



GFEMS SOUTH ASIA PREVALENCE ESTIMATION RESEARCH PROGRAM

SHATTERED DREAMS: BANGLADESHI MIGRANT
WORKERS DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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ACRONYMS

BAIRA	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies
BCSM	Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BOESL	Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited
BMET	Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DEMOs	District Employment and Manpower Offices
DFID	Department for International Development
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFEMS	Global Fund to End Modern Slavery
ILO	International Labor Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MoEWOE	Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoDMR	Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief
NGO	Non-government Organization
OLR	Overseas Labor Recruitment
OKUP	Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program

BAIRA	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies
PKB	Probashi Kallyan Bank
PROKAS	Promoting Knowledge for Accountable Systems
RMMRU	Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WARBE	Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants
WEWB	Wage Earners' Welfare Board
WEWF	Wage Earners' Welfare Funds

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The onset of the global pandemic exposed Bangladeshi migrant workers to additional adverse situations, making them even more economically vulnerable and exposed to health risks. Existing weak labor systems in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries combined with poor living conditions, restricted access to health care, restricted mobility, and increased vulnerabilities to a host of social issues. In addition, scarce legal protection and limited information amplified the vulnerabilities of the migrant worker population. For example, forced repatriation of Bangladeshi migrant workers led to a mass exodus of migrants back to their home country. After battling employment uncertainty and stressful working and living conditions in the GCC countries, migrants return to Bangladesh and struggle to adjust to life in their home country amidst a global pandemic.

The purpose of this rapid assessment is to understand how COVID-19 is affecting overseas labor recruitment from Bangladesh to the GCC countries and Bangladeshi migrant worker vulnerabilities. “Shattered Dreams: Bangladeshi Migrant Workers during a Global Pandemic” presents a wide range of insights that support the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) in adapting its future programming to new realities on the ground. To this end, NORC at the University of Chicago developed five descriptive and normative research questions addressing the pandemic's short- and long-term impact on both Bangladeshi migrant workers returning from GCC countries and pre-departure migrants.

This primarily qualitative study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, NORC conducted a desk review of recently published media articles, reports, white papers, and other online content to help address the research questions as well as inform the approach to primary qualitative data collection. Primary data collection was carried out in the second phase, including key informant interviews with sector stakeholders, including government officials, international donor agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national NGOs and recruiting agencies.

The assessment identifies key emerging issues, policy and programmatic gaps, and recommendations for NGO, international donor, recruitment agency, private sector, and government stakeholders. Overall findings and recommendations from the rapid assessment are summarized below.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Finding 1: There is limited reintegration support for returnee migrants.

With increasing amounts of debt, no source of income, and uncertainty about their future employment and income prospects, returnees are in an extremely vulnerable situation. They are vulnerable to both economic and social discrimination in their communities compounding their vulnerability as they try and reintegrate in Bangladesh. Moreover, a pandemic-induced failed

migration experience, financial insecurity, societal harassment, rejection by families, and uncertainty about the future is impacting the psychosocial wellbeing of returnee migrant workers. Vulnerable groups, such as women, are facing additional challenges reintegrating. At the household level, there are reported increases in gender-based violence among women returnees.

The reintegration process itself is complex, including economic, social, and psychological components. Yet, the government of Bangladesh does not have sufficient experience addressing these types of concerns—previous efforts were undertaken largely by NGOs, CSOs and international donors—and they are under-equipped to successfully address returnee concerns and meet their reintegration needs. In addition, the large volume of returnee migrants necessitates a need for coordinated, multi-stakeholder implementation of reintegration programs.

Recommendations applicable for government, NGOs, and donors

1. **Expand local awareness-raising activities**, via social media, local radio, and cable networks, on the challenges that returnees face upon return to communities. Include specific messaging to increase community awareness about female returnees' experiences and challenges.
2. **Establish accessible and effective psychosocial counseling** and support for returnee migrant workers.

Recommendations for government

3. **Increase support for the refinement of a functional and effective centralized returnee migrant database.** Such a database can serve as a critical tool to design reintegration and training programs based on workers' employment history, skills, and foreign language proficiency.
4. **Ensure timely disbursement of financial assistance to returnee migrants.**
5. **Establish a reintegration policy framework**, which addresses the unique challenges faced by vulnerable groups such as female migrants.

Key Finding 2: There is an increased risk of forced labor among returnee and pre-departure migrants.

A growing debt burden and limited opportunities in their home country will likely push migrants to resort to unsafe migration channels. Both, a majority of returnees and pre-departure migrants, have large amounts of debt associated with the exorbitant costs of migration and are at risk of being in a situation of debt bondage. Greater financial vulnerabilities due to an increase in the total cost of migration (visa re-issuing costs, COVID-19 related medical examinations, and higher recruitment agent fees) and financial insecurity and lack of safe alternative paths may push migrants towards risky behaviors to regain their source of income, including illegal

recruitment channels that put them at a greater risk of forced labor. In addition, limited credible information on GCC country developments and recruiting agents' inclination to misinform migrants could lead to more migrants using illegal channels to migrate.

Recommendations

1. **Government, NGOs, recruitment agencies should expand safe migration training and awareness programs** to highlight the risks and indicators of forced labor and provide transparency and knowledge around the real costs of migration.
2. **Ethical recruitment agencies should coordinate efforts** with the government and businesses to expand the market for formal, safe migration channels.
3. **GCC businesses should prioritize partnerships with recruitment actors** who have a proven track record of ethical practices and can demonstrate policies and procedures against forced labor.

Key Finding 3: There is a lack of interventions targeting skill development, remigration, and pre-departure migrant protection.

The lack of structured reintegration programs that meet the needs of the large number of returnees is likely forcing returnees to remigrate. Migrant worker supply currently exceeds demand, in the scramble to remigrate and regain their source of income migrants could resort to unsafe channels and be vulnerable to exploitation.

Data from centralized returnee migrant databases will be crucial to design trainings and entrepreneurial development programs for the smaller number of migrants who choose to reintegrate. Implementers can use databases to assess returnee migrant skill levels, entrepreneurial abilities, and identify areas of skill development that would have the most impact. Moreover, there is a need to design skill development programs for migrant workers seeking to remigrate. Training for those seeking to remigrate should ideally be reflective of the demand and opportunities in future labor markets. The pandemic has further exposed vulnerabilities that migrants face in destination countries. As workers think of remigration, it will be important for policy actors to work on creating a stronger migrant support and protection mechanism in migration destinations.

Recommendations

1. **Government and NGOs should support skills and enterprise development activities** reflective of existing and potential labor markets while considering the profile of returnee migrants. For example, increase the employability of migrants by reskilling and upskilling with expertise for work in the health sector, which has witnessed a sudden increase in labor needs ranging from highly-skilled nurses and doctors to hospital cleaners and security guards.

2. **Government should lead greater coordination among policy actors and NGO partners** to design sustainable skill-building training and programs.

LOOKING AHEAD

Policy actors and program implementers can use our research and other emerging data on returnee and pre-departure migrants to adapt programs and address the multi-faceted challenges of migrant workers. Future research should identify new labor markets, sectors (health care, agriculture and tourism and hospitality sectors), and demand for skills (e.g. information technologies and digital education) for low and semi-skilled migrant workers. Research should additionally support implementers in developing relevant training and skills development programs.

1. INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Overseas labor migration is currently one of the most important contributors to the Bangladesh economy with remittance inflows estimated at 12% of the nation's GDP (BASUG, April 2020). In 2019 alone, approximately 700,159 migrant workers from Bangladesh migrated overseas to engage in long and short-term employment in order to pursue better opportunities, with GCC countries being a major destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers who provide an inexpensive and lucrative labor pool for the GCC. Within GCC countries, Saudi Arabia has been the most common destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers since 2016. In 2019, 57% of Bangladeshi migrants departed for Saudi Arabia and 18% departed for Oman.

Despite the high rate of migration between these countries every year, the Overseas Labor Recruitment (OLR) industry remains complex and often leaves migrants susceptible to human trafficking, forced labor, and modern slavery. The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic is further compounding these adverse outcomes as migrant workers face significant wage cuts and longer working hours with little negotiating power for their employment rights. Migrant women in domestic work sector are also disproportionately affected as they have to fulfill additional house chores and care demands, while being subject to violence and abuse from their employers especially during the lockdown period (France-Presse, 2020; Ara, June 19 2020). Highlighting the vulnerability of the migrant worker population, Manuela Tomei, Director of ILO's Conditions of Work and Employment Program has described the situation as "a potential crisis within a crisis" (France-Presse, 2020). Existing labor systems in destination countries combined with poor living and working conditions, restricted access to information and health care services, and inadequate legal protection have amplified the vulnerabilities of migrant workers.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

There have been efforts and strategic initiatives from both governmental and non-governmental entities with regards to safe repatriation of migrants and emergency support of returnees during the COVID-19 crisis. International donors and NGOs are also taking steps to address the need for concrete and coordinated reintegration plan as well as market outlook and skill development for future migration. However, the medium- and long-term effects of the global pandemic on migrant workers and overseas labor recruitment remains unclear. As many reports have suggested the likelihood of substantial impacts on migration trends and recruitment of migrant workers in GCC countries, there is an immediate and pressing need to better understand the multi-faceted impacts of COVID-19 on the OLR industry and migrant workers conditions and vulnerabilities.

In response to this need, NORC designed a rapid assessment to address descriptive and normative questions about COVID-19's short- and long-term impact on both Bangladeshi migrant workers returning from GCC countries as well as pre-departure migrants.

The research team conducted semi-structured key informant interviews with important stakeholders including but not limited to government officials, NGOs and recruiting agencies in order to obtain comprehensive insights on the multi-faceted impact of COVID-19 on OLR.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for the GFEMS OLR Rapid Assessment are as follows:

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How has COVID-19 impacted migrant workers in GCC countries? What activities and/or policies are GCC countries considering and implementing for migrant workers?

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

What is the situation of returnee migrants in Bangladesh? What economic and social discrimination is faced by returnee migrants because of the stigma that they may be carriers of COVID-19?

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

What policy measures or actions are the Government of Bangladesh, international donors, local NGOs/CSOs and recruiting agencies taking to repatriate and reintegrate migrant returnees in Bangladesh and support pre-departure migrants?

RESEARCH QUESTION 4

What are the possible medium and long-term implications of COVID-19 on OLR and the willingness of Bangladeshi workers to migrate to GCC countries?

RESEARCH QUESTION 5

What are some medium and long-term recommendations for governments, policy makers, program implementers, NGOs, donors and other key stakeholders in Bangladesh and GCC to repatriate, reintegrate and protect migrant workers affected by the global pandemic?

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

DATA COLLECTION & TOOLS

RAPID SYSTEMATIC DESK RESEARCH

The desk review constitutes a critical data source for this rapid assessment. In order to conduct this study and gather relevant information in an efficient and timely manner, we conducted a rapid systematic review of grey literature tied to our research questions. Rapid reviews are a useful approach to swiftly provide actionable evidence for informed decision-making in emergency contexts, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic. Our team relied on credible newspaper articles, media reports, government and international organization COVID-19 response statements and policy briefs, white papers, and blogs from research institutions and reputed policy experts.

To structure our search and ensure reliable information, the research team developed an online search methodology and internal databases of relevant sources in consultation with GFEMS and our subject-matter experts. The team completed the searches using the following databases. The detailed search protocol is attached as [Annex B](#).

- General search engines, such as Google and Google Scholar, to identify relevant online content – newspaper articles, white papers, media reports, policy blogs
- Government websites;
- NGOs and service provider websites;
- Websites of local and international research organizations focusing on human trafficking policy issues to source relevant articles, blogs, and online content
- Websites of key international multilateral organizations working in the migration space, such as the ILO, IOM and World Bank;
- Reliable local news sources, our team will use local language skills to source relevant information from country-specific media reports as well.

In parallel to this evidence gathering effort, the research team also gathered documents reflecting the larger context in each of these countries as it relates to the overall developments and issues in the OLR sector. These documents included country-specific forced

labor assessments, legal briefs on specific force labor related laws, country profiles from reliable sources, and migrant worker statistics and databases.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIs)

The research team used a stakeholder mapping tool to identify the key stakeholders working in the OLR sector, including government officials, international donor agencies and NGOs, national NGOs and recruiting agencies. A detailed list is included as [Annex C](#). Initial sampling for the stakeholder interviews was done in consultation with GFEMS and reviewed and finalized by NORC using a purposive selection method. Over the course of data collection, NORC conducted a total of 31 virtual key informant interviews (KIIs), of which 28 were individual KIIs and 3 were group KIIs.

Conducted via Zoom, KIIs were approximately 60 minutes long. The semi-structured interview guide was customized for different stakeholder groups, but broadly covered topics related to overseas migrant protection, repatriation, reintegration of returnee migrants, pre-departure migrant protection, implications and recommendations.

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

DOCUMENT REVIEW AND CODING

The research team gathered indexed documents and news reports published between early-March and mid-July, 2020. The team used a deductive thematic approach to develop a codebook, which was iteratively refined as new themes emerged during the document review process and imported into Dedoose (version 8.3.35), a qualitative analysis software. A total of 110 sources were reviewed using the final codebook, resulting in 817 code applications and 500 media excerpts. Additional documents were also reviewed during the desk research process, but were not analyzed using Dedoose. Some key themes identified during the analysis include global and GCC-specific COVID-19 trends among migrant workers, COVID-19 implications for stranded, returnee and potential Bangladeshi migrants, policy and regulatory measures implemented by Bangladesh and GCC stakeholders, and recommendations for migrant protection, repatriation and reintegration.

KII CODING

Data gathered from interviews was transcribed (and translated for interviews conducted in Bangla), coded using Dedoose, and analyzed using an inductive approach. The desk review codebook was updated and used to code the KIIs. A total of 31 KII notes were included in the coding process, resulting in 1,424 code applications and 1,095 excerpts. Emergent themes are detailed in the report and supported with relevant quotes.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the rapid nature of the assessment, the study focused more on analyzing policy and programmatic actions for vulnerable migrant workers in Bangladesh rather than in GCC countries. The perspective of GCC stakeholders is under-represented in the study. In addition, we were unable to interview Bangladesh embassy and labor wing officials working on migrant repatriation in the GCC countries.

Among Bangladesh policy actors, we had limited interviews with government stakeholders. Government officials from divisions working on returnee migrant worker issues stated they were pre-occupied with managing the large number of returnees and were unavailable for interviews. In many cases, government officials were hesitant to give interviews as the lack of government support toward migrants is a sensitive topic in Bangladesh.

3. FINDINGS

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How has COVID-19 impacted migrant workers in GCC countries? What activities and/or policies are GCC countries considering and implementing for migrant workers?

KEY FINDINGS

- Low and semi-skilled migrant workers who constitute a large proportion of the workforce in GCC countries are facing direct consequences of the economic depression in the form of wage cuts and withholding, long working hours, compromised health and occupational safety, and lack of social protection.
- Not only are workers forced to find a new job in a short time-frame, but they are also competing with a large labor pool across industries and skill levels for limited job opportunities. This added layer of complexity makes it unsafe for workers in unfavorable working situations to switch jobs and seek fair employment. Consequently, many choose to accept wage cuts and longer work hours in exchange for employment stability.
- Mounting evidence suggests that women migrants, who are primarily domestic workers, are not only exposed to greater risk of COVID-19 infection due to close proximity to employers who may have contracted the virus, but are facing increased risk of forced labor and workplace violence.

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected migrant workers' economic and social well-being in destination countries. Although the health crisis in GCC countries is not as severe as other countries, plummeting oil prices and shrinking economies have prompted energy-rich GCC countries to deport migrant workers to their home countries (The Daily Star, July 1 2020; Palma, 2020). An overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers in GCC countries are experience unemployment, wage theft, termination of lawful residence, food deprivation, and restricted access to health care services since the onset of the global pandemic (Bhuyan, May 1 2020; Ara, June 18 2020; The Daily Star, May 14 2020).

COVID-19 impacts on migrants in GCC Countries

Migrants across the GCC countries are facing job loss and financial insecurity. Triggered by COVID-19 related disruptions in oil-dependent industries such as manufacturing, transportation, construction and trade, the gulf region is witnessing a negative demand shock which has severely impacted its oil-driven economy. Low and semi-skilled migrant workers who constitute a large proportion of the workforce in these sectors are facing direct consequences of the economic depression in the form of wage cuts and withholding, long working hours, compromised health and occupational safety, and lack of social protection.

For example, in the UAE the government recently passed a new law¹ allowing employers to arbitrarily revise employment contracts such as changing work status from fulltime to part-time and making salary reductions. The policy was enacted partially in an attempt to stabilize the market and the private sector, but is only applied to expatriate workers, highlighting the marginalization of migrant workers. By prioritizing employers' rights and economic interests, the decree has to some extent, legitimized forced labor conditions among migrants.

“There are companies negotiating that they will not pay for migrant’s settlement benefits, but will keep their immigration employment visa for another year so they could stay here looking for work and then switch to employment. This helps the employers to offset the cost of paying these migrant workers...but if you look across the board, workers are not in a strong position to negotiate full benefits.” – (GCC Researcher KII)

Due to COVID-19, there is decreased internal mobility to switch between jobs in GCC. The post-employment visa period has been further reduced to 30 days, within which workers are required to find a new job after leaving their current position to maintain legal immigration status. Not only are workers forced to find a new job in a short time-frame, but they are also competing with a large labor pool across industries and skill levels for limited job opportunities. This added layer of complexity makes it unsafe for workers in unfavorable working situations to switch jobs and seek fair employment. Consequently, many choose to accept wage cuts and longer work hours in exchange for employment stability.

Migrant workers are also facing a dilemma of whether to return home or stay in the GCC during the COVID-19 crisis. Flight cancellations and delays are associated with high time and monetary cost to return. In addition, many migrant workers are unemployed and carrying a heavy debt burden. Returning home, to an uncertain and saturated job market, is increasingly challenging under these circumstances.

¹ Ministerial Resolution No. (279) of 2020 on Employment Stability in Private-Sector for Non-UAE National

“The issue here is not COVID, but when the family calls there is nothing you can do about it to help with family rent, tuition, etc. Repatriation becomes tricky because they know the employment prospects back home and the unemployment rates here. In fact, for lower skilled workers, the ability to earn is higher in the informal market here (GCC) than formal market back home.” – (GCC Researcher KII)

GCC migration experts have identified three major subgroups of migrants who are most likely to return back to the country of origin because of COVID-19. First, there are migrants with expired *iqamas* or work permits who can't afford the high renewal costs, which are currently the responsibility of the worker rather than the employer. Second, migrants with families residing with them at the destination country are facing immense difficulty in financially supporting the entire family, especially when a middle-class lifestyle is no longer sustainable. The third group consists of migrants who have pending legal trials and are currently living in prison, detention centers or embassy shelters. Given their heightened risk of contracting COVID-19, they may be prioritized by the GCC government for repatriation efforts. In terms of forced repatriation, the degree of enforcement varies by different gulf countries, and given the upcoming regional events like the World Cup and EXPO, GCC countries are cautiously striking a balance between migration diplomacy and national interest.

COVID-19 is also accelerating the enforcement of ongoing nationalization policies within GCC countries. For example, Kuwait's² renewal policy marginalizes older migrant workers seeking to renew work permits by making them ineligible to do so if they are 60 years old or above. UAE and Oman³ are also considering policy changes by encouraging private sector employers to hire more local nationals than migrant workers. Stringent migration policies in the GCC countries are now accompanied by greater localization efforts as the COVID-19 situation intensifies, further threatening migrant rights and protection in destination countries.

COVID-19 impacts on Bangladeshi migrant workers in GCC Countries

As macroeconomic conditions worsen in the Middle East, many Bangladeshi migrants are being laid-off arbitrarily, illegally, and at short-notice. Increasing financial burdens due to high *iqama* renewal costs and sustaining family livelihoods amidst pay cuts and nonpayment of wages are increasing migrant worker vulnerabilities. Undocumented migrants are among the most vulnerable to unfair labor practices. Some may be returning to Bangladesh under general pardon or amnesty by the gulf government, but many others are being held for deportation and forced repatriation. KIIs with international donors and national NGOs reveal that migrants are randomly targeted by police and taken to detention centers both during work and while walking in the streets.

Migrants working as freelancers under the *kafala* system or free visa constitute another significantly affected group. Without a legal contract, they are deprived of proper documentation, making them an easy target for detention. Although some freelancers migrated

² <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-bans-work-permits-for-expats-above-60-1.73243710>

³ <https://intpolicydigest.org/2020/06/30/foreign-labour-in-the-gulf-amid-the-covid-pandemic/>

with valid iqamas, they hold illegal status after overstaying on their expired permits which makes them vulnerable to forced repatriation and most likely to return back to the country of origin.

The relative impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers also differs by employers. Better business owners, usually large multi-national firms, are still honoring employment contracts with workers and are waiting for the pandemic to end to resume operations. However, smaller and less financially resilient companies are unable to maintain contract terms during the economic crisis, forcing many migrants to return home.

Gender Considerations

Although women migrants employed in domestic service have retained their jobs during the pandemic, they are still vulnerable to exploitation. Mounting evidence suggests that women workers are not only exposed to greater risk of COVID-19 infection, but are facing increased risk of forced labor and workplace violence. Due to stay-at-home policies in GCC countries, there have been additional housekeeping work and longer hours for women migrants, often with reduced, delayed or no wages. Women domestic workers are being burdened with additional household and caregiving duties, especially for COVID-19 positive members and often staying in close proximity with the patient. In refusing to work for fear of their health and well-being, some workers have also become victims of physical abuse and torture perpetrated by their employers.

“Not many women return, they are stuck in the Middle East – workloads have greatly increased, especially among domestic workers, the reason being that more family members are not going out during the pandemic and thus, there is increased household burden. Their human rights are being violated, so are their contracts.” – (International Donor KII)

“They (women domestic workers) were locked in the washroom for four days. Later, they were rescued. They were beaten badly, so badly that their legs were badly injured.” – (National NGO KII)

GCC’s migrant protection efforts

Many GCC countries are taking positive steps to procure necessary medical aid and establish COVID-19 testing and quarantine measures for migrant workers, although in some cases, pandemic-related healthcare expenses are only waived for legal migrants. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar also have policies allowing workers to access COVID-19 treatment, regardless of their immigration status. Although guaranteed by the GCC countries, the actual implementation of these policies remains unanswered. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the law requires public healthcare centers to serve undocumented migrant workers, but the same mandate is not extended to private hospitals. In addition, fear of uncertain consequences like detention and deportation after treatment, is further discouraging illegal migrants from seeking COVID-19 medical assistance.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

What is the situation of returnee migrants in Bangladesh? What economic and social discrimination is faced by returnee migrants because of the stigma that they may be carriers of COVID-19?

KEY FINDINGS

- A combination of stress due to a pandemic-induced failed migration experience, financial insecurity, societal harassment, rejection by families and uncertainty about the future is impacting the psychosocial wellbeing of returnee migrant workers.
- According to a BRAC report, more than half of returnees are in dire need of financial assistance, only 10% reported getting support from government and NGOs and 10% of returnees stated taking loans from formal and informal sources, likely adding to their existing debt burden from the exorbitant costs associated with migrating to the GCC countries.
- The treatment and status women migrants receive in their households are closely tied to the tangible financial benefit they bring to the family, which for returnee migrants, has significantly decreased leading to increases in gender based violence.

Forced and voluntary repatriation of Bangladeshi migrant workers has led to a mass exodus of migrants back to their home country. After battling employment uncertainty and stressful working and living conditions in the GCC countries, migrants return to Bangladesh and have to deal with multi-faceted issues arising out of adjusting to life in their home country amidst a global pandemic. Bangladeshi returnee migrants are vulnerable to health and safety concerns due to poor implementation of quarantine and COVID-19 containment protocols at home combined with the mental stress and trauma associated with a loss of livelihood and societal discrimination. They are also vulnerable to both economic and social discrimination in their communities compounding their vulnerability as they try and reintegrate in Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) reports that a total of 111,111 workers returned to the Bangladesh between April to September 2020, while BRAC's migration program estimates this number to be closer to 275,000

considering the number of returnees in February and March as well (Star Online Report, September 9, 2020). A report from the Bangladesh Wage Earners' Welfare Desk, stated that from 1 April to 03 October 2020, a total of 170,573 migrants returned to Bangladesh from different destination countries.⁴ Although many workers are being forcefully repatriated due to the pandemic-induced economic crisis, there is a sizable number of migrant workers who are voluntarily returning to Bangladesh to spend time with their family during these unprecedented times.

“The clients sending them back is one issue, but sometimes the workers themselves want to come back, which has not been addressed by the media. This is one of the most important things because we see there is no issue with their salaries or anything, they just want to come back to spend time with their family during this pandemic.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

Situation of Returnee Migrants: Physical and Mental Health Concerns

Once migrants return to Bangladesh they are required to go through quarantine. However, there is limited information on the effectiveness of the local health authorities' implementation and monitoring of the quarantine protocols for migrants. Initially, the government containment protocol for returnee migrants involved screening at the airport, after which healthy migrants would be quarantined at Hajj camps for 14 days and only sick migrants would be sent to designated hospitals (Bhuyan, April 18 2020). However, due to poor implementation and mismanagement, there were reported increases in coronavirus cases among migrants returning to Bangladesh, leading to a move towards more stringent self-quarantine requirements (The Daily Star, June 23 2020).

Due to poor implementation of containment measures and lack of information and awareness, few migrants who returned home quarantined properly or were released by authorities with proper COVID-19 medical clearance certificates. According to the BRAC Migration Program's phone-based survey with returned migrants, 84% of migrants

Exhibit 1: Returnee Migrant Worker Profile

- Undocumented migrants
- Semi-skilled and unskilled workers
- More likely to be male workers from the construction industry or female domestic workers
- 95% male workers versus 5% female workers
- Average age under 35 years old
- Early-stage migrants i.e. those who have migrated in the last 2-3 years

Source: BRAC COVID-19 Migration Survey 2020; KIIs

⁴ WEWB. 2020. Monthly Information of Workers Returning Abroad (1 April – 03 October, 2020). Dhaka: Wage Earners' Welfare Desk, Wage Earners Welfare Board (WEWB), Government of Bangladesh.

reported maintaining it, 14% reported not maintaining it, and 2% reported maintaining only a one-week quarantine (Dhaka Tribune, May 22 2020).

Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and other migrant rights organizations are raising concerns on how the steps taken to reduce the spread of coronavirus by government is creating a negative mindset against returnee migrants. Often these migrants are not allowed to stay in their villages, face harassment in accessing medical services, are physically attacked, and face extortion (RMMRU, April 20 2020). As a result of awareness campaigns and efforts by NGOs and CSOs, however, instances of migrant workers facing harassment in their communities has been decreasing since April 2020.

“At the community level or area of origin, when somebody returns there’s always the news that the community leader ask them to leave the place immediately, otherwise the whole village would be infected. In general, discriminatory opinions are shared even by media, not as straightforward as stating that these people are carrying COVID, but the way they are portraying it is as if these people are returning without wearing masks or without awareness of the COVID situation, that creates anti-migrant sentiments among the general people... Some journalists are compassionate but in most cases we don’t see much compassion towards returnees.” – (Migration Researcher KII)

A combination of stress due to a pandemic-induced failed migration experience, financial insecurity, societal harassment, rejection by families and uncertainty about the future is impacting the psychosocial wellbeing of returnee migrant workers. Many migrants find it hard to cope with the uncertainty around their future and need emotional support and counseling to help them during this difficult time.

Most KII respondents highlighted that returnees’ mental health is at risk, and there is a need for more psycho-social support programs especially for vulnerable groups such as women who are at a high risk of being abused or facing instances of violence.

Social and Economic Discrimination

Social discrimination of returnee migrants, perceived to be carriers of coronavirus, presents challenges to the successful social reintegration of this group. According to the BRAC survey, 29% of returnees reported that their relatives and neighbors were not accepting of their return and did not behave normally with them (Dhaka Tribune, May 22 2020). Another USAID-WINROCK survey

reported that nearly half (48%) of returnee migrants stated they are being treated worse or much worse than before by community members and/or community leaders, and in some cases by friends or family⁵

“When they returned at the very beginning of the COVID-19 situation, they were prohibited from entering all restaurants. In fact, many restaurants put a sign on their door stating that no foreigners or migrants were allowed inside.” – (National NGO KII)

At the onset of the crisis, due to a lack of awareness and government monitoring, some returnee migrants violated self-quarantine protocols causing risks to their families and community. Such instances led to stereotyping and migrants are increasingly being blamed for bringing the virus from abroad. A large amount of misinformation circulating through social media by government representatives and citizens reinforces this belief. In some areas and communities, migrants are being marked as ‘dangerously-infected people’ and there have been cases reported of red-flags being hoisted on their houses to mark them as migrant and virus-carrying households (BASUG Diaspora and Development, June 2020).

As a result, returnee migrants are subjected to harassment, physical assaults, extortion and discrimination in accessing medical care. There are also reports that the most marginalized and vulnerable of migrant workers (e.g., low-skilled workers in construction or domestic sectors) are being stigmatized as carriers of the virus, while other returnees (e.g., businesspeople, students, visitors and other professionals) who failed to adhere to the quarantine rules are not being similarly stigmatized (RMMRU, April 24 2020).

Pervasive social discrimination compounds returnee migrants’ economic insecurity. Migrant workers are returning to Bangladesh with limited employment prospects, loss of wages and income, depleted savings and the stress of providing for themselves and their families. The BRAC Migration Program’s survey of returnee migrants’ highlighted some critical trends in returnees’ financial security – 87% of all returnees do not have any income opportunities amidst the pandemic and the remaining 13% are dependent on family members or a small income from farming activities. Most migrants have limited savings, exhausting what savings they had through surviving in the destination countries before repatriation while also trying to sustain their families while Bangladesh was under a COVID-19 lockdown. The survey reported that 34% of respondents have already spent their savings, 33% could manage for the next three months with existing savings, and 19% could survive for one or two months, while about 14% did not share information to this end. According to the report, more than half of returnees are in dire need of financial assistance, only 10% reported getting support from government and NGOs and 10% of returnees stated taking loans from formal and informal sources, likely adding to their existing debt burden from the exorbitant costs associated with migrating to the GCC countries (Star Online Report, May 22 2020).

⁵ Situational Assessment of Labor Migrants in Asia: Needs and Knowledge During COVID-19 Series Paper 2: Bangladesh, https://www.winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh_migrant-study-.pdf

According to Professor KAS Murshid, Director General of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Bangladeshi migrants face more risks of slipping into poverty because they pay hefty amounts for migration (Palma, 2020).

“You know, the migration cost is high. They had to spend around 800,000 Taka at a high interest rate. When they earned money, they repaid the loan and the interest. When they returned, they came with almost zero money and also have no job. As a result of this, they are facing an economic crisis.” – (National NGO KII)

With large numbers of migrants returning to Bangladesh in a very short period, returnees are severely disadvantaged in the local job markets due to scarcity of jobs and limited self-employment opportunities. Social discrimination against migrants exacerbate these factors. As increasing numbers of migrants return to Bangladesh, amidst the pandemic and an environment of economic uncertainty, tensions are rising in their communities because of the fear that returning migrants may take jobs away.

“From an economic perspective, in the local market there is unrest – local people are losing jobs while migrants are coming back. When returnee migrants want to start their own business, they are not getting support from the community or service providers. Local people see them as competitors, and (this unrest) will increase.” – (International NGO KII)

The traditional perception in society is that migrants earn in foreign currencies and send large remittances back to their families. Therefore, during a crisis it is assumed that neither migrants nor their families need government support or any special consideration.

“When government provides migrants with stimulus support, it creates agony among local workers as well – how come we are not getting the support we’ve been here all along. Additionally, in the local market the pay band is low so migrant workers sometime don’t want to work locally either. Now that migrant families are included in the most vulnerable groups for government protection programs, there is also tension/agony because the local perception is that migrant families have money.” – (International NGO KII)

Gender Considerations

Women experience every stage of migration different than men do, including returning back to the home country. Although only a small number of women migrants returned during the pandemic, like all migrants, they are not immune from the accusation of carrying and spreading the virus. At the household level, there are reported increases in gender-based violence. When women return from destination countries, they are facing the risk of being abused at home due to lockdown or harsh family economic conditions.

They are taking the primary blame when the economic situation worsens. The treatment and status women migrants receive in their households are closely tied to the tangible financial benefit they bring to the family, which for returnee migrants, has significantly decreased.

“While women are migrants and still sending money back to the family, their family values them; the minute they want to come back and are not migrant workers, the family doesn’t value them anymore – women are always looked down upon and the family treats them as a pariah.” – (International Donor KII)

In addition, women workers are often believed to migrate for sex work and “deserving” of any abuse they experience abroad or after returning home. The fact that some women chose to work abroad to escape domestic violence or harassment and are now forced to return home to an unsafe environment due to COVID-19, further complicates an already complex situation. Stigmatization and humiliation add another layer to the tension between women returnees and the family and fuels more domestic violence. This also creates hurdles for women to find employment locally since they are not treated as equal. Therefore, women returnee migrants encounter the double pressure of not being accepted by family and not being able to reintegrate economically.

“The most vulnerable group – domestic workers, especially the less educated – they contribute significant amount of remittance but the narrative carries with them (even when they return) that they must be sex workers and must be abused. Society doesn’t want to acknowledge women workers. Traditional social stigma for women workers makes it hard for them to get a job in the local market” – (International NGO KII)

Overall, returnee migrant workers experience multi-faceted challenges creating a need for concerted and coordinated efforts and policies from the government, international donors, NGOs and migrants rights organizations to address returnee migrants’ needs. These challenges center around physical and mental health concerns and social and economic discrimination; both of which carry gendered implications that require targeted efforts for men and women to address their unique experiences.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

What policy measures or actions are the Government of Bangladesh, international donors, local NGOs/CSOs and recruiting agencies taking to repatriate and reintegrate migrant returnees in Bangladesh and support pre-departure migrants?

KEY FINDINGS

- Due to the sensitive nature of diplomatic relationships between labor supply and labor demand countries, there is a lot of pressure to repatriate large numbers of migrant workers without being able to negotiate for their rights.
- Efforts to maintain a central repository of returnee migrant worker data will help international donors, local NGOs and CSOs keep track of potential project beneficiaries as well as help adapt programs to meet returnee's current needs.
- NGOs highlight that there have been severe funding cuts from donors, limiting their capacity to support the large number of vulnerable returnee migrant workers.
- International donors are performing market research to identify near-term and long-term in-demand job functions, helping both government and partner organizations with the design of more targeted training programs and learning materials for migrants.
- Employment uncertainty and debt burden due to the costs of migration to the GCC might push pre-departure migrants to resort to unsafe channels, putting them at a greater risk of working in forced labor arrangements.
- Limited credible information on GCC country developments, dependency on informal agents and recruiting agents' inclination to misinform migrants could lead to more migrants using illegal channels to migrate.

In this section we discuss findings on measures taken by the Government of Bangladesh, international donors and NGOs, local NGOs/CSOs and recruiting agencies in the areas of migrant repatriation, reintegration and pre-departure migrant protection since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Repatriation Efforts

Repatriation activities to return migrants to their country of origin are carried out by home-country and sending-country governments. International donors and NGOs/CSOs contribute toward repatriation by disseminating information to overseas migrants, providing counseling services and advocating for quick and timely repatriation. Recruiting agencies' contribution in the repatriation process remains limited as most of them are not legally bound to repatriate migrant workers.

Government

The Government of Bangladesh is playing a central role in repatriation efforts. Government entities such as the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), BMET, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR), Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), Wage Earners' Welfare Funds (WEWF) are coordinating efforts for repatriating and reintegrating Bangladeshi migrant workers. In GCC countries, MoFA monitors the migrant situation through their in-country embassy and labor wings. Migrant workers in destination countries can also use a special mobile-app created to make a distress call to the local embassy in times of crises.

The government is implementing a multi-phase repatriation process to rescue stranded migrant workers from the GCC and safely transport them back to Bangladesh in stages. A government KII respondent highlighted that this was done to not overwhelm local capacity in managing a large number of returnees. The general consensus among local NGOs/CSOs and international donors is that there are not enough repatriation flights and the process of bringing back migrants is moving slower than expected. Moreover, a slower process leads to migrants most in need of immediate rescue and repatriation being stranded in the GCC. Many migrant are vulnerable to abuse in their work places, especially women, and in cases where they want to return to Bangladesh to escape this abuse there are insufficient mechanisms to rescue and bring them back safely.

“On the 24th, I worked on three cases. A woman was burned on both hands. We are trying our best to bring her back. I have talked with the agencies to help me in this regard. The agency is saying: ‘There are no flights at the moment, so how can we bring her at the moment?’ The agency is again saying: ‘She’s doing fine.’ The agencies are saying things like this.” – (National NGO KII)

Repatriation missions involve Bangladesh flights, such as Biman and US-Bangla, along with GCC country airlines such as Oman Air and Kuwait Air. Countries like Bahrain are also operating special chartered flights to repatriate migrants. Most repatriation flights have been operating with the support of the Bangladesh Air Force Welfare Trust and GCC country governments (Abdullah, April 30 2020; Abdullah, July 8 2020; Bhuyan, 2020).

Importantly, migration researchers NORC interviewed reported that, regardless of the Government of Bangladesh's efforts, repatriation activities, mechanisms and support for migrants depends largely on GCC countries. All government respondents highlighted that, due to the sensitive nature of diplomatic relationships between labor supply and labor demand countries, there is a lot of pressure to repatriate large numbers of migrant workers without being able to negotiate for their rights.

“Bangladesh’s position was not like that of India and our position was always to protect the current and future labor market and not to anger the host government. Therefore, the embassies arranged flights and allowed planes to land in Bangladesh.” – (National NGO KII)

The government is taking some measures to ensure the safety of migrants traveling back on flights, which can often become hotspots for the spread of coronavirus. Specifically, they have mandated COVID-19 medical clearance certificates for migrants traveling back to Bangladesh and have implemented screening and self-quarantine mandates for anyone returning from abroad. One NGO respondent noted that the government is making efforts in the right direction, but meeting the needs of the large number of people experiencing food and employment insecurity in the GCC remains a challenge due to insufficient resources at the government's disposal. Moreover, as mentioned earlier in the report, these efforts are not adequate enough for the most vulnerable subpopulations.

International Donors, Local NGOs and CSOs

Although not taking direct part in the repatriation efforts, international donors are working with local organizations to provide technical support and facilitate the repatriation process. Donors are encouraging the Bangladeshi government to use international obligations such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue to bargain and negotiate with destination countries when under the pressure of forced repatriation. In addition, they are leveraging the referral system to support overseas migrants who reach out to report abuse or desire to return home. By contacting the appropriate government entities or recruiting agencies, they link migrants to the appropriate repatriation resources. In special cases like trauma and human trafficking, WINROCK has a Bangladesh Counter Trafficking in Person (BCTIP) program in place for victims to connect with Bangladesh law enforcement agencies or NGOs to prepare for safe repatriation.

Local NGOs/CSOs provide repatriation support by disseminating critical information to GCC migrants, especially through social media. They provide contact information for relevant embassies, repatriation flight information, updates on COVID-19 related developments, and counseling services.

Reintegration Efforts

As noted above, a number of actors are working to reintegrate migrants who have been repatriated during the pandemic, either forcefully or by choice. These include the Government of Bangladesh, international donors, national NGOs/CSOs and recruiting agencies, as detailed below.

Government

In the initial stages of the pandemic, the government of Bangladesh implemented COVID-19 response activities to support the domestic economy, including the release of stimulus packages supporting COVID-19 health infrastructure, marginalized groups in the country, and export-oriented industries. In July, forced repatriation of migrant workers in large numbers and strong advocacy efforts by international donors and migrants rights organizations led the government to create a US \$85 million (Taka 700 crore) fund to specifically support the reintegration of returnee migrants.

This fund aims to support returnee migrants in two related ways. First, it offers loans to support their economic reintegration and provides access to existing training centers and new ones that the government is planning to set up to enhance returnee migrant skills. Second, it is intended to train migrants so that they can find better jobs abroad once the situation returns to normal, and to provide them with seed money to jump start employment-generating activities in Bangladesh either in the meantime, or as an alternative.⁶ The government will offer soft loans without a need for collateral. The Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB) will supply the returnee migrant workers' fund to the Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB), who will then disburse loans with a low 4% interest rate. Each worker is eligible to get an amount between Taka 100,000 to 500,000 based on their project proposals of income-generating activities. Immediate family members of those who died of COVID-19 while working abroad will also be eligible for these loans.

Even though migration rights organizations, such as RMMRU, welcomed this initiative, they stated that the interest rate on the loan scheme is high considering the money will be allocated from the migrant workers' welfare fund, which includes money contributed by migrants themselves (Ara, June 6 2020). Moreover, many NGO and international donors believe that the complex process of reintegration cannot be simplified by just providing these loans.

“COVID has only brought out the issue that’s already there, it’s only amplified the issue. There has to be a systematic and structured solution, not just some NGO solution like giving out money, by the government.” – (International Donor KII)

⁶ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/covid-19-pandemic-profoundly-affects-bangladeshi-workers-abroad-consequences-origin>

Many implementer respondents emphasized that even though the government has created this fund and is offering loans to returnee migrants, the eligibility requirements and complicated application process results in a very small proportion of returnees reaping the benefits provided under this scheme.

“The returned migrants are unaware on the process of securing a loan from Probashi Kalyan Bank. The migrants will not get a loan like that, but they need to prepare a proposal. They also need counseling and advice. Also, the people who have lost a lot of money, how can that money be recovered? Does the government have this kind of mechanism? The government cannot do very much.” – (National NGO KII)

“For this loan, the beneficiary should provide different types of papers and documents while the problem is they don’t know the right information, and the information isn’t shared by the district office with the migrant workers’ family and this was a gap between them so, when we learned this, we went there to follow the procedure so that he could get a loan and, at that time, we saw that the deadline had passed. Because of using many ways to reach them for the loan application, he couldn’t register for the loan so we have seen many gaps between the government and migrant workers.” – (National NGO KII)

In addition to fund-supported training and seed money, the government is making positive strides in setting up and maintaining a database of returnee migrant workers to facilitate systematic reintegration and tracking. Various government ministries, including home affairs, civil aviation and MoEWOE, are working toward creating a database of all returnee migrants to maintain data that can be used to monitor the safety and health of returnees, provide support and strengthen reintegration efforts (RMMRU, April 24 2020). The government also created the Srom Obhibashon Forum including concerned ministries, NGOs, and members of civil society to facilitate idea sharing and create a platform to discuss returnee migrants’ issues and concerns. Efforts to maintain returnee migrant worker data will help international donors, local NGOs and CSOs keep track of potential project beneficiaries as well as help adapt programs to meet returnee’s current needs.

Despite these efforts, significant gaps in government-led policies to support reintegration remain. The reintegration process itself is complex, including economic, social, and psychological components. Yet the government does not have sufficient experience addressing these types of concerns—previous efforts were undertaken largely by NGOs, CSOs and international donors—and they are under-equipped to successfully address returnee concerns and meet their reintegration needs.

“Now that people are coming back, they think they should start reintegration but they don’t have any reintegration policy and they don’t know how to reintegrate the people. They are thinking of giving a loan but I think giving loan and reintegration are not the same thing. We started the coordination with government but there is a huge communication gap between the government and the CSOs.” – (National NGO KII)

A majority of NGOs and international donors stated that there are limited measures being taken to address the social discrimination that migrant workers experience along with interventions targeting social reintegration. Another problem is that there are no structured programs for job integration or training or entrepreneurship, even though the government has included it under their migrant worker relief scheme. Current government initiatives also don't prioritize vulnerable groups, such as returnee female domestic workers for whom traditional social stigma serves as a hindrance in finding jobs in the local market.

International Donors and NGOs

International Donors, such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) and International Organization for Migration (IOM), are coordinating with local NGOs and government to provide technical support regarding reintegration of the returnee migrants. Their efforts center on sharing knowledge about migrant experiences at the grass-root level and informing policy design and implementation. Through downstream partners, they help provide immediate necessities, such as food, money and short-term accommodations, to migrants upon arrival at the airport. As donor agencies gradually return to normal operations, they are also mobilizing field teams to collect more data and raise awareness through various channels.

The ILO is promoting a market-driven approach to reintegration efforts. By connecting migrant workers with the local market, they are not only upgrading and certifying migrants' skills but also facilitating enterprise development and ongoing sustainability of the value chain. Additional work has been put into adjusting the length and content of training courses in some technical schools such that they match with skills demanded by the market and especially small medium enterprise sectors. These course would be blended in nature with components of both face-to-face training and online/distant learning.

“Even if you are skilled or have entrepreneurship, you have to connect and engage with the market. If you only work with migrant workers alone, why would the market care. You certify them, you show these are the competencies they have so that the local factories would hire them.” – (International Donor KII)

The ILO is now focusing on building capacity in terms of enterprise training and potential E-certificate management and pioneering the approach among 10-15 associated institutions. Other measures to ease the smooth transition consist of credit facilities, rapid finance investment and general advisory programs. These programs focus on creating a strong referral platform to help returnee migrants identify the places or point of contacts where they could access specific services like loan application and skill certification. Besides economic reintegration, the ILO is also taking steps to assess the vulnerability of returnee migrants and their families'. They are working to develop a strategic roadmap and consult ministries in future reintegration projects.

Many international donors are also dedicating resources to social reintegration. Such efforts include psychosocial counseling for returnees and their families and community programs focused on reducing the stigma and discrimination faced by returnee migrants.

Organizations like ILO and PROKAS, along with the UN Migration Network, frequently hold dialogues that engage government entities, workers, CSOs and various stakeholders to communicate migrant concerns, share data-based reports and discuss reintegration recommendations. Further initiatives are tasked towards vulnerable subpopulations. For human trafficking survivors, WINROCK tries to identify victims among returnee migrants and link them to partner organizations for psychosocial counseling services. For women migrants who have experienced gender-based violence, support is offered by the donors to connect victims with respective government agencies and hotlines to ensure their safe return and create awareness about their rights.

“With the government, we are continuously doing advocacy to ensure their (women’s) safe return so that they have the correct information in the quarantine syntax. The major issue that we are working for...is women should be put into the central point of COVID-19 response planning and designing.” – (International Donor KII)

UN Women continuously pushes for gender-responsive migrant support mechanisms. For example, the organization is running a project reaching out to roughly 10,000 returnee women migrant workers in ten districts of Bangladesh. By encouraging women to be resourceful experts and role models, UN Women gives women migrants cash, food and sanitary packages while capitalizing on women’s’ ability to disseminate the support within the community. Through partnership with two women-led CSOs, the agency also creates food distribution work and mask production units to assist with wage earning and economic independence.

Local NGOs/CSOs

Local NGOs and CSOs in Bangladesh are playing a vital role in supporting returnee migrant workers throughout the reintegration process. Although reintegration was not a key priority area for these organizations in the past, the pandemic led to most adapting their programming to meet the changing needs of returnee migrant workers.

“Since we are not a traditional program from the start, we are adaptive and flexible. Within a month of COVID we changed our work plan; e.g. gender-based violence was not our program focus, but because of COVID and its impact on women and girls, we included gender-based violence in our program which include migrants and in general, we contact all support programs and we develop the referral support and build a channel to track violence cases. Another example: reintegration was not our focus but is now a key area, since (our original role) was more about regulating intermediaries.” – (International NGO KII)

Specifically, NGOs/CSOs provide critical advocacy support for migrant worker rights and government interventions and insights to inform policy decisions around reintegrating returnee migrants. Through the Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration (BCSM), the nine member NGOs coordinate advocacy efforts, collaborate on and share new research, strategize and discuss ways forward to address key emerging challenges for migrant workers. Outside of Bangladesh, Netherlands-based Bangladeshi Diaspora organization

BASUG and the Migrants Forum in Asia network are analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Bangladeshi migrants and publishing briefs, reports and statements of support for overseas and returnee migrants.

Port of entry assistance – Many organizations have volunteers waiting at the airport to assist returnee migrant workers. Organizations like BRAC, OKUP and RMMRU set up centers around airports to provide food, accommodation and counseling services for returnees close to their port of entry. Other organizations provide assistance at the airports for returnee women migrant workers who are survivors of abuse and trauma in their destination countries and are not accepted back by their families.

Health and well-being support – NGOs are limited in the extent to which they can provide direct medical support to migrants as they are dependent on donor priorities, which currently focus on social and economic reintegration over physical health related services. However, they provide information on COVID-19, promote awareness on pandemic safety measures, some NGOs also assist returnees in the testing process or through airport centers.

However, some organizations are providing psychosocial and counseling services to meet the mental wellbeing and emotional support needs of returnees, especially to help cope with stress arising out of financial insecurity and uncertainty about the future. To align with recommended pandemic safety protocols, these services are being adapted from a face-to-face to a tele-counseling model.

“The first important step in the integration of migrant workers is to counsel them so that they are mentally prepared to return to the country and the different types of stress, so their mental stability is very important after their return. As part of our activities, we first identify them and then provide them with training which we call life skills training, through which we try to build their confidence and finally help them to create a business plan to make them interested in their opportunities. In that case, we provide financial support according to their skills by identifying the existing skills of an individual as well. We make sure that the work is sustainable so that they will feel comfortable about it.” – (National NGO KII)

Economic reintegration – Organizations implement economic reintegration interventions with a focus on providing cash grants, trainings, skill-building activities, counseling on receiving government-provided loans from the Probashi Kalyan Bank and planning for future remigration.

“What we started to do is providing emergency support and we deliver the cash money digitally, depending on their needs, range from 1,000 to 10,000 Taka. Usually on the emergency support, we try to give them 4,000 or 5,000 Taka. The other area of economic support is for returnee migrants to start their own business but for that kind we don't give them direct cash, if for example it is too costly to buy something we will directly pay to the seller.....for people who

returned due to COVID-19 we haven't started this portion we are giving emergency support first because we think most of them are still thinking of migration and considering if their employers would take them back or not.” – (National NGO KII)

Social integration – NGOs/CSOs provide support to returnees subject to social discrimination and facing problems around social cohesion and reintegrating back into their communities. Some organizations address this problem by working at the grassroots level and creating community-level awareness on the plight of migrant workers. Other organizations provide psychosocial support and counseling services to help returnees adjust to life in society.

“Whenever we start reintegration project, what we found is when you are giving counseling to them it's the society who's blaming them. For that reason we started social reintegration, we include village members, chairmen, even the government people so that they don't blame people. We started from the school so that they understand what migration is and why we should not blame.” – (National NGO KII)

Vulnerable population support – While the government has not explicitly prioritized vulnerable groups through their interventions, many local NGOs/CSOs are working to address the unique challenges that vulnerable groups such as women and undocumented workers are facing. For instance, returnee women migrant workers have been experiencing increasing instances of gender-based violence and being abandoned by their families.

“First, we consider and check the physical condition. We see how their body is working. Then, we ensure that they recover properly. Then, we advise them to rest. Once they have rested, we ask them to talk to us and share their concerns and everything. We give them hope that everything will be set right and help them as much as we can. We also provide some money to help them obtain their basic necessities.” – (National NGO KII)

“Through our partner organization we are running a small shelter to provide support for tortured and ill-treated returning migrants. Later, the family members receive the victim from the shelter.” – (National NGO KII)

Creating a migrant database – Interviewees across the different respondent groups, from recruiting agencies to local NGOs, highlight the importance of maintaining a returnee migrant worker database to support large-scale reintegration efforts. Accurate migrant worker data helps program implementers adapt their programs to meet the most critical needs of returnees. In addition, profiling returnee migrants helps in the design of appropriate training modules and life-skills interventions. Most NGOs/CSOs are tracking returnee migrants they provide support to and collecting information on their work history, skills, education levels, physical and mental health and preferences for reintegration versus remigration. However there is still a need for a central repository for the information being collected

“We couldn’t get much of such data in the airport. But immediately following that 6/7 days, our counselors build communication with them and our volunteers go to them and then we build a profile of the migrants, 9 pages for each person including health, mental condition, skill level, education, how many members of family, what he wanted to do afterwards, everything is there in the returnee profile. We also try to make it online for maintaining record, that’s the profile only we BRAC have. We are sharing these data with ILO, and with ministry, and whoever want to understand the situation.” – (National NGO KII)

Challenges and concerns

Many organizations express concerns related to adapting programs due to time-consuming donor approval processes and limited direction from donors. In many cases, NGOs highlight that there have been severe funding cuts from donors, limiting their capacity to support the large number of vulnerable returnee migrant workers. In addition, organizations have to decide between competing priorities given limited resources, for instance should they prioritize livelihood programming or work toward economic and social reintegration.

“In the past, we focused more on potential and aspirant migrants. We were working on how safe and easy the migration process can be. Now, the rate of migration is decreasing. The number of returning migrants is increasing. Now, our focus is that we want to work with the returning migrants. Sadly, due to the insufficient budget, we are unable to provide much aid and help for the returning migrants. Considering our drawbacks and the insufficient budget, now we are trying to focus on creating a network with the aid and help of the government.” – (National NGO KII)

“There is also the issue of who should be responsible for reintegration among the policy actors. The government is more focused on out-migration and NGOs have limited funds driven by donor priorities. Among the existing organizations, BRAC and ILO provide some level of reintegration support through their programs (reaching almost 3000 beneficiaries).” – (Migration Researcher KII)

Moreover, given the uncertainty around the current situation of migrants and the medium and long-term impact on migration to the GCC, there are many areas where NGOs/CSOs are unable to make concrete decisions. Some challenges highlighted in the KIIs are problems estimating the number of returnees in need of support, how best to use resources to reintegrate migrants, determining the time frame to use while designing interventions (i.e. will migrants need support for 6 months, or long term support), differentiating between the needs of returnees planning to re-migrate versus those planning to integrate back into the local communities, and deciding between entrepreneurship versus skills training.

Recruiting Agencies

With almost 1,300 member agencies, the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) is working with the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare & Overseas Employment to generate a link to gather data on returnee migrants as it relates to their employment and medical history. BAIRA has also contributed US \$95,000 (80 lakh Taka) to various emergency funds to support safe and successful reintegration of returnee migrants. Additionally, findings indicate that for each visa processed, recruiting agencies contribute US \$12 (1,000 Taka) to the welfare fund which is now being used to support returnee migrants who are able to provide valid documents. BAIRA is also working with different arms of the Ministry to re-assess migration strategies based on workers' skills and healthcare needs.

While these reintegration efforts provide some immediate financial assistance, it is challenging to find alternative employment opportunities providing long-term financial stability. Bangladesh was suffering from a saturated labor market pre-pandemic, complicating the prospects of employing returnee migrants in the local job market. Further, some respondents noted that returnee migrant workers lack the motivation to work in local jobs once they have had the experience of being employed overseas.

“They waste their savings and earnings because they don't have the mentality to do something new in the (source) country and they retain the mentality of leaving again. They do not have the mentality that they need some money for the survival of the country.” – (Informal Recruiting Agent KII)

Pre-departure Migrants

Prior to COVID-19, on average about 50,000 Bangladeshi job seekers would migrate for employment each year over the last ten years (BMET 2020). With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, there has been a complete halt in labor movement from Bangladesh to employment destination countries. An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 workers could not travel to destination countries despite having legal work permits and papers in the months directly after COVID-19 started (Sakib, 2020). While government support for pre-departure migrants remains limited, international donors and NGOs, local NGOs/CSOs and recruiting agencies provide support to such migrants in different capacities.

International Donors

Many international donors continue to implement interventions targeting pre-departure migrants. For example, the IOM is working with recruiting agencies to develop guidelines on how to conduct recruiting business and various precautions to be taken facing the pandemic situation. The organization is also hosting events such as webinars and discussion series to engage the government sector, workers, and NGOs on future migration plan. Given the likelihood of illegal or irregular migration practices in response to the pandemic, IOM is increasing efforts around awareness raising for ethical recruitment by creating an online program for sharing insights and promoting ethical practices. Specifically, the organization is selecting a sub-set of recruiting agencies, with the

coordination of BAIRA, and contacting employers in destination countries to conduct introductory training on the tools and standards regarding recruitment.

“We design this plan because there are ill practices where migrant workers pay for the cost of migration. For example, when workers do medical checkup before joining the firm, companies should pay for it and they do for people with white collar jobs like you and me, but for migrants, workers pay for it themselves and that is not right.” – (International Donor KII)

Apart from ensuring a safe recruiting environment, the donor agencies are also taking measures in skill development for future migrants. For instance, ILO is providing technical support for the government to review migration policy and make recommendations on the type of training needed based on market demand. Another example is the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). It has already had projects around skills in place in the domestic market and now is trying to add the migration component to the existing projects.

“We have project on skilling migrants before they depart. What we found is migrants don’t want skills and they don’t have time to invest in skills, even though those skills may come with higher remittance – their idea is how soon they can depart the country. SDC has expertise in skilling...so now we are trying to link those projects to training for potential migrants, at least those who are interested in taking the skills.” – (International Donor KII)

Other agencies are actively building technical training centers and designing modules for pre-departure training that aim to incorporate additional elements such as empowerment and gender responsiveness. Many pre-departure migrants are not able to work overseas due to visa expiration and will need assistance if they want to migrate again, especially during this period of market uncertainty. Another integral part of donors’ effort on pre-departure migrant protection therefore has been collecting international data and performing market research to identify near-term and even long-term in-demand job functions, helping both government and partner organizations with the design of more targeted training programs and learning materials.

Furthermore, international donors are establishing programs around better working conditions and migrant rights protection. Through outreach campaigns with various industries and unions, international donors are repurposing their work to emphasize COVID-19 related health and hygiene issues to promote a safer work environment and building knowledge and awareness around the key pillars of workers’ rights for policy reform and international bilateral agreements. Additionally, international donors are disseminating relevant information and updates on travel and immigration policies, and providing psychosocial counseling to pre-departure migrants who have gone through all the steps in migration but could not immigrate overseas due to COVID-19. For those who are still in the process, donors are also encouraging re-skilling among the workers and introducing them to job opportunities locally.

Local NGOs/CSOs

Similar to international donors, many local organizations are working on implementing pre-departure trainings. However, given the uncertainty around when pre-departure migrants may be able to travel abroad for jobs since the onset of the pandemic, many organizations are adapting their programs. NGO/CSO respondents highlighted that they are now prioritizing providing COVID-19 and GCC country updates and information to pre-departure migrants.

In addition, many NGOs/CSOs are working on awareness raising on illegal and risky channels of migration to deter potential migrants from resorting to those. Respondents highlighted that employment uncertainty and debt burden due to the costs of migration to the GCC might push pre-departure migrants to resort to unsafe channels, putting them at a greater risk of working in forced labor arrangements. Therefore, there is a need to guide migrants away from using unsafe channels.

Organizations such as RMMRU and Manusher Jonno Foundation are advocating for government support to meet the needs of pre-departure migrants. Their advocacy efforts are targeted toward seeking emergency cash and food assistance, helping recover migration costs and fees paid to recruiting agencies, and low interest rate loans to support their livelihood.

Recruiting Agencies

Following travel restrictions and business closures, it is estimated that between 100,000 to 200,000 aspirant workers are now caught in different stages of the migration process. While some workers were awaiting their visa approval or medical clearance, others who had flight reservations were forced to return from the airport after not being allowed to board their flight. It is worth noting that there are several steps involved in the migration process starting with recruitment, medical tests, visa approval, training, immigration clearance, and finally the plane journey – all of which highlights the significant financial investment made by both migrants and recruiting agencies. Further, it is common for potential migrants to take on substantial debt and leave their current jobs before departing. This is particularly concerning now when those who were ready to leave are facing heightened debt burden and are compelled to seek alternative local sources of income. One respondent shared –

“For the 100,000 people who are not able to go, they have to take a lot of preparation to go abroad, which means they have closed everything over here and it would be hard for him to survive and restart again.” – (Recruiting Association KII)

Another challenge for pre-departure migrants is that already processed visas and employment contracts will likely expire before the pandemic ends, meaning recruiting agencies will have to re-submit all necessary documentation for renewal. Since destination country governments have not given employers any directions about foreign workers, there is immense uncertainty about the fate of potential migrants.

“We have a really tough time and it is a question of survival now. We are in problem with visas that are processed, that money has already been spent. If workers are not able to join the company, we don’t know how we will get the money back.” – (Recruiting Association KII)

Recruiting agencies are not in direct contact with all potential migrants, especially those who came through informal recruiters or middlemen. Aspirant migrant workers living outside of Dhaka tend to migrate with the help of a well-established informal recruitment network or middlemen known as *dalals*. Although sometimes this is because workers living in remote areas are unaware of formal recruiting agencies in Dhaka, it is more likely that they feel comfortable trusting someone in their immediate network with their migration experience, money and documents. Leveraging their strong connections and good reputation, *dalals* are able to recruit migrant workers of various profiles (age, gender, skills) to meet the demand. Findings from a focus-group discussion reveal that informal recruiting agents unanimously believe that workers would rather spend more money migrating with the help of middlemen, than trusting strangers with the migration process -

“No one can trust a recruiting agency. They (workers) are unaware of or do not have any connection with the recruiting agencies. The majority of the recruiting agencies are in Dhaka. Here, the workers know us or reach to us via recommendations, so they feel that they are safe and that their money will be spent properly and safely and they also give us their passport. They have faith in us.” – (Informal Recruiting Agency KII)

“People do not go to recruiting agencies, as it is a matter of five to seven lakh Taka, which makes it hard for them to rely on the recruiting agencies. They do not want to travel and rely on a stranger with so much money in Dhaka and go to the recruiting agencies and contact them. In one sense, the public’s coming to us is beneficial for them because, if they go to the recruiting agencies, they might be able to save 10,000 Taka but, if by chance something goes wrong, the entire money is gone. If they come to us and pay 10,000 Taka more, if they face any problem, we can solve the problem.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

Given this scenario, formal recruiting agencies have not been in contact with pre-departure migrants during the pandemic, as they too are aware that migrants prefer speaking to informal agents.

“What we see is that candidates are not comfortable working with recruiting agencies directly. They feel that if they leave everything to the agency, the agency may not do justice since they have to spend a lot of money to go abroad, whereas if they deal with a man next door they think they would be able to get the money back. Many candidates don’t even know there are agencies so the only option for them is the person who links them to us. They don’t know there are licensed agencies who can also send them abroad with more reliable source and less cost.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

RESEARCH QUESTION 4

What are the possible medium and long-term implications of COVID-19 on OLR and the willingness of Bangladeshi workers to migrate to GCC countries?

KEY FINDINGS

- With increasing amounts of debt, no source of income and uncertainty about their future employment and income prospects, returnees are in an extremely vulnerable situation.
- There is an immediate need of creating alternative employment opportunities for migrants in destination and source countries.
- Lack of credible sources of information regarding developments in GCC countries and the limitations of the government in disseminating correct information and handling migrants' stress and concerns will likely create further unrest among returnees.
- While returnees are still eligible for government financial assistance through the COVID-19 relief package introduced in July 2020, pre-departure migrants do not receive any monetary support from the government.
- Current supply of low-skilled labor from Bangladesh far exceeds demand in GCC countries, as a result when borders open, total cost of migration is likely to increase, especially fees charged by informal and formal recruiting agents.

The findings in this section highlight the emerging short, medium and long term implications for overseas, returnee, and pre-departure migrant workers.

Short and Medium-Term Implications

All categories of migrant workers – returnee migrants, pre-departure/potential migrants, and overseas workers in GCC – are facing multiple issues as a result of the effects of the pandemic on their livelihoods, financial security, and mental and physical health. Uncertainty regarding their future further adds to their stress. The onset of COVID-19 also affects the overall economic and social environment in Bangladesh, adding to the existing challenges that policy makers face in effectively supporting migrant workers.

Overseas GCC Migrants

Migrants in the Gulf countries are developing several coping strategies to remain in the GCC and survive amidst the pandemic. Since August, most GCC economies have started reopening and most workers who lost their jobs are hoping to return to employment within the GCC, many working low wage part-time jobs to provide for themselves and their families.

Most migrants are cutting their household expenditures and making lifestyle changes to allow them to survive in GCC countries for longer, for instance many migrants are moving from houses to live in single rooms to save on rent. Interviews among GCC respondents indicate that migrants are choosing to live in such arrangements because it allows them to survive on a bare minimum while remaining in the GCC. Some migrants are borrowing money from local friends and working in GCC country informal markets to make ends meet. These factors add to their vulnerability by increasing their existing debt burden and exposing them to unsafe working arrangements in unregulated markets.

Although GCC countries are scheduled to re-assess foreign labor needs and policies in October 2020, there are speculations that more workers will be repatriated without finishing their contracts. While some companies are gradually beginning to resume operations, many are unable to do so, highlighting the urgency of creating alternative employment opportunities in destination and source countries. Employers who rely on government funding will re-evaluate their labor needs based on projects that are prioritized. *Iqamas*, or resident work permits, are issued to expatriates for 3 years, after which the employer can choose to renew the contract. The substantial cost involved in the iqama renewal process is further discouraging employers from keeping migrant workers employed during the pandemic. Consequently, many workers have overstayed their contract to pay off the cost of the migration, and are therefore considered holding “illegal” immigration status. The following quote highlights this dilemma –

*“Unfortunately, for those free visa workers, the iqamas are not renewed and the cost is also paid by these workers so the money they have earned goes to renew their visa in 2-3 years. When they can’t afford it, they are basically illegal.”
– (Recruiting Agency KII)*

However, it is worth noting that in order to alleviate some pandemic-related economic challenges, the Government of Saudi Arabia instituted a waiver for iqama renewal fees which enables employers to retain their foreign workers in the midst of the pandemic.

Being a lucrative industry in Bangladesh, OLR has created a diverse market of recruiters, offering varying levels of protection and profits for migrant workers. Recruiting agencies that deal in volume prefer to contract with large, well-established corporations that are more resilient to economic changes and likely to follow an ethical code of conduct. Such agencies initiate the recruitment process only after demand for labor is approved by sending and receiving country governments to allow for better documentation and protection of workers.

“A large part of what we do is grievance mechanism, we are trying to get their iqamas transferred to another company, specifically maintenance companies that are doing a lot of work in the middle of pandemic.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

“The work of those who are working through my company has not stopped during this pandemic. They can also get overtime opportunities. They got an Eid bonus, holidays and salaries properly during this period. Those who do not obtain a visa with our assistance, we do not take any further responsibility for them once they arrive there, and we make this very clear to the passengers.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

In contrast, other recruiting agencies help workers migrate through more informal channels and connect them to employers who are unable to offer the same level of financial and social protection to migrants. Consequently, workers who migrated through well-known and well-networked recruitment agencies are less severely impacted during the pandemic compared to those who migrated through informal channels. Leveraging their goodwill and strong network in destination countries, these large and more ethically-driven agencies are actively working to internally transfer work permits and provide alternative, in-country employment opportunities for workers who were laid off. The following quotes capture these efforts –

“A big part of what I do is staying in touch with our clients, cold calling, marketing, what do you need and when do you need them, and a lot of them do need workers. They are asking for specific types and categories.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

Returnee Migrants

The large number of migrants returning to Bangladesh during the pandemic include workers who lost their jobs, those who traveled for holidays and are now stuck, along with those who voluntarily returned due to uncertainty around the pandemic and wanting to spend time with their families.

A majority of returnee migrants carry a heavy debt burden due to the costs of migration and are risking being in a situation of debt bondage due to the impact of COVID-19 on their key source of income. Many migrants are relying on their family members and informal lenders for loans to survive when they return to Bangladesh, adding to their existing debt burden.

“Yesterday, I came across a male worker who had returned. I said, “Why did you come back”? He was like, “I have no job over there. I took out a loan from my family members and came back. I’ve a huge debt to clear. I don’t know what to do and how to clear the debt.” People who could not go due to Covid-19, their flight date has expired. These people are in huge debt. We are helpless and can do nothing for them.” – (Informal Recruiting Agency KII)

“We are hurt by this one situation which is, to go abroad, using their own capital, which they have borrowed from their relatives and/or the chief of the village at a high interest rate. This situation is creating problems for their family members. Every day, the lenders are surrounding the house, holding meetings and also insulting and taunting the family members badly in public. They are clueless about how they will be able to get out of this mess.” – (Informal Recruiting Agency KII)

Migrants who were visiting Bangladesh on holiday, but have been stuck there due to the global lockdown, lost their jobs in GCC countries or stopped being paid wages. At this point, many of them have exhausted their savings and are borrowing money to make ends meet.

“People who took out loans to go abroad with interest, for them the pressure is building, which they share with us. The lender is regularly visiting their house and bothering them. People who came for a holiday brought a lot of money by borrowing which is creating a problem for them. Again, these people have spent like crazy here, thinking ‘I will be here for a month or so’ but, due to Covid-19, they are stuck here. When we go to visit, we come across them. They are saying, ‘We came on vacation and spent all we had. Now, to survive, we are driving an auto rickshaw.’” – (Informal Recruiting Agency KII)

With increasing amounts of debt, no source of income and uncertainty about their future employment and income prospects, returnees are in an extremely vulnerable situation.

In response to the situation, the Bangladesh government introduced a migrant reintegration and support package that includes providing financial assistance through the disbursement of US \$85 million (Taka 700 crore) in loans to returnee migrant workers. However, the process to apply for these loans remains unclear. In addition, the stipulated guidelines, conditions and eligibility requirements for these loans are very complicated. NGOs and CSOs have expressed their concerns and highlighted returnees’ challenges with receiving such financial assistance. Moreover, this assistance is offered only to legal migrants, not undocumented migrants, excluding support for those who may be most vulnerable and exacerbating social exclusion. Therefore, the government and other policy actors in Bangladesh face the challenge of adapting programs to address the multi-faceted impacts of the pandemic on returnee migrant workers.

As GCC countries are set to reopen their markets and international travel resumes, many returnees are hopeful about returning to their old jobs or finding new opportunities in these countries. Recently the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced the opening of their borders. Recent media reports suggest that returnees in Bangladesh are becoming increasingly anxious about whether, due to a shortage of air tickets, they will be able to return to Saudi Arabia, a key destination country. Tensions are been rising and recently, there were protests by “ticket-seekers” anxious to try and get back to their destination countries. Therefore, it is likely that when the other migrants receiving countries open their borders, there will be more turmoil. The lack of credible sources of information regarding developments in GCC countries and the limitations of the government in disseminating correct information and handling migrants’ stress and concerns will likely create further unrest among returnees hoping to resume work in destination countries.

Returnees have the option of remaining in their home country or going abroad again in pursuit of new job opportunities. The experience of success or failure in the migration process determines migrant worker’s propensity to reintegrate in Bangladesh or re-migrate to other destination countries. Researchers, NGOs and donor agencies describe that the combination of a heavy debt burden and lack of opportunities in their home country leads to fewer migrants attempting to reintegrate, choosing to re-migrate instead. A majority of migrants view remigration as the solution to their financial problems. A rapid study on returnee preferences by IOM reported that 93% of returnees wanted to re-migrate, while an ILO study reported 70% of returnees planning to re-migrate.

“99% of women wanted to re-migrate because of the social stigma they are facing back home; for men in general they want to re-migrate for three or four times because they cannot recover the money they spent upfront on migration (if they just return) and then after three or four times they would probably come back and start their own business. Now because of COVID they won’t migrate anytime soon but they’ll definitely try to re-migrate when things get better because they want to earn money.” – (International NGO KII)

The lack of structured reintegration programs that meet the needs of the large number of returnees is likely forcing returnees to re-migrate. Respondents highlighted that younger returnee migrants were more likely to re-migrate relative to older migrants. However, it is important to emphasize the risks of illegal migration to those who plan to re-migrate. In addition, skill building programs are important for migrants planning to move abroad for work again

Gender discrimination could be further perpetuated in skill development component of migrant reintegration, particularly in sectors where gender plays a role in the work function. As one international donor noted: “It will happen...prioritizing men in skill training because there is no systematic goal to tackle gender discrimination.” Interestingly, some respondents noted that women migrants are less likely to use illegal channels for migration as they tend to be more cautious or sensitive about the potentially significant consequences.

Pre-departure Migrants

Pre-departure and potential migrants are stuck in Bangladesh, having spent exorbitant amounts on migration costs and preparation to work in GCC countries. In most cases, they’ve incurred large amounts of debt through loans in order to fund their need to work abroad. For many such migrants, they’ve spent large sums of money to recruiting agents to secure jobs but have now lost these jobs with no way of recovering spent money. Moreover, while returnees are still eligible for government financial assistance through the COVID-19 relief package introduced in July 2020, pre-departure migrants do not receive any monetary support from the government.

“On an average, migrant workers spend between 500-1000 dollars to migrate abroad. In most cases, they usually have no movable or immovable assets to use to finance themselves, no friends or family to support them. Therefore, making them easy prey for loan sharks, and more likely to fall into situations of debt bondage.” – (Migration Researcher KII)

As mentioned before, Saudi Arabia recently announced that migrant work visas can be renewed for those who have been stranded since returning home. However, many migrants who received visas in March had their visas revoked and will need visas to be reissued. To complete the visa reissue process, migrants will need to pay extra money which will increase the overall cost of migration. In addition, there is the belief that middlemen or *dalals* will likely manipulate uninformed migrants and ask for more money.

In addition, due to COVID-19, destination countries have imposed many medical related examinations before arriving in country, leading to a rise in the already high costs of migration on the pre-departure migrants who bear these costs.

Moreover, the current supply of low-skilled labor from Bangladesh (majority of returnees plus pre-departure migrants) far exceeds the current demand of such labor in GCC countries. When borders open, there will likely be a large number of migrants desperate to complete medical tests early to go abroad for jobs, which will eventually drive up the total cost of migration, especially fees charged by informal and formal recruiting agents.

Long-term Implications

Overseas GCC Migrants

Migrants from Bangladesh suffer high migration costs which ultimately affect the overall migration lifecycle of migrants and their families, particularly the poorer and more vulnerable migrant households. High migration costs also contribute to high vulnerability to forced labor and poor working conditions in host countries. To cover large debt burdens and meet the costs of living for themselves and their families, many migrants engage in part-time jobs without securing permission or engage in jobs in informal markets in the host countries, adding to their vulnerability.

Returnee and Pre-Departure Migrants

The economic impact of COVID-19 will highly impact the resilience of migrants to cope with further shocks and stresses. A high debt burden coupled with job insecurity will have long term implications on family structures and social dynamics. Migrants are forced to remain at home due to COVID-19 and their unpaid wages and debt burden continue to accumulate. This situation is creating problems at home between family members, particularly married couples, who are finding it difficult to balance a new family dynamic with COVID-19 stressors.

“Three days ago, I went to a house in Tangail town. I couldn’t do their application process. I returned 50,000 Taka to them. I could not take the passport back. The person’s wife was aggressive and rude, stating that the money had been stuck for a long time. ‘We had to sell the auto bike. If we had the bike, we could have had a daily income.’ They understand it’s Covid-19 and we even do, but I had to face this behavior. This kind of situation is there from everyone’s perspective.” – (Informal Recruiting Agency KII)

Capitalizing on returnees and pre-departure migrant’s desperation to work in destination countries, middlemen give false hope and information about migration. Recruiting agency respondents highlighted that male migrants are more likely to embrace illicit means of migration than female migrants. Female workers are more cautious and well-informed about the risks of using illegal channels. However, most private recruiting agencies warn that financial insecurity may force even female migrants to resort to illegal migration channels if they do not have any safe alternatives, exposing them to greater risks of being trafficked or forced into situations of modern slavery.

“There will be a few people who will create problems, as migrant supply will exceed the demand, which will lead to some people promoting illegal means of migration among those people who would be left behind. I personally feel the work will start fast but we all need to be cautious. For the past few months, a lot of recruiting agencies in Dhaka have been sitting idle so, to recover the loss, they will provide false hope and information and mislead ambitious, able workers. Here, we have to be cautious.” – (Informal Recruiting Agency KII)

Illegal means of migration will also increase if one or two countries open its border but other countries do not open up or avoid further recruitment of migrant workers. Fewer destination country options will lead to competition among workers and a need to secure potentially limited employment opportunities in the countries that do open up their borders. Desperation to resume work and regain their source of income could lead to returnee and pre-departure migrants resorting to illegal migration just to get to destination countries. Recruiting agencies, whose businesses have also been affected could take advantage of the situation, and provide false hope and information to migrants on using illegal channels. These agencies often tend to be profit oriented and do not take any responsibility for the social protection and well-being of migrant workers.

Future Labor Markets

OLR is influenced by several factors including the nature of work and demand for foreign labor. Many migrants have voluntarily left their jobs due to the pandemic and companies would need to quickly fill this void by hiring new workers. In many cases, companies have not terminated contracts with migrants stuck in home countries and would likely give priority to take back returnee migrants who are trained and experienced and who have been employed by the company for a long time. However, although there is continued demand for skilled and semi-skilled workers during the pandemic, embassies are not issuing visas for a new cohort of migrant workers.

“For skilled workers or semi-skilled workers going to construction companies, those companies are still asking us for them, but the problem is visa. They are not allocating or processing visa for any countries, not just Bangladesh...The only positive is the companies are also waiting for the visa office to open.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

Recruiting agencies are however, taking comfort in the fact that construction and health sector employers still have demand for Bangladeshi migrant workers as captured in the following quotes –

“We predict a building boom in the GCC post pandemic, specifically in Saudi Arabia. In addition to construction sector, health sector is definitely on the rise too. Right now one of my biggest clients is in the health sector, and they are pretty much calling me every week asking when is the embassy opening. Specifically, one thing the pandemic had done is making people in the Middle East more aware of health issues. For agricultural sector, it is not going to be GCC, that is going to be further east, Malaysia.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

“The future construction market in gulf countries will be there. There are jobs on FIFA, but it’s not a big number as they are almost done preparing. They might need some facility workers like cleaners and security guards and drivers.” – (Recruiting

Agency KII)

However, GCC researchers highlighted that the demand for South Asian low-skilled workers may decline in most GCC countries because of nationalization policies by the GCC governments in their local labor market to integrate and provide more jobs for their own citizens.

On the other hand, subject matter experts highlight that the governments of the Gulf countries are allocating billions of dollars into the private sectors SMEs where they need to hire massive number of migrant workers. However, since Bangladesh is regarded as the supplier of unskilled workers abroad, due to the lack of skill training and limited capacities of skill training, it will be difficult to “up skill” migrants to meet the future demand. The government of Bangladesh is trying to change the system but it is well beyond the desired aim and the strain is too high for the system to be regulated. In the labor migration market, there are simply more beneficiaries than investors who can generate skilled workers. The COVID time may, in reality, be a good opportunity to raise awareness and up-skill migrant workers.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has moved things forward by 10 years, in terms of technology. Everybody has understood the value of online systems or digital education, so we now need to consider the technological challenges – from the conventional market to the new markets, from unskilled individuals to skilled individuals, how will people use the latest technologies? This should be the priority.”– (National NGO KII)

While these findings are encouraging, it is important to carefully assess future prospects of OLR in GCC countries since the pandemic has severely impacted oil-driven economies of these countries due to sudden and sustained disruptions in oil dependent sectors such as manufacturing, construction, trade, and transportation. The government of Bangladesh should look for countries in the long-term where migrants’ human rights are better protected. For instance, because of high demand, female migrants are being sent to Hong Kong, and unlike what we see in the GCC countries, there have been no reported instances of abuse because of human rights protections in place. The government should make a forecast for 10-20 years and engage in market research with other policy actors to identify new migrant destination countries.

RESEARCH QUESTION 5

What are some medium and long-term recommendations for governments, policy makers, program implementers, NGOs, donors and other key stakeholders in Bangladesh and GCC to repatriate, reintegrate and protect migrant workers affected by the global pandemic?

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS***Overseas Migrant Protection***

- Provide short-term emergency cash and food assistance to overseas migrants
- Increase coordination between sending and receiving country policy actors

Reintegration of Returnee Migrants

- Raise awareness and implement interventions to sustain a positive attitude toward migrant workers in local communities
- Provide accessible and effective psychosocial counseling support
- Create and maintain a comprehensive returnee migrant database
- Rapidly and efficiently disburse government financial assistance to migrants
- Training, skills building and entrepreneurial support reflective of existing and potential labor markets, while considering the profile of returnee migrants.

Remigration and Pre-Departure Migrant Protection

- Increase safe migration training and awareness programs to highlight the risks and indicators of forced labor and provide transparency and knowledge around the real costs of migration.
- Ethical recruitment agencies should coordinate efforts with the government and businesses to expand the market for formal, safe migration channels
- Research to identify future labor markets for low and semi-skilled migrant workers
- Prioritize partnerships with recruitment actors who have a proven track record of ethical practices and can demonstrate policies and procedures against forced labor.

COVID-19 has affected various aspects of the OLR industry in Bangladesh and added to the vulnerabilities of migrant workers. Going forward policy actors will need to adapt their programming to address key emerging concerns to protect returnee and pre-departure migrants. This section highlights recommendations for policy actors working on overseas migrant protection, returnee reintegration and pre-departure migrant protection.

Overseas Migrant Protection

Engaging GCC policy stakeholders and coordinating efforts is one of the key challenges in protecting overseas Bangladeshi migrants in GCC countries.

Short-term emergency cash and food assistance. Limited access to support networks in source countries combined with travel restrictions and slow repatriation activities severely affects the health and well-being of overseas migrant workers forced to remain in destination countries. Providing short-term emergency cash and food assistance in case of sickness or loss of employment can alleviate the basic and immediate needs of migrant workers. For the large numbers of migrants who have lost their jobs and are unable to bear the fees involved in transferring to another job, such assistance will make a huge difference in alleviating the impacts of COVID-19 (ILO 2020).

Improved migrant status monitoring, grievance redressal mechanisms and accessibility to emergency support will help Bangladeshi Embassies in the GCC ensure the health and safety of migrant workers. In addition, building shelter homes in GCC countries would provide safety and protection for migrant workers in risky labor situations.

“Shelter home implementation near embassies could be what additional steps government could do. Government should spend wage earners money on building shelter homes in gulf countries, not only in European countries, because that’s where we are sending more migrants.” – (National NGO KII)

Increase coordination between sending and receiving country policy actors. The government of Bangladesh should advocate for migrant worker legal protection mechanisms in the GCC. There are no laws to specifically protect migrant workers from being ill-treated or abused at their workplaces in the GCC. Moreover, many employer-related labor laws in GCC countries have been eased during the pandemic, making it easier to terminate migrants and/or reduce their pay without notice. Most respondents highlighted that the governments of source countries and destination countries need to work together to protect the rights and safety of overseas migrant workers.

“They have to shift their focal point from sending countries to destination countries because that’s where modern slavery happens. Yes, we have the responsibility to prepare the workers and to train the workers but in the destination site in work place. They should be more focused on destination country and how workers are treated there. As there

are more seminars when you can engage the destination countries, they will see the problems and face the challenges. This is an important task as we need more engagement from them.” – (Recruiting Agency KII)

“The government should immediately contact all the Middle East countries and even Malaysia and Singapore, and they should convince those country that last 40-50 years it’s the Bangladeshi people who are helping you build your countries. It’s not only they are hard-working but also many Bangladeshi migrants die to work there. We are requesting you please don’t send back our people.” – (National NGO KII)

While diplomatic sensitivities do make it complicated to coordinate policy actions and push for migrant protection in destination countries, the government of Bangladesh can adopt strategies similar to those adopted by India and Philippines. Through cooperative agreements, these countries are able to create a stronger migrant support and protection mechanism in GCC countries. The Bangladesh government can also use international forums like the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue and Colombo Process to advocate for migrant protection.

Better collaboration between recruiting agencies and Bangladeshi embassies, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia, home to many Bangladeshi migrants, could help coordinate efforts around finding alternative employment opportunities for migrant workers. Resource and manpower constraints in embassies could be bolstered with support from recruitment agencies who may be better placed to identify alternative opportunities for migrants and facilitate transfer of visas to other employers where needed.

Reintegration of Returnee Migrants

Increase awareness among local communities. At the onset of the pandemic, returnees faced different forms of discrimination and stigmatization because they were believed to be carriers of COVID-19. While instances of discrimination based on the idea that migrants brought COVID-19 have reduced as the pandemic continues and better information is available, returnees still face economic and social discrimination as they try and adjust to life in Bangladesh. Key stakeholders should raise awareness within local communities on the challenges that returnees face and facilitate and sustain a positive attitude toward migrant workers with social media playing an important role in disseminating information and creating awareness.

Accessible and effective psychosocial counseling support. Migrants are finding it hard to cope with the uncertainty around their future and need emotional support and counseling to help them during this difficult time. NGOs/CSOs should provide accessible and effective psychosocial and counseling services to meet the mental wellbeing and emotional support needs of returnees, especially to help cope with stress arising out of financial insecurity and uncertainty. There should also be specialized support services for vulnerable groups, such as women, who are often survivors of abuse and trauma in their destination countries and are not accepted back by their families.

Returnee migrant database creation. A well-maintained and comprehensive database of returnee and pre-departure migrants can

serve as a critical tool for recruiting agencies, NGOs/CSOs and the government to design reintegration programs and identify and train workers based on their employment history, skills, and foreign language proficiency. In order to develop a robust data management system providing end-to-end information on the migration process starting from recruitment to return, it is important for all stakeholders involved (employee, recruiters, employer, and governments in both countries) to work in close collaboration to ensure ethical recruitment and proper documentation. Organizations such as RMMRU, BRAC and BMET are collecting and maintaining records of returnees and have their own existing databases. Their models can be adapted by the government and other local organizations to collect and maintain data on returnees, which will help in customizing reintegration programs based on returnee profiles.

The government should expand their activities to provide District Employment and Manpower Offices (DEMOs) and grassroots organizations with funding to collect data on returnee migrants in order to develop data on returnee migrants so that their knowledge and experiences can be used to educate aspirant or potential migrants and also use their skills to link with Technical Training Centers (TTCs) and Technical Vocational Education Centers (TVET) to work as trainers and assessors.

Timely disbursement of government financial assistance to migrants. The government's migrant reintegration support program, launched in July, is a step in the right direction. However, due to the complicated application process and slow disbursement of financial assistance, many migrants may not get the support in time to meet their most immediate needs. In addition, the application process requires submitting a large number of documents, which many migrants may not have carried back with them (for instance, those who were visiting for a holiday but got stuck). NGOs/CSOs highlighted that migrants are struggling with the application process and unable to get timely assistance, adding to their stress. Moreover, undocumented migrants are not eligible for government support under this program. The government should consider simplifying the application process and coordinate efforts with local organizations who can provide guidance to migrants applying for loans. Many NGOs/CSOs are already assisting migrants in the process, however, engaging a larger number of organizations would help provide timely support to the large number of returnees.

Training, skill-building and entrepreneurial development support. In addition to providing immediate cash and food assistance, the government is urged to consider long-term strategies of skills development programs to generate a skillful labor community and offer better overseas employment opportunities for its citizens. Local organizations and donors can work with the government to design and implement training and skill-building interventions based on their expertise. Effective skills-building and training programs would be reflective of local and foreign market needs and be designed keeping in mind the profile of returnee migrants. Data from a returnee migrant database would be critical to enable thoughtful designing of training and skills-building programs.

In light of the shifting priorities and changing labor needs for skilled workers, policy actors should design a robust skills development plan and invest resources to skill-up returnee and pre-departure workers, particularly with health-related expertise that will increase their employability in the health sector which has witnessed a sudden increase in labor needs ranging from highly-skilled nurses and doctors to hospital cleaners and security guards. While it will be difficult to prepare skilled medical professionals in a short amount of time, workers can be trained to serve in relatively low-skilled roles of assistants and cleaners.

More government-led reintegration and migrant support programs. Prior to COVID-19 there were a limited number of reintegration programs implemented by the government. With the onset of the pandemic and to meet the needs of the large number of returnees, the government launched a reintegration support program that provides loans based on migrant's project proposals of income-generating activities, and access to existing training centers. However, for effective economic reintegration of migrants, the government would need to set up accessible skills-training and entrepreneurship development programs that align with current market needs.

Given the scale of assistance required by a large returnee population, the government, with the support of local NGOs/CSOs, should be a key implementer of reintegration programs. Developing a reintegration policy in coordination with organizations that have been running successful reintegration programs would help plan out reintegration activities to meet emerging needs and have the greatest impact on migrant lives.

In addition to loans for income-generating activities, the government can consider providing livelihood loans and emergency cash assistance for returnees. These loans could provide short-term assistance for migrants and their families to fund basic needs such as food and accommodation.

Remigration and Pre-Departure Migrant Protection

More safe migration trainings and awareness programs to highlight the risks of illegal channels. The pre-migration decision phase is a crucial stage for aspirant and returnee migrants planning to re-migrate. Local organizations in Bangladesh should impart pre-migration training to assist aspirant migrants make an informed decision on where and how to migrate in a safe manner. Social media information dissemination and in-person/virtual trainings can be used to make outgoing migrants aware of the current working conditions of migrant receiving countries under the COVID-19 situation and keep them informed on key developments affecting migration. In addition, given the likelihood of more migrants resorting to unsafe channels of migration out of desperation, there should be efforts to create greater awareness on the risks of using illegal migration channels.

Research to identify future labor markets for low and semi-skilled migrant workers. Policy actors need to invest in conducting research on new labor markets, sectors (health care, agriculture and tourism and hospitality sectors) and demand for skills (e.g. information technologies and digital education). Given the uncertainty around COVID-19 and preference of a majority of returnees to re-migrate in the future, there is a need to gather information on potential markets if the GCC closes their borders to low and semi-skilled migrant workers. Additionally, research in this area will help policy actors design and implement relevant skill-building and training programs. Ethical recruitment agencies should coordinate efforts with the government and businesses to expand the market

for formal, safe migration channels. In addition, GCC businesses should prioritize partnerships with recruitment actors who have a proven track record of ethical practices and can demonstrate policies and procedures against forced labor.⁷

⁷ From the IOM Policy Brief [“Promoting Responsible Recovery: Detecting, Mitigating, & Remediating Modern Slavery in Supply Chains”](#)

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