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Research Article

Bangladeshi migrants in the Middle East: Precariatisaton, leave and return amid COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: The Middle Eastern countries host a large proportion of workers originating from Bangladesh. Every year thousands of Bangladeshi workers migrate to these countries with a hope for secure employment, better income and better savings. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected Bangladesh migrant workers' working and living conditions. Due to stressful conditions at work and daily life struggles, many of these migrant workers were forced to leave their work and return home helplessly. Joblessness, leave and return of these migrant workers during the pandemic mark an absence of labour protection. In this context, this paper examines how Bangladeshi migrants experienced multiple forms of pressures and insecurities throughout their return journey from the Middle East during the beginning of the pandemic. The paper analyses Bangladesh's initial COVID-19 responses for its returnee migrants. Empirical evidence for this paper is built upon the primary data collected through in-depth interviewing of seventeen male and three female returnee migrants. Their personal experience narratives confirm that their prolonged joblessness due to the outbreak of the pandemic increased their vulnerability in many ways and thus made them unprotected. However, they received very inadequate assistance from Bangladesh missions in the Middle East. Their helplessness and absolute dependence on their personal sources for processing their return, as this paper argues, subjected them to deception and exploitation. The original contribution of this paper helps understand immediate responses of the Middle East as well as Bangladesh for migrants amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS: Migrant workers, Middle East, Precariatisation, Deception, Exploitation, COVID-19

I. INTRODUCTION

Many Bangladeshi migrants working in the Middle East have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unprecedent workplace disruption and persistent daily struggle for survival in deteriorating living conditions due to the outbreak of the pandemic led to their precariatisation which eventually forced them to leave their workplace and return home. For these migrants, returning home was not a straightforward process as they had to go through various complicated changes and restrictions involving international travel arrangements and social distancing practices amid the pandemic. Their personal experience with health testing and quarantine requirements on return to their home country reveals not only a high risk of contracting the coronavirus but also inadequacy of coordination in emergency responses for them. This paper examines how Bangladeshi migrants experienced multiple forms of pressures and insecurities throughout their return journey from the Middle East during the beginning of the pandemic. In doing this, the paper analyses Bangladesh's initial COVID-19 responses for its returnee migrants. Empirical evidence for this paper is built upon the primary data collected through in-depth interviewing of seventeen male and three female returnee migrants. Their personal experience narratives confirm that their prolonged joblessness due to the outbreak of the pandemic increased their vulnerability in many ways and thus made them unprotected. However, they received very inadequate assistance from Bangladesh missions in the Middle East. Their helplessness and absolute dependence on their personal sources for processing their return, as this paper argues, subjected them to deception and exploitation. Also, their post-arrival experience shows that apathetic facilities helped them pass through health screening and quarantine measures in their home country effortlessly but augmented their health risks associated with COVID-19.

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II. THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALISATION

In the Middle East, Bangladesh has a large migrant population serving in various important sectors. Since the mid 1970s more than 77 percent of Bangladeshi migrants headed to the Gulf states such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which are heavily reliant on foreign labour. Bangladeshi migrant workers are believed to be the second largest group in the GCC region, behind migrants from India. These migrant workers sent US$19.69 billion remittance from January to November 2020 (RMMRU, 2020; The Financial Express, 2020). While this huge amount of remittance substantially contributed to the growing economy of Bangladesh, the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected work and life of the migrant workers who earned and sent the money to their home country. During the beginning of the pandemic, the public-health emergency situation created serious challenges to the Bangladeshis working overseas, particularly those in low skilled categories in various Gulf countries. It resulted in migrants losing jobs in a vast array of sectors including construction, tourism, transportation, retail, hospitality and entertainment. A large number of migrant workers was laid off by their employers due to unavailability of work. Loss of employment coupled with non-payment of wages and other entitlements such as end service benefits and involuntary repatriation exacerbated the plight of these migrants. In the absence of official data, it has been reported in print and electronic media that thousands of migrants returned home between the beginning of January and August of 2020 when flights were suspended and migrant workers' mobility was restricted. According to Bangladesh Wage Earners' Welfare Board, over 327,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers, mostly from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, returned home from April to November. Of them, 287,000 were male and 40,000 were female migrants. Apart from KSA and UAE, Bangladeshi migrants also came back home from Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Iraq, Maldives, Malaysia, Jordan and Lebanon (Bhuyan, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent phenomenon and therefore there is hardly any empirical study on Bangladeshi migrant workers' working and living conditions during the pandemic in the Middle East. Various surveys including IOM (2020) and BRAC (2020) were conducted to assess the livelihood status of the returnee migrants. Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) conducted various surveys to examine returnee migrants' livelihoods and their household dynamics. Returnee reintegration was a common theme for all these studies. However, the study this paper is built upon was set to empirically examine the working and living conditions of Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East, particularly during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. It aimed to produce new knowledge on sufferings of Bangladeshi migrant workers due to lack of labour protection in the Middle East. This paper is therefore theoretically positioned in the concept of precarious work which is generally characterised by high levels of labour insecurity and lack of labour protection. It is a prominent theme in recent employment relations and labour migration research [1, 2].

Although the concept of precarious work is being increasingly used in academic and activist research, theoretical conceptualisations of precarious work are ambiguous because of conceptual slippage and confusions that have led the academics to either misinterpret or entirely overlook the theoretical foundations of precarious work [3]. The definition of precarious work is vague and multifaceted due to the multidimensional nature of precarious work and the differences in its understanding which typically depends on the geographic, economic and social structure of the political systems and labour markets. As a result, the concept of precarious work has been extensively debated and refined [1-5]. A variety of terms, such as precarity, informalisation, casualisation, contractualisation, flexibilisation, nonstandard, irregular, subcontracted, atypical and contingent work or employment, have emerged from particular national contexts. Precarious work has generally been conceptualised to include all forms of work involving job insecurity, limited statutory entitlements, both in the workplace and to social benefits, low wages and high risks of ill health.

As the ILO [5] mentions:

> *Although a precarious job can have many faces, it is usually defined by uncertainty as to the duration of employment, multiple possible employers or a disguised or ambiguous employment relationship, a lack of access to social protection and benefits usually associated with employment, low pay, and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and bargaining collectively (p. 27).*

Precarious work is a multi-dimensional concept. Labour researchers have often theorised precarious work in connection to the structural changes of employment arrangements introduced by neoliberal developments. Political economists and economic sociologists, in particular, have explored how profit motivations had let the employers introduce flexible employment practices that cut costs and shift risks onto individual workers [6-10]. Researchers in the fields of sociology of work have associated the concept of precarious work to workplace conditions and the quality of employment. They have referred precarious work to involve high employment

insecurity, low regulatory protection, low wages, and a low level of employee control over wages, hours and work conditions [11, 12].

In spite of theoretical debates and confusions, precarious work has been frequently conceptualised as employment that is uncertain, unpredictable and risky in which the workers bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections [3, 8, 10, 11, 13-15]. Defined in this way, the concept of precarious work not only encompasses the work conditions but a range of emerging employment arrangements that the workers are forced to accept. Among them, outsourced and subcontracted work arrangements are the key work arrangements, introduced by neoliberal policies, to attribute to contemporary rise of precarious work [16-21]. Precarious work is characterised by diversity of individual work experiences and their impacts may differ from one society to the other but they are fundamentally same in terms of diminishing rights. In particular, the migrant labourers experiencing precarious work face extreme forms of labour exploitation that flexbilise, subordinate and coerce them to continue with widespread insecurities in employment arrangements [8, 10, 14]. Because the process of labour management has important effects on the migrant labourers' working and living conditions, this paper examines precarious work in this important area and builds on conceptualisations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and labour protection in the Middle East. It examines the connections between a pandemic and precarious work and in doing so casts new light on migrant workers and their sufferings during a pandemic.

Given the complexity of defining precarious work, this paper limits its scope to the nature of employment relationships characterised by poor work conditions. It measures precarious work through four dimensions of precariousness that represent instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social or economic vulnerability, as suggested by Rodgers [23]:

(a) Temporal dimension: low certainty of continuity and availability of work;

(b) Organisational dimension: lack of workers' (individual and collective) control over work conditions, wages and the pace of work;

(c) Social dimension: legal, collective or customary protection against discrimination, unfair dismissal or unacceptable working practices, and social protection (access to social security benefits covering health, accidents, unemployment insurance, etc.); and

(d) Economic dimension: inadequate and irregular payment.

Given the theoretical ambiguities and conceptual slippage, the theoretical framework of this paper is built on eminent scholar Guy Standing's theory of "the precariat" that is fundamentally derived from Marxian interpretations of global capitalism and struggles of the working class people. Standing [8] conceptualises the contemporary changes in employment arrangements and their repercussions in producing multiple forms of insecurities in the life of working people. He refers to the precariat as a new "class" that lacks seven forms of labour-related security in relation to their employment: labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security, and representation security. According to him, flexible labour practices under global capitalism have contributed to the emergence and growth of this class. Benchmarking this new class with Karl Marx's "proletariat", he argues that the precariat has a distinctive bundle of insecurities and they are a "class-in-the-making" rather than Marx's "class-for-itself" [8].

As he argues:

> *The precariat was not part of the 'working class' or the 'proletariat'. The latter terms suggest a society consisting mostly of workers in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements, with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers whose names and features they were familiar with … The precariat has class characteristics … And it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states. Without a bargain of trust or security in exchange for subordination, the precariat is distinctive in class terms [8].*

Distinguishing the precariat from Marx's class interpretations, Standing [8] claims precariousness of working people as a new development of global capitalism that aims to make labour temporary, flexible and subordinate through flexible labour market policies such as subcontracting. These policies have already contributed to erosion

of the standard employment relationship and thus diminished the rights of the workers. In particular, the subcontracting practices have induced contingent employment arrangements to flexibilise labour to the benefits of capital. Labour-capital relations in such practices are despotic where the employers control and subordinate the workers to maximise their labour productivity in pursuit of competitiveness in neoliberal markets. The precariat therefore represents the victims of neoliberal policies that have significantly curtailed the state regulations of the labour markets. While they are flexible and subordinate to their employers, they are vulnerable due to lack of rights and labour security. In absence of upward mobility, they are overrepresentative in "insecure forms of labour that are unlikely to assist them to build a desirable identity or a desirable career" [8].

One of the core propositions of Standing's theory of the precariat is the process through which the employers subject the workers to their subordination in flexible arrangements. He conceptualises this process as "precariatisation" that isolates the workers and limits their space and opportunity for collective action. Precariatisation is a process through which the employers establish control over the workers by making them "subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence" [8]. Taking this important conceptualisation of employment relationships for the precariat, the overarching theoretical framework enables this paper to examine the specific conditions that create pressures and insecurities to subordinate the workers to their employers, with reference to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Middle East. It also extends the scope of this paper to confirm the layers and mechanisms of precariatisation that the Bangladeshi migrant workers experienced in the Middle East. In this context, this paper is theoretically positioned on Standing's interpretations of the new class of working people who do not have labour protection during an unforeseen pandemic, and it endeavours to gauge Bangladeshi migrant workers' precariatisation in the Middle East.

III. METHODOLOGY

The findings of this paper are built upon the primary data collected through in-depth interviewing of seventeen male and three female returnee migrants. The participants were reached through the author's social networks that included NGOs, independent researchers and government functionaries working with returnee migrants in Dhaka. They were selected purposefully based on a philosophy of random selection of sampling units within the segment of the population with the most information on the characteristics of interest [24, 25]. It allows choosing the right participant possessing the capacity and willingness to be included in a study based upon a variety of criteria [26]. Also, it allows a researcher freedom to decide what needs to be known and find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of their first-hand knowledge or experience [27-29]. Thus it is basically a criterion-based selection in which particular settings, persons, or events and areas are selected deliberately in order to provide important information. It follows through preparing a list of essential attributes that are useful in locating and matching participants. Although participants are selected out of convenience, everyone had equal chance to be selected through purposive sampling [30-32]. Using this sampling technique, the author was able to select the information-rich participants independently of one another.

All of the participants originated from Dhaka district and they were staying at their homes at the time of interviewing (February 2021). Participants covered in this study returned from five Middle Eastern countries. Seven of them returned from Saudi Arabia, five from Kuwait, four from Qatar, three from the United Arab Emirates, and one from Oman. Most of them were below 40 years of age. 14 of them were married. All had left their family members in Bangladesh. They did not have strong formal educational background. Only two had higher secondary education, six had secondary education, nine had primary education, and three did not have any formal education at all. The highest number of returnees (n=11) worked in the construction sector, followed by those who were employed in domestic work (n=3), hotels (n=3), restaurants (n=2) and driving (n=1). While the female migrant domestic workers lived in their employer's house, all male migrants lived in labour camps.

Maintaining social distance and COVID-related restrictions, the study involved telephone survey of 20 returnee migrant workers who returned from five Middle East countries. Only those returnee migrants were interviewed who returned during the twelve months from March 2020 to February 2021. The participants were reached through a snowball sampling technique to reach out to migrants having diverse experiences of return. In doing this, the author asked the participants to share contact details of their fellows or acquaintances who were forced to return from the Middle Eastern countries during the mentioned period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This technique allowed the author to combine convenience-based purposeful sampling strategy with snowball technique.

The ratio of male and female respondents was not even. 17 male and three female returnee migrants were interviewed. This is reflective of a very low rate of return of women from the Middle East countries. In addition, this study was not able to determine the impact of the pandemic on female migrants in Middle Eastern countries

of destination given that at the time of the study, women migrants had not yet begun to return home. One of the main reasons attributed to this is the occupational placement of the female migrants. In general, many Bangladeshi female migrants work as domestic workers in the Middle Eastern houses. Although most of the male-dominated sectors halted or suspended their operation due to the pandemic, the demand for cleaning and sensitisation-related tasks of the female domestic workers remained unchanged at this time. Bangladeshi female migrants serving as domestic workers in Middle East did not lose jobs due to this. As a result, they did not experience forced return from Middle East at a large scale.

In-depth interviewing is the key technique and probably the most commonly used in qualitative research. Enabling a thorough examination of experiences, feelings or opinions, it allows the researcher to produce a rich, in-depth and varied data set in an informal setting [33]. The respondents for in-depth interviewing were selected using a purposeful sampling technique by considering their countries of destination, occupation, gender and the reasons for return. Purposeful sampling strategy helped selecting rich cases to obtain the first-hand account of narratives and experiences from the returnee migrants. In fact, the in-depth interviewing of returnee migrants was conducted in order to gain rich insights on the return process and the responses from the governments by exploring their original knowledge in how they experienced the return process in both Middle East and Bangladesh. The author utilised his subjective preference and selected those who were able to share diverse experiences and had better capabilities to articulate their personal experiences and perspectives. The basis for recruitment for in-depth interviewing was the participants' self-identification of willingness to participate in the in-depth interviewing process, as indicated by completion of the relevant consent form. In doing this, the main aim was to select the information-rich cases, even very low in number, which can provide in-depth insights into people's first-hand experience.

In fact, in-depth interviewing allowed the author to adopt a constructivist perspective. The constructivist approach, also called social constructivism, enabled this study to rely on the participants' multiple but complex views of the situation being studied. Thus the goal of in-depth interviewing was to elicit multiple meanings from the selected participants, to build deeper understanding than a survey yields and to generate a theory or pattern of responses that explains the central topic [34]. Through interpreting the subjective meanings of the participants' experiences, this approach is useful in understanding the world that they live in. Open-ended questions for the interviews focus on specific contexts which the participants usually experience. Following the ideas of Berger and Luckmann [35] on social constructivism summarised by Crotty [36], this study assumes that subjective meanings reported by the interviewees are formed through interactions with other individuals and through social, historical and cultural norms that operate in their lives. Therefore, social interactions among individuals are the key aspects to investigate through the constructivist approach. Addressing the process of interactions among individuals such as migrant workers and their recruiters and employers, the constructivist approach enabled this study to understand the participants' real-life settings and thereby develop a pattern of their meanings.

A qualitative questionnaire including open-ended questions was used for interviewing. In-depth interviewing through questionnaires is often used for exploratory research in which there is a need to know how participants think or feel or experience a phenomenon or why they believe something happens [35, 37]. Open-ended questioning in qualitative questionnaires helps to explore an issue which is little known. It allows knowing what participants are thinking and dimensions of a particular variable that are not well-defined. Because participants are allowed to express themselves in their own words, open-ended questions offer rich information to understand participants' inner worlds in their own natural languages and categories [35, 38].

The length of the interviews was 40 minutes on average. The telephone interviews for this study took place in the evening. With few exceptions, most workers preferred that time stating that they would be more comfortable to talk with the author at that time. The interviews, conducted over telephone in Bangla, were audio recorded upon permission of the participants and later transcribed and translated to thematically match with the contents of this paper. The author transcribed the in-depth interviews and produced a verbatim account of all verbal utterances. The process of transcription was laborious but it did offer the author an excellent opportunity to thoroughly familiarise himself with the qualitative data. The audio recording of conversations provided a reliable record for later analysis. The author was able to capture long verbatim quotations with the recorder and transcribe and analyse them appropriately by referring back to the audio clips over and over again [39]. The participants narrated their personal experiences in their native language Bangla. Born and brought up in Bangladesh, the author was able to speak the same language. This cultural and lingual similarity helped to ensure that the author had an accurate interpretation of the conversations and to check the accuracy of the original transcripts against the audio clips back and forth.

IV. MIGRANTS AND THE COVID PANDEMIC IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Bangladeshi returnee migrants narrated various forms of precariousness in the Middle Eastern countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their personal experience reveals that they were substantially dependent on their employer for all matters. This dependence led to various conditions marked by domination and arbitrary practices at their workplace. During the beginning of the pandemic, they had no alternatives other than depending on the discretion of their employer. All participants reported that they had no options other than approaching their employer if they experienced any COVID-19 symptoms. However, fearing likely backlash from fellow migrants and also of employers, some of them stated that they had to refrain from approaching anyone even in case of serious anxiety.

All 20 returnees covered by this study reported that they had a valid visa at the time of returning from the Middle East. Out of 17 male returnees, 14 reported that their employer had sent them on forced leave. Initially the migrants perceived it to be re-scheduled annual leave as an adjustment to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Eventually upon return they realised they had little hope to return to their work at least in the foreseeable future. Annual leave for some returnees was due within the next few months but their employers forced them to avail it sooner. Thus the returnees who came home on annual leave eventually realised that they were actually sent back by their employers due to the pandemic. In such context they viewed the act of their employer as deceitful and arbitrary. So for all practical purposes their return was not the outcome of informed choice. Moreover, three male and three female returnees were forced to return home as they lost their jobs due to prevailing economic condition triggered by the pandemic. All 20 returnees migrated to the Middle East after 2018 which indicates that the migrant workers had to return after staying for a short period of time in the countries of destination in the Middle East. While their return has been commonly associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, returning home after a short period abroad creates financial risks and socio-economic stresses for the migrants. Six returnees had to return within months after they had gone abroad to take up employment, spending huge sums of money.

Most of the returnees reported that their employer did not have any quarantine provision available. However, only four returnees reported that they had access to a quarantine facility which was placed at their workplace. Dependence on the employer during sickness is understandable as it is in sync with the pervasiveness of the kafala system in the Middle East. When asked about the how the returnees dealt with any COVID-19 symptoms, the female returnees reported that they had not approached their employer fearing dismissal of their job in such a situation whereas all male returnees informed that they had to approach their employer but the latter had not taken any action. Thus they were instructed to remain in their rooms even if they suspected experiencing COVID-19 symptoms from their roommates, without having an access to health care providers and/or hospitals. Living at high risks of contracting the virus, they did not have access to masks, gloves, hand sanitisers or personal protective equipment. Only two male migrants confirmed that they had access to some of these items but they were not briefed about how to use them.

Bangladeshi migrant workers working in various sectors in the Middle East were adversely affected soon after the outbreak of the pandemic which caused major disruption in their employment arrangements. 17 participants reported that they were not able to continue their work during the lockdown. Only three were able to work during the lockdown but they experienced reduction in their wages due to a cutback in the number of working days or working hours per day. These findings suggest that the Bangladeshi migrant workers were being deported from the Middle East soon after the onset of the pandemic. A large proportion of the migrants did not have any experience to share on reduction of hours or days of work as their employment was already disrupted and forced to return home immediately after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of 20 returnees, 13 reported that their employer suggested them to travel back home as work had stopped due to outbreak of the pandemic.

As one returnee from Kuwait mentioned:

> *"I returned in August. In fact, I was not supposed to return home so unexpectedly. Suddenly our employer said, 'you all have been dismissed. Now I will send you all back to your own country'. When we mentioned about our two years contract, the employer said, 'ok, then I will send all of you to another worksite.' After going another worksite we had no work. We remained jobless for five months there. Then I thought I should go home."*

Five returnees stated their employers forced them to resign after clearing some portions of their dues. For another two returnees, their employer simply expelled them without clearing their dues. Almost all participants reported that they were jobless and seeing no hope to secure employment in the foreseeable future they chose to return

home. Widespread anxiety about the future created severe mental stress which forced the migrant workers to return home.

As a returnee from UAE reported:

> *"I returned in June. I had no intention to return but I had to return due to the mental pressure I was feeling due to the outbreak of the pandemic. I was so frustrated to think where would my employer throw the body if the I die from Corona virus. I was feeling overwhelmed to think about where would my employer bury my dead body….So, I thought it would be better to die in my own country. At least I will be buried in my motherland….I thought I would not be able to live long. I would die soon. My mother was in Bangladesh and she cried a lot for me. Then I returned only for my mother. After coming back, I got her for two months only. Then she passed away. My mother was alive only for me."*

For migrant workers, securing wages regularly often becomes a challenge in normal situations. COVID-19 exacerbated incidences of non-payment and irregular payment of wages. Non-payment or delayed payment of wages were rampant in case of Bangladeshi migrants in the Middle East. Bangladeshi migrant workers who used to receive remuneration regularly under normal condition were deprived of regular payment of wages as soon as the pandemic started. Of 20 returnees, 18 informed that they had not received their wages regularly since February 2020. Out of them, 14 reported that they received remuneration on a regular basis till January 2020 only. Some received partial payment of wage till February, some till March and some till April. Interviews for this study, undertaken in February 2021, brought up a wide range of responses from the returnees which revealed that many returnees had to forego their remuneration due to unplanned rush return that in many instances were involuntarily imposed. All returnees covered by this study confirmed that they were not given any documents related to the amount they had to forego. Moreover, nine of them reported that they were made to sign documents when they were being involuntarily repatriated, they were not informed about the contents. Some were made to sign blank papers while that their employers owed dues to them. It ranged from a month's wages to equivalent amount of eight months' wages. In several instances aggrieved workers stated they were deprived of their end of service benefits. This amount varied from BDT30,000 to BDT800,000 (USD3530 to USD9412). Many Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East were under an arrangement which reveals that the workers used to collect a certain portion of their wages to maintain subsistence at the country of destination and send amounts to the family, keeping the rest with the employer. They could withdraw the amount as and when they needed, such as for meeting emergency expenditure at home or while coming back to Bangladesh on holidays. Unfortunately, inability of the workers to contact their employer during the lockdown deprived them from accessing the large amounts of outstanding resource.

One returnee from Saudi Arabia stated:

> *"I didn't return willingly. My employer forced me to return. One day, without sharing any background information, he was saying that I should go on leave for six months. However, he was not clear to explain whether I would be re-appointed after the leave….He hurriedly purchased air tickets and sent us to our country in the name of sending us to another place. I am not happy with what he did with us."*

In addition to these, the returnees in general were disappointed with their employer's inertia in dealing with the pressures and stresses that they were going through. Failure of the employers to provide protective gear and health safety materials has been the foremost complaint. The insensitivity of the employers about personal safety pitted them against the employers. Lack of communication with the employer during and after the lockdown was particularly disturbing for the migrants. The returnees mentioned that their employers, in many cases, did not bother to meet with them. Moreover, some returnees resented that they were made to sign blank papers before the employer returned their passports. They mentioned that they had little choice but to sign the document their employer provided. Several other workers blamed ill treatment and degrading conditions of work for their decision to return home. Some returnees claimed that work pressure was high but the pay was low during the beginning of the pandemic. This made them disappointed and eventually forced them to return home. In the absence of employer's support, the migrant workers had to organise their return by themselves. They had to contact their friends and relatives in the Middle East to know about the process of return. Also, they secured return-related information from the newspapers, television and the social media and friends and relatives at home. Bangladesh embassy and non-government sources i.e., diaspora associations were the other two sources of information, as identified by the migrants.

Except two, none of the migrant workers had enquired with the embassy about the possibility of repatriation. Based on their own and their friends' past experience, they felt such an exercise would not yield any meaningful

result. A few migrant workers stated that it was compulsory to register with the embassy, while most of them informed that registration with their embassy was not mandatory. It is likely that either the registration process was introduced by the embassies at a later date (by that time most of the returnees might have returned) or the registration process was discontinued after initial introduction. Many returnees reported that they were not interested in the registration process as they might be required to present valid documents to complete the registration process. Fearing complications in such cases they stayed away from the registration process. Moreover, the embassy stipulation to come in person to the embassy premises and that of finger printing might have worked as a deterring factor. In general, the long distance and difficulty in travelling in COVID situation made the migrants reluctant to participate in the registration process. Many migrants have also stressed that their financial condition, due to joblessness and non-payment of wages immediately after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, was not conducive to pay for travel and other related expenses that might have been incurred to register with the embassy. Also, some feared that they may have to pay speed money to process their registration. However, those who registered with the embassy were not happy with the services they received. It was because the registration process had taken a lot of time, the behaviour of the embassy staff was not respectful and the embassy staff lacked professionalism.

Almost all returnees reported that ticket prices were higher than normal at the time of their return. They felt that reduced number of flights during the pandemic situation has been one of the prime reasons for the hike in ticket price. Others felt as they had depended on their employers or agents to buy the ticket, the latter might have overcharged them. A few returnee workers felt that in their haste to get back home they had purchased ticket that involved travelling by two airlines that resulted in hike in price in air tickets.

One returnee from Qatar reported:

> *"My employer bought the ticket for me. He got the ticket but did not clear my dues. I think he has adjusted the ticket price from my dues. If that is true, the ticket price was too high. It could be true because at that time many people like me were trying to return home."*

Quite a few of the returnees stated that they had paid two to three times more than what they had paid during their earlier returns to home. In contrast, there have been cases in which migrants said that they could not make any comparison as this was first time they were returning home after they took up employment overseas. While various excuses in normal time have been frequently reported by the migrants, COVID exacerbated those excuses. General perception of the migrants on corruptive practices of airlines authority have indicated ticket black marketing and overpricing the tickets at the time of their return. 13 returnees stated that they had to pay for their tickets by themselves. For the rest it was the employer who covered for the costs of the ticket. Those who had to pay for their tickets by themselves, families from home paid for their ticket. In a couple of instances, the ticket cost was borne by friends of the migrants. All the returnee migrants covered by this study noted that the airlines did not follow strict social distancing as promised at the time of purchasing the tickets. They mentioned that due to limited availability of flights amid travel restrictions many migrants were trying to return home. This led to a huge demand for air tickets. Although the migrants were promised strict social distancing at the time of buying air ticket, the flight was full.

A returnee from Saudi Arabia reported:

> *"I returned in August. At the time of buying the air ticket, I was told that I should pay for two seats in order to maintain social distance. The airlines staff asserted that the seat next to me would remain vacant. After entering into the aircraft, I found all the seats full. In fact, my seat was the last seat in the tail area of the aircraft."*

In spite of these sufferings, the migrant returnees covered by this study stated that they had no contact or communication with the embassy. Some stated that the embassy was not courteous in extending their services. Others reported that the embassy staff was not respectful to labour migrants. Another group informed based on their previous experience they had little to hope for from the embassy and thus did not approach it. When asked what type of services that they had expected from the embassy, the respondents noted that during COVID-19 period a large number of Bangladeshi migrants led distressful lives and thus needed food and other kinds of support. They stated although the embassy provided some support, the amount was paltry and much lower than the needs of the migrants. They also felt that embassy officials should have been proactive in providing information. This was particularly important as migrant workers were stranded under the lock down condition and did not have access to reliable information. They further explained though embassy to an extent provided messages about health, safety and the importance of social distancing, the information that the workers needed at that critical

time was information about their visa status, the likelihood of visa extension during the lock down, the embassy's role in negotiating such extension and in cases where workers faced arbitrary termination, opportunities and procedure for repatriation and the like. Some returnees expressed their ignorance about the services that the embassies are meant to render and thus had little urge to contact them. One of the major demands of the returnees was that the Bangladesh embassies in respective countries should ensure that those who were forced to return home should be given priority when those countries start re-hiring of workers from overseas.

As one returnee from Oman reported:

> *"I returned in August….The embassy people did not offer any help in my case. I tried to contact the embassy several times but nobody picked up the phone. We, the migrant workers, are not valuable to them….They do not feel that they should serve us."*

A section of the Bangladeshi returnee migrant workers was of the opinion that the performance of the Bangladesh missions was much wanting compared to the Lebanese, Indian, Pakistani and Nepali embassies. The Lebanese embassy was very active and well looked after their nationals, also embassies of India, Pakistan and Nepal were quite forthcoming in providing food and cash support to the distressed migrants and information and protective health gear particularly masks to other migrants. They also disseminated information about dos and don'ts during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The representatives of those embassies appeared to be more visible and engaged in dealing with their workers. In many instances they contacted the employers and succeeded in securing outstanding wages. The returnee migrants further informed that in addition to the embassies, the diaspora groups, such as the local Indian association and the Organization of Non-resident Nepalis mobilised food, support and information and in some instances medical support for the very sick migrants. A few returnees, particularly from the UAE, reported that they had to face starvation and serious food scarcity in the country of destination during the beginning of the pandemic. Their food scarcity lasted for as long as six weeks. Most of those who faced food scarcity reported that Bangladesh embassy did not take any step during the time of food scarcity or starvation.

As one returnee from the UAE reported:

> *"In the beginning, it was really hard time for us. We were stuck in our camp. We did not know what was going on….No money, no food, no medicine….We all were very anxious….Even the employer was completely out of touch. There was nobody to look after us. We were simply helpless in our camp."*

Two returnees reported physical harassment in the country of destination during the lockdown period. The harassed migrants stated that they were harassed by their employers or their representatives. One such migrant confirmed that he was physically harassed because he lodged a complaint for getting his dues paid. When he raised the issue of outstanding wages his employer got upset and he physically assaulted the complainant. However, the assaulted migrants expressed their disappointment as the embassy of Bangladesh did not take any step regarding the incident of physical harassment. In general, the returnees interviewed for this study expressed their deep frustrations with the embassy of Bangladesh that they contacted in the country of destination. While the returnees from Saudi Arabia shared that their sufferings, they repeatedly noted that the Embassy of Bangladesh in Saudi Arabia had not helped them at all. Rather some returnees were threatened. Inertia and inefficiency of the embassy staff made some returnees to state that there was no reason to have an embassy of Bangladesh in Saudi Arabia as it did not have effective and sincere staff to serve the migrants.

In addition to physical sufferings, more than half of the returnees (n=12) reported that they had faced immense economic difficulties in the countries of destination during the beginning of the pandemic. The reasons for their economic hardship were mainly due to loss of their employment, reduction in working hours and wages which have been discussed above. These adversely impacted migrant workers had to borrow money from various sources to deal with their hardship. The sources of borrowing, as reported by the returnee migrants, included relatives and friends in the home country, family members in the home country, friends in the country of destination, colleagues, and other sources such as employer, acquaintances in the country of destination etc. The borrowers had to pay interest on the borrowed money, they confirmed that they had to pay interest at rates ranging 5 to 15 percent.

V. AFTER COMING HOME

Upon arrival in the home country, the returnee migrant workers, in general, had not received any protective items such as mask, sanitiser or gloves. Only two returnees mentioned that they received one mask only. However, six returnees reported that they had to undergo thermal screening, five had to undergo thermal screening as well as body temperature check and four had to undergo body temperature check only. The rest mentioned that they did

not have to undergo any screening process after arriving at the airport in Bangladesh. Press reports of March and April 2020 informed that the screening device at the Dhaka airport was dysfunctional and it took several weeks' time to bring in new equipment. This finding suggests that the returnees were not screened properly after arriving in Bangladesh. Some returnees stated that the airport treated them with contempt.

As one female returnee from Saudi Arabia reported:

> *"When the airport staff saw me at the immigration desk, their body language suggested that as if they were dealing with infected people. Although I had no COVID symptoms, they were checking my passport in an apathetic way….as if I was a COVID patient. They checked my details in a few minutes and asked me to leave quickly….Then a female doctor advised me to go home and stay in isolation."*

16 returnees stated that they were not put in compulsory quarantine after arrival. The rest had to go to compulsory quarantine upon their arrival. The compulsory quarantine was set for 14 days. Except one returnee migrant, no one reported payment of money at the government's mandatory isolation camp. He said he had to pay some money at the isolation camp. This irregular financial transaction was made to get better food, medical assistance and better living arrangement to live in. All four returnees who went to compulsory isolation camps reported that they saw other returnee migrants leaving the camps early, before completing 14 days, by paying bribes.

Some of the 16 returnees who were not put in compulsory quarantine after arrival reported that at the airport they were advised self-quarantine whereas others stated that they did not receive any such instruction at the airport to stay in self quarantine. Almost all of the returnees, except one, who received instructions to stay in self-quarantine did not follow the instruction properly and thus they did not keep themselves isolated from their family members, friends or neighbours. Moreover, all returnees reported that they had not received any form of financial support from the government after their arrival in Bangladesh. Only two received grocery packets which contained rice, potatoes, cooking oil and lentil. Discussions with the returnee migrants revealed that due to economic difficulties they were unable to mobilise funds to investment even in small trading activities. Returning from overseas, they were under social pressure as they were perceived as failed migrants. Constant distress and financial hardship created sever psychological toll for them that in some cases affected their family harmony. Many returnees expressed their anxiety and fear for their children's future. In absence of any support from the government, they perceived that their overall future plan had been adversely affected due to status degradation.

As one returnee from Kuwait expressed her disappointment:

> *"When I was in Kuwait, I heard that Bangladesh government would give a loan amount of BDT500,000 (USD5,882) at a low interest rate but I did not get any such thing upon my return….Nobody came to extend any help to me. I can't explain what kind of hard time I am currently going through….My family members are suffering too, as I have no income at the moment…. I am really in a beggar-like situation".*

When asked about the future migration plan, half of the returnees (n=10) reported that they were keen to go back to the Middle East countries for work. The rest were not interested to go back as they were planning to stay in Bangladesh. Some of these migrants had a plan to start business in Bangladesh and some were thinking about going to a non-Middle East country in the future. While most of the returnees are keen to remigrate, due to lack of financial support, they were facing economic hurdles to meet their basic needs. At the time of interviewing, many returnees earnestly requested the author to help them get financial support from the government. Referring to a miserable life, they reiterated that they were really struggling to meet daily expenses for their family members. Frustrations related to joblessness and increasing debts had led some returnees to think that migrating abroad will never be beneficial for them. As a result, they had developed an aversion to go abroad.

As one returnee from Qatar stated:

> *"I went abroad with lots of hopes for a better life but I have failed….Now I have got huge debts to repay….If you ask me about my future plan, I would never be interested to go overseas again even if you offer me a wonderful opportunity….I can't afford that anymore….I have to stay in my home country and live a miserable life….That's what I can see."*

18 returnees reported that they took support of intermediaries or middlemen (*dalal)* to migrate to the Middle East for work. These intermediaries were from their locality or neighbouring village and had contacts with recruiting agencies and travel agencies. The returnees were asked if they had solicited any support from recruiting agents and/or intermediaries (*dalals*) before their return. Half of these returnees (n=9) said they contacted them but to no

help was available. Others said they did not approach them as they knew that recruiting agents and/or *dalals* were only facilitators of migration and they would not be able to offer any assistance in completing the repatriation process.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study explicitly elaborate on various forms of precariatisation of Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East. These are expected to help policy makers and other stakeholders to initiate dialogues and take meaningful actions for better protection of migrant workers. Although this study is not statistically representative, the qualitative interpretation of the findings may help reduce the migrant workers' vulnerability in case of future pandemic situations. The findings of this study add to the existing knowledge by offering detailed insights on the experiences of Bangladeshi migrant workers serving in the Middle East. While a few studies conducted earlier have focused mainly on the livelihood and remittance aspects of the returnee migrants, this study is unique as it produces new knowledge on how the migrant workers faired in the countries of destination, the problems they encountered, the support they had received and experience they endured upon return during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study presents pathways to effective management of migrant workers in emergency situations. It therefore offers some empirical evidence to act on vulnerabilities and precariatisation of the migrant workers during such situations. It calls for effective actions from employers, authorities in the countries of destination, civil aviation authorities, international organisations, CSOs both in countries of destination and countries of origin and government authorities. Thus it calls for comprehensive policy actions so that migrant workers could be protected in future emergency situations. Emphasising the complexities involved in the repatriation of the Bangladeshi migrant workers, findings of this study are expected to help policy makers and other stakeholders to initiate dialogues and take meaningful actions for better protection of migrant workers. Considering the vulnerability and experience of the Bangladeshi migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Middle East, this paper calls for better protection of the workers in emergency situations both in the countries of destination and upon return in home country through establishing an effective mechanism for treatment of migrant workers both under national policy frameworks and international standards.

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