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## **Shattered Dreams: Bangladeshi Migrant Workers during a Global Pandemic**

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## **Table of Contents**

Abstract	107
Key Words	107
Introduction	107
Data Collection	108
Data Analysis	108
Key Findings	109
Limitations	127
Conclusion, Recommendations and Future Implications	127
References	129

## Abstract

Overseas labor migration (OLR) is currently one of the most important contributors to Bangladesh's economy and is a highly profitable form of labor for Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries. Despite the high rate of migration between these countries, the OLR sector remains complex and often leaves migrants susceptible to human trafficking, forced labor, and modern slavery. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed migrant workers to additional adverse situations, increasing their vulnerability to forced labor and COVID-19 related health risks. This rapid assessment addresses critical questions about the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on Bangladesh's OLR industry. Findings from this assessment will inform migrant rights protection policies and programs.

*Keywords:* overseas labor recruitment, labor migration, migrants, human trafficking, forced labor

## Introduction

Overseas labor migration (OLR) is currently one of the most important contributors to the Bangladesh economy with remittance inflows estimated at 5.52% of the nation's GDP (Bangladesh Bank 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 (BMET, 2020). 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 (BMET, 2020).

Despite the high rate of migration between these countries every year, the OLR sector remains complex and often leaves migrants susceptible to human trafficking, forced labor, and modern slavery. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic is further compounding these adverse outcomes as Bangladeshi migrant workers across industries face significant wage cuts and longer working hours with little negotiating power for their employment rights. 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. 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).

The purpose of this rapid assessment is to understand how COVID-19 is affecting OLR from Bangladesh to the GCC and highlight Bangladeshi migrant worker vulnerabilities. This paper presents a wide range of insights and recommendations that can support and orient future programming to new realities on the ground. To this end, NORC at the University of Chicago



developed descriptive and normative research questions (RQs) addressing the pandemic's short and long term impact on migrants.

1. How has COVID-19 impacted migrant workers in GCC countries?
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?
3. What policy measures or actions are the GCC government, Government of Bangladesh, international donors, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs)/ civil society organizations (CSOs) and recruiting agencies taking to protect, repatriate, reintegrate and support overseas migrants, and returnees and pre-departure migrants in Bangladesh?
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?

## Data Collection

This primarily qualitative study was conducted in two phases between June and December, 2020. In the first phase, NORC conducted a rapid systematic desk review of recently published credible media articles, reports, white papers, and other online content to help address the research questions and inform qualitative data collection. To structure the search and ensure reliable information, the research team developed an extensive online search protocol focused on the repatriation of Bangladeshi migrant workers. In the second phase, the research team used a stakeholder mapping tool to identify key stakeholders working in the OLR sector, including government officials, international donor agencies, national and international NGOs, and recruiting agencies. 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.

## Data Analysis

The research team gathered indexed documents and news reports published between March and July, 2020. The team then 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 analyzed, resulting in 817 code applications and 500 media excerpts. Additional background documents were also reviewed, but were not analyzed using Dedoose. Some key themes that emerged were COVID-19 trends in Bangladesh and GCC countries, short and long-term impacts on migrant workers, policy and regulatory response on repatriation and reintegration (or lack thereof), and forced labor vulnerabilities. The desk review informed the design of the KII instruments, provided important information on the emerging trends around migrant worker vulnerabilities, and was critical in developing the initial codebook for analysis.

Interview data was transcribed, translated, and analyzed using an inductive approach. KIIs were coded on Dedoose using an updated version of the desk review codebook. A total of 31 KII notes coded, resulting in 1,424 code applications and 1,095 excerpts. Emergent themes are detailed in the report and supported with relevant quotes.

## Key Findings

### **COVID-19 Impacts on Migrant Workers in GCC Countries (RO1)**

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 (Palma 2020). Given the economic contraction, an overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers in GCC countries are experiencing unemployment, wage theft, termination of lawful residence, food deprivation, and restricted access to health care services since the onset of the global pandemic (Bhuyan 2020; Ara 2020).

#### ***Impacts on Migrants (Bangladeshi and non-Bangladeshi) in GCC Countries***

Triggered by pandemic related disruptions in oil-dependent industries such as manufacturing, transportation, construction and trade, the GCC is experiencing a negative demand shock severely impacting 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 government recently passed a new law<sup>1</sup> 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)*

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

Due to COVID-19, there are limited opportunities to switch jobs in the GCC. Not only are workers forced to find a new job within a short time-frame and while maintaining legal status, but they are also competing with a large labor pool across industries and skill levels for limited job opportunities during a pandemic. This 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.

Migrants are also facing a dilemma of whether to return home or stay in the GCC during the COVID-19 crisis. Many workers are unemployed and/or carrying a heavy debt burden. This, in conjunction with uncertainty around flights and associated travel costs, makes returning home, to an uncertain and saturated job market, an increasingly challenging prospect.

*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)*

There are three major subgroups of migrants who are most likely to return back to their 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 who have lost their jobs and are facing immense difficulty in financially supporting the entire family. The third group consists of undocumented migrants who have pending legal trials and are currently living in prison, detention centers or embassy shelters.

### ***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, nonpayment of wages and sustaining family livelihoods amidst pay cuts are increasing migrant worker vulnerabilities, with undocumented migrants among the most vulnerable to unfair labor practices. This group 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. Bangladeshi migrants working as freelancers under the *kafala* or free visa system 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 with valid *iqamas*, many hold illegal status after overstaying on their expired permits which makes them vulnerable to forced repatriation.

The relative impact of COVID-19 on Bangladeshi 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 – Bangladeshi Migrants***

Although a majority of 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 (Ara 2020). Due to stay-at-home policies in GCC countries, there has 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)*

### **Situation of Returnee Migrants in Bangladesh (RQ2)**

Forced and voluntary repatriation of Bangladeshi migrant workers since the onset of the pandemic has led to a mass exodus of migrants back to Bangladesh. After battling employment uncertainty and stressful working and living conditions in the GCC, 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 containment protocols at home combined with the mental stress and trauma associated with repatriation. They are also vulnerable to 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 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.<sup>2</sup> Although many workers are being forcefully repatriated due to the pandemic-induced economic crisis described earlier, there is a sizable number of migrants voluntarily returning to Bangladesh to spend time with their family during these unprecedented times.

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

Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and other migrant rights organizations raised concerns on how government measures to reduce the spread of coronavirus creates 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 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.

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.



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 violence. The status of returnee migrant women is closely linked with the financial support they provided their family pre-pandemic. As returnees with little economic prospects, they are more vulnerable than ever.

### ***Social and Economic Discrimination***

Social discrimination of returnees, perceived to be carriers of coronavirus, presents challenges to successful social reintegration. According to the BRAC survey, 29% of returnees reported their relatives and neighbors were not accepting of their return and did not behave normally with them (Dhaka Tribune 2020). Another USAID-WINROCK survey reported that nearly half (48%) of returnee migrants are being treated worse or much worse than before by community leaders and members, and in some cases by friends or family.<sup>3</sup> This is supported through our KIIs, with one respondent stating:

*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 migrants and labeling them as carriers of the “foreign virus”. Misinformation circulated by government representatives and citizens through social media reinforced this belief. As part of surveillance efforts to keep non-migrant citizens socially distanced from returnee migrants and their families, local security forces hoisted red flags on top of migrants’ homes to mark them as virus-carrying households. Local youth also posted warning messages on social media about virus importers, monitored migrant activity, and informed law enforcement of migrants’ arrival and movement which led to further stigmatization. Consequently, absence of returnee migrants or “foreigners” in a community was perceived as an indicator of safety in terms of proximity to the virus (Identities 2020).

As a result, returnee migrants are subjected to harassment, physical assaults, and discrimination while accessing medical care in Bangladesh. Returnee migrants who were unable to provide negative test results were considered the source of the spread of the infection in the country. Reports also indicate that the most marginalized and vulnerable group 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 comply with quarantine rules are not facing similar stigma and suspicion. (RMMRU 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> 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](https://www.winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh_migrant-study-.pdf)

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 (Dhaka Tribune 2020). Most migrants have limited savings, exhausting what savings they had while 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 (Dhaka Tribune 2020). More than half of returnees are in dire need of financial assistance, only 10% reported getting support from the government and NGOs, and 10% 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 (Star Online Report 2020). 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). Several KII respondents supported this finding and a National NGO representative stated that:

*You know, the migration cost is high. They had to spend around 800,000 Taka (~ US \$9,500) 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)*

The average migration cost highlighted by a national NGO representative is five times more than the per capita income of \$1,855 in Bangladesh<sup>4</sup>. However, despite the exorbitant cost of migration largely borne by migrants, there is a steady influx of Bangladeshi workers to GCC countries, where they are offered significantly higher wages than what they would have received for local jobs. 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 home amidst the pandemic and an environment of economic uncertainty, tensions are rising in their communities because of the fear that returnees may take jobs away.

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<sup>4</sup> World Bank Bangladesh Database, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=BD>

*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. In addition, there is a perception that migrants do not want to work locally, and yet the government provides support and benefits to them and their families. These factors lead to ill feelings towards migrants even when they receive required support from the government and NGOs.

*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 Bangladesh job 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 among Returnee Migrants***

The experience of migrant women differs substantially from men. This also holds true in terms of repatriation. Robust data from KIIs highlighted that, relative to men, a smaller number of women migrants returned during the pandemic. This is tied to the sectors in which male and female migrants usually work in the GCC – men tend to be concentrated in the construction sector while women are engaged in domestic work (Ara 2020). As a result of the pandemic, most factories and construction sites shut down, forcing male migrants to return to Bangladesh. On the other hand, nationwide lockdowns led to an increased demand for female domestic workers to support households as most family members remained confined to their houses.

However, similar to their male counterparts, returnee migrant women also faced discrimination at home. They were not immune from the accusation of carrying and spreading the virus. Moreover, an additional vulnerability they face at the household level is increased exposure to gender-based violence. 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. KIIs highlighted that this along with “victim blaming” in which returnee women are blamed for the worsening economic condition of the household, leads to an increased risk of abuse.

*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)*

Several KII respondents highlighted that 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, fueling more domestic violence. This also creates hurdles for women to find employment locally since they are not treated equally to either men or non-migrant women. Therefore, women returnees encounter the double pressure of not being accepted by family and being unable 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.

### **Policy Responses around Repatriation, Reintegration and Current and Pre-Departure Migrant Protection (RO3)**

#### ***GCC's Migrant Protection & Repatriation 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 unclear. 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.

Given their heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and the cost of incarceration, undocumented migrants in detention centers are prioritized by the GCC government for repatriation efforts. In terms of forced repatriation, the degree of enforcement varies by country, and given 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's<sup>5</sup> 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 Oman<sup>6</sup> 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.

### ***Repatriation Efforts***

#### Government of Bangladesh

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 Board (WEWB) are playing a critical role in repatriating and reintegrating Bangladeshi migrant workers. 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. Specifically, they have mandated COVID-19 medical clearance certificates for migrants traveling back to Bangladesh which returnees can use to demonstrate they are not carriers after screening and self-quarantine mandates are met.

However, the general consensus emerging from local NGOs/CSOs and international donor KIIs is that the repatriation process is moving slower than expected due to the low number of flights dedicated to bringing back migrants. Consequently, migrants most in need of immediate rescue and repatriation are stranded in the GCC, many of whom are vulnerable to workplace abuse, especially women domestic workers. Moreover, resource constraints limit the government's ability to meet the needs of the large number of Bangladeshi migrants experiencing food and employment insecurity in the GCC.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://gulfnnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-bans-work-permits-for-expats-above-60-1.73243710>

<sup>6</sup> <https://intpolicydigest.org/2020/06/30/foreign-labour-in-the-gulf-amid-the-covid-pandemic/>



### International Donors, Local NGOs and CSOs

Although not directly involved in 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 existing migrant referral systems to support overseas migrants reaching out to report abuse or a desire to return home. 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 are providing repatriation support by disseminating critical information on repatriation flights, COVID-19 updates and counseling services to GCC migrants, especially through social media.

### ***Reintegration Efforts***

#### Government of Bangladesh

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 health infrastructure, marginalized groups in the country, and export-oriented industries. 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 (Ara 2020).

The stimulus package provides loans to support migrant economic reintegration, access to training centers to re-skill or up-skill, and seed money to jump start employment-generating activities in Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> The 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 (\$1,180) to Taka 500,000 (\$5,900) based on their project proposals of income-generating activities. In addition, immediate family members of those who died of COVID-19 while working in destination countries will also be eligible for these loans. However, many NGOs and donor KII respondents believe that the complex process of reintegration cannot be simplified by providing these loans, especially given the high interest rate, narrow eligibility criteria, and complicated application process. Moreover, this assistance is offered only to legal or documented migrants who can show proof of valid employment visas, excluding support for undocumented migrants who may be most vulnerable.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/covid-19-pandemic-profoundly-affects-bangladeshi-workers-abroad-consequences-origin>

*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)*

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, document returnee migrant profiles, provide necessary support, and strengthen reintegration efforts (RMMRU 2020). Although government efforts are notable and deserve attention, they were drafted quickly and under a tight timeframe to meet the immediate needs of the population. Therefore, leading to vulnerable populations “falling through the cracks” and not receiving the attention they needed to deal with COVID-19 shocks.

### International Donors and NGOs

KIIs and desk review reveal that International Donors, such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) and International Organization for Migration (IOM), are working closely with local NGOs and the government to provide technical support for migrant reintegration. Their efforts center on sharing knowledge about migrant experiences at the grass-roots level to inform policy design and implementation (IOM 2020). Through downstream partners, they help provide immediate necessities, such as food, money and short-term accommodations to migrants upon arrival at the airport. By connecting migrant workers with the local market, the ILO is not only upgrading and certifying migrants' skills, but also facilitating enterprise development and on-going sustainability of the value chain (ILO 2020). Other measures consist of credit facilities, rapid finance investment and general advisory programs focused on creating a strong referral platform to help returnee migrants identify places or points of contact to access specific services like loan applications and skills certifications.

*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)*

Many international donors are also dedicating resources to social reintegration efforts, including psychosocial counseling for returnees and their families, and community programs to reduce stigma and discrimination toward returnee migrants. Through KIIs we found that organizations like ILO, PROKAS, and IOM, frequently hold dialogues that engage government entities, workers, CSOs and various stakeholders to communicate migrant concerns, share data-

based reports and discuss reintegration recommendations. WINROCK tries to identify human trafficking survivors/victims among returnees and link them to partner organizations for psychosocial counseling services. Given increasing vulnerabilities of migrant women described above, many donors are targeting this sub-population in their programs.

*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)*

However, given the scope of the impact of COVID-19, it is unclear whether focusing on one subgroup is as effective as programming for the community as a whole. Future research on the impact of system shocks such as COVID-19 should carefully analyze the costs and benefits of such approaches.

### Local NGOs and CSOs

Local NGOs/CSOs in Bangladesh are playing a vital role in supporting returnee migrant workers throughout the reintegration process. Specifically, NGOs/CSOs provide critical advocacy support for migrant worker rights and government interventions, and insights to inform policy decisions around reintegrating migrants. KIIs reveal that organizations like BRAC, OKUP and RMMRU have set up centers around airports to provide food, accommodation, and counseling services for returnees close to their port of entry. Other organizations are providing assistance at the airports for returnee women migrants who are survivors of abuse and trauma in their destination countries and are not accepted back by their families.

*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)*

Other organizations we interviewed are implementing economic reintegration interventions, with a focus on providing cash grants, trainings, skill-building activities, counseling on receiving government-provided loans from the PKB and planning for future remigration. Although 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.

*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. We make sure that the work is sustainable so that they will feel comfortable about it. – (National NGO KII)*

### Recruiting Agencies

The Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA)<sup>8</sup> is working with the MoEWOE to generate and make public self-reported data on returnee migrants as it relates to their post-return employment and medical history; which if successful, would provide an important dataset on longitudinally tracking the impact of COVID-19 on returnees. BAIRA also contributed 8,000,000 Taka (US \$95,000) to various emergency funds to support safe and successful reintegration of returnees. Additionally, findings indicate that for each visa processed, recruiting agencies contribute 1,000 Taka (US \$12) 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.

Overall, when looking at government, NGOs/CSOs, international donors, and recruitment agency efforts –there are many positive contributions in reaction to the migrant crisis during COVID-19. However, a tension arises between programs focused on particular sub-communities of returnee migrants and the returnee migrant population as a whole. With limited funds and a quickly evolving landscape of needs, it is difficult for programmers to identify the best possible interventions. The pandemic should be seen as a learning experience in how to react to system shocks in the future. Increased coordination between government, NGOs, and the international community is warranted to ensure both migrant populations writ-large as well as smaller, often more vulnerable, sub-populations are both served during crisis. The next section (RQ4) details the short and long-term implications of recruitment agency operations.

### ***Pre-departure Migrants***

KIIs suggest that 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. 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 highlight the significant financial investment made by both migrants

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<sup>8</sup> BAIRA currently represents over 1,300 recruitment agencies in Bangladesh

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.

*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 highlighted in KIIs is that many pre-departure migrants have processed visas and employment contracts that will likely expire before the pandemic ends, meaning recruiting agencies will have to re-submit all necessary documentation for renewal. Since GCC 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)*

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 the recruitment process, as well as hosting webinars and discussion series to engage the government officials, workers, and NGOs on future migration strategies. Given the likelihood of illegal or irregular migration practices in response to the pandemic, IOM is raising awareness on ethical recruitment through an online program (IOM 2020). Specifically, KIIs revealed that in coordination with BAIRA, IOM is selecting a sub-set of recruiting agencies 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)*

Many pre-departure migrants are not able to work overseas due to expired visas and will need assistance if they want to migrate again, especially during this period of market uncertainty. KIIs revealed that another integral part of donors' effort to protect pre-departure migrants has been to collect international data and perform 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. 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 (ILO & IOM 2020). For those who are still in the process, donors are also encouraging re-skilling among the workers and introducing them to job opportunities locally.

*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)*

### Local NGOs and CSOs

NGOs/CSOs KII respondents stated that they are now prioritizing providing COVID-19 and GCC updates and information to pre-departure migrants. 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. Consequently, many NGOs/CSOs are working on raising awareness on illegal and unsafe channels of migration to deter potential migrants from seeking such channels.

### Recruiting Agencies

Formal recruiting agencies are not in direct contact with all potential migrants, especially those who migrated through informal recruiters or middlemen. Aspirant migrant workers living outside of Dhaka tend to migrate through the 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. 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.

*No one can trust a (formal) recruiting agency. They (workers) are unaware of or do not have any connection with the (formal) recruiting agencies. The majority of the recruiting agencies are in Dhaka. Here, the workers know us or reach 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)*

### **Short, Medium and Long-Term Implications of COVID-19 on OLR from Bangladesh (RQ4)**

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***

Both returnee and pre-departure migrants are facing several challenges as a result of the pandemic on their livelihoods, financial security, mental and physical health, and prospects of migration. The pandemic also affects the overall economic and social environment in Bangladesh, adding to the existing challenges that policy makers face in effectively supporting migrant workers.

#### **Returnee Migrants**

The large number of migrants returning to Bangladesh during the pandemic include workers who lost their jobs, those who traveled home for holidays and are now stuck, and those who voluntarily returned due to uncertainty around the pandemic. The majority of returnee migrants carry a heavy debt burden due to the costs of migration and risk being in a situation of debt bondage due to the impact of COVID-19 on their key source of income. At this point, having exhausted their savings, many migrants are borrowing money to make ends meet. Risks of debt bondage are compounded by migrant reliance on informal and non-institutional sources of borrowings, especially informal moneylenders who often charge very high interest rates and may exploit migrant vulnerabilities (GFEMS 2019). KII respondents reported that 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.

*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. 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)*

As GCC countries reopen their markets and international travel resumes, many returnees are hopeful about returning to their old jobs or finding new opportunities in these countries. KII respondents 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. 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.

Moreover, 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. KIIs with researchers, NGOs, and donor agencies indicate that heavy debt burden combined with lack of structured reintegration programs in their home country is likely also forcing returnees to re-migrate, especially younger migrants. Gender discrimination could be further perpetuated in the skills development component of migrant reintegration, particularly in sectors where gender plays a role in the work function.

*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-19 they won't migrate anytime soon but they will definitely try to re-migrate when things get better because they want to earn money. – (International NGO KII)*

### Pre-departure Migrants

Pre-departure migrants have incurred large amounts of debt from formal (bank and government loans) and informal lenders (family, friends, loan sharks) to meet their migration costs. Having lost the overseas jobs, and with no alternative source of income in Bangladesh or being eligible to receive assistance through the government's COVID-19 relief package, they have no way of recovering spent money and pay off their debt. Further exacerbating their financial vulnerability is the fact that many migrants had their visas revoked, compelling them to pay extra money to renew their visa, as well as complete additional COVID-19 related medical examinations, consequently increasing the overall cost of migration which is disproportionately borne by migrants.

*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)*

Moreover, returnee and pre-departure migrants constitute the majority of the current supply of low-skilled labor from Bangladesh which 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 renew visas and complete medical tests, which will eventually drive up the total cost of migration, especially the fees charged by informal and formal recruiting agents.

### ***Long-Term Implications***

#### **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. As KII respondents report, this situation is already creating problems 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 and 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, informal middlemen who migrants trust and rely on give false hope and information about migration. Recruiting agencies often tend to be profit oriented and do not take any responsibility for the social protection and well-being of migrant workers. Recruiting agency KIIs highlighted that male migrants are more likely to embrace illicit means of migration since female workers are typically more cautious and well-informed about the risks of using illegal channels. However, most 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. 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 fewer destination countries open borders, creating competition among workers and underscoring the need to secure potentially limited employment opportunities in the countries that do open their borders. Desperation to resume work and regain their source of income might compel migrants to seek illegal migration just to get to destination countries.

## 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, under-representing the perspective of GCC stakeholders in the study. In addition, the research team was unable to interview embassy and labor wing officials working on migrant repatriation in the GCC countries, as well as policy actors in Bangladesh who were unavailable for interviews given the sudden influx of returnee migrants. In many cases, government officials were hesitant to give interviews as the lack of government support toward migrants is a sensitive topic in Bangladesh.

## Conclusion, Future Implications and Recommendations

Despite conscious and concerted efforts, significant gaps remain in government-led reintegration policies. The reintegration process itself is complex, including economic, social, and psychological components. Although stimulus packages and loans offer some immediate financial assistance, it is challenging to find alternative employment opportunities that provide long-term financial stability, especially given the lack of structured programs for job integration, training or entrepreneurship. Moreover, Bangladesh was already suffering from a saturated labor market which has further complicated the prospects of employing returnee migrants in the local job market. Current government initiatives neither address social discrimination faced by returnee migrants nor prioritize vulnerable groups, such as returnee female domestic workers for whom traditional social stigma poses a hindrance in finding jobs in the local market. Therefore, government representatives and other policy actors in Bangladesh face the challenge of adapting programs to address the multi-faceted impacts of the pandemic on all categories of migrant workers.



Many organizations express concerns related to program adaption due to time-consuming donor approval processes, limited direction from donors, as well as severe funding cuts which limits their capacity to support the large number of vulnerable returnee migrant workers. Moreover, given the uncertainty around the current situation of migrants and the medium and long-term impacts on migration to the GCC, there are many areas where NGOs and 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. short or long term support), differentiating between the needs of migrants planning to re-migrate versus those planning to re-integrate, and deciding between entrepreneurship versus skills training.

These findings highlight the need for increased collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors especially during a global crisis, without which, stakeholders run the risk of working at cross-purposes and focusing efforts indiscriminately. Moreover, through increased collaboration, the needs of especially vulnerable groups can be integrated into policies through multiple points in the system.

OLR sector stakeholders, including NGOs/CSOs, international donors, formal and informal recruitment agencies, private sector actors, and the government, can use this research to adapt programs and address the multi-faceted challenges of migrant workers. Based on study findings, the authors put forth the following short and long-term recommendations involving varying levels of stakeholder collaboration:

- ***Government, NGOs, and donors should expand local awareness-raising activities***, via social media, local radio, and cable networks on the challenges that returnees face upon returning to their communities. Include specific messaging to minimize discrimination against returnee migrants and increase community awareness about experiences of and challenges faced by female returnee migrants.
- ***Government, NGOs, and donors should establish accessible and effective psychosocial counseling*** and support for returnee migrant workers.
- ***Government should increase support for the refinement of a functional and effective centralized returnee migrant database*** which can serve as a critical tool to design reintegration and training programs based on workers' employment history, skills, and foreign language proficiency.
- ***Government should ensure timely disbursement of financial assistance*** to returnee migrants.
- ***Government should establish a reintegration policy framework***, which addresses the unique challenges faced by vulnerable groups such as female migrants.

- **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.
- **Ethical recruitment agencies should coordinate efforts** with the government and businesses to expand the market for formal, safe migration channels.
- **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<sup>9</sup>.
- **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.
- **Government should lead greater coordination among policy actors and NGO partners** to design sustainable skill-building training and programs.

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