ABSTRACT

Overseas Labor Recruitment (OLR) Study - Bangladesh

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NORC at the University of Chicago is conducting a six-month rapid assessment of COVID-19's impact on Overseas Labor Recruitment (OLR) in Bangladesh with funding from the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), with an emphasis on the increased risk of forced labor among vulnerable migrant worker populations.

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 alone, 700,159 migrant workers from Bangladesh[1] traveled abroad for employment purposes. GCC countries are a major destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers with Saudi Arabia being the most common destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers since 2016. In 2019, 57% of Bangladeshi migrants departed for Saudi Arabia and 18% departed for Oman.

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

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[1] BMET, http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/stattisticalDataAction

forced labor.[2] Recruitment agencies and third-party brokers in Bangladesh often misinform prospective migrants about the migration process and costs, leaving them to endure difficult and abusive working conditions to pay off their large debts. Once arriving in the destination country, workers often learn that their location of work or the type of work they will be required to do differ from what was agreed upon.

The onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic has exposed migrant workers to additional adverse situations, making them even more vulnerable and exposed to health risks. Existing labor systems in GCC countries combined with poor living conditions, restricted access to health care, scarce legal protection and limited information have amplified the vulnerabilities of the migrant worker population[3]. In addition, forced repatriation of Bangladeshi migrant workers has led to a mass exodus of migrants back to their home country. After battling employment uncertainty and stressful working and living conditions in the GCC countries, migrants return to Bangladesh and have to deal with issues arising out of adjusting to life in their home country amidst a global pandemic. Bangladeshi returnee migrants are vulnerable to health and safety concerns due to poor implementation of quarantine and COVID-19 containment protocols combined with the mental stress and trauma associated with a loss of livelihood and societal discrimination. They are also vulnerable to experiencing various forms of economic and social discrimination in their communities.

The medium- and long-term effects of the global pandemic on migrant workers and overseas labor recruitment remains unclear. However, given that preliminary research suggest the likelihood of an immense effect on migration trends and recruitment of migrant workers in GCC countries, there is an immediate and pressing need to better understand the multi-faceted impacts of COVID-19 on the OLR industry and migrant workers conditions and vulnerabilities.

NORC's COVID-19 rapid assessment is designed to address descriptive and normative questions about COVID-19's short- and long-term impact on OLR. Five research questions and their related sub-questions guide the rapid assessment. The preliminary research questions are as follows:

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[2] IOM, 2019

[3] https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/04/covid19-makes-gulf-countries-abuse-of-migrant-workers-impossible-to-ignore/

1. What repatriation activities and/or policies are GCC countries considering and implementing in response to the global crisis?
2. What discrimination is faced by returnee migrants in their home country because of the stigma that they may be carriers of COVID-19?
3. What policies or actions is the Government of Bangladesh implementing to repatriate and reintegrate returnee migrants and support potential migrants?
4. What are the possible medium and long-term implications of COVID-19 on OLR and the willingness of Bangladeshi workers to migrate to GCC countries?
5. What are some medium and long-term recommendations for governments, policy makers, program implementers, NGOs, donors and other key stakeholders in Bangladesh and GCC to repatriate, reintegrate and protect migrant workers affected by the global pandemic?

To answer the research questions, the research team will use a mixed-methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a holistic and deep understanding of the topic as well as mitigate potential bias in the data and findings through triangulation. Qualitative data collection methods include semi-structured key information interviews (KIIs) with a range of stakeholders to understand the multi-faceted impact of COVID-19 on OLR. Quantitative data collection includes a social-media based survey of returnee and pre-departure migrant workers. Finally, we will conduct a rapid systematic desk review of recently published media articles, reports, white papers, and other online content to help answer the research questions as well as inform the approach to primary data collection.

The research team will complement the findings from the desk review with qualitative data collected through 25 KIIs with government officials, local NGOs, international organizations, migration researchers, and formal and informal recruiting agencies. We will supplement qualitative data with quantitative data collected from migrant workers. Given the travel and social distancing challenges associated with COVID-19, we will conduct all data collection virtually, implementing best practices in remote-data collection.

Table 1 shows NORC's proposed work plan and timeline for conducting the research.

Table 1: Work Plan – OLR Rapid Assessment Study							
Milestone	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
■ Start up and research design	■						
■ Desk research, consultant and partner contracting	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■ Identify stakeholders, develop interview instruments		■	■				
■ Qualitative data collection			■	■			
■ Qualitative transcriptions and analysis				■	■		
■ Develop initial report and recommendations				■	■		
■ Supplementary quantitative data collection					■	■	■
■ Final analysis and report							■