters and include all types of work and workers under the full protection of labour and employment laws.

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