



Shattered Dreams: Bangladeshi Migrant Workers during a Global Pandemic

Rapid Assessment of the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Overseas Labor Recruitment (OLR) From Bangladesh to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

This policy brief presents findings from a rapid assessment conducted to assess the multi-faceted **impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Bangladesh OLR industry and migrant workers' conditions and vulnerabilities**.

NORC at the University of Chicago's research addressed the pandemic's short- and long-term impact on both Bangladeshi migrant workers returning from GCC countries and pre-departure migrants.

The assessment identified key emerging issues, policy and programmatic gaps, and recommendations for non-governmental organization (NGO), international donor, recruitment agency, private sector, and government stakeholders.



OVERVIEW

The onset of the global pandemic **exposed migrant workers to additional adverse situations**, making them even more vulnerable and exposed to health risks.

Existing weak labor systems in the GCC countries combined with poor living conditions, restricted access to health care, restricted mobility, scarce legal protection, and limited information have amplified the vulnerabilities of the migrant worker population.

In addition, **forced 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 struggle to adjust to life in their home country amidst a global pandemic.

RESEARCH METHODS

STUDY PERIOD

March to September 2020

STEP 1

Rapid Systematic Desk Review



175

Gray literature and policy documents



Systematic content analyses using qualitative software

STEP 2

Semi-Structured Key Informant Interviews (KIs)



31

Virtual KIs with the representatives of government agencies, local NGOs, international organizations, formal and informal recruitment agencies, as well as migration researchers



Migrant Worker Vulnerabilities

- Financial insecurity and increasing debt burden
- Societal harassment and rejection by families
- Uncertainty about the future
- Pandemic-induced failed migration experience
- Declining psychosocial wellbeing



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.

WHAT WE FOUND

- Returnee migrants are facing economic and social discrimination.

“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 Representative

- Without financial assistance, returnees are taking on more loans through informal and formal means.
- Pre-departure migrants, who have already borne costs of migration and have large amounts of debt, do not receive any monetary support from the government.
- 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
- There is an immediate need to create alternative employment opportunities for migrants in destination and source countries.

Women experience every stage of migration differently than men do, including returning back to the home country.

- 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 Representative

- At the household level, there are reported increases in gender-based violence among women returnees. Women workers are often believed to migrate for sex work and “deserving” of any abuse they experience abroad or after returning home.

“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 Representative



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations 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.

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

Median age under 35 years old

Early-stage migrants, i.e., those who have migrated in the last 2-3 years



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

Heavy debt burden and limited opportunities in their home country will likely push migrants to resort to unsafe migration channels.

WHAT WE FOUND

Excessive debt burdens

- 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

- Increase in total cost of migration due to visa re-issuing costs, COVID-19 related medical examinations, and higher recruitment agent fees.
- Financial insecurity and lack of safe alternative paths would likely push migrants to seek any means, including illegal channels that put them at a greater risk of forced labor, to regain their source of income.

Lack of awareness

- Limited credible information on GCC country developments and recruiting agents' inclination to misinform migrants could lead to more migrants using illegal channels to migrate.

"On an average, migrant workers spend between 500-1000 US 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

"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."

– Informal Recruitment Agency Representative



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Government, NGOs, and 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.¹

¹ From the IOM Policy Brief "Promoting Responsible Recovery: Detecting, Mitigating, and Remediating Modern Slavery in Supply Chains."



KEY FINDING 3: There is a lack of interventions targeting skills 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.

WHAT WE FOUND

- Data from 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.
- Skills development programs are also important for migrants planning to move abroad for work again.
- 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.

“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 Representative



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.

For more information contact NORC at the University of Chicago