

Policy Brief

Internal and International Return Migration Amidst COVID-19 in Bangladesh: How to Deal with the Reintegration Challenges?

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended life and livelihoods in Bangladesh. A recent study undertaken by BRAC, UN-Women, and New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) highlights the impact of the pandemic on migration in particular—on Bangladeshi migrants themselves, who were compelled to return to their places of origin due to various circumstances during the pandemic, as well as their families and communities.

This is, in some sense, a curious starting point: COVID-19 has spawned unprecedented levels of human immobility, as governments around the world have closed their borders, banned international and domestic travel, and asked their populations to minimise movement and limit interactions. Nevertheless, the pandemic has also ushered in a new era of mass migration, as livelihoods have evaporated and living costs have risen more quickly in urban centres than in rural areas. As a result, even amid mobility restrictions, hundreds of millions of people worldwide have been compelled by desperation to relocate from cities back to their ancestral homes.

That is precisely what has happened in Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, pandemic migrations have mostly escaped global attention, with the welfare and priorities of returnee migrants and their families remaining little understood. This study aims to help fill that gap. It looks, in particular, at the demographic, social, and economic changes that took place within secondary towns, peri-urban (upazila) regions, and rural areas after Bangladeshi migrants returned home en masse in 2020.

Methodology

To understand the circumstances of returnee migrants, their families, and their communities, qualitative and quantitative research targeted 21 of Bangladesh's 64 districts through multi-stage systematic random sampling. A focus was placed on those districts most prone to (reverse) migration. Subsequently, one upazila (representing rural areas) and one municipality (representing peri-urban and urban areas) were randomly selected from each of the focus districts. Quantitative research utilized an analytical approach, while qualitative research maintained an interpretive approach. Primary data collection was conducted using a survey that included a semi-structured questionnaire and was carried out from December 10 to 25, 2020 in select villages and towns. Ultimately, 6,370 households were surveyed (60% from rural areas and 40% from urban and peri-urban settings). Roughly 26.5% of the surveyed households included at least one migrant worker (internal or international), and 21.85% of households were female-headed. Of the migrant households, 60% had returnee migrants (i.e., migrants who had returned to their ancestral homes during the pandemic). Qualitative analysis focused on four migration-prone districts: Dhaka, Rajshahi, Barishal, and Sylhet.

Finally, policy dialogues were held on May 8, 2021, and June 23, 2021 with government officials, academics, and civil society members to elicit policy insights from the study findings. This policy brief summarizes key research findings and policy recommendations that emerged from this multi-stage effort.

Key issues identified in the study

Child marriage rates were alarmingly high in 2020, especially among returnee migrant households

Prior to the pandemic, national data suggested that roughly 51% of Bangladeshi brides were married before the age of 18, and 18% were wedded before 15 years of age. The present study found that incidences of child marriage surged well above these levels during the pandemic, with grave implications for maternal and child health.¹ Among marriages that occurred in the surveyed households during 2020, 77% of brides were below 18 years of age, and 61% of brides were younger than 16 years of age.² Child marriages were more frequent in households with returnee migrants (83%) than those without (76%).

Returnee households experienced economic shocks to a much larger extent than non-returnee households

Among households that had only internal returnees, 62% had at least one member who lost a job or income earning opportunity during the pandemic. Among those with only international returnees, 64% experienced a loss of job/earning opportunity during this period. In comparison, roughly 34% of all surveyed households experienced the loss of a job or income earning opportunity. In addition to disproportionate job losses, returnee households also experienced a significantly larger fall in monthly average income and expenditure than households without returnees.

Debt levels rose across the board, but skyrocketed in returnee migrant households

Amidst dire economic circumstances, Bangladeshis attempted to manage expenses by drawing on their savings. Among all households, savings fell by 62% as debt increased by 31%. Debt rose

1 The legal age of marriage for girls in Bangladesh is 18 years.

2 A proxy indicator was used to identify the incidence of child marriage. As people typically tend to hide the actual age at marriage for legal reason, the incidences of child marriage in Bangladesh remain underreported. Therefore, the respondents were asked what school class/grade the bride attended in the marriage period during the pandemic. From the classes the brides attended during their marriage, the age at marriage was calculated. Brides with no formal education were kept out of consideration for this proxy measurement.

much more among migrant households (82.4%) compared to households without migrants (12.8%). Outstanding loans compounded this situation. Alongside heightened economic inactivity due to structural unemployment, one of the major concerns for 25% of returnee migrant households is outstanding migration loans that average 76,000 BDT (around \$900 USD) with a maximum amount of 700,000 BDT (around \$8,300 USD).

Reverse migration and extensive job loss had large impacts on remittances

Reverse migration coupled with the global economic crisis took a toll on remittances sent to Bangladeshi households. Over 5% of surveyed households were identified as remittance receiving households. These households reportedly experienced a 58% decrease in monthly remittances received, on average, during the pandemic.

Returnees struggled to find new jobs or income-earning opportunities in rural areas

77% of respondents opined that rural job or work opportunities for returnee migrants were scarce while around 41% of returnee migrants reported that they could not find any income-generating work. The majority of the returnee migrants (69%) reported a need for support for business development or to enhance earning capacity (e.g. loan, training, networking support etc.), while another 31% need grant support.

For international returnees, barriers to re-migration remain considerable

The returnee-fueled population boom may not be temporary, as many returnee migrants will have a difficult time migrating again in general, as will older populations in particular, while they also face limited job prospects at home. Among international returnee migrants, 44% are age 35 or older. This population has a lower chance of migrating again and therefore will contribute to increased populations in the medium- and long-term. Older returnees will face additional barriers to re-employment. Qualitative evidence suggests that age and corresponding factors make it harder for older individuals to find employment in returnee areas and cope with new circumstances. They are also facing various barriers to re-migration such as international travel restrictions, expired visas, unemployment, and a lack of support from governmental and intergovernmental migration agencies.

Social protection support has been insufficient

Government and non-government agencies and individuals made efforts to support those in need during the pandemic, however only 19% of responding households reported receiving any assistance from government or non-government sources. Urban households received more support (24%) than rural households (15%) while 17.5% of households with returnee migrants reported receiving support compared to 19% of households without any returnee.

Public services face added pressure

Returnee migrant families will put pressure on already limited community resources, especially in the education and health sectors. The study found that 4.57% of returnees were school-aged children (ages 5 to 16 years). If these children cannot return to their previous schools after the schools reopen, then educational institutions in local host communities will be under pressure. Further along the age spectrum, 13.35% of returnees (both external and internal) are above 40 years of age, and 4.56% are above 50 years of age. These groups, as previously noted, have a lower chance of migrating again. This has significant implications for Bangladesh's rural health services, especially for services related to non-communicable diseases.

Women and girls have faced distinct and disproportionate impacts during the pandemic

Relocation has been especially hard for female returnee migrants. Women who returned to their (or their husbands') places of origin have experienced considerable challenges adjusting to day-to-day life in their new villages or peri-urban areas. The most common reported problems female returnee migrants have faced include the inability to take up income-earning opportunities (57.9%), problems in moving freely in streets and markets (26.8%), the concern of losing work skills and efficiency (15.9%), problems in adjusting to local culture and absence of social utilities (20.1%), and the increased burden of unpaid care work such as household chores, childcare, and children's education (17.9%).

Policy Recommendations

1. Undertake effective awareness and preventive measures to reduce the alarming rate of child marriages and possible dropouts of girls from education

Local administrations and NGOs should work together to conduct awareness campaigns and undertake preventative measures. Additionally, local government agencies should provide close monitoring and prompt action in response to this growing trend. Both public and private schools must be asked to report “back to school” attendances (disaggregated by gender) when schools reopen.

2. Ensure that returnee migrant households are included in existing social protection programs

A review of existing social protection programs (pre-COVID-19 programs and COVID-related programs) should be undertaken and, where necessary, eligibility criteria should be amended or expanded to ensure that returnee households can access the support they need.

3. Provide additional, targeted grants (or, where appropriate, highly concessional microloans) to especially impoverished or indebted returnee households

A significant fall in income and remittances and subsequent depletion of savings has pushed returnee household debt burdens to unsustainable levels. This trend has long-term implications not only for households themselves but for economic development more broadly. Special assistance may be needed specifically for returnee families to help them avoid falling deeper into debt. Highly concessional microloans may be considered so long as these will not exacerbate debt burdens. NGOs have essential roles to play in these regards. Careful monitoring, mentoring, and training will be needed to bring about a sustainable solution.

4. Allocate additional resources to returnee-prone areas to accommodate the increased need for social services as a result of population growth

The government needs to closely monitor increased, and potentially long-term, resource requirements in education and health sectors, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. Additional resources should

be allocated where necessary to accommodate the increased need specifically for educational, maternal/pediatric, and geriatric services.

5. Support the economic (re)integration of returnee migrants who intend to (or have no option but to) remain in rural areas

Employment promotion programs aimed at the rural economy are needed to enable returnees to familiarise themselves with the local market, supply chain, and business environment. Skill development training may also be needed for those who intend to change careers. Programmes can also be designed to incentivize local employers to hire returnee migrants, and/or to increase returnees' appetite for self-employment. A focus should be placed on rural SMEs. Their links to financial institutions need to be strengthened. Government agencies, multilaterals, the private sector, and NGOs can all play a role in providing the necessary support for reintegrating returnee migrants into the rural economy.

6. Provide support for re-migration of international returnee migrants

Many international migrant workers want to go back to their previous employment locations outside Bangladesh. However, they have lost their savings and become burdened with loans, among other challenges. Some are still eligible to migrate for work once again, however. Therefore, the government should support international returnee migrants to return to their previous foreign places of employment if so desired.

7. Create informal sector- and CMSME-specific employment retention and economic recovery plans to stimulate (re)employment of internal migrants in urban areas

The informal and cottage, micro, small, and medium entrepreneurs (CMSME) sectors have been hit hard by the pandemic. Their recovery has been slow compared to manufacturing. Government support is needed to ensure that CMSMEs can recover and thereby (re)hire displaced migrant workers. Tax incentives and wage subsidies can also be provided to CMSMEs to reverse or avert further job losses.

8. Provide psychosocial support for returnee migrants

Psychosocial support for returnees should be prioritized. Amidst significant job and income loss, family adversity, and challenges with community reintegration, returnee migrants need psychological support to cope.