

Does COVID-19 have profound and long-term economic consequences on the migrant workers?

Among the plethora of health risks that the coronavirus has exposed us to in the last eight months, we see worldwide unemployment, layoffs, and furloughs. And, from the very beginning of the global shutdown, the brunt of these work disruptions is facing by the migrant workers worldwide. Many Bangladeshi migrant workers across countries are subjected to salary cuts and many even lost their jobs. Yet their question on return remains uncertain considering the lack of income-generating opportunities in Bangladesh which has become even more dearth due to the coronavirus fallout.

In light of the above mentioned situation, OKUP conducted a rapid assesment among Bangladeshi migrant workers using online survey tools to enable feedback directly from the migrant workers in destination countries. 40 migrant workers working in Saudi Arabia, Maldives, Qatar, Oman, Malaysia, Singapore, UAE, and Lebanon voluntarily participated in the online survey. Based on OKUP's response data, the findings are:

■ As of September 2020, nearly one third (32.50 percent) of migrant workers staying in their destination countries reported that they have lost their job and another one third (32.50 percent) have irregular work since the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic. These workers are in a financially precarious situation even before the pandemic.

■ 35 percent migrant workers have regular work and income so far.

■ More than 47 percent of migrant workers want to stay in the destination countries and do not seek return even though they have experienced job loss, income reduction, and furloughs.

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As the coronavirus pandemic cripples the global economic activity, the closure of business companies in the Persian Gulf region has hit Bangladeshi migrant workers particularly hard. For covering any shortfalls in their (destination countries) own nationals' wages, many companies have also broken their contracts with migrant workers to lower salaries, make workers take unpaid leave, and, force them into the utmost uncertainty.

As lockdowns around the world increased unemployment and underemployment, overseas labor has become even cheaper. Our survey data shows that around 68 percent of migrant workers now earn little more than a subsistence wage and they have no other means to protect their incomes if they lose their jobs.

Covid-19 and the resulting economic downturn have also caused termination to a huge portion of the overseas jobs in construction sites, business companies, and forced many Bangladeshi workers to return to their homes. However, such a return of migrant workers does not indicate any shortage of labor in overseas employment rather it increases, as our survey shows, the possibility of exploitation of the remaining workers.

The pandemic situation has pushed at least 65 percent of the migrants into very irregular and sporadic works in more precarious situations than the early months of shutdown.

As the emergency and lockdown are still in force in many destination countries, these workers now perform less essential tasks and face an increased risk of losing their jobs.

The survey finds that more than 32 percent of these workers are now being furloughed and paid their salaries very irregularly.

For migrant workers, the economic damage from the coronavirus brings uncertainty and a dilemma to choose between return or stay in the destination countries.

OKUP's finding reflects on the emotional pain of losing jobs which also includes grief and desperation.

Return? Is it an option to cope with economic shocks?

More than 52.5 percent of workers are growing increasingly pessimistic as their income losses spread beyond any chances to restore their livelihood from the presently closed-overseas employment. These migrant workers and their families now believe that the layoffs taking place can be permanent rather than temporary ones.

As more than 32 percent of Bangladeshi workers have been laid off, they must wait for an indefinite period as companies struggle with the economic effects of the crisis.

OKUP's survey shows that around half of these people who seek to return, belong to the age group of 18-25. Their migration period is less than 4 years, and it seems that they have more physical and emotional energy inked to finding new local jobs upon their return to Bangladesh.

The other half is aged between 41- 50 and as their age limit for overseas migration is gradually closing, they significantly exhibit a bleak outlook towards their stay. Without alternative income sources in the destination countries, many of these workers and their families in Bangladesh have hardly any means to survive. Fearing that such long-term unemployment could prolong their economic recovery, these workers now seek to return and try local economic activities.

Why no return? Are they seeing the light at the end of the tunnel?

So far, only 35 percent of our surveyed workers are fully employed and have a regular source of income in various countries.

Strikingly, it sets the bar higher for the groups who do not seek to return Bangladesh during this pandemic. Even though many workers on insecure contracts are facing income loss and much greater risks of abuse and exploitation, more than 47 percent of migrants want to stay in the destination countries.

The reasons are multifold. Despite facing challenges, they remain hopeful that their job losses could be temporary. They rely on sporadic work to make ends meet.

For migrant workers job prospects in Bangladesh during this pandemic have become uncertain. So, back home, the situation could be even worse with no income source and these migrant workers would need to fight harder to adapt to the current economic shocks if they return.

On the other hand, uncertainty about their remigration is looming large. At least 42 percent of our survey people informed that if they return now, it would be very difficult to migrate again considering the high cost they already paid for migration. Besides, due to such untimely return, many are likely to remain highly indebted as they managed the migration cost simply by taking loans. They are yet to pay off the money they owed. Moreover, they suspect that upon their arrival, they are less likely to get any chance to use the skills they developed during their work overseas.

They also risk that low-income opportunities in Bangladesh can put much pressure on their livelihoods and entrap them in regular debts. Consequently, as we ask our respondents of their future plans, around 37 percent of workers positively responded to re-migrate to lift their families from the economic hardship that the pandemic situation aggravated. 28 percent of our entire surveyed workers cannot just return to their homes due to loss of income. Many migrant workers are also trapped in lockdown and cannot return owing to travel bans or reduced number of flights.

What is the decision of Undocumented workers?

Among our total respondents, 30 percent of migrant workers are staying in the destination countries on so-called free visas. Among these undocumented workers, 59 percent of workers seek return as they are suffering massive damage due to job cuts.

On the other hand, the remaining undocumented workers want to stay and continue their sporadic work in the destination countries. If they return, as they responded, it would be very difficult for them to re-migrate. Covid-19, thus, has profound and long-term economic consequences for all of these migrant workers we surveyed.

Recommendations

Although the online survey we conducted is fairly small, the responses we analyzed reflect an alarming crackdown on the livelihoods of the migrant workers.

More than 275,000 workers have returned so far amid this pandemic, and many of them are yet to settle any livelihood opportunities in Bangladesh.

With little improvement of employment-generating opportunities, the compulsory return of the undocumented workers will only weigh down the country's national capacity. Although we are trying every little step to improve the migrant workers' conditions better, *we like to recommend the government agencies to take the following actions in a coordinated way:*

■ The government should open multi-lateral dialogue with the government of destination countries, employers, business partners, and other stakeholders so that the employers adhere to the job contracts with the migrants. Negotiation and bargaining with these actors can help avoid the temporary suspension of the regular migrant workers in this hard time. The government must ensure that furloughed workers are paid off, and the laid-off workers can access any employment and living wages to meet their ends.

■ The government of Bangladesh has to be proactive for regularizing the status of undocumented migrant workers who are staying in the destination countries. The government will strengthen its diplomatic relationship with the destination countries so that the deportations or enforced returns of these workers can be brought to an end

■ The government of Bangladesh must ensure timely access to information and social services for migrant workers and their families. The government has to relay information to the migrant workers on legal support, managing the return, etc.

■ National economic policies should be taken with the utmost priority to lift the migrant workers from the current dire situation. The government must ensure comprehensive support and services together with the already declared reintegration loan by the Probashi Kallayan Bank for sustainable reintegration of the returnees.

Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) is a community based migrants organization, operates on the principle of human rights first priority based on gender justice, substantive equality and non-discrimination. Believing in that the unity of migrant workers enhances their empowerment and contributes to the protection of their rights and dignity, OKUP came up as a platform of returnee migrant workers in 2004.

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