
BANGLADESH FOREIGN POLICY PAEDIA

11

BANGLADESH ECONOMY IN AN EVOLVING
REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXT



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Volume 11

**Bangladesh Economy in an Evolving
Regional and Global Context**

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The Other Face of Globalisation: COVID-19 and Treatment of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers*

Tasneem Siddiqui

The integration of global labour market created scope for marginalised people to benefit from globalisation through accessing employment in countries of their own as well as overseas. At the same time, current form of globalisation of labour market has exposed labour migrants, both internal and international, to experience of various forms of decent work deficits. It is well-established, that during crisis situations, vulnerabilities of this section, particularly of the international labour migrants, exacerbate manifold. A large number of low-skilled Bangladeshis, mostly from rural areas, participate in the short-term international labour market. This paper attempts to understand how the Bangladeshi labour migrants have borne the burden of current global health crisis, the COVID-19, in different destination countries.

The paper is based on a study as part of which the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and the Bangladesh Civil Society for

* This paper is based on an initial paper of the author, prepared for presenting at the first e-symposium on COVID-19, organised by RMMRU under the Build Back Better series, on June 22, 2020.

the Migrants (BCSM) interviewed 100 involuntarily returned migrants and 100 left-behind family members of migrants during May to July, 2020. The returned migrants were interviewed over phone, within a few days of their return to Bangladesh from 12 destination countries. Their phone numbers were recorded while providing emergency services at the airport by member organisations of BCSM. The household members, on the other hand, were interviewed at the origin areas where the member organisations are engaged in grassroots-level service delivery and other programmes. The paper focuses on the extent of health risks and shocks of migrants, their access to healthcare services, experiences of job loss, salary deduction, arbitrary return and wage theft in the destination countries after the outbreak of COVID-19.

15.1 COVID-19 and International Labour Migration Scenario of Bangladesh

International labour migration is an integral part of the Bangladesh economy. Each year more than 600 thousand to 700 thousand workers migrate to the Gulf, other Arab and Southeast Asian countries to take up foreign employment. Remittances sent by the migrant workers are the highest net foreign exchange sector of the country (RMMRU 2012, 2013, 2014). International labour migration also reduces the pressure of creating domestic employment. Each year around 200 thousand jobs are created within the country in the formal sector, whereas almost three to four times higher number of Bangladeshis secure employment overseas (RMMRU 2017). However, in the backdrop of the global pandemic in 2020, only 217,669 could migrate overseas for employment, according to the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) (RMMRU 2021). Thus, the flow of migration saw a sharp decline by about 69 per cent in 2020 due to COVID-19.

Earlier, Bangladesh mostly participated in the low-skilled end of the male labour market. Since 2003, after the lifting of restrictions on female labour migration, a large number of women also started participating international labour market. They mostly work as domestic workers. A handful of them also work in garments and other manufacturing sectors, and also in the services sector. In the recent past, annual share of female migration hovered between 12 to 16 per cent. Female migration from Bangladesh in 2020 reduced by 79 per cent compared to the previous year—in 2019, 104,786 women migrated overseas; the figure dropped to 21,934 in 2020.

On the other hand, return flow of migration in 2020 was eight times higher than the previous years (Siddiqui et al. 2021). A little more than 408,000 migrant workers have returned to the country⁷⁴; nearly 50,000 of them were women.

During the initial months of COVID-19, the World Bank forecasted that remittance to Bangladesh could drop up to 25 per cent from the last year.⁷⁵ This, however, turned out to be incorrect. The flow of remittances declined from February to April (2020); but since then, the flow continued to register a rise. In the end, Bangladeshi migrants remitted USD 21.74 billion in 2020⁷⁶, which was 18.6 per cent higher than that of 2019 (USD 18.33 billion). However, the problem with this data is that the increased amount of remittance does not indicate that migrants' earnings have remained unaffected during the COVID-19 crisis. Remittance flow is a complex phenomenon. Growth of remittances rather originated from large-scale return, lack of demand in the shadow economy for *hundi*, 2 per cent incentives offered by the government, etc. This is evident from the numbers of recent months (July–August) of 2021, as Bangladesh has been experiencing decline in remittance flow.

15.2 Conceptual Issues

The paper draws on literature of globalisation and labour migration (Czaika and de Haas 2018; Castles and Miller 2009; Arango 2000; Faist 2000; Held et al. 1999); and global crisis and migration (Castles and Vezzoli 2009). These studies showed that during the Great Depression of 1930s or during the 1973 oil crisis, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and 1999 and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007–08, international migrants suffered more compared to the locals. Castles and Vezzoli (2009) showed that migrants act as a safety valve to reduce the negative outcome during any crisis. The United States of America (USA), for example, placed embargo on movement between the US and Mexico to reduce unemployment at home during the Great Depression of 1930s. The United Kingdom (UK), Taiwan and South Korea limited the scope of in-migration to those countries during the 1973 oil crisis. Thailand did not renew registration of the international migrants to overcome the oil crisis. During the Asian financial crisis, several Southeast Asian countries expelled

⁷⁴ Statistics of returnee migrants for the period of April 1 to December 31, 2020, from the Welfare Desk, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka.

⁷⁵ *Prothom Alo* (2020).

⁷⁶ Bangladesh Bank (n.d.).

foreign workers without respecting the terms of employment contracts. Plantation workers of Malaysia and fishing sector workers of Thailand are typical examples of this (Castles and Vezzoli 2009). Wickramage, Peiris and Agampodi (2013) showed the disproportionate burden of 2005 avian influenza viral outbreak on the Asian migrant working in the poultry and animal husbandry. West African seasonal migrant workers were considered both as cause and victims of Ebola (Rashid, Jahid, and Nasrin 2021). Since the beginning of 2020, the world has been facing COVID-19, the largest health crisis of the century. The spread of COVID-19 is again showing the other face of globalisation in respect to labour migration.

The experiences of the crisis impact vary on several factors. Important among those are migration status, nature of employment, skill level and gender of migrants. Migrants in irregular status are more exposed to harm compared to those in regular status. Low-skilled workers are more likely to face discrimination in availing healthcare and other services compared to the highly skilled and professional workers. Sector of employment also affects treatment towards migrants during crisis situations. Those who work in informal sector are more likely to remain outside the social protection framework compared to those in the formal sector. Both male and female migrants are exposed to vulnerabilities during crisis, yet types of vulnerability vary between sexes.

The following sections present the COVID-19 impact experiences of 100 abruptly returned migrants and household heads of 100 migrants who are currently residing in different destinations.

15.3 Health Risks and Shocks

A number studies have concluded that the spread of COVID-19 is higher among the migrants compared to the nationals in all destination countries irrespective of their economic status. In the first four months of the pandemic, about 70,000 Bangladeshi migrants in 186 countries have been infected with the COVID-19 virus. In Singapore alone, around 23,000 Bangladeshis got infected by the end of November (Rashid, Jahid, and Nasrin 2021). As of December 28, more than 2,330 Bangladeshi had died from COVID-19 in various destinations (RMMRU 2021). In Saudi Arabia, 979 migrants died. The death toll of Bangladeshis was much higher compared to migrants of other countries. As of July 2021, 327 migrants died in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—122 of them were Bangladeshi citizens. In Kuwait, 382 migrants died; 70 of them were Bangladeshis. In Singapore, even though the infection

numbers were high, the death rate was quite low; due to timely treatment and other safety measures, the number of deaths of Bangladeshi migrants could be contained to two. The Maldives has a large number of Bangladeshi workers in the tourism sector, most of whom are irregular. Although nearly a thousand Bangladeshi migrants were infected there, there was no loss of life.

Among 200 involuntarily returned and current migrant households interviewed, two households reported death of the migrants during COVID-19—one of them died of COVID-19 virus and the other from brain stroke. Before he passed away, Abdul (38), who died of brain stroke, informed his family that he had cold, but was not being able to go out to secure treatment due to his irregular status. His fellow workers informed the family that he had all the symptoms of COVID-19. Abdul might have not been infected by COVID-19, but he eventually passed away without treatment, because of his fear of being arrested and deported.

Maintaining physical distance was tough for the migrants in their congested shared accommodations. Singapore authorities evacuated the infected migrants when they were detected COVID-19 positive. Fazlur Rahman has returned from Singapore, where he had been working for seven years as a construction worker. He said, “Singapore took good care of those who were infected with COVID-19. If a migrant was detected as COVID-19 positive, he would be evacuated from the dormitory and usually placed in a hotel.”

In cases where the migrants were forced to return, more than half (54 per cent) did not go through COVID-19 test before travelling. Mohon Ali, who has returned from the UAE, said that a common certificate was simply provided to them which stated that they did not have COVID-19.

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

A very large percentage of the current migrants (87 per cent), both males and females, expressed various types of anxieties to their left-behind family members. Some of the sources of fear are common for male and female migrants. However, some of the fear factors varied across the gender divide.

Stresses that male migrants experienced can be divided into three types: health-related, mental stress-related and financial situation-related. Health-related stresses include inability to access regular health services. Mental stress arises from being confined to one room since March and the feeling of isolation and suffocation. Nafiz informed that, "If one person of a camp was detected positive, the whole camp would be put in isolation. Then many of us were in situation with no work, and consequently, no wage and no food. So, you can imagine what type of stresses we go through." The family members of a section of the current migrants who still remained in different destination countries informed that their household members migrated recently and had borrowed money to bear their migration costs. They expressed concern about how they would repay those loans if the migrant member could not earn.

Almost all migrants expressed worries about their uncertain future in the destination country. For some, visa would expire soon. Under a normal circumstance, they could take initiative to renew those. Worries of irregular migrants were related to the possibility of detention and arrest. They passed through agonising time as they felt that police may detain them any time and send back home. Lack of income and the possibility of losing jobs are major sources of anxiety. Due to irregular status, a section of them could not go out to look for work. Those who experienced salary-cut were worried about ensuring food during rest of the COVID-19 period in destination. Some of them were surviving by taking loan from fellow workers. They were worried how they would pay the money back. Those who were involved in grocery business were incurring major losses as products remained unsold and their dates of expiry passed.

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

Live-in domestic workers were concerned about delayed or non-payment of wages, increased workload and reduced level of communication with family. Along with these, live-out domestic workers and other female migrants also

experienced job loss like their male counterparts. Shahnaz (Saudi Arabia) is a live-in domestic worker. Her employer was not paying her salary. She was worried how her mother would feed her two children whom she left behind with her. Her mother did not have any other sources of income. Her children were stressed as they could not talk to their mother frequently. Earlier she used to ring up every day, but during COVID-19, she only managed to call once a week. Neither did she have the money to recharge her mobile, nor was she allowed to go out for that purpose. Left-behind family members of migrants also went through various types of anxieties. They expressed that when their migrant members were suffering, they also went through traumatic situation. Besides, financial management of the household becomes difficult without (or with less amount of) the remitted money as in most cases, it is their main income source.

15.4 Income and Job Loss

COVID-19 affected the jobs of workers in many ways. Some lost their jobs (34 per cent male and 8 per cent female), and some others were partially employed (26 per cent of the male and 27 per cent of the female). As for retained jobs, it happened for 40 per cent male and 65 per cent female migrants, but of course a section of them were paid reduced salaries or delayed payment. They used to work with different companies. In all likelihood, they were on so-called free visa. Though many workers in formal sectors worked for cleaning companies and construction firms, they were mostly hired informally through supplier companies. These workers also lost jobs. They suffered the most since they often relied on short-term or casual work. They did not have regular employer to provide food and housing. These migrants spent their savings and borrowed money from friends and relatives for their subsistence and payment of house rent in the destination country.

Interestingly, migrants received both good and bad treatment from employers in this situation. The Government of Malaysia, for instance, provided incentive only to those companies or factories who employ their own nationals. Workers of those firms who employ international migrants did not receive any subsidy for paying the salaries of their workers. Although the government allocated stimulus packages so that employers could continue to provide workers with food and accommodation, some employers kept the migrants outside the safety net. It is more explicit in the following statements of forcibly returned migrants.

Showkat, who was 22 years old, migrated to Qatar only a year ago. He

used to work in a construction firm. After the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the construction work came nearly to a complete-halt. He did not have any income and was in deep trouble. In his own words, “I desperately looked for work everywhere as my construction company was closed. Finally, I found work at a vegetable shop near my camp. At the end of the day, I would receive some money with which I could barely purchase my food.”

Ashraf (32), on the other hand felt, “My employer was good. During COVID-19 I was working half time and getting half payment. My office maintained strict regulations on wearing masks and cleaning hands.”

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

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

Bangladeshi female migrants are predominantly engaged as domestic workers. Live-in domestic workers did not experience loss of jobs due to COVID-19. They suffered from non-payment of wages, increased workload and reduced communication with the family. Nazneen Akhtar (Saudi Arabia) informed her family that her workload has increased manifolds since the start of the pandemic. Her washing load has increased so much that she has developed some skin condition due to contact with soap all the time. However, her employers were sympathetic and bought medicine for her. In contrast, the live-out female domestic workers suffered from job loss. In order to maintain safety, employers of live-out domestic workers stopped taking their services.

Saima (28) was a live-out domestic worker in Saudi Arabia who experienced loss of job. Her recruiting company forced her to sign a paper stating it was no longer able to pay her salary. Shumi Khatun (35) was employed in Dubai as a live-out domestic worker and used to work in three houses. With the outbreak of COVID-19, two employers stopped availing her service. It became difficult for her to even manage food and accommodation with the reduced earning. Her family members in Bangladesh informed about

her distressed situation. While earlier she used to make phone calls home every now and then, after the corona pandemic she could not afford to make calls even once in ten days.

This section demonstrates that, experience of job loss, partial job loss and non-payment of salary varied on the basis of nature of job, gender of the migrant as well as their legal status.

15.5 Detention

As seen in discussion on conceptual issues, sending back workers to their countries of origin is a common method used by the governments of destination countries during any crisis that has prolonged economic ramifications. The same approach has been adopted by many of the labour-receiving countries of Bangladesh during the ongoing pandemic. From early April 2020, Governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Maldives started negotiating with the GoB to take back Bangladeshi workers who were in irregular status. They also offered the option of granting amnesty to the migrants who have been convicted, if Bangladesh committed to bring them back. Arrest and detaining migrants in the pretext of strict implementation of lockdown and drive against irregular migrants are also methods frequently used by law enforcers of destination countries to collect migrants together and subsequently deport them to their countries of origin.

The present study found 55 per cent of the sample migrants to experience detention/jail.⁷⁷ Only a few of them were already serving jail for long time. Detention was not used as a method of subsequent deportation for female migrants. Besides, interviews of this study took place during April–July, whereas return flow of female migrants mostly started from September. When data on those who experienced detention is divided on the basis of countries of destination, the highest number of detainees was from UAE (67 per cent). Malaysia deported 27 of the involuntarily returned migrants, of whom 33 per cent experienced detention. From Saudi Arabia, 19 of the interviewees returned; 56 per cent of whom experienced detention.

Migrants who have been detained during COVID-19 in different countries

⁷⁷ Percentage of migrants who were detained is overrepresented in the data, as a large number of the interviews were conducted on those who have been provided emergency services at the Dhaka Airport. If data was collected by following a rigorous methodology of sampling at village level, then the number of detained migrants would have been less.

were arrested from different sites. Some were picked up from stores, some from roads and some others from around their living quarters. Tota Miya (22) was a migrant of Saudi Arabia. In his words, "I was returning from after finishing my shift. White clothed police stopped me. I produced all my papers. Still they detained me." Mohan Ali (43) was working in Qatar. He narrated, "My job did not fetch enough. I had a side business of vending cigarette. One of my customers ordered a few packets of cigarettes, and I was waiting with that on a roadside. All of a sudden police came and detained me. I tried my best to convince him that I had valid visa, but they put me in jail anyway." The experience of Mohammad Ashraf was harrowing. He said, "I had nothing to eat for a few days. It was the Eid day. Although it was a lockdown situation, I went out to a nearby place and stood in front of a tea stall with the hope that people may give me something to eat. When the police came, others ran away. Thinking me to be the tea stall-owner they arrested me."

Two migrants who returned from Kuwait, in fact voluntarily availed detention. The Kuwait Government announced general amnesty to those who have overstayed their visa. The government informed that it would not punish the migrants for overstaying, rather they would be provided assistance to return to their countries of origin. Those who returned from Kuwait explained that as there was no work and their savings were also depleting. As such, they did not have any other option than to decide to come back. Salam stated that, "For months, I did not have any work. Every year we need to save some money for renewing our visa. Since I did not have work, I was meeting my day-to-day expenditure from that savings. That savings was also coming to an end. Then, the Kuwaiti Government declared general amnesty. As per the Kuwaiti Government's advice, we went to our embassy and then enlisted ourselves for returning. Once Bangladesh embassy issued the document of proof, we submitted that to Kuwaiti authority, and they put us into detention camp."

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

Kajol did not have much to complain about food and other facilities in the detention centres. He said, "I did not face major problem in jail. Food was available. What else do you expect? You are not a guest there. Therefore it was expected that the quality of food would not be good. Nonetheless, I received a piece of bread in the morning; rice and lentil for dinner and lunch. I was upset only because they took away my money and the cell phone when they put me in jail. They never returned those items."

Some migrants reported that health and hygiene were severely compromised in the detention camps. Rashid, who was 38-year old, was detained in Dubai. He stated that, "Before being arrested I was told by my office to maintain cleanliness. But in jail, I stayed in a pair of clothes for 28 days. While taking shower I wore a plastic bag. They had one rule for their nationals and another for us."

Iqbal (39) is still traumatised with his experience of detention centre. He revealed that, "For hours the police wouldn't even give me a glass of water. I had 180 dirham (BDT 4,200) with me. Police took that money. I was then sent to a detention camp. It wasn't a detention camp per say. I, along with others, was under the open sky; at day time under scorching sun and at night in shivering cold. They did not bother to give me a blanket. I was later transferred to another jail. Altogether I was there for 22 days in the same cloth. If I asked anything I was beaten up by the security guards. I endured all these despite having a valid visa. Instead of coming to my rescue the employer handed over my passport to the police who then sent me back home."

15.6 Involuntarily Returned Workers

As data shows, more than 400,000 Bangladeshi workers returned home between April to December of 2020.⁷⁸ At the beginning of November 2020, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment shared a country-wise breakdown of return, which showed that 76,922 Bangladeshi migrants have returned from Saudi Arabia, which was the highest; followed by 71,903 from the UAE (RMMRU 2021).

The involuntarily returned migrants interviewed for this research came from 17 countries. The two females returned just before the lockdown. Out of the rest, 98 male migrants (67.34 per cent) were forced to return. Among the

⁷⁸ BMET (n.d.).

returnees, 9.18 per cent had come on leave just before the lockdown and 25.51 per cent either opted themselves or their employers helped them to return to Bangladesh, some with a commitment, that they might take them back when the situation changed. The returned migrants are of two types. One group includes those who were picked up from different places, detained and then deported; and the other group is those who chose the general amnesty by themselves.

A few of the respondents served jail term and returned with 'out passes'. However, some of the 25.51 per cent who returned voluntarily were from the USA, Uzbekistan, Ukraine and Somalia.

When it comes to forced return, the experiences are somewhat similar even in different countries of destination. For example, Tota Miya, Mohon Ali and Wasim were deported from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE, respectively. All of their stories were similar, as Wasim said, "On 10 June 2020, I was walking near my residence after finishing daily work. Suddenly police came and arrested me. I told them that I had all the valid documents, but they did not listen to anything. Police remained silent about the reason for my arrest, and later threatened to beat me, as I was trying to convince them. I was thrown to jail. I stayed there for three days. After testing COVID-19 negative, I was given an air ticket. This is how I returned."

A large number of those who returned arbitrarily claimed that their visas had not expired. This was claimed by as many as 68 per cent of the returnees. However, many of their visas would run out after a few months anyway. But they knew, under a normal situation they would have been able to obtain extension of those. Selim returned from Kuwait. He stated that he was staying in Kuwait for the last five years. Each year he needed to renew his visa. Usually, all labour migrants in Kuwait save a portion of their income to pay for renewal of their visas. When lockdown was imposed, he could not work. So, he was paying for his food and accommodation from the savings he made for paying the visa renewal fee. His savings was depleting fast. At this point, the Kuwait Government announced general amnesty, and Selim agreed to take that. In his words, "Although I voluntarily decided to return to take the benefit of general amnesty, I would not go for that in a normal situation. However, at this point of time, I was forced to return knowing that the Government would not renew my visa."

15.7 Unpaid Wage and Other Dues

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

Among the involuntarily returned migrants, 67 per cent left a portion of their hard-earned income in the destination countries in the form of unpaid wage/salary. Also another 62 per cent reported to leave some of their assets or belongings in destination. At least 19 per cent of the migrants experienced confiscation of their money by the law-enforcing agencies when they were arrested. In case of 7 per cent, money went wasted which they had spent for renewal of their visas. The interviews also revealed 5 per cent of the returned migrants to loss the money that they had lent to their fellow workers.

In many of the Gulf countries, in certain types of jobs full salaries are not cleared regularly. They are paid a lump sum subsistence, and later at the end of the year or before they go for holidays, the payments are cleared. Atiq (55) was forced to return from the UAE. In his words, "I had been working in a steel factory for 14 years. As part of my payment procedure I used to get a small amount per month; and at the end of the year, the owner cleared my dues. I was planning my visit to Bangladesh. My employer was supposed to clear all my dues before my return. It is my bad luck that I got arrested and deported. I still have an outstanding amount of around BDT 500,000, including last two months' salary."

Belal (41) was working in Saudi Arabia for quite some time. He knew a Pakistani with connection with the authorities. Belal took his Pakistani friend's help to renew his visa. In his words, "My visa would have expired in June 2020. Just before COVID-19 outbreak, I have given 3,000 dirham (BDT 70,000) to a Pakistani friend of mine for renewing my visa. As I got arrested all on a sudden, I could not contact that friend, and I lost that money."

Sabuj (24) was working in Qatar. He lost money as he lent that to one of his friends. He said, “One of my campmates from India had financial emergency back home. He borrowed an equivalent of BDT 25,000 from me. There is no way I will get back that money again.”

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

15.8 Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper exposes the other face of globalisation that the low-skilled male and female workers of Bangladesh experienced during COVID-19 pandemic. It concludes that, norms and standards of ethical globalisation pertaining to migrant workers are yet to emerge. Lack of commitment to the international standards and normative guidelines, created a type of globalisation which allow the destination countries to avoid obligation towards the international migrant workers during crisis situations. This conclusion is drawn based on experiences of Bangladeshi migrants on five issues: health risks and shocks; income, job loss and partial or delayed payment of wage; detention; deportation; and wage theft.

It reveals that during COVID-19, Bangladeshi migrants like all other migrants around the world, were highly exposed to health risks. The highest number of deaths occurred in Saudi Arabia. Most of the governments of destination countries officially included all migrants irrespective of their visa status in their healthcare system. Those who are in irregular status have not availed healthcare because of fear of arrest and deportation. Those who were on free visa in the Gulf could have attained healthcare when needed, but many of them did not have the access to information on services available. It seems live-in women migrants had better access to healthcare, but the live-out female domestic workers as well as those working in cleaning industries had financial difficulties in availing healthcare.

Both the involuntarily returned migrants and the current migrants who still remain in their countries of destination went through different types of anxieties. This is true for both the male and female migrants. However, the nature of anxiety varied between the two groups, as well as on the basis of their type of work and legal status.

Short-term migrants, both men and women, experienced loss of job, reduced level of job and income. It is the live-in domestic workers whose jobs were not terminated, whereas the live-out female domestic workers, like their male counterparts, experienced termination. These women were extremely vulnerable to the extent of some not having access to food. The workload of live-in domestic workers increased manifold, and also they did not get their due wages in time.

Like any other crisis situations of the past, the destination countries used forced return of the Bangladeshi migrants to their origin countries as one of the methods of tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. None of the international normative frameworks or standards was respected by the destination countries when it came to the issue of returning workers to their origin countries. Arrest and detention were two instruments used by some of the Gulf countries in hauling up migrants for future deportation. Declaration of general amnesty to the visa overstayers was another way of encouraging deportation. Half of the returned migrants experienced detention. Arrest and detention were mostly experienced by male migrants.

Due to abrupt nature of the return, many migrants had to leave behind a portion of their hard-earned income in the destination countries. Wages of more than two-thirds of the migrants were not fully cleared. A few items, such as money in local currency, mobile phones and watches, were confiscated by the law-enforcing agencies while arresting them, and were not returned. The Bangladeshi case illustrates that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected migrants who were already suffering from violation of rights and deprivation of protection.

Recommendations

- The global community needs to work towards attaining an ethical globalisation as regards movements of labour. Implementation of international labour standards may contribute towards attaining such goals. Ratification of United Nations (UN) Convention 1990 by the destination countries and implementation of Global Compact on Migration, Decent Work Standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO), ILO Conventions No. 205, No. 111, No. 206 and No. 199 are some of the standards that ensure protection of the migrants.
- COVID-19 has demonstrated that destination countries mostly negotiated with the country's origin bilaterally. Pursuing multilateralism would

contribute towards establishing a fair globalisation.

- Both countries of labour origin and destination require emergency guideline that protects basic rights of the migrants. The emergency guideline should cover all types of crisis, including natural disasters, economic depressions, financial crises, health disasters, etc. The emergency guideline needs to be sensitive to both male and female migrants, and migrants in both regular and irregular status. It should also support creation of a special fund to pursue its actions during emergency.
- If and when a destination country decides to arbitrarily return the Bangladeshi migrants, the missions should begin a registration process following due diligence. If any unpaid wages and other benefits remain pending, then the missions need to take the power of attorney on behalf of the migrants and pursue settlements of claims subsequently.
- National, regional and global networks should continue their campaign for creating a system of repayment of due wages and other entitlements of involuntarily returned migrants.

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