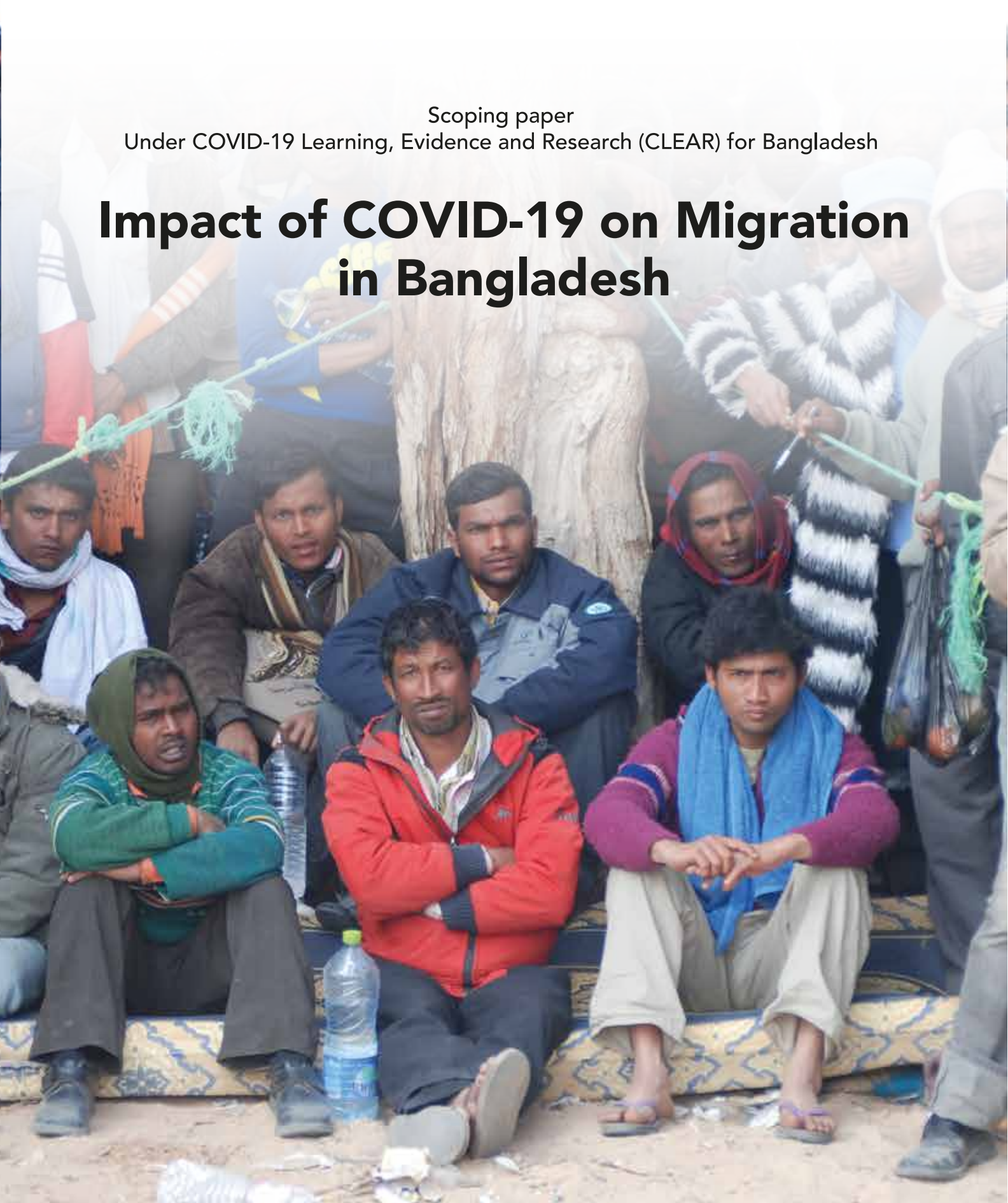


Scoping paper
Under COVID-19 Learning, Evidence and Research (CLEAR) for Bangladesh

Impact of COVID-19 on Migration in Bangladesh



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Impact of COVID-19 on Migration in Bangladesh

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31 March 2022

Summary

This paper discusses the post-Covid-19 migration landscape in Bangladesh and identifies the research gaps and policy opportunities that can ease the plight of migrants. A literature review of the existing evidence; Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and a webinar among relevant government and non-government stakeholders were used to formulate this paper.

More than 400,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers were forced to return during the pandemic. Findings reveal that COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on the sector. More than 400,000 Bangladeshi workers involuntarily returned due to the pandemic. Those aspiring to migrate abroad were stranded with an uncertain future and thousands who stayed in their destination country during COVID-19 times, while those who remained abroad faced various difficulties triggered by COVID-19. Findings revealed that COVID-19 had a significant impact on migration. As a result, state and non-state actors have taken measures to contain its impact on the migrant crises.

However, substantial policy and research gaps nonetheless exist. Some highlights from the findings include a lack of research on the magnitude and heterogeneity of the effect of the crises by different demographics, the need for a structural reintegration process and evaluating its long-run impact, an absence of a database to track and profile migrants requiring assistance, governance failures, the dearth of knowledge on the impact of the crises on families and communities of migrants, and an urgent need for adherence to labour rights.

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List of Acronyms

BAIRA	Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies
BIGD	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
BMET	Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training
BOECL	Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
KII	Key Informant Interview
ILO	International Labor Organization
IOM	International Organization of Migration
MoEWOE	Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSDA	National Skills Development Authority
OKUP	Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program
PKB	Probashi Kallyan Bank

RMMRU	Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit
USD	United States Dollar
WEWB	Wage Earners' Welfare Board

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Migrants play an important role in the socio-economic development of Bangladesh. In 2020, the country received around 15 \$billion in foreign remittances, which accounted for 12% of GDP and generated nine per cent employment of the total active workforce of Bangladesh (BMET, 2020; Karim et al., 2020). From 1976 to 2020, around 13 million Bangladeshi workers left the country in search of work abroad (BMET, 2020).

COVID-19, however, has disrupted the global labour market. Bangladeshi migrants, even those typical unskilled labour working on temporary contracts, were not spared from its blow. This scoping paper synthesizes the existing literature, identifies gaps in knowledge, and points to the scope for further research to inform policy and implement effective programs.

The primary audiences for this scoping paper are research organisations working on producing novel evidence on issues faced by Bangladeshi international migrants. This paper also targets state and non-state actors implementing various programs and formulating new policies to alleviate the myriad plights of migrant workers.

This paper's targeted audiences are both public and private organisations as well as state and non-state actors proactively involved in issues surrounding migration in Bangladesh, engaged in generating knowledge or implementing projects to alleviate the plight of migrant workers.

Our findings show that the viral outbreak forced a large number of Bangladeshi migrant workers to return home. According to IOM (2021), more than 400,000 migrant workers returned to Bangladesh between April and December of 2020. Estimates by BRAC (2021a) suggest 77% of returnees were struggling to find a job¹. As many families in Bangladesh are dependent on remittances, the return of the breadwinner can disrupt their economic

¹ The survey was conducted among 6,370 households during 10-25 December 2020 as part of the study that applied both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

stability and exacerbate psycho-social wellbeing, which can induce long-run complications on the economy of the country.

COVID-19 has led to the unplanned return of migrants into the home country and has also exacerbated existing vulnerabilities in the global labour market for migrants. Some have had to take on increased workload, while others face higher anxieties of job loss as well as increased risk of contracting COVID-19. They dwell in congested and dense living quarters often labelled as COVID-19 epicentres. Access to testing and treatment is inadequate, often compounded by paperwork and legal status complexities. The virus has already infected more than 70,000 migrant Bangladeshi workers worldwide.

The pandemic has also affected prospective migrants in Bangladesh planning to depart soon. On average, 700,000 migrants leave Bangladesh to work abroad annually (ILO, 2020). However, the number went down to 217,669 in 2020 (BMET, 2020) – a steep 75 percent drop. Moreover, newspaper articles indicate a substantial number of migrants, visiting home were left stranded in the country due to the lockdown and flight cancellations (The Financial Express, 2021). The fate of these groups of migrant workers remains a salient and underexplored issue.

With the rising migration of female workers from Bangladesh since 2016, the intersection of gender and the pandemic has become particularly prominent. Female migrants are already at a higher risk of abuse and rights violation and with the advent of COVID-19, such vulnerabilities are often exacerbated. With the rising stigma of COVID-19 returnees alongside the existing social stigma faced by female migrants, policies to assist these workers are a pressing concern.

Evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants, their families, and their communities is still lacking. Most of the studies on this matter either lack nationally representative data or do not explore all the dimensions of COVID-19 and its myriad consequences on migrants and their family lives. Targeted interventions and policies to address migrants' issues are often absent. Migrants in Bangladesh usually go abroad by selling assets and borrowing money. Their families are highly dependent on their remittance. So more studies are needed to understand how migrants' return impacts their psycho-social and economic welfare, mental and physical health, intra-household relationships, family life, social

standing, income, consumption, asset transfer, debt status, and other aspects of life. Such studies need to account for the significant heterogeneity that might exist by different demographic groups.

Substantial policy and research gaps also exist on best practices for a comprehensive reintegration process. Evaluating the long-run impact of COVID-19, assessing migrants' needs and interventions tailored to such needs can help practitioners take necessary steps. Lack of a centralised database to track migrants in the nation, governance failures on administration, the dearth of knowledge on the impact of the crises on families and communities of migrants, and an urgent global agenda of respect for labour rights can help researchers and practitioners to take necessary steps for betterments of migrants.

Detailed and rigorous investigations of migrant workers can reveal issues they face and the consequences of the pandemic on their families and society. Knowledge of these matters can help actors choose proper interventions and policy steps that can help migrant workers and alleviate their plight.

1.2 Methods and Analysis

1.2.1. Literature Review

The scoping paper identifies relevant studies, reports, articles after which the evidence was collated, summarised and gaps identified and reported. This review included project reports, policy briefs, survey reports, and descriptive/exploratory/analytical cross-sectional studies. Qualitative studies were also included that focused on qualitative data such as Key Informant Interviews. Also included were systematic reviews, evidence gap maps, experimental (randomised controlled trials), and quasi-experimental studies (non-randomized controlled trials) which focused on migration.

The primary search term used was "impact COVID-19 migration Bangladesh" along with combinations of these words with demographic descriptors (e.g., female migrants, outbound migrants, stranded abroad, community, family, etc). Article published in last ten years (with an emphasis on the last two years) were searched in EconLit, RePEc (Research Papers in Economics), Scopus, PLOS one, Emerald Insight, National Bureau of Economic

Research: NBER working papers, Science Direct, International Organization of Migration (IOM), World Bank and the International Labor Organization (ILO) website.

Government and non-government websites like Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE), Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB), Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), National Skills Development Authority (NSDA), Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOECL), Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), Ovbashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), and several others were also used for this literature review and stakeholder identification.

Google and Google Scholar were used. Reference lists and bibliographies of the articles collected from those identified studies were reviewed. The search was conducted from October 2021 to January 20, 2022. Thematic analysis was used as the method for identifying, analyzing, and exploring patterns within papers since it can account for both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

1.2.2. Stakeholder Mapping and KIIs

This scoping paper interviewed many migration experts in Bangladesh. They were chosen for their position with government and non-government agencies or their previous track record of publications and research on the matter. Relevant interviewees and stakeholders were identified broadly on three fronts: 1) Government agencies directly pertinent to migration in Bangladesh; 2) Non-state actors working to reintegrate and rehabilitate migrants amid the COVID-19 crises, and 3) research institutions providing insights on the needs and requirements of migrants.

Interviews focused on possible policy interventions, governance failures, and evidence gaps in the current migrant crisis. Both KIIs, as well as a webinar, were conducted to gather insights. Since we followed Chatham House Rules, the identities of participants in the webinar and KIIs remain anonymous, to encourage openness of discussions and opinions.

Some of the government actors working on migration in Bangladesh are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, MoEWOE,

BMET, and BOESL. Non-government actors include the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), BRAC, the BIGD, OKUP, and others. International actors include the IOM and ILO, the Royal Danish Embassy, and many others.

Since MoEWOE is directly in charge of overseas employment, it was important to gather insights and engage people from the agency for any effective policy. The Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), which is under the direct supervision of the ministry, is a highly relevant stakeholder given most migration processes are conducted under their aegis.

This is the relevant authority that migrants usually engage with before departing Bangladesh or after arrival. The NSDA has also been closely involved with the government drive in re-skilling migrants and reintegration. KIIs were performed from both of these administrative units as well as BOESL.

The RMMRU is a centre for evidence-based research on migration in Bangladesh. It has been proactive in exploring the crises of migrants due to COVID-19 and various scopes for rehabilitation and reintegration. Researchers from the University of Dhaka are also engaged in the process. Thus KIIs were conducted with personnel from these organisations.

BRAC has been engaged with the Royal Danish Embassy in implementing assistance to returnees through various programs. They were a valuable source of information on effective reintegration procedures for returnees and the hurdles they face, as well as ground realities and logistical difficulties. In both webinars and KIIs, BRAC was consulted to provide valuable feedback.

We mapped stakeholders in the appendix by constructing two stakeholder matrices based on research and project implementation capacity. Our construct is based on their previous project implementation, involvement with other organisations, and their responses to BIGD in preparing the scoping paper, webinar, and KIIs. Power measurement was done based on size, cooperation with other organisations, and publications.

The insights from the literature review, stakeholder consultations, and the KIIs are synthesized in our findings below.

2. Research and Policy

2.1. The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Returnee Migrant Households

COVID-19 is anticipated to cost between \$5.8 trillion and \$8.8 trillion to the world economy, or 6.4 to 9.7% of global GDP (Chowdhury & Chakraborty, 2021). The World Bank (2020a) anticipated an almost 11% decline in remittances to South Asia in 2021. Bangladesh has around 13 million migrant workers, providing a substantial amount of foreign exchange and remittances to the nation, accounting for 12% of the country's Gross Domestic Product. The nation was projected to raise remittances by 8% year-on-year, or around US\$20 billion (WB, 2020a).

According to Bangladesh's remittance figures, remittances declined by 20% in March, April, and May of 2020 (Bangladesh Bank, 2020). In April 2020, remittances reached \$1.09 billion, a 32% low from the previous month. This had a substantial impact on the household earnings of many migrant families since it contributed to poverty alleviation in the country's rural regions. Earlier research indicated poverty rates declined more rapidly in migrant-sending districts, dropping by 1.7 percentage points for every 0.1 percentage point increase in a migrant's departure from that district (UNDP, 2020).

Previous research on migration has focused on the positive effects of migration and remittances on migrants' households and the broader economy of their countries, such as increased income, savings, and GDP (Akhter & Islam, 2019; Sarker & Islam, 2018). However, there has been little emphasis regarding research on the negative consequences of a rupture in the migration process on migrants and their family members.

A substantial number of Bangladeshi expatriates suffered from the upheaval in Libya during the Arab spring (Siddiqui & Bhuyian, 2013). Migrants and their families suffered extensively due to the migration rupture caused by the turmoil (Siddiqui & Bhuyian, 2013). Financial hardship followed as they could not retrieve the unpaid wages and belongings left behind in Libya or find employment opportunities in the Bangladeshi labour market (Siddiqui &

Bhuyian, 2013). However, the impact of such events on Bangladeshi migrants remains out of the limelight of the investigation.

It is conceivable that the positive effects of migration might be undone when the migration endeavour does not bear fruit. Moreover, migrants often acquire significant debts to fund migration, and when an attempt at migrating is ruptured, the ramifications might be dire. Only a few studies have examined the effect of migration rupture and its numerous implications on migrant families' lives. These vary from economic costs such as decreased income, debt payments, and difficulty obtaining work, to social repercussions such as hostility of the host community and declining mental/psychosocial health (Das et al., 2019; IOM, 2020). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the influx of returnee migrants, this scarcity in research and evidence becomes particularly salient.

Most Bangladeshi workers repatriated during the pandemic did not receive any prior notice and were subjected to abrupt deportations (IOM, 2021). Relevant work by Barker et al. (2020) revealed that migrant families in Bangladesh performed worse regarding income and food security than non-migrant families at the onset of the pandemic.² Migrant families' monthly income decreased by 36% between spring 2019 and April 2020. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, families with a migrant member earned more on average, but have experienced a 25% reduction in income relative to non-migrant families after the pandemic.

In April, 10.2% of migrant worker families reported no earnings from any source, while the rate was only 5.4% in households without migrant workers. These results point to the pressing need for assistance to migrant families, given their dependence on remittances as their sole source of earning.

Migrants typically find themselves in debt. According to IOM (2020)³, 54% of COVID-19 returnees reported owing money, the majority of which was owed to family and friends, and some reported loans from MFIs/Self-Help Groups/NGOs. The vast majority of returnees anticipated repaying their debts before returning home. However, with the advent of the

² The study was conducted on a subsample of migrants working in Malaysia under the G2G government program, and is thus not nationally representative

³ The survey was conducted among 136 returnees of Brahmanbaria, a district of Bangladesh so this is not a nationally representative survey.

pandemic, and the unexpected return home, 47% were uncertain about how they would repay their debt. Before the pandemic, only 1% of migrant families intended to repay their debt via property sales, but the percentage jumped to 10% during COVID-19, indicating an inclination to sell assets to repay debt.

Migrant families used a range of strategies to overcome the barriers posed by COVID-19. Reduced family expenditures, and income supplementation or diversification techniques, are the primary mechanisms reported by migrant families (Siddique, 2021). Families largely reduced their food consumption, notably consumption of meat, fish, and other seafood, while lowering the number of food items included in each meal (Siddique, 2021). When surveyed on daily food intake, 91% reported eating three meals a day before COVID-19, but during the pandemic, only 72% could afford three meals a day (IOM, 2020b). Additionally, many migrant families were compelled to sell property and jewels to finance household expenditures (Siddique, 2021). They also reduced spending on festivals, rituals, and charity (Siddique, 2021). The healthcare spending also saw a concomitant decrease, most likely due to a lack of funds.

Little is known about the impact of such abrupt returns on the family life of migrants. If the main earner in the household faces a sudden loss of employment, does the spouse feel compelled to seek alternative income routes? What coping strategies do they use? While previous literature points to the absence of the household head and its effect on children, abrupt returns and the resulting loss of income could have an ambiguous effect on the migrant's children (Siddiqui & Ansar, 2020).

Given previous research on the impact of migration and remittances on the power structure within the household, questions arise as to how these abrupt returns impact these dynamics (Rashid, 2016). There might also be consequences on conjugal life, as well as the family's social standing. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have so far examined the impact of COVID-19 on migrant's social life.

The COVID-19 crisis and its impact on returnee migrants could potentially vary by gender, given the different migration patterns of men and women. Migration for females often comes with its own set of gendered challenges. For females, stepping outside the home is still largely stigmatized in Bangladesh's patriarchal society. Thus often women from the

lowest-rung of socio-economic strata choose to migrate, regardless of the social ramifications (IOM, 2021). However, female migration is increasingly taking a larger role in the migration landscape of the country due to increased demand, particularly in Saudi Arabia.

While in 2004, female migrants accounted for less than 1% of Bangladeshi migrants (MFA, 2011), the trend reversed after 2004, and by June 2007 the rate jumped to over 5%. (MFA, 2011). Since 2016, the country has been sending more than 100,000 females each year, with the majority being employed as housemaids or in the hospitality sector. The COVID-19 crisis, however, has not left female workers unscathed.

According to available data, almost half of Bangladeshi female migrant workers endured harassment and abuse (TBS, 2021b)⁴. Migrants were often mistreated by their employers and wives, but others claimed being abused by agency officials. In research conducted by the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment, 110 female domestic workers who had returned from Saudi Arabia were surveyed (Rahman, 2021). Of them, 35% returned home after being physically and sexually assaulted, and 44% were not paid consistently. There might also be important heterogeneities within female migrants concerning the impact of the pandemic, with increased workloads for some, and job losses for others (IOM, 2021). Regrettably, those who survived such trauma will continue to suffer in the long run. Many of their family members are adamantly opposed to their presence and shunned from society. Although the remittances they send contribute significantly to the growth of foreign currency reserves.

There still exists significant knowledge gaps on the economic impacts of the pandemic on international migrants in Bangladesh. While Barker et al (2020) examined the effect of COVID-19 on migrants' income, food security, and social participation, not enough variables were included and the sample was drawn from a selected group of unrepresentative migrants. Moreover, the data might be outdated given the survey was conducted at the onset of the pandemic. IOM's (2020a, 2020b) and Siddique et al's (2020) studies include

⁴ 153 respondents of 42 districts of Bangladesh were interviewed in September and October of 2021. So it is not a nationally representative data.

more variables, although their results are based on small-scale surveys rather than a systematic investigation of the general migrant landscape.

Extensive research is required to determine how large deportations prompted by the COVID-19 affected females. To what extent are females differentially affected in dimensions of economic, psychological, and social aspects? Mixed-method research here could prove particularly useful. Small-scale qualitative research can help identify the multi-faceted dimensions of migrant return and its consequences, informing quantitative surveys to provide representative insights. Additional qualitative work could explore the less tangible and intersecting consequences of the crises.

2.2. Psycho-Social Impact of COVID-19 on Returnee Migrants

The International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants (2020a, 2020b) surveyed about 300 returnees in two districts in Bangladesh. The report highlighted the dangers faced by them in Bangladesh during the pandemic, including, poor income and impending debt, and a host of negative psycho-social effects. Migrants often faced unfavourable responses from family and friends upon their return, ranging from a judgment of being a failure to being carriers of COVID-19.

The sudden reversal of fortune for migrants induced by the pandemic could have grave effects on their psycho-social wellbeing, hopes, and aspirations. An extensive literature review highlights the myriad consequences of aspirations on long-run outcomes. While studies have focused on the immediate impact of the pandemic on migrants, this aspect of the crisis and its eventual consequences needs further exploratory work.

The majority of migrants reported psychological stress, restriction of movement due to COVID-19, and being forced to do as their supervisors instructed (BCSM, 2021)⁵. Tasneem Siddique's (2021) research examined the effect of COVID-19 on Bangladeshi migrants through a survey of 200 migrant families. According to her research, both male and female

⁵ The survey was conducted among 1160 returnee workers from 6 gulf countries who returned after February 2020 in 45 districts of Bangladesh. It was conducted between March 25 and May 6, 2021. So it cannot be considered as nationally representative data.

migrants who returned involuntarily, or those who stayed in their destination country, demonstrated various degrees of psychological suffering.

Migrants expressed concern about their health and money. They reported being confined to a room, the possibility of defaulting on loan repayments, distress and a sense of helplessness caused by their inability to send remittances to their family, the possibility of visa expiration, the closure of businesses, and loss of capital at home (Siddiqui, 2021)⁶. In conversations with migrants, it became evident that their families were also experiencing COVID-19 related stress.

Female migrants were particularly vulnerable to psychosocial stress (Chy et al., 2021; Nawaz et al., 2020). For example, Nawaz et al. (2020)⁷ found that returnee female migrants suffer a variety of reintegration barriers, including poor social acceptability, patriarchal societal norms, a lack of comprehensive reintegration processes, and other physical and psychological difficulties. One qualitative study (Siddiqui, 2021) confirmed a case of physical violence against women in returnee's households, although the magnitude of the phenomena is unknown due to lack of research. Occasionally, they are falsely accused of sex work by family members (Nawaz et al., 2020). For instance, a female Bangladeshi migrant who confronted these issues stated in her interview:

"They used to imply I could have acquired it (income) in an unethical manner. If I were a guy, these events could not possibly have occurred to me " (Nawaz et al., 2020, pp. 53–54).

The media in host countries often vilify migrants, claiming they are a major source of COVID-19 transmission (Siddiqui, 2021). According to reports in the media, migrants were evading the rigorous lockdowns imposed by governments, increasing the likelihood of viral infection among citizens of the host countries (Siddiqui, 2021). However, many were compelled to do so in search of work, food, and medicine (Siddiqui, 2021). Moreover, host governments used

⁶ The research followed a mixed method approach. The primary data include a survey (of 200 households in 21 districts of Bangladesh), in-depth interviews (with 25 involuntarily-returned migrants) and case studies (42 case studies of gender-based violence in five districts during the month of May to June 2020). Secondary information was gathered from newspaper reports, transcripts prepared from the e-symposium series of RMMRU. So it cannot be considered as nationally representative data.

⁷ A total of 30 women returnees from Saudi Arabia staying at different areas of Dhaka (capital of Bangladesh) were contacted. The study includes female migrants and their family members as well. So it cannot be considered a nationally representative data.

media reports as a tool to support and justify their decision to repatriate almost 400,000 Bangladeshi migrants.

Around 29% of returnees were not greeted upon their return by family or neighbours (Karim et al., 2020). Villagers often stigmatised returning migrants due to superstitious beliefs, even after the completion of the quarantine period (Sorkar, 2020). Bangladesh's institutional quarantine facilities are often inadequate and overburdened, forcing practically all returning migrants to isolate themselves not in institutional facilities, but instead inside their communities. They are regarded as an unwanted underclass in their host nations, and upon their return to Bangladesh, they face social alienation and shame from neighbours who assume they are COVID-19 carriers.

According to Barker et al. (2020), migrant families are four times likelier to report being excluded from social events and three times likelier to report being excluded from prayers due to COVID-19 concerns. Additionally, being a migrant appeared to be associated with medical exclusion. Patients with COVID-19 symptoms were less likely to be granted to obtain medical treatments (Barker et al., 2020).

Returnees face isolation and abuse at the hands of their employers in their destination countries, which is compounded by more stigma upon their return to Bangladesh. One involuntarily deported female migrant from Hong Kong reported how upon arrival in Bangladesh she was forcibly quarantined at the Hajj camp outside the airport and kept there for two weeks in dire conditions with a lack of necessary food and hygiene. Upon finally returning to her hometown, she was forced to spend more than a month confined inside her house when her neighbours threatened her, suspecting her of bringing the virus home with her.

The long-term ramifications of social exclusion and stigmatization of migrants are particularly important. Being labelled a “failure” could have implications for the hopes and aspirations of migrants and their future endeavours. A rich literature pointed to the implications of psychosocial wellbeing on various aspects of life, and the long-run impact of trauma. Thus, various pressing questions emerge to tackle the crisis. What psycho-social counselling could migrants utilize after such events? How do state and non-state actors

raise community awareness to stop the social exclusion of migrants? To what extent do such stigmatization and trauma persist 2 years after the onset of the pandemic?

Of importance here is also the impact of such a return on the community at large. To our knowledge, no work has been done so far examining the effect of the crises on migrant villages. Given the propensity of the migrant network to be concentrated, it is conceivable that such mass return not only affects the migrant household but also the social and economic fabric of migrant villages. Do initial findings show migrant-faced hostility from their community, but do such stigmatization last in the long run? What about community support in the form of financial assistance to migrant households? How are non-migrant households affected in migrant communities? The intersection of the crises with non-migrant households in migrant communities remains underexplored.

2.3. Stranded Abroad During COVID-19

While most of the work on the pandemic and international migration has focused on returnees, the plight of migrants abroad has received little attention. Many migrant workers who were allowed to remain in their host countries during COVID-19, were isolated in unclean living quarters, were stressed about their job and family, and frightened of deportation to Bangladesh (Karim et al., 2020)⁸. They were particularly afraid of contracting the virus since they dwelled in densely populated dormitories and houses labelled as COVID-19 epicentres (Karim et al., 2020). Saudi Arabia whose migrants account for 38% of the population, reported on May 5th of 2020 that foreigners accounted for 76% of newly confirmed cases.

This is not the first time that migrant workers have been stricken in Gulf countries during times of crisis. The phenomenon of large deportations from the Middle East (i.e., Saudi Arabia) in 2013 is likewise comparable (HRW, 2015). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW; 2015), migrant workers claimed various abuses during their detention and deportation, including assaults by security officers and individuals, incarceration in harsh conditions, and physical assaults. Unauthorized migrants are placed in even more perilous

⁸ Study of Karim et al is more of a review article rather than a research findings. Its findings and conclusions are drawn from secondary data.

situations during times of crisis. Migrants, regardless of their legal status, have been caught in the crossfire, and many are on the edge of being deported to their countries of origin, with the Gulf States intensifying the pressure for deportation daily (Sorkar, 2020).

COVID-19 has killed countless Bangladeshi migrants as a result of host countries' inadequate handling of foreign labour. According to records, the virus has claimed 1,380 Bangladeshi migrants' lives. Of them, over 500 migrants have died in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the virus has infected around 70,000 Bangladeshis in other nations (Chowdhury & Chakraborty, 2021). Countries such as Singapore have a low rate of migrant mortality due to robust isolation protocols and timely supply of health care services. COVID-19 deaths per million of South Asian migrant workers are 27 times higher in Gulf countries compared to Singapore where the rights of workers are more stringently observed (TBS, 2021c).

When migrants arrive in a new country, they often have to give up their basic rights. Numerous Bangladeshi migrant workers find themselves in precarious positions as employers seize their passports. Although it is illegal, some employers and middlemen do so. If workers do not have proper documents, they lose their legal standing and are exposed to harassment overseas. Many migrants have faced difficulties acquiring COVID-19 vaccinations due to a lack of proper documentation or having a valid passport (Ara, 2021). Even though certain countries, such as Brunei, have made COVID-19 vaccination mandatory for overseas workers, others were experiencing difficulties. "As I had no passport and identity card, police arrested me while raiding a nursery" a migrant worker in Brunei revealed (Ara, 2021). His employer then submitted his passport to immigration authorities, clearing the way for his release and vaccination.

The COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent drop in remittances affected migrant family members. Some families prioritized children's education over other family needs and made sure fees were paid on time, although this put them under more financial strain (Siddique, 2021). However, there were occasions when migrant families opted to stop paying for their children's education and several families even chose to marry off their daughters to cut education and household costs (Siddique, 2021). Families also decreased their healthcare-seeking behaviour to curb their expenditures (Siddique, 2021). The research agenda here is tied to the agenda of returnee migrants and the effects of a sudden drop in remittances.

The impact on family members due to the abrupt termination of migrant income remains underexplored, and a systematic quantitative survey could provide representative insights and inform policy.

The intersection of gender and migration with respect to labour rights during COVID-19 is of particular prominence. Women migrants are a vulnerable group of the population. COVID-19 exacerbated the plight of female migrants abroad. During lockdowns, with male members in destination countries, female migrant workers endured harassment and abuse. The majority have experienced a sharp increase in workload amounting to roughly 18 hours every day (Siddiqui, 2021). With no dedicated office for arbitration disputes, female workers' claims to wages continued to be unsettled during the pandemic. In rare cases, when there is compensation, the amount agreed upon in arbitration is small (Rahman, 2021).

The pandemic has worsened the already challenging situation of labour rights violations on migrants in gulf countries. A proper grievance mechanism to mediate labour disputes has long been wanted.

Unilateral actions of GoB by strengthening labour attaches would only go part of the way in resolving this issue. The daunting challenge of labour rights would require a multilateral and transnational approach between migrant-receiving and host countries and coordination from major global powers. This is closely linked with the broader global agenda of Modern Day Slavery and human trafficking. In contrast to the RMG sector in Bangladesh, which has witnessed significant strides in improving labour rights since the Rana Plaza Disaster, the relative oversight of migrant labour rights remains perplexing. Quantitative research only gleams limited insights given the dynamics of governance issues and international stakeholders. Qualitative research can help identify the persistent governance failures plaguing migrant labour rights over decades and explore the remedies to such coordination failure across nations to end migrant labour rights violations.

2.4. Perils of Aspiring Outbound Migrants

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected existing migrants and those who aspire to migrate. Outbound migration significantly decreased after the onset of the pandemic. Between January 2019 and March 2020, almost 900,000 Bangladeshis migrated abroad, while the

number declined by more than half in the next twelve months. (Mahmud, 2021). The steep decline is largely attributable to COVID-19 restrictions and decreased demand for international workers since recruitment agencies have received fewer job contracts from foreign employees during the pandemic (Mahmud, 2021).

While there is some research on stranded migrants both at home and abroad, we are unaware of any existing studies or interventions assessing the situations of prospective outbound migrants who were planning to move but were unable due to COVID-19. Bangladeshi migrants are often forced to sell their possessions or take out loans to cover the financial expenses of migration (Rahman, 2015). Unforeseen circumstances like COVID-19 impose serious hardship on these people. For example, the government's abrupt suspension of all foreign flights in 2020 prevented many hopeful migrants from traveling overseas (Mahmud, 2020; Mahmud & Hasan, 2021).

According to the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA; Mahmud, 2020), the pandemic has suspended or postponed the transfer of at least 85,405 aspiring migrants to different countries till mid-July 2020. (Mahmud, 2020). Similarly, abrupt flight cancellations in April 2021 prevented a large number of potential migrants from traveling overseas (Mahmud & Hasan, 2021). According to Oikya Parishad, between 20,000 to 25,000 potential migrant workers were anticipated to arrive in the second week of April 2020 to board their planned flights (Mahmud & Hasan, 2021). Prospective migrants paid agencies and middlemen in advance and often incurred large debts to fund migration. If these households are unable to successfully depart, chances of recouping the cost of migration remain slim, with an ominous future burdened by debt.

Migrants often have a short visa validity period, which must be renewed regularly. However, owing to abrupt lockdowns, their visas often expire, generating fresh complications. When they are unable to depart at the scheduled period, their travel expenses rise and their potential income drops (Mahmud & Hasan, 2021). As anecdotal evidence, Jahangir, a potential migrant, borrowed TK 3 lakh to pay for his work visa. He also had to pay an extra TK 70,000 from his savings, but his flight was delayed due to the lockdown (Mahmud, 2020) and he remained stranded. "Now, I am paying interest on the debt but there is no indication of when I'll be able to catch a flight," he said (Mahmud, 2020, p. 1).

Moreover, there could be significant heterogeneities here across migrant groups. For instance, female migrants pay a much lower upfront cost to migrate compared to men, but face tighter labour market restrictions domestically (IOM, 2021). These imply trade-offs across gender with different implications. Such differences could also exist across social class, education, destination, as well as skill level. Unpacking these intersections will prove pivotal in tailoring targeted and efficient policies.

Migrants usually repay their debt mostly via remittance earnings (IOM, 2020a). But how do those who fail to migrate repay their debt or retrieve their sold assets? How are they coping with their situation now that they are unable to travel? What alternative opportunities do they seek? The plight and circumstances of these migrants, stranded in Bangladesh, with an uncertain future and enormous debt burdens have received little attention.

3. Ensuring Sustainable Reintegration of Migrants

The massive inflow of returnees during COVID-19 because of employment losses begs the issue of the pandemic's influence on these families' long-term wellbeing. Evidence showed that such encounters might have long-lasting effects that span generations (Malmendier, 2021). The crisis' size, the susceptibility and resilience of families to similar shocks, and measures to reintegrate these migrants continue to be a major national concern for the government.

A sustainable reintegration occurs "when an individual is successfully reintegrated into the everyday life, the labour market, and the social environment of their origin country and has the resilience to deal with the forces that initially drove their migration" (OECD, 2020, p. 2). Islam (2010), for example, posits several ILO strategies aimed at facilitating a sustainable reintegration process. These measures include improving policies aimed at enhancing institutional performance, boosting operational efficiency, and providing social protection and assistance for migrant workers, geared at long-run sustainability. These principles are intended to kick-start the economic and social reintegration of Bangladesh's migrant workers.

Because a considerable proportion of returnees are unable to find jobs in their home countries, many state and non-governmental actors have been actively engaged in supporting and preparing for their reintegration. While such immediate measures are urgently required in providing emergency relief during a crisis, a sustainable reintegration strategy will prove pivotal in the eventual rehabilitation of returnees (ILO, 2020). Research could help identify elements of these measures most beneficial to migrants, and extend such components to even migrants voluntarily returning at the end of their natural migration cycle.

The government has established a Tk 700 crore fund to support migrants who have returned home after losing jobs abroad owing to the COVID-19 outbreak. Reintegration of returnee migrants via soft loans has been a primary objective of authorities to address the problem caused by the enormous inflow of migrant workers (BSS, 2020). The response, however, has its own set of challenges. While the PKB offers reintegration loans to small business start-ups, applicants must go through an extensive approval process, which many migrants cannot navigate. Moreover, not all migrants are eligible for such loans. Streamlining the approval process, along with expanded coverage, could increase the efficacy of such measures.

Another flagship project of the government, Recovery, and Advancement of Informal Sector Employment (RAISE), aims to provide BDT 13,500 to 200,000 migrants who involuntarily returned due to COVID-19. Funded by the World Bank, RAISE aims to reintegrate returnees via direct cash assistance. The government is also providing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) certificates, according to their previous work experience abroad, to enhance their scope of job market opportunities. Provisions for reintegration have also been included in various regulations and acts to shift the focus to a smoother reintegration. For instance, the “Overseas Employment and Migrant Act, 2021” includes a provision on “Reintegration”.

Non-state actors have similarly taken a leading role in addressing the problem. BRAC has launched a program to support returnees in reintegrating sustainably. The organization is now executing a large-scale intervention dubbed "Socio-Economic Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Workers of Bangladesh". The initiative, supported by the Royal Danish Embassy, supports returnee migrants (involuntarily returned due to COVID-19 or returning

after the completion of contracts) by increasing community knowledge of the need for returnee reintegration.

Additionally, it supports returnees in avoiding the traps of illegal migration by contributing to and enhancing local and national institutional structures essential for socio-economic reintegration. It contributes to returnees' reintegration by providing psychological, economic (via skill training and in-kind assistance), and social support. Another promising measure implemented by IOM Bangladesh, in collaboration with BRAC, is providing emergency needs assistance and sustainable reintegration support for a targeted 3,000 returning migrants as part of the European Union's regional support addressing the sustainable reintegration of migrants returning to Bangladesh. This assistance is delivered in the returnees' home district and is based on individualized social and economic reintegration plans, psychosocial support, and economic reintegration assistance, which includes referrals to economic reintegration services.

Unfortunately, some of these initiatives, while much needed as a stopgap measure to soften the blow, could eventually prove more be more of a band-aid rather than a long-term answer to widespread unemployment and deportation. A similar scenario panned out during the 2008 global economic crisis when Bangladesh witnessed an influx of returnee migrants because of global economic turmoil (Sanogo & WFP, 2010). The government implemented short-term initiatives (similar to contemporary programs aimed at mitigating the impact of migrant workers' return) that did not aim to guarantee a sustainable reintegration and return process (Sanogo & WFP, 2010). The long-run efficacy of these measures requires further evaluation.

Moreover, the majority of the programs stated above are “one-size-fits-all”, and not tailored to a specific migrant’s needs. Such mistargeting could be a source of major inefficiency in assistance. Do returnees possess the necessary skills for business and entrepreneurship? The effectiveness of soft loans and cash transfers hinges on such answers. Migrants’ need assessment needs to be taken into account before doling out assistance.

Given resource constraints, it might not be tenable to provide continuous assistance to all returnees. But whether existing resources are being used with maximal efficiency is a question for further research. Of critical importance towards improving efficiency and

tailoring assistance to individual profiles would be the establishment of a national migrant database. This is a theme that has repeatedly emerged in our KIIs. The logistical hurdle to such an endeavour will not be challenging since migrants already register at the port of entry during exit and arrival. The hurdle here is one of data governance and coordination across ministries and departments of the government. Why such a database has so far not been established and what incentives are misaligned is a governance question that needs urgent exploring.

Also, given the psycho-social impacts of the crises, the absence of any public programs directed at the issue remains a glaring absence. Female migrants, already reported in the media as particularly susceptible to trauma given their vulnerability to abuse abroad, might be in urgent need of counselling for effective reintegration. Would implementing such programs have any beneficial effects in practice? Research needs to explore such issues further.

Moreover, existing literature indicates that most remittances sent back home are consumed right away. In our KIIs productive use of remittances repeatedly emerged as a common theme. What investment opportunities or products can stimulate savings and spur investments at home by migrants? Would Special Economic Zones (SEZ) for migrants help in this regard? How to organically provide future security without resorting to assistance in crises?

What the migrant crises most highlight are the structural flaws in the migration of sectors of the country – a lack of preparedness and established structures for reintegration. Until now, the focus of overseas employment in Bangladesh has been a relentless search for new labor markets and higher remittances. But the time is ripe to take an end-to-end approach to the sector and seriously contemplate repatriation and reintegration as a strategic pillar. This applies not only to those involuntarily deported due to COVID-19 but also to those voluntarily returning at the end of the migration cycle.

As the sector ages, a structural and comprehensive reintegration plan becomes all the more pressing, given the increased volume of migrant returns. What optimal social safety nets can be devised to cushion blows from such crises? How to best transition returnees back to the local economy and put their skillset to use? What are the most productive utilizations of

remittances and savings earned toiling abroad? Until now the predominant focus has been on only half the story – sending migrants away. But it's high time the focus also shifts to the other half – making all migrants feel at home when they're back.

4. Ensuring Safe Remigration

Migrants often express inclinations to remigrate if provided with the opportunity. The International Organization for Migration (2020b) estimates that more than 80% of returnees want to re-migrate. Consequently, it is not inconceivable that a substantial share of returnees will try to emigrate in the future, instead of seeking pathways of economic integration in their home country. It is thus vital to guarantee that such migrants do not resort to irregular or unsafe migration channels, which are often rife with exploitation and abuse.

In Bangladesh, many migrants have historically chosen unsafe, irregular migration routes due to a lack of work prospects in the country, limited local awareness of safe travel, and a predominantly unregulated recruiting sector. Even when state-run agencies mediate the process of migration, the process is fraught with difficulties. Noteworthy here is the G2G program implemented by the government to recruit workers to Malaysia that eventually failed amid allegations of corruption. The role of state and non-state actors as intermediaries to migration, and the trade-offs thereby implied, needs more delving through exploratory research.

To guarantee safe migration for Bangladeshi workers, gaps in state and private migration processes must be identified, and mechanisms must be strengthened to make sure that migrants receive efficient, reliable, and accessible migration services. Furthermore, potential migrants and their communities require a greater grasp of safe migration processes and methods. Understanding the hazards of moving via irregular channels, the benefits of using regular channels, and the mechanisms is particularly crucial for providing successful and beneficial migration experiences (IOM, Prottasha, 2019).

The government can take more proactive measures to control the activities of private recruiting companies to curb mismanagement and corruption. Newspaper reports are

flooded with stories of exploitation and fraud by unscrupulous middlemen involved in the migration process. Given that many already vulnerable returnees might try to remigrate soon, it is imperative to guarantee that they are not further exploited in the emigration process. There is a precedence of programs to tackle the issue like BRAC's Safe Migration Program. The program provides information and assistance to prospective migrants on the dangers of using irregular channels in the migration process and was successful in reducing such risky endeavours. In the context of COVID-19 and the potential future outflow of stranded migrants in the future, whether such programs are of relevance once more requires delving into.

The intersection of gender and migration also bears importance on issues of migrant safety. Women employees have good job prospects in other countries. This potential has yet to be realized, however, due to a lack of appropriate initiatives and safety concerns. Anecdotal evidence and newspaper articles indicate widespread abuse and harassment of female migrant workers. Partly instigated by this, the government imposed a blanket ban on female migration from 1981 to 2003⁹ (Siddiqui; 2005).

Instead of such blanket measures, the government could try to address specific sources of abuse and keep channels open to tapping into the expanding market for female migrant workers. Tailored interventions are yet to be realized because the extent or scale of such abuse is still unclear as samples were selectively chosen, and no systematic survey exists on female migrants. Given patriarchal social norms, and the stigmatization of female mobility outside homes, it is conceivable that abuse and harassment were used as tools to restrict female employment and mobility.

Women employees have good job prospects in other countries. This potential has yet to be realized however due to a lack of appropriate initiatives and safety concerns. The widespread abuse of females migrants' prompted the government to impose restrictions on female migrant outflow. Instead of such blanket measures, the government can attempt to

⁹ The then Government of 1981 issued a circular restricting migration of all categories of female workers other than professionals. The ban was replaced by restricting the migration of unskilled and semi-skilled women in 1987. The ban was imposed again in 1997 on all categories of female workers. The then government of 2003 lifted female migration bans with some conditions, which too was later removed.

address specific sources of abuse and keep channels open to tapping into the expanding market for female migrant workers.

Moreover, the popular narrative in public discourse is one of the hapless migrants uninformed of the dangers and pitfalls of migration and lured in by fraudulent middlemen to catastrophe. However, the reality on the ground, as put forth by research, indicates otherwise. Aspirant migrants seem well aware of the dangers in the migration journey. Female migrants, for instance, are informed of the social ramifications of being a migrant abroad. Given the inherent risks and rewards associated with migration, how individuals trade-off these costs and benefits, and to what extent information and awareness campaigns can benefit migrants are areas that require further exploration.

5. Identifying New Markets for Migrants

Bangladesh's main source of workforce exports is the Middle East. However, Bangladesh has the promising potential to export labour to other parts of the world. Some areas of potential labour export have yet to be investigated. There is a lack of initiative on the part of the government and the recruiting agencies to find new work opportunities in other parts of the world. Even in the Middle East, employment opportunities have not been properly explored. The bulk of Bangladeshi labourers working in Gulf countries is unskilled. By training and deploying more skilled workers, the government can take an initiative and maximize remittances collected from migrant workers. To deal with its citizens' foreign employment, the Bangladesh government has built organizational infrastructure that includes a Ministry, a Directorate, a Public Limited Company, and certain field offices. The various agencies however lack a cohesive approach. The government can endeavour to tap into the country's full potential regarding workforce exports by relying on an integrated approach.

With migration becoming more important, the government intends to increase the contribution of the workforce exports to the country's economic growth and poverty reduction. The labour export sector is now widely recognised as a reliable, quick, and long-term path to economic independence for Bangladesh. However, the sector involves multiple stakeholders— foreign governments, Bangladesh authorities, recruiting agencies, and the

migrants themselves – each with its own set of interests and motives. Often private interests might not align with the social, creating inefficiency within the system.

For instance, Malaysia, which has been a lucrative market for labor for years, suspended recruiting migrants altogether. Newspaper articles indicate differences among intermediaries and the government regarding which channels (private vs. government) to use for the lucrative recruiting market. Lobbying by foreign agencies in Malaysia, as well as local agencies, brought labor flow to a halt. The impact of such governance failures is eventually borne by migrants. Mixed method designs and qualitative research can help identify these mismatches and explore the less tangible incentive incompatibility of different stakeholders. Devising strategies within existing constraints that align the interests of all parties will eventually prove crucial in reaching the socially optimal solution.

6. Governance and Policy

In the context of the pandemic, the government needs to emphasize diplomatic routes for safeguarding workers' employment until the situation returns to a semblance of normality. Collaboration with migrant destination nations and the government is crucial for avoiding job loss. Experts have proposed measures such as sending representatives to host nations for discussions to protect migrant workers' employment during times of crisis. Such measures have borne fruit previously, such as during the 2008 global financial crisis (CPD, 2009).

Strategies aimed at the long run should also include maintaining positive diplomatic ties with current markets in Saudi Arabia (which remains the largest market for the workforce in Bangladesh) and expanding market diversity and tapping into newer labour markets. To avoid complications and dangers for migrant workers during crises such as COVID-19, the government can collaborate with international organizations such as the ILO and destination countries of migrant workers to preserve jobs, provide monthly wages following the contract, safe and decent living conditions in the working destination, and legal assistance in the event of disputes between workers and employers (CPD, 2009).

A standardised grievance mechanism is essential alongside strengthening labour attaches abroad. Such measures could help preserve migrant rights during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Trans-national collaboration could also prove fruitful. The existing "Colombo Process"¹⁰ and "Abu Dhabi Dialog"¹¹ should take the lead in providing comprehensive solutions to alleviate the adverse implications for migrant workers from all South Asian countries. The main objective of these frameworks is to share experiences, lessons learned, and best practices on overseas employment to formulate effective policies in the host and home countries of migrants. Novel research from Bangladesh can help these frameworks adopt and share necessary knowledge and policies to address migrants' sufferings both at home and in host countries.

While government policy until now has focused on the "quantity" of migration via higher remittances and departures, the "quality" of migration has gone relatively unnoticed. Qualitative research here can shed much-needed light to explore issues persistently leading to governance failures and plaguing migrant rights.

The GoB has been lacking in addressing the issue of outstanding salaries for migrant employees forced to return due to COVID-19. Uniform guidelines and legal frameworks must be established for evaluating cases of individuals who have been involuntarily returned by their destination nations. Tasneem Siddiqui (2021), the chairperson of RMMRU, advocated that in the case of an involuntary returnee, the government should verify that the workers' visas have not expired and that all outstanding bills have been paid.

Governments and civil society organizations may utilise this information to launch an international campaign for compensation and payment of unpaid wages. The balance of negotiation power here might very well be uneven among migrant-sending and receiving nations. Here again, the issue of labour rights violations rears its head, and the urgent need

¹⁰ The Colombo Process is a Regional Consultative Process on the management of overseas employment and contractual labour for countries of origins in Asia. It started with Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam as initial participating states but now it consists of 12 member states and eight observing countries. <https://www.colomboprocess.org/about-the-colombo-process/objectives>

¹¹ In 2008, Colombo Process members met with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations to explore temporary contract labor practices and policies in Asia. Then the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) was formed, and the ADD Declaration was issued to address challenges of temporary contractual labor mobility and to maximize the advantages of labor migration for all participating nations. https://mfasia.org/mfa_programs/advocacy/abu-dhabi-dialogue/

for a global solution arises. What incentives do different stakeholders have in addressing the issue, and to what extent does apathy lead to such outcomes? Why such coordination failures persist, despite efforts over decades, remains perplexing and requires further exploration.

The relative invisibility and silence of the migrant crisis in popular discourse partly stem from a lack of a voice on migrants' behalf. In contrast to the BGMEA, which has been proactive in lobbying for the RMG cause during the pandemic, there exists no such organization to espouse for international migrants. The issue here is partly structural: it is difficult to unify and coordinate when migrants are dispersed across continents and separated by space. Strengthening such organizational capabilities of migrants will be key in flagging their issues and perspectives. Research needs to investigate whether innovations on community-based models, where NGOs and GoB can partner, that can be federated at higher levels can be a fruitful solution.

The government stimulus in response to COVID-19 has also been inadequate. While cash and food assistance was provided to support disadvantaged families, the projects drew widespread criticism for their inadequacies and recurrent corruption. While the stimulus represents around three per cent of GDP, the estimated payments are negligible in comparison to lost foreign migration income (Barker et al., 2020). According to survey statistics, government aid covers no more than one month's salaries lost while migrating (Barker et al., 2020). Protests have already revealed the inadequacy of this aid. In April 2020, 147 rallies throughout 43 of Bangladesh's 64 districts demanded more economic support (Barker et al., 2020).

The slow response of airport authorities to the evolving crises and bureaucratic red tape have also added further layers of complication to the migration process. Migrants who intend to remigrate often require prompt COVID-19-testing. but despite government commitment, the establishment of a COVID-19 testing facility at the airport has been delayed by months (New Age, 2021). These delays during times of crisis might place migrants in even more precarious positions. A large part of the expense in migration is incurred in airline tickets for poor families, and rescheduling flights places an additional burden on these households. Moreover, employers often have strict schedules concerning

holidays, and missing work days have serious ramifications, including contract invalidation and job loss.

The issuance of passports was delayed severely during and after the COVID-19 shut down due to technical challenges with the Department of Immigration and Passports' MRP (Machine Readable Passport) system (TBS, 2021a). Returnees were unable to travel because of a lack of documentation. Even those who succeeded in getting the necessary papers were forced to spend an inordinate amount of time in lengthy line-ups at various government agencies and the Bangladesh airport (Rashid, 2021).

Corruption and inefficiency have so far received little attention from researchers despite numerous reports in the local media. Further research could elucidate the cost borne by these events in the context of the pandemic and their impact on migrant households. It could also spur relevant authorities to bring about much-required change in service provision to migrants.

7. Directions for Future Research

Using small-scale surveys, organizations like IOM, ILO, RMMRU, and BIGD have gathered information on the help that the returnees need, the challenges they face, and their skills and employment opportunities (BIGD, 2020; IOM, 2020; Siddique, 2021). However, there is nonetheless a scarcity of data, particularly on the national scale, on the migrant crisis. The GoB (GoB) does not maintain a central database tracking the number of returnee migrants. Statistics provided by BMET are insufficient. Nor is there any unified database recording the number of intended or potential departures. Investigation of the challenges of establishing a unified database of migrants is needed to discover ways to develop it and its implications for state and non-state stakeholders.

Thus, while narratives in newspapers abound on the crisis in migrant families, a detailed study investigating the impact on the migrant's life trajectory and the receiving community because of COVID-19 is still missing. Also, many migrants who came to the country to visit were stranded due to COVID-19. Yet there is still a paucity of data identifying these migrants and documenting the impact of this on their lives and livelihoods. Nor is there much work

on the state of migrants who did not return but stayed in host countries. Any attempts by governments and non-government actors to provide short/long term assistance to migrants face difficulties due to the lack of data and rigorous research on migrants and COVID-19.

In light of the issues mentioned above, it is critical to think through the following questions for future research. The primary stakeholders to engage with would-be MOEWOE, BMET, PKB from the government, NGOs like BRAC, and research organizations like BIGD, RMMRU, and ILO.

1. What strategies can be executed to ensure sustainable reintegration of migrants?

Research Questions	Relevant Stakeholders
a) Which cohorts of Bangladeshi migrants are more vulnerable and face reintegration challenges upon their return?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
b) What knowledge and skills do migrants possess when they return and how can these be used to reintegrate them into the Bangladeshi labour market?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
c) What kind of market products, investment, or savings opportunities will encourage migrants' to diversify their income and wealth?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU, PKB, MOEWOE
d) What is the impact of cash and loan assistance (and other assistance) provided by NGOs and GoB? How can these best be tailored to individual needs? Are these effective in the long run?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU

2. What vulnerabilities do migrants face concerning labour rights violations and governance during crises like the pandemic? What are the factors leading to such governance failure? What mechanisms can ensure migrants' safety and human rights in host communities? What policies can be implemented to ensure migrants can remigrate successfully without falling prey to dishonest middlemen?

Research Questions	Relevant Stakeholders
a) What incentives do different stakeholders in the sector have to fix governance issues, and how can their incentives be aligned?	BIGD, OKUP, ILO, RMMRU
b) What steps need to be taken to establish a structure for redressing migrants' complaints? What are the factors hindering the provision of justice for migrants? Will international co-operation play a vital role? What diplomatic role can GoB play?	BIGD, OKUP, ILO, RMMRU
c) Governance failures plagued the provision of assistance as well as the responsiveness of GoB to the crises. What lessons can this provide in tailoring efficient policies for the future?	BIGD, OKUP, ILO, RMMRU, PKB, MOEWOE
d) Given the high reported rates of intent to remigrate, how can various state and non-state actors cohesively act to ensure safe re-migration by migrants, instead of through irregular channels which often leave migrants susceptible to abuse and fraud?	BIGD, OKUP, ILO, RMMRU, MOEWOE, BOESL, BMET
e) The possible factors leading to the absence of a central migrant database remain critical for effective policymaking in the future.	BIGD, OKUP, ILO, RMMRU, MOEWOE, BOESL, BMET

Of particular concern for governance and reintegration are female migrants, given their pre-existing vulnerability even before the pandemic. To the best of our knowledge, no systematic survey has been done on female migrants and their working conditions, despite the booming female migration rate from the country of late. Significant knowledge gaps exist given the novelty of the sector. Research on female migrants can shed light on the impact of the pandemic on this subgroup, effective reintegration strategy, the vulnerabilities they face at home and abroad, as well as future female migration policy for the government.

3. What is the impact of the pandemic on migrants' families and communities? More specifically:

Research Questions	Relevant Stakeholders
a) Did migrants' families suffer from loss of income, increasing debt, food insecurities, and other consequences because of the pandemic?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
b) What was the impact of the sudden return of the household's main earner on household power dynamics and other social aspects?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
c) What was the impact on education, health, and other aspects of migrant families' children?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
d) How did the families cope with the sudden change in their economic and social life?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
e) What was the impact on other household earning members?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
f) Given certain migration-rich areas in the country, this sudden return can have consequences not only for the migrant family but for the community at large. The impact of the crises on the community remains underexplored.	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
g) To what extent has the community helped (via financial assistance, loans, etc.) during the crises? What has been the impact of the stigmatization of migrants during the onset of the pandemic?	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU

4. The magnitude and intensity of the crises are still unknown. GoB does not track the number of returnees or potential departures. However, such data can be acquired using airport records and manpower agencies. A systematic analysis of this is required to capture the gravity of the issue. While airport data will reveal the aggregate scenario in terms of departures and returns, it will not glean any insights into the reasons for return or the gravity of the crises. A nationally representative survey of migrant workers thus remains imperative to address any future policies aimed at reintegration and rehabilitation of migrant workers. There are also various sub-groups facing migration disruption due to different reasons:

Research Questions	Relevant Stakeholders
a) Migrants returning home due to job loss abroad	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
b) Migrants stranded at home while on a visit	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU
c) Expected migrants who were planning to leave	BIGD, ILO, RMMRU

5. Previous research indicates the long-run consequence of negative events in life.

Repatriation due to the covid crises can affect the aspirations, hopes, and confidences of migrant families. The psychological aspect of the crises and their intersection concerning future endeavour by these households needs to be examined closely. Stakeholders: BIGD, ILO, and RMMRU.

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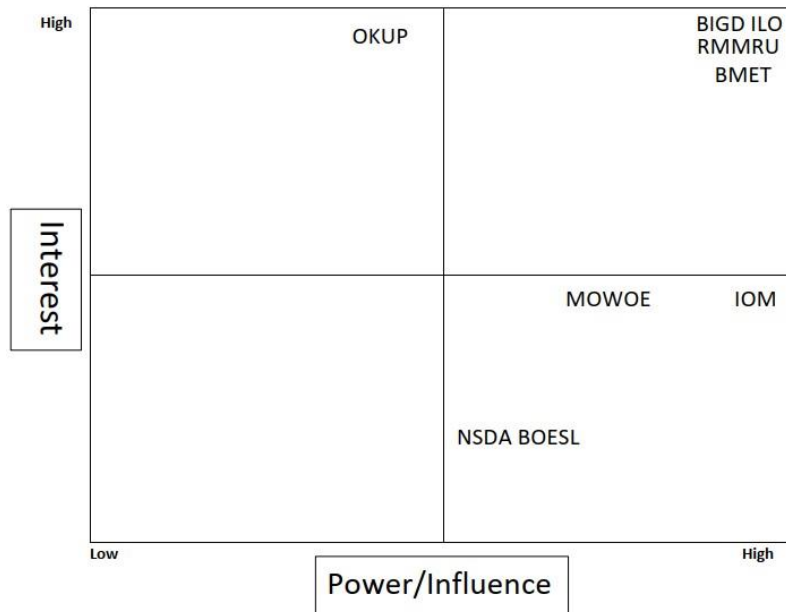
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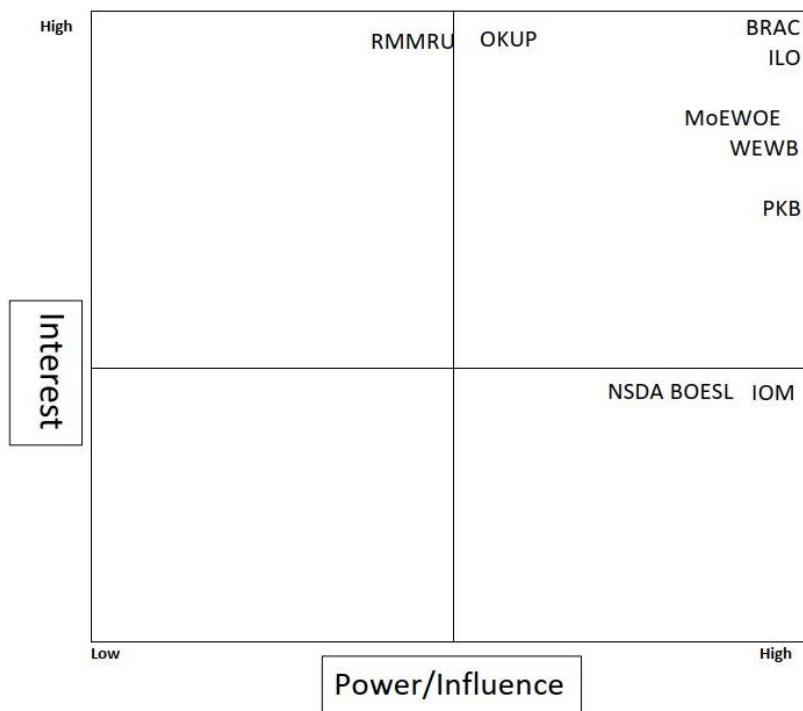
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Appendix



Graph 1: Stakeholder Matrix of organizations specialized in the research




Graph 2: Stakeholder Matrix of policy/program implementation of organizations

Bangladeshi migrant workers, listening to the instructions and orientations. A Bangladeshi official is here, he's translating the instructions of the camp's authorities, and explaining how to proceed with registration.

PHOTO

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Supported by the UK aid from the UK Government through the Covid-19 Learning, Evidence and Research Programme (CLEAR). CLEAR generates policy-relevant research and evidence to support Covid-19 recovery in Bangladesh. For more information, contact clear.bgd@ids.ac.uk or visit <https://www.covid-collective.net/clear/>.