

Vulnerable Communities during COVID-19: International Labour Migrants and Their Remained Behind Families in Bangladesh

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Abstract

International labour migration and remittances from migration have substantial influences on socio-economic livelihoods in Bangladesh like other developing countries. This paper investigates the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and their remained behind families in Bangladesh. Based on in-depth interviews the study shows that the vulnerabilities of migrants as a result of lockdown situation in accompanying countries manifested themselves as - job loss, less payment, state of captivity in working place. On the other hand, the remaining behind families faced additional challenges due to slowing down of remittance flows impacting daily food consumption, children's education, and health care. The study argues that the experiences and consequences of COVID-19 pandemic were different for women migrant workers and their families compared to their male counterparts. This is because of the differences in the nature and characteristics of migration between men and women along with differences in the location of women compared to males within the households. This study is based on 20 interviews of male and female migrants' households (a total 40) to capture these dimensions. Munshiganj and Manikganj districts were the focus areas for identifying the migrant household.

Keywords: Vulnerable community, labour migrants, remained behind family, COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh

Introduction

It is now well known that COVID-19 pandemic has created economic hardships all over the globe, especially for the migrant workers. ILO estimates that there are a total of 164 million migrant workers representing 4.7% of the global labour pool, half of whom are women. In some countries, the share of migrant workers is much larger and makes

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very significant contributions to family income, and national economies (ILO 2020), Bangladesh is one such country.

Bangladesh is a cheap labour exporting country in the world (IOM, 2020). By 2019 around 12 percent of the labour force was working in the overseas labour market (IOM, 2019). Bangladeshi workers are mostly male, the proportion of female migrants was about 15% in 2019, which came down from 19% in 2015 (BMET, online).

Migrating out of the country for work is an attractive and, in some ways, inevitable option for the country's workforce because of high rates of unemployment over the years and challenges in the agricultural sector. The unemployment rate has increased from 8% in 2013 to 10.6% in 2017 due to a hasty slowdown in the capacity of the manufacturing sector to generate occupations (GED, 2020, p.10). Due to the advancement of labour market abroad, overseas labour migration from Bangladesh was a key component of the 7FYP employment policy compared to the local job creation (GED, 2020, p.10). To promise the maximum profit to the national economy from international labour migration the GoB (Government of Bangladesh) has been taking various actions to facilitate the process of migration. Moreover, the demographic dividend has given Bangladesh an advantageous position to export labour force abroad (ILO, 2014).

Migrant workers play a significant role by sending remittances from abroad to their left-behind families. Remittance usually provides a cushion against the economic hardship of their families back home. The influx of remittances not only supports the left-behind families of migrants but also has a larger development impact on the country. Bangladesh was the 8th highest remittance recipient country among the 10 countries in the world and the 6th largest emigrating country in terms of its stock of migration in 2019 (World Bank, 2020a). In terms of net earnings, remittance is seen as the highest source of foreign currency (Bangladesh Bank, 2018). In the last six years, remittance inflows increased from US\$14 billion in FY2013-2014 to US\$16 billion in FY2018-2019 (UN Migration Network, 2020). The country's remittance earnings reached a record high of \$22.07 billion in just the last year in 2021 despite a slowdown in the earnings in the second half of the year, according to Bangladesh Bank data. The volume of remittances the country received in the previous fiscal year was \$21.74 billion (Bangladesh Bank, 2021). Due to this additional amount, the GDP of Bangladesh reached 6.5% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020a). The Government of Bangladesh believes that income transfers from the remittances have directly supported poverty reduction by increasing the income and consumption of the rural poor. (GED, 2020, P.13). Thus, remittances are

not only seen as a macro economic gain for the economies like Bangladesh but they are also associated with economic and social gains for the migrant households and as a means to address household poverty. Covid 19 has brought to the fore the limitations and weakness of such beliefs. The precarious nature of employment and scant entitlements in destination countries for migrants from the poor countries leaves very limited scope for the migrant families to experience economic shocks in any manner that is distinctly different from the labouring non-migrant households.

However, with the advent of the novel coronavirus, Bangladesh like other South Asian countries started experiencing a lower inflow of remittance as a result of disruptions in global business. Due to this disturbance, the host country also sends back migrants to their home countries. TBS (2020) reports that after the COVID-19 outbreak within a few months about 666,000 Bangladeshi labours were sent back home and about 2 million faced possible deportation. Sorkar (2020) in his article quoted the speech of Giorgi Gigauri, chief of the IOM mission in Bangladesh

"For many of these migrant workers, it was not a happy homecoming as they have lost their source of income due to the pandemic outbreak and it is uncertain that they will be able to return back again to their work abroad until the global labour market recovers from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic."

This continuous uncertain situation of COVID 19 and lowering the demand of migrant workers or causing a sudden loss of their income creates a vulnerable situation for the migrant families. In the context of Bangladesh, remittance is often the single source of income for households and there is no one else to earn except the migrant worker in some families. Therefore, without regular remittances inflow, it is difficult for these households to carry on daily consumption and other necessities like food, medical, education clothing, etc. (Chowdhury and Chakraborty 2021). Though, the GoB has taken various measures to protect the livelihood of the migrants. In particular, it has created numerous funds to disburse loans on easy terms and at low-interest rates for return migrants (UNDP, 2020). To get an idea about the well-being of the return migrants during the time of the pandemic, BRAC (2020) migration program conducted a survey and stated that 91% of returned migrants have not received any government or non-government assistance after returning.

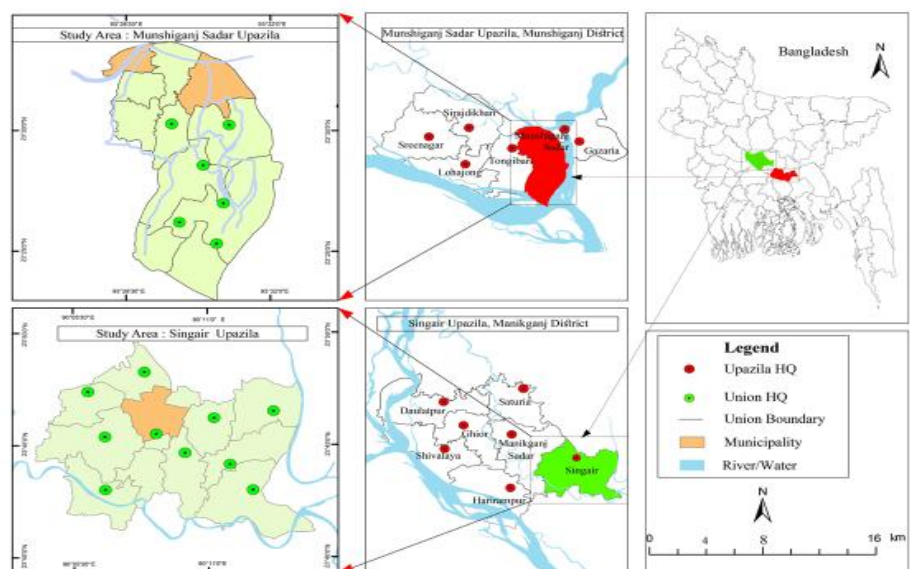
This study is a small attempt to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers and their left-behind families. Specific questions that this study tries to answer are:

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- What has been the impact of COVID 19 on left-behind families of migrant households? What are the specific problems, migrants and their families are facing as a result of the COVID-19 crisis?
- Are these challenges in any way different for female migrant households and male migrant households? If yes, what are the plausible reasons for the same?
- What are the coping strategies of migrant households to deal with the financial crunch?

Study area and research methods

For the field survey, this study concentrates on two districts, Munshiganj and Manikganj both of which have a high incidence of male and female migrants. Based on the population to migrant ratio, Munshiganj and Manikganj stand first in the ranking for the concentration of male migration (15.9%) and female migration (3.5%)(Computed data from BMET 2019 and BBS 2011). The national average of male migration is 8.17% and for female migration, it is 1.03%, based on BMET data. Munshiganj Sadar Upazila (sub-district) and Singair Upazila (sub-district) have 31% and 45% of male and female shares of migration from the Munshiganj and Manikganj districts respectively (BMET 2019). Two villages from each Upazila (sub-district) have been chosen to pick the respondents. The respondents come from two villages, male migrants are from Ramergaon in Munshiganj Sadar sub-district and women migrants are from Medulia of Singair, sub-district. Both the districts are the neighbouring districts of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. These districts have diverse kinds of economic activities and in many ways, perhaps, representative of the economic and social conditions in the country.



Map: Study area

Information on the experience of dealing with the COVID was collected from the left behind families over phone. The key criterion for choosing the migrant household was that the migrants should be married members and who have a minimum of one year migration experience before COVID-19 and in the last one year the family has been receiving the remittances from the migrants. With the advancement in communications, the information collated from the migrant household about the migrant is treated as being collected from the migrant himself or herself since the families are in day-to-day touch with the migrant.

Profile of the migrants in the sample

For women migrants in our sample, the important destinations were Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Dubai. For migrants among men Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Kuwait were also important destinations. Only one male migrant in our sample had migrated to South Africa (figure 1).

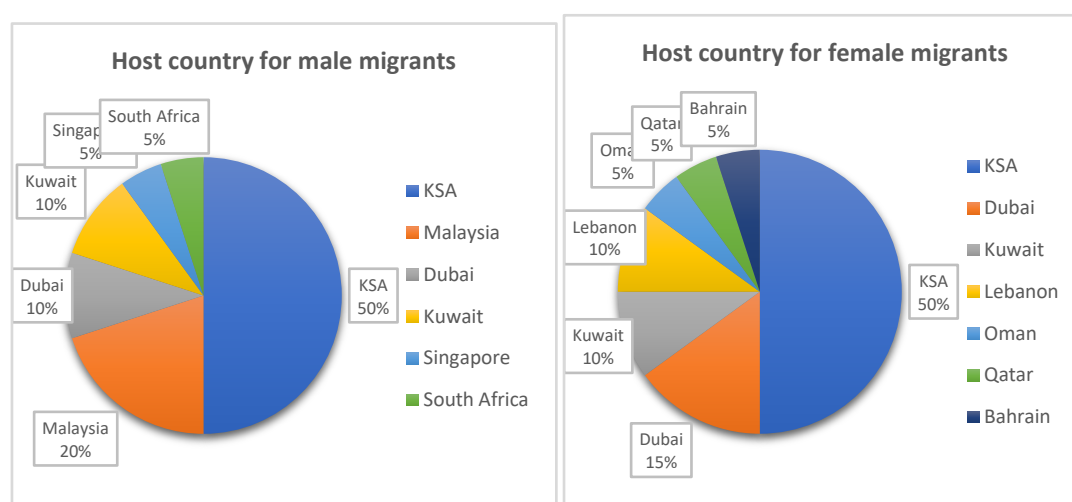


Figure 1: Place of destination of migrants

Source: fieldwork, 2021

Amongst our respondents 40, only 2 migrants had a history of migration before 2000. 12 men had migrated between 2000 and 2010 and remaining even more recently. Out of the 20 women, migrants 18 had migrated in recent years, particularly in 2010. Interestingly, even in this small sample, the pattern of migration is consistent with the patterns in the secondary data provided by BMET¹.

¹According to BMET statistics, the share of female migrants was only 1% until 2004 and 5% until 2009, after that the number started to increase and reached its peak in 2015, close to 19%. BMET statistics also show from 2000-2018 (15 years) top five destinations for men were UAE, KSA, Oman, Malaysia, and Qatar while for females KSA, Jordan, UAE, Lebanon, and Oman. The key common destinations (for both men and women) of Bangladeshi migrants are Middle East countries because of the strong social network and low cost of migration. A small proportion of males go to South-East and South Asian countries where the female was unseen.

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Out of the 40 migrants we reached out to only 4 tested covid positive. 29 reported that they had got vaccinated which was arranged by their employer. The vaccination rate was a bit higher for women migrants. For those who did not get vaccines, the families said that the key reason for that was their lack of legal status in work or inadequate documentation, that was necessary to get vaccinated.

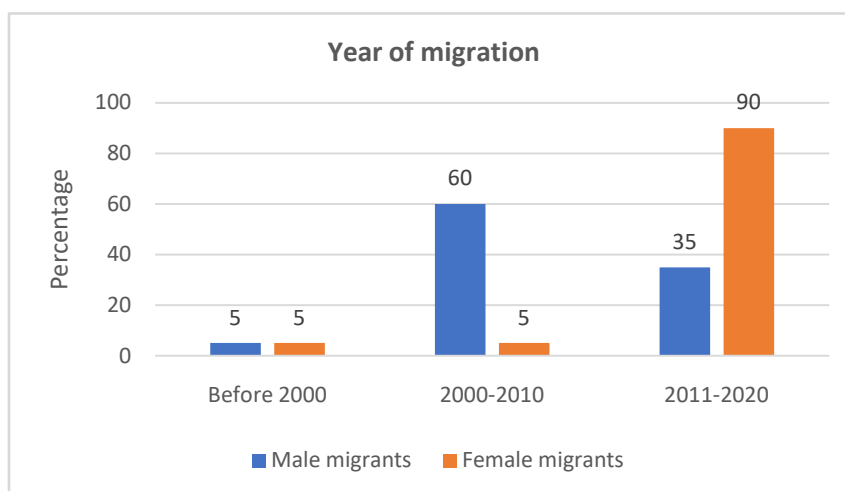


Figure 2: Year of migration

Source: Field study, 2021

Work status, income loss, and experiences at the workplace:

Looking at the work profile of the migrants we found in our survey that men were involved in diverse set of activities in the host countries – like construction workers, cooks, tailors, Drivers, and cleaners. A bulk of women worked as domestic help, 16 out of 20. When asked about their job status the left-behind families reported that during COVID, 13 out of 40 have lost their previous jobs. The situation was worst for the male migrants, 12 out of 20 were without jobs now and amongst women, only one had lost her job. The nature of occupation, as reported by the left-behind families of women migrants, might explain this significant difference in job loss. Women as domestic helper are likely to be living with their employer and work and home is likely to be the same for them. This might explain why employers were less inclined to take away their jobs. 3 women migrants who worked in hospitals as nurse or attendants also continued with their jobs, perhaps because their skills were much in demand during the pandemic. The distinct occupation profile of women migrant workers makes their experience of job loss during the pandemic distinctly different from men. However, there is one disturbing dimension of this work arrangement that was reported in our survey. Two families reported that the women were wanting to return home, but they were being forced to work and not allowed to return home by their employers. The absence of written work contracts for migrant workers exposes them to such risks of forced work.

In the case of 12 men who lost their jobs, 11 could manage new job or got back to their previous job after lockdown and the remaining two suffered because of their visas had expired as migrant workers. One man and one woman, in our sample of 40, were stuck abroad without job. They are surviving with support from their social networks. Their families said that both of them wish to return to Bangladesh soon. Nineteen workers out of forty got reduced payments during the COVID period. Here again, 16 of these were men and 3 women. In fact, two families of women migrants reported that they earned additional money for housework during the Covid period. Amongst the 16 men, members of seven families said that their family members earned less because their work schedule got changed, and six families said that the earnings were less because during Covid the possibility of overtime had dried. Another way in which families reported how the earnings were impacted was the withdrawal of financial support to get work permit, *Akama*. Annual payment to get this permission costs 300,000 BDT and this burden has now fallen on the workers themselves. This has reduced their earnings substantially. For women, nonpayment of salary was reported by two of them. In one instance, the employer deducted 100 Saudi Real from her salary for the use of Wi-Fi, something that became a necessity for her during the Pandemic to be in touch with her family. This singular instance reveals the inhumanity inherent in work contracts of migrant workers, where the employers are unwilling to support even bare survival expenses that are needed in a Pandemic.

The impact on left-behind families of this reduced earnings or loss of employment during the Pandemic is substantial. The exact nature of the reduction in financial flows to left-behind families can be better understood if they can be seen with the inter and intra-household differences across the 40 families that are covered in this survey.

Overall, the 40 migrant households in our sample together had 157 family members. An average of 3.9 members, excluding migrants. For both men and women migrants, the living was equally divided as nuclear or extended family. The age distribution of migrant families suggests that all of them are very young families. Nearly 50% of the household members were children, in the age group of 0-18 years. Within male migrant households, the proportion of children was 53% and in the case of female migrant households, it was 43%. 38% of the population in the migrant households was in the working age. In case of female migrant households, the working-age population was 41% compared to the 35% for the male migrant households. The Elderly constituted around close to 14% of migrant households' population.

From amongst the working-age population, nearly 50% (30 out of 157) were earning. The proportion of earning members was much higher for female migrant families. This could be because, in the male migrant

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families, the main breadwinner could be the migrant himself, and given the socio-cultural milieu women are expected to stay at home and provide care giving for other left-behind family members of the male migrant. While in the case of women migrants, even though they may be making substantial share of family income as migrant workers, their income is likely to be perceived as supplementary income, and the left-behind family members, in particular, the male members continue to have greater workforce participation rates. Among the left-behind members, those who were the earning members of the family, most of their monthly income was in the range of 5000BD to 10000BDT per month. Around 32% earned between 10000 BDT to 15000 BDT. Around 8% of migrant household members earned less than 5000BDT, and all of them were members of female migrant households. Twin facts of higher work participation rates among female migrant households and very low earnings of these members suggest that for these households, migrant women were the main breadwinners in these families. Per capita income of migrant households as reported by left-behind families was 1788 BDT. For female migrant families, the reported income was 2720 BDT and in the male migrant families, the per capita income reported was only 743 BDT. In the 20 male migrant households, there were only 5 local earning members spread across 4 households. So, the dependency on remittance was much higher in male migrant households compared to female migrant households. In female migrant households, 19 out of 20 households had earning members in the home country. However, most of them were doing informal and low-paid job. It is important to mention here that during covid times majority of these informal workers lost their job and there is increased dependence on remittances from women migrants. In a few cases, these families have fallen back on loan for their survival.

Education and health impact on left-behind families and their coping strategy

In 40 migrant households, there were 58 school going children. 54% of them were studying in primary schools, 37% in high school, and 9% were enrolled in college. In male migrant families, 66% were in elementary school while in the female migrant families 52% were in secondary school. Sixty one percent of migrant household children were enrolled in private schools and 39% in government school. Children's enrollment rate in private schools was higher among male migrant households (71%) while in female migrant families it was 52 percent. The survey reveals that 33% of female migrant households and 13% of male migrant households spent up to 1000 BDT for children's education. 58% spent between 1001 BDT to 3000 BDT on education. Most of them were from male migrant families. 23% of male migrant households in our survey communicated that they were inclined to pay above 3000 BDT for the

proper education of their children, while only 15% in female migrant households were willing to spend such amounts. Male migrant households spend more on their children's education compared to female migrant households.

83% of migrant households had no smartphone, no internet line (88%), and 80% said that they had no family members who could hand hold children to participate in the new method of learning viaonline education. Almost all migrant household respondents mentioned that due to outbreak of corona virus and closure of schools, their children's education has immensely suffered. For their children, participation via online class was not easier due to the lack of basic infrastructure and access to phone. Many mentioned that the only option for their children to study with the help of home tutors during COVID time has also run into trouble. Due to limited intermittent or reduced inflow of remittances paying the private tutors has become a challenge. About 43% of children's education was suffering, in our sample, due to reduction in the inflow of remittance. This impact on paying capacity for children's education varied from 60% in male migrant households to 17% in female migrant households. 63% of them stopped private tuition of their children. Two respondents in male migrant families cited that they shifted their children from private school to government school to reduce the expense²One out of 20 male migrant families decided to stop schooling their daughter and decided to marry her off. In the case of female migrant households, there was a case of a dropout of a son found who has started driving to meet the family expenses.

Our survey also reveals that the reduction of remittance inflow has impacted the access to health services too. Approximately 35% of migrant families said that their access to health care services came down. 55% of male migrant households' and 15% of female migrants' families reported that they were struggling for proper health care. The key reason is that to meet other essential family expenses, in times of declining incomes, migrant family members had stopped going to the doctor for their regular treatment. Three out of twenty male migrant wives reported that they took help from their relatives for treatment. One migrant's wife said that she has been forced to not take her prescription and reduce her prescribed dosage of medicine because of reduced family expenses.

Reduced remittances and impact on food for left-behind families

Among the 40 migrant households, 29 families reported in our survey that their food consumption declined during the covid period. This they said was in comparison with the food intake before the pandemic. The

²In Bangladesh, primary education is free for all, and girls' have free education up to grade 10.

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intake of food by children was also reported by respondents. Within the male migrant families, the reporting suggests that their situation was worse. Around 85% of male migrant households reported difficulties of getting regular food in their limited budget while in case of female migrant families 60% reported reduction in food intake. Two male migrant families said that they have moved to their natal house to get meal for 3 times a day.

Humayra, 30 years old migrant's wife shared her experience

"...My son is an autistic baby, he becomes sick frequently. For his treatment, I need money. I am feeling shy to say there was no rice or dal at my home, and no one will trust me. First, I need to feed my family after that treatment."

Male migrant families reported that they were getting food help either from extended families or from their natal house. Two migrant's wives mentioned that they were purchasing grocery food with due payment and they were hoping to pay the due payment of shop after getting remittance from their husbands. In terms of female migrant families, left-behind husbands said 90% of them took *kisti* (loan) to meet the daily food consumption of the family because most of the husbands were not the direct receiver of remittance. Their migrant wives used to send remittance to their parents or others so that they can allocate money easily according to their choice from abroad.

Conclusion

This study is based on interviews of both male and female migrant households in the districts of Munshiganj and Manikganj, the two most significant areas in Bangladesh exporting men and women to other countries. Information on the experiences of dealing with the COVID 19 was collected from the left behind families on phone. The premise of this study is that with the advancement in communications the information collated from the migrant household is as good as being collated from the migrant. The families are in day-to-day touch with the migrant and therefore in a position to reveal the work experiences of the migrants. On work status, income loss, and experiences at the workplace let us know that male migrant were involved in a diverse set of activities in the host countries like construction workers, cooks, tailors, drivers, and cleaners while the majority of women worked as a domestic worker. Since the work pattern is diverse for male migrants, the situation of job loss was also worst for them compare to female migrants. Because of distinct occupation profile of women migrant workers, their experience of job loss and reduction of payments during the pandemic was less than men.

Reduced work time and no chance for overtime was the main reason for the less earnings of men. Overall, the experience of female migrants during COVID 19 pandemic was better compare to male migrants in host countries.

In case of left-behind families, due to limited intermittent or reduced inflow of remittances expense capacity for children's education varied from 60% in male migrant households to 17% in female migrant households. Stopped private tuition, and shifted children from private school to government school was the main coping strategy to lessen the education expense of migrant households. There were also some cases of dropout from school by migrants' children who have ultimately started paid work to assist the family. Migrant family members told that they were reluctant to visit doctor for their regular treatment because they did not have extra money to buy medicine. Food intake of migrant family members also declined during the covid period in comparison with the food intake before the pandemic. Around 85% of male migrant households and 60% of female migrant households reported difficulties in getting regular food in their limited budget. Male migrant families had the option to move to their natal house or get food help either from extended families or from their natal house. But, left behind husbands, used to take *kisti* (loan) to meet the daily food consumption of the family.

The study found that the differences in the nature and characteristics of migrants between men and women, along with differences in the destination and work pattern of them explain the diversity in experience of men and women migrants. The vulnerabilities of left-behind families due to reduced earnings or loss of employment during the pandemic is also substantial and unique for male and female because of their socio-economic condition of households. In male migrant families, the rate of earning member was very low and completely depend on migrant's remittances. On the contrary, in female migrant households, left behind male members continue to have greater workforce participation rates. However, most of them were doing informal and low-paid job who lost those job in covid situation and increased their dependency on remittances from women migrants and also these families have fallen back on loan for their survival.

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