

A Rapid Assessment of the Impacts of COVID-19 on Overseas Labor Migration: Findings from Bangladesh

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Abstract : Overseas labor migration is currently one of the most important contributors to the economy of Bangladesh and is a highly profitable form of labor for Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries. In 2019, 700,159 migrant workers from Bangladesh traveled abroad for employment. GCC countries are a major destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers, with Saudi Arabia being the most common destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers since 2016. Despite the high rate of migration between these countries every year, the OLR industry remains complex and often leaves migrants susceptible to human trafficking, forced labor, and modern slavery. While the prevalence of forced labor among Bangladeshi migrants in GCC countries is still unknown, the IOM estimates international migrant workers comprise one fourth of the victims of forced labor. Moreover, the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic has exposed migrant workers to additional adverse situations, making them even more vulnerable to forced labor and health risks. This paper presents findings from a rapid assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 on OLR in Bangladesh, with an emphasis on the increased risk of forced labor among vulnerable migrant worker populations, particularly women. Rapid reviews are a useful approach to swiftly provide actionable evidence for informed decision-making during emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team conducted semi-structured key information interviews (KIIs) with a range of stakeholders, including government officials, local NGOs, international organizations, migration researchers, and formal and informal recruiting agencies, to obtain insights on the multi-faceted impacts of COVID-19 on the OLR sector. The research team also conducted a comprehensive review of available resources, including media articles, blogs, policy briefs, reports, white papers, and other online content, to triangulate findings from the KIIs. After screening for inclusion criteria, a total of 110 grey literature documents were included in the review. A total of 31 KIIs were conducted, data from which was transcribed and translated from Bangla to English, and analyzed using a detailed codebook. Findings indicate that there was limited reintegration support for returnee migrants. Facing increasing amounts of debt, financial insecurity, and social discrimination, returnee migrants, were extremely vulnerable to forced labor and exploitation. Growing financial debt and limited job opportunities in their home country will likely push migrants to resort to unsafe migration channels. Evidence suggests that women, who are primarily domestic works in GCC countries, were exposed to increased risk of forced labor and workplace violence. Due to stay-at-home measures, women migrant workers were tasked with additional housekeeping working and subjected to longer work hours, wage withholding, and physical abuse. In Bangladesh, returnee women migrant workers also faced an increased risk of domestic violence.

Keywords : forced labor, migration, gender, human trafficking

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