

# Demographic and Socioeconomic Changes Induced by the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh:

Dynamics and challenges of new circumstances



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# **Demographic and Socioeconomic Changes Induced by the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh:**

**Dynamics and challenges of new circumstances**

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**August 2021**

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# Table of Contents

|                                                                                                                                             |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary</b>                                                                                                                    | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1</b>                                                                                                                            | <b>9</b>  |
| Introduction                                                                                                                                | 10        |
| 1.1 Background of the study                                                                                                                 | 10        |
| 1.2 Research questions                                                                                                                      | 14        |
| 1.3 The rationale of the study                                                                                                              | 15        |
| 1.4 Organization of the report                                                                                                              | 15        |
| <b>Chapter 2</b>                                                                                                                            | <b>16</b> |
| Methodology                                                                                                                                 | 17        |
| 2.1 Selection of study locations                                                                                                            | 17        |
| 2.2 Methods of data collection                                                                                                              | 18        |
| 2.3 Data cleaning, coding and analysis                                                                                                      | 20        |
| 2.4 Limitations of the study                                                                                                                | 20        |
| 2.5 Key demographic characteristics of the surveyed households                                                                              | 20        |
| <b>Chapter 3</b>                                                                                                                            | <b>23</b> |
| Major findings of the study                                                                                                                 | 24        |
| 3.1 Alarming high incidences of child marriage, higher still among returnee households                                                      | 24        |
| 3.2 Higher expected crude birth rate in surveyed households with returnee migrants                                                          | 26        |
| 3.3 International returnee migrants are stuck in the country, and many have scarce prospects of returning abroad, at least in the near-term | 28        |
| 3.4 The decreased death rate in 2020                                                                                                        | 29        |
| 3.5 A drastic fall in income, remittances, and savings, and elevated indebtedness, caused by the pandemic                                   | 31        |
| 3.6 The returnee migrants face grim economic prospects                                                                                      | 34        |
| 3.7 Both the supply and demand side of education and healthcare could suffer if the returnees do not migrate again                          | 38        |
| 3.8 Impacts on female-headed households and female returnee migrants                                                                        | 39        |
| 3.9 The second and third waves                                                                                                              | 43        |
| <b>Chapter 4</b>                                                                                                                            | <b>44</b> |
| Conclusions and Policy Insights                                                                                                             | 45        |
| 4.1 Conclusions                                                                                                                             | 45        |
| 4.2 Policy insights                                                                                                                         | 46        |
| <b>Annex</b>                                                                                                                                | <b>49</b> |

## List of Figures

|                                                                                                                |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1: Education of household heads                                                                         | 21 |
| Figure 2: Number of earning members in surveyed households                                                     | 21 |
| Figure 3: Households with returnee migrants                                                                    | 22 |
| Figure 4: Preganancy and expected crude birth rate in surveyed households (per 1000 women of reproductive age) | 25 |
| Figure 5: Rate of the marriage of children under 18 in the surveyed households (using proxy indicator)         | 25 |
| Figure 6: Rate of the marriage of children under 16 in surveyed households (using proxy indicator)             | 27 |
| Figure 7: Age distribution of international returnee migrants                                                  | 29 |
| Figure 8: Causes of death during the pandemic (n=152)                                                          | 30 |
| Figure 9: Loss of jobs or earning opportunity during the pandemic                                              | 31 |
| Figure 10: Change in average household income during the pandemic                                              | 32 |
| Figure 11: Percentage of households who received govt. or non-govt. support during pandemic                    | 34 |
| Figure 12: Loss of jobs or earning opportunity among households with migrants                                  | 35 |
| Figure 13: Support needed for returnee migrants                                                                | 38 |
| Figure 14: Average percentage change in household finances, pre-pandemic to during pandemic                    | 40 |

## List of Tables

|                                                                                                                     |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Table 1: Study locations                                                                                            | 17 |
| Table 2: Determination of sample size from each division according to the probability of proportional to size (PPS) | 19 |
| Table 3: Challenges the female returnee migrants facing after coming back from abroad/ other places of the country  | 41 |

## List of Box

|                                                                        |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Box 1: Unwanted pregnancy left a workless migrant in a distress        | 28 |
| Box 2: The misery of a returnee migrant from Italy                     | 36 |
| Box 3: The Story of a Female Internal Migrant from Patuakhali District | 42 |

# Executive Summary

## Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended life and livelihoods in Bangladesh. This report calls attention specifically to the impact of COVID-19 on migration – 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.

This reverse urbanisation has mostly escaped global attention. Pandemic migrations briefly dominated headlines following India's lockdown in March-April 2020. However, little global attention has been paid to them since then or in other contexts.

This study aims to help fill this gap by focusing on the causes and consequences of pandemic migration in Bangladesh. A collaboration between BRAC, UN Women, and New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC), the study looks, in particular, at the demographic, social, and economic changes that took place within secondary towns, peri-urban (upazila sadars) regions, and rural areas after migrants returned home en masse in early 2020.

To understand how these reverse migrations impacted household and community welfare, qualitative and quantitative research targeted 21 of Bangladesh's 64 districts through multistage 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).

The survey, coupled with qualitative and desk research, revealed the following main findings:

## Key Research Findings

### Demographic

**Child marriage incidences were alarmingly high during the pandemic, including among returnee households,** with grave implications for maternal and child health. Among marriages that occurred in all surveyed households during the pandemic, 39% of brides were reported to be below 18 years of age, and 30% of brides were reported to be below 16 years of age. Since child marriage is illegal under Bangladeshi law, it is common to overstate a brides' age. To address this, the study also included a proxy question (what grade in school is the child/bride presently in) to estimate the actual age of brides and decipher an indication of true child marriage incidence. This estimation indicated that 77% of marriages that took place during pandemic in 2020 involved girls below the age of 18 and 61% under the age of 16. Child marriage of individuals under the age of 18 was higher in rural areas compared to urban locations (81% vs 70%), and more prevalent among female-headed households (81%) compared to male-headed (76%). Child marriages were also more frequent in households with returnee migrants (83%) than those without (76%).

**Birth rates were especially high – nearly twice the national average – among returnee migrant households in 2020.** In the context of the pandemic-induced reverse migration, the study found important indications of population growth within local communities hosting returnees. 604 pregnant women were identified among the surveyed households – implying a pregnancy rate of 34.6 per 1000 people among surveyed households. After deducting infant mortality rate, the expected crude birth rate (CBR) was found to be 15.6 per 1000 people. Although the expected CBR is lower than the national CBR overall (18.18 in 2018), it is higher in rural areas (19.5) and exceptionally higher in households that received returnee migrants (33.4).

**Mortality rates may have decreased in 2020.** Amongst the study population, 152 individuals died during the survey reference period, which implies a 5.1 mortality rate per 1000 people. The pre-pandemic mortality rate in Bangladesh was 5.53 (2018). Although such a decrease in mortality may seem counterintuitive amidst a deadly pandemic, mitigation measures such as lockdowns and social distancing had the effect of reducing other major causes of death in Bangladesh, such as traffic accidents.

**The returnee-fueled population boom may not be temporary, as many returnee migrants will have a difficult time migrating again in general, and older populations in particular, while they also face limited job prospects at home.** Returnee migrants were living in 15.9% of all the surveyed households. International returnees, specifically, were present in 5.3% of surveyed households. Among international returnee migrants, 44% are age 35 or older. Based on well established trends, this population has a lower chance of migrating again and may thus contribute to a population increase in the medium- and long-term. Furthermore, 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. Meanwhile, 56% of international returnees are between the ages of 19 and 34. This demographic has a higher likelihood of returning abroad. However, 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.

### Economic

**Economic disruptions precipitated a drastic fall in household incomes, especially among low-income households and those working in the informal economy.** Around 34% of surveyed households had at least one household member who lost one or more jobs or income-earning opportunities and subsequently became economically inactive. Even among households that did not experience a job

loss, decreased income-earning opportunities caused a drastic fall in household income. Overall, 77% saw a decrease in their average monthly income during the pandemic.

**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.

**As a result of the fall in income, households depleted their savings and borrowed money to manage daily expenses.** The average monthly savings of households decreased by 62%, on average, while household debt increased by 31%. Average monthly expenditures, meanwhile, fell by only 8.6%. Households with migrants experienced larger decreases in income and expenditures than households without migrants (statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval).

**Returnee migrants are facing particularly grim economic prospects.** Among the surveyed households that had internal returnees, 62% had at least one member who lost a job or income-earning opportunity during the pandemic. Among the surveyed households that had international returnees, 64% experienced a loss of jobs or income-earning opportunity during this period. For households with both internal and international returnees, 56% experienced a job loss or loss of income-earning opportunity. These figures stand out in comparison to the 37.8% of migrant households without any returnee migrant (households that have migrant workers still residing abroad) that experienced a loss of job or income-earning opportunity.

**Returnee migrants are further financially constrained by a lack of new job opportunities.** 77% of respondents opined that work opportunities for returnee migrants are scarce. Further, around 41% of returnee migrants could not get involved in income-generating work in their places of origin. Some of these individuals have then been forced to manage expenses by withdrawing from savings or renting their assets for revenue. Alongside limited opportunity for economic activity, these individuals are also required to repay outstanding migration loans which average 76,000 BDT (around \$900 USD), and can reach a maximum of 700,000 BDT (around \$8,300 USD).

## Social services

Returnee migrant families will put pressure on already limited resources, especially in the education and health sectors. The survey found that 4.57% of those who migrated during the pandemic were school-aged children (5 to 16 years of age). (As noted above, returnee migrant households also have extremely high birth rates, increasing the school-age population in future.) If these children do not return to their previous schools after they reopen, it could place additional pressure on local educational institutions' resources in their ancestral areas. On the other side of the age spectrum, the survey also found that 13.35% of returnees (both external and internal) are above 40 years of age, and of them, 4.56% are above 50 years. The 50+ population are less likely to return to their previous migration destinations, which could have potential implications for local health service capacity, especially for the services related to non-communicable diseases.

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 female-headed households received more support (24%) than their male counterparts (17%).

## Gender

**Women and girls have faced distinct and disproportionate impacts during the pandemic.** The pandemic badly impacted women and girls in general. As previously noted, the rate of child marriage increased to an alarmingly high level, and was higher in female-headed households than in male-headed ones. Young adult female college and university students also faced pressure from their parents to marry during the pandemic despite their preference for completing their education first.

**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, child care, and children's education (17.9%).

**Female-headed households demonstrated notable resiliency.** Despite the added burdens they faced, female headed households were found in some instances to have coped better with the financial shock compared to their male counterparts. While female-headed households' average monthly income dropped by 29.5%, a figure slightly higher than male-headed households (28.9%), the fall in their average monthly expenditure, savings, and remittances was significantly less (statistically significant at 95% confidence interval) than male-headed households.

## Outlooks

The reverse migration and economic disruptions induced by the pandemic brought on several demographic and socio-economic changes which have important policy implications. Internal reverse migration is a new phenomenon for Bangladesh, which has previously only experienced migration from rural and peri-urban areas to urban settings. At the same time, the return of international migrants, although not new, grew in scale due to the pandemic. Many of the changes brought on by this reverse migration may or may not continue in the long run. This will depend on the policy response as well as the duration and depth of the pandemic. However, social and economic reintegration of the returnee migrants, especially those with fewer opportunities for or limited will to migrate again, needs immediate policy attention. Special focus should be given to avert the alarming rise in child marriage and to ease the difficulties faced by female returnee migrants experiencing new and changed circumstances. While unpaid care is recognized as a long-time challenge, the closure of schools and care facilities during the pandemic has increased the burden of child care and the provision of children's education. Investment in quality care services for children, persons with disability, and older persons is necessary to reduce the burden of unpaid care work. Meanwhile, the unprecedented shock to household incomes, especially among returnee migrant families, requires urgent action. Without it, poverty and desperation will only grow as savings dwindle, debt rises, and the pandemic persists.

# Chapter 1



Photo: BRAC

# Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started as a health crisis<sup>1</sup>, quickly turned into an economic and then a social and humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh. To contain the spread of COVID-19, Bangladesh's government declared "general holidays" beginning March 18, 2020. Just over two months later, with the pandemic still in its early phase, the strict lockdown was lifted. Bangladesh, like so many other countries, faced a grueling choice, as the lockdown needed to slow the spread of the disease all but collapsed the economy and sent poverty and hunger spiking. To avert an economic calamity that many worried could prove more fatal than the disease itself, a series of less stringent measures to contain the pandemic followed, with variable success. As in most of the rest of the world, both the economic and the health crisis persisted throughout 2020, an unprecedented shock that may well only deepen in 2021.

Although no quarter of Bangladeshi society escaped the economic and social dislocations induced by COVID-19, the burdens were borne, disproportionately, by poor and marginalized communities. This report calls attention to the impact of COVID-19 on one such group in particular: migrant workers, especially those who were compelled to return to their places of origin, as well as their families and communities.

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This study aims to help fill this gap by focusing on the causes and consequences of pandemic migrations in Bangladesh. It looks, in particular, at the demographic and socioeconomic changes that took place in areas and communities to which migrants and their families fled.

## Migration in Bangladesh

Prominent literature suggests that internal migration in Bangladesh mostly follows the rural to urban direction. The population growth rates in urban and rural areas endorse this thesis. Over the last several

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1 First detected in Wuhan City of Hubei Province in China on 31 December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to distress 216 countries, areas and territories worldwide. Bangladesh reported its first confirmed COVID-19 case on 8 March 2020 and recorded the first death due to COVID-19 on 18 March 2020.

decades, residence in rural areas has grown by 24%, compared to 49% in urban areas (UNDP, 2019)<sup>2</sup>. The last Population Census, undertaken in 2011, found that the rural to urban migration rate was 22.29%, while urban to rural movements accounted for only 4.6% (BBS, 2011)<sup>3</sup>.

Most of the existing literature further suggests that the more significant economic opportunities in urban areas are the primary motivating factors behind internal migration in Bangladesh, especially movements towards metro cities such as Dhaka and Chattogram. Existing evidence also points to the tendency of climate-induced catastrophes to only accelerate urbanisation, as the climate crisis increases vulnerabilities in disaster-prone rural areas of the country. For instance, it has been predicted that by 2050, one in every seven people in Bangladesh will experience climate-induced displacement, and up to 18 million people will be uprooted by sea-level rises alone.<sup>4</sup> It is also expected that these dislocations will fuel fast and messy urbanisation. Dhaka is predicted to be one of the world's largest refuge cities for climate-induced displaced populations.<sup>5</sup>

**International migration** of Bangladeshi workers started in the 1970s and the remittances sent by migrant workers have been contributing significantly to the economic growth of the country.<sup>6</sup> There are several pull factors (e.g. demand for labour, relatives living abroad etc.) and push factors (e.g. poverty, unemployment or underemployment, lack of rural development etc) that work as motivators behind international migration.<sup>7</sup> Middle Eastern countries are the migration destination of majority of Bangladeshi migrant workers.<sup>8</sup>

## Migration amid COVID-19

COVID-19 has profoundly – and not necessarily temporarily – reshaped these dynamics. The economic calamity induced by lockdown measures, which were put in place precisely to restrict the movement of people from hotspots in urban areas to the rest of the country, triggered a wave of migration to the countryside as people's means of survival in the cities dried up all but overnight. With the economy locked down, there was suddenly no way to

pay rent or buy food. With a deadly virus circulating, the overcrowded and underserved settlements where most urban workers reside were considered COVID ticking time bombs.

At least five cycles of movements occurred after the pandemic broke out in early 2020. Initially, the pandemic migrations resembled what we commonly see before Eid festivals,<sup>9</sup> when millions leave the cities to celebrate with extended family in rural areas. Indeed, according to National Telecom Monitoring

2 Marshal, R. and Rahman, S. Internal Migration in Bangladesh: Character, Drivers and Policy Issues. UNDP, Bangladesh. URL: [https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/internal-migration-in-bangladesh--character--drivers-and-policy-.html](https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/library/democratic_governance/internal-migration-in-bangladesh--character--drivers-and-policy-.html)

3 Source: Population and Housing Census 2011, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Planning. URL: [http://203.112.218.65:8008/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/National%20Reports/SED\\_REPORT\\_Vol-4.pdf](http://203.112.218.65:8008/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/National%20Reports/SED_REPORT_Vol-4.pdf) (Accessed on 22 July 2020)

4 <https://ejfoundation.org/reports/climate-displacement-in-bangladesh> (Accessed on 21 July 2020)

5 <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/01/climate-change-drives-migration-crisis-in-bangladesh-from-dhaka-sundabans/> (Accessed on 22 July 2020)

6 Abu Siddique, E. A. Selvanathan & Saroja Selvanathan (2012) Remittances and Economic Growth: Empirical Evidence from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, *The Journal of Development Studies*, 48:8, 1045-1062.

7 Barkat, A., Osman, A., Sen, S. K. (2014). "In the corridors of remittances: Cost and use of remittances in Bangladesh". ILO country office-Bangladesh, Dhaka.

8 Source: BMET. Website: <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=24> (accessed on 08 August, 2021)

9 The religious holidays of the majority Muslim citizens of the country.

Centre (NTMC), around 10 million mobile sim users left Dhaka city alone as lockdown was announced.<sup>10</sup> The early lockdowns were referred to by government officials as “general holidays”, and many workers of formal and informal sectors returned to their villages for what they expected to be a short stay, as in years past. However, the lockdown lingered until May 30th, 2020, while the economic crisis persisted far longer than that, stranding many of the millions who moved in this first wave, indefinitely, in rural areas.

Some did return to the cities. Even amid the lockdown, the workers of the readymade garments (RMG) industry were made to return to their workplace as many of the factories began to open in late April, 2020 – despite concerns and confusion over safety protocols in the factories.<sup>11</sup> By then the industry was losing billions of dollars, and was desperate to resume operations. However, not all workers who returned were offered their job back, as global retailers remained closed and many of the factories continued to experience cancellation of orders.<sup>12</sup> These workers again moved back to their ancestral homes, a second wave of pandemic migration, albeit far smaller than the first.

Meanwhile, many of the informal sector workers who lost their jobs during the initial lockdown had few options but to stay put, as the jobs that had disappeared in March-April-May failed to materialize anew even after the lockdown ended.

This initial internal exodus(es) mainly involved informal and RMG workers, but the depth of the crisis precipitated movements by other groups as well. Alongside low-income informal sector workers, the pandemic also affected middle-class urban people. Starting from June 2020, media began reporting mass-emigration by middle-class urbanites and their families living in Dhaka and Chattogram to small towns, taking with them their belongings as if aware that their stay would be a long if not an indefinite one. National media reported in July that around 50,000 such families left Dhaka alone.<sup>13</sup> Many of them reported a loss of income due to pay cuts or loss of income-earning opportunities and had to relocate to cities outside Dhaka where the families can enjoy a relatively safer pre-existing social network and avail of low-cost accommodation. In contrast, a family's primary earning member can return to their job in Dhaka and reside in a shared accommodation.

Amid this crisis, another decision of the government layered on challenges for a different set of workers. In July 2020, the Government of Bangladesh laid off around 50,000 jute mill workers – at least half of whom were irregular seasonal hands, who used to live in secondary towns such as Khulna and Jashore.<sup>14</sup> It is expected that most of these workers' family members travelled back to villages, at least for the time being.

Alongside this, another form of reverse migration took place during the early stages of the pandemic. More than 165,000 overseas<sup>15</sup> migrant workers, including 16,640 women, returned to Bangladesh from April to September 2020 after losing their jobs overseas. That is on top of the more than 666,000 expatriate workers who returned to Bangladesh between January and mid-March, when the pandemic was beginning to take hold in their (former) places of work. Most expatriate workers had traveled to overseas countries, especially those in the Middle East, from villages or peri-urban areas.

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10 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2020/03/28/covid-19-10-million-mobile-subscribers-left-dhaka> (accessed on 08 August 2021)

11 <https://www.wvd.com/business-news/government-trade/bangladesh-factories-reopen-amid-coronavirus-chaos-1203630811/> (Accessed on 22 March 2021)

12 <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/54180-001-sd-04.pdf> (Accessed on 22 March 2021)

13 <https://www.newagebd.net/article/109552/families-leaving-dhaka-as-coronavirus-crisis-hits-livelihood>

14 <https://www.newagebd.net/article/110162/over-50000-jute-mill-workers-worried-as-uncertainty-looms>

15 Data from the expatriates' welfare desk at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladeshs-overseas-employment-in-depths-of-slump-1601695502>)

## An unprecedented, and unequal, socioeconomic shock

Although some of those who relocated amid COVID-19 were middle-class, the vast majority came from poor and/or vulnerable communities. Indeed, to say that the pandemic's impact, and the crises arising in parallel to it, have not fallen equally on all Bangladeshis is a substantial understatement. A BRAC survey (May, 2020) revealed that 36% respondents lost job or earning opportunity during initial months of the pandemic. The study found that the circumstances of job (or income opportunity) loss were higher (62% of respondents) among the low-income population and daily wage earners such as CNG/auto drivers, day labourers in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, skilled labourers such as carpenters, blacksmith, goldsmith, bus/truck drivers, factory workers, house helps, and hotel and restaurant workers. Further, female-headed households were found to be more economically vulnerable compared to male-headed households. Female-headed households' average income reduced more (80%) than male-headed households (75%). A UN Women's survey shows that 83% of women in formal employment and 49% of women from the informal sector faced job loss or reduced working hours.<sup>16</sup> Another survey conducted by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) in April 2020 revealed that 75% of urban and 62% of rural households encountered an income drop. The same survey shows that 28% of households in urban slums and 22% of households in rural areas had to cut their expenditure on food items.<sup>17</sup> A follow-up study conducted in June 2020 by PPRC and BIGD reveals that the moderately poor, vulnerable non-poor, and non-poor households experienced an income drop of 41-45%, while the extreme poor, with an already meagre income to start with, suffered an income drop of 34%.<sup>18</sup> A BRAC study conducted in August 2020 on informal sector workers revealed that 88% of informal sector workers experienced an income drop, and still urban workers faced a bit higher degree of distress.

The pandemic has also had a calamitous impact on education. Various research reports suggest the prolonged closure of schools, lack of access to digital platforms, and migration of students to a new location can cause a large number of dropouts.<sup>19, 20</sup> A World Bank (2015) survey conducted in Liberia after the Ebola outbreak reveals that more than 25% of students could not redeem their education once the schools resumed.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, experts are forecasting a 45% dropout rate once the schools reopen in Bangladesh, based on no specific surveys but considering the implications of trends such as higher incidences of child marriage, child labour, learning losses, and the psychological state of children due to extended school closures.<sup>22</sup> An analysis by Save the Children focused on South Asia predicted that approximately 200,000 more girls would be at risk of child marriage in 2020.<sup>23</sup> Bangladesh has the highest rates of child marriage in South Asia. Simultaneously, when schools do reopen,<sup>24</sup> the possibility of additional students in rural areas could overwhelm existing facilities.

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16 COVID 19 Bangladesh, Rapid Gender Analysis, UN Women, May 2020

17 <http://www.pprc-bd.org/covid19response/> (Accessed on 21 July 2020)

18 <http://www.pprc-bd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/PPRC-BIGD-Livelihoods-Coping-and-Recovery-during-COVID-19-Crisis.pdf> (Accessed on 2 November 2020)

19 Emon, E. K. H., Alif, A. R., & Islam, M. S. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on the Institutional Education System and its Associated Students in Bangladesh. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 11(2), 34-46. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2020/v11i230288>

20 <http://www.brac.net/program/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Rapid-assessment-impact-of-COVID-19-education-in-Bangladesh.pdf> (accessed on 08 August 2021)

21 Selbervik (2020) Impacts of school closures on children in developing countries: Can we learn something from the past?, CMI Brief, Number 5, May 2020

22 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/08/07/covid-19-over-45-secondary-school-students-may-drop-out#:~:text=According%20to%20a%202019%20report,36%25%20at%20the%20secondary%20level>

23 <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/covid-19-places-half-million-more-girls-risk-child-marriage-2020>

24 Schools and educational institutions in Bangladesh were closed in March 2020 and remained closed till August 2021 when the final version of this report was written.

On the positive side, migration can change the stock of capital in rural and peri-urban Bangladesh as the internal and external returnees arrive with new financial and social capital from their former employment place. The level of experience and ambition of these returnees can be markedly different, too. Further, they may bring back components of the different cultures they were exposed to during a large part of their lives. Along these same lines, the men and women who migrated from urban areas might face cultural shocks in rural areas and resist rural cultural practices. In urban areas, women can go to the market to shop, enjoy freedom of movement, and make many other decisions, which is not usually allowed by traditional rural cultural norms and practices.

Gender norms are one of the areas of such cultural distinction that the returnee migrants may bring back. Several studies suggest that for decades female migration has occurred from rural areas to cities in search of employment.<sup>25</sup> Yet one of the critical motivations for women is to enjoy relatively more equity and freedom. With the return of a significant number of urban women back to villages, the gender norms, particularly those around decision-making, freedom of movement for shopping or working, female-initiated income-generating activities, and sharing household chores among others, may be influenced.

Conversely, male returnees from countries where women face more restrictions than in Bangladesh may bring with them norms that do not support gender equality. Moreover, if returnee migrants have not brought money to invest or contribute to families, their livelihood opportunities and position in families might be challenged in the long run compared to others. Similarly, women who migrated due to loss of jobs or pay cuts from urban to semi-urban and rural areas might face similar challenges.

## 1.2 Research questions

In this context, BRAC, UN WOMEN and NYU-CIC have undertaken research to engage the following questions:

- What are the changes in demographic, economic, and social environments in secondary towns, peri-urban (upazila), and rural areas brought on by reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Are the changes and their impact equal for male-headed and female-headed households?
- What are the challenges facing local people and migrants in terms of co-existence and sharing of limited local resources, income opportunities, and essential services such as education, health, credits etc., in rural towns and villages?
- What are the plans and needs of migrants and their families to overcome their economic, social, and psychological hardship while co-existing in a changing environment?

## 1.3 The rationale of the study

This study was crucial for several reasons. Firstly, as stated above, evidence needs to be generated through research so that the knowledge gaps related to the new dynamics of demographic and socioeconomic changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic can be filled. Secondly, this issue holds key policy implications. The study has helped to identify people in need and their plans and needs for coping with the changed situation. Thirdly, as this study has seen that a demographic change takes place and many migrated people are destined to stay in rural or peri-urban areas for a longer time, an action plan should be designed

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25 Kathinka Fossum Evertsen & Kees van der Geest (2019): Gender, environment and migration in Bangladesh, *Climate and Development*, DOI: 10.1080/17565529.2019.1596059

to engage them in strengthening the local rural economy. Furthermore, healthcare and other essential services, including education, will need to be bolstered. Fourthly, the study has identified the gendered impacts of pandemic migration to be addressed by policymakers. This report provides evidence-based policy recommendations on these issues.

## **1.4 Organization of the report**

The first chapter of the report provides a background of the study alongside the study's research questions and rationale. The second chapter details the methodological approaches adopted for this study. The third chapter contains the report's central component – the research findings alongside the analysis and discussion. The fourth and final chapter concludes the study findings and highlights some policy insights for policymakers, researchers, and development analysts.

# Chapter 2



Photo: BRAC

# Methodology

## 2.1 Selection of study locations

Almost all the districts of Bangladesh felt the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic. The “general holidays”, i.e. the lockdown or restricted movements, were declared for the entire country to reduce the spread of COVID-19 transmission. Moreover, it can be assumed that although all districts have likely received returnee migrants, migration-prone districts received more. Therefore, migration-prone districts were given priority while selecting study locations to understand the changes in demographic, economic, and social environments in secondary towns, peri-urban (upazila), and rural areas brought on by reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure migrant households are well-represented to provide balanced insight on the impact on their lives as well as local communities, purposive sampling was applied to pick one-third of the districts of Bangladesh as study locations. The following districts were selected in this sampling procedure (see Table 1). Then, one upazila (representing rural areas) and one municipality (representing urban areas) were randomly selected from each of these districts.

**Table 1: Study locations**

| Division                  | Selected districts                            |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Rangpur                   | Dinajpur, Kurigram, Gaibandha                 |
| Rajshahi                  | Bogra, Chapai Nawabganj, Pabna                |
| Mymensingh                | Jamalpur                                      |
| Dhaka                     | Tangail, Kishoreganj, Munshiganj, Narayanganj |
| Sylhet                    | Moulvibazar                                   |
| Chattogram                | Cumilla, Chattogram, Chandpur, Cox's Bazar    |
| Barishal                  | Barishal, Bhola                               |
| Khulna                    | Kushtia, Jessore, Khulna                      |
| Total number of districts | 21                                            |

## 2.2 Methods of data collection

With the consideration of the study's nature, the research was designed with mixed-methodology where both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. In this study, the quantitative part mainly took an analytical approach, whereas the qualitative part maintained an interpretive approach. To supplement the survey with deeper insights and to reveal the discursive aspects of the phenomenon being captured by the survey, a qualitative inquiry was carefully designed. Appropriate quantitative and qualitative tools were employed in the designing phase of the survey, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, a series of policy consultations were held with senior government officials, UN officials, and experts from relevant fields to fine-tune the policy recommendation section to ensure well thought-out policy recommendations to overcome the challenges identified by the study.

For the quantitative component, a survey was conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire that was carried out for primary data collection from households in the selected villages and towns from December 10-25 2020. The survey was conducted with 6,370 households in total.<sup>26</sup> Roughly 26.5% of the surveyed households included at least one migrant (internal or from overseas; 1,684 households in number). They are referred as migrant households throughout the report. 21.85% of the households were female-headed (1,392), while the rest of the households were male-headed (4,978).<sup>27</sup> More than 50% of respondents from all surveyed households were women. 59.75% of households were selected from rural areas (3,806 households), and the rest of the households were from urban/peri-urban areas (2,564 households).<sup>28</sup>

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26 The estimation formula for the sample size,  $nh$ , is  $nh = (z^2) (r) (1-r) (f) (k) / (p) (n) (e^2)$ , where,  $nh$  is the parameter to be calculated and is the sample size in terms of number of households to be selected.  $z = 1.96$  is the statistic that defines the 95% level of confidence.  $r$  (here 0.68, on average 68% income drop) is an estimate of a key indicator to be measured by the survey.  $f$  is the sample design effect, for multi-stage sampling, assumed to be 2.0 (default value).  $k$  (here 1.1 as 10% non-response in developing countries) is a multiplier to account for the anticipated rate of non-response.  $p$  (here 0.62 as economically active population 62.1%, BBS 2018) is the proportion of the total population accounted for by the target population and upon which the parameter,  $r$ , is based.  $n$  (here 4 according to HIES) is the average household size (number of persons per household).  $e$  (here 5%) is the margin of error to be attained.  $n = 296.62 \approx 300$  HH for each district, so  $300 \times 21 = 6300$  HH in total.

27 12.5% female-headed households (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.HOU.FEMA.ZS?locations=BD>) (accessed on 2 November 2020)

28 63% of people live in rural areas (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=BD>) (accessed on 2 November 2020)

According to probability proportional to size (PPS) and to avoid complex sampling weight to estimate the parameters, this study optimised the sample units for each division as follows:

**Table 2: Determination of sample size from each division according to the probability of proportional to size (PPS)**

| Division                                                      | Number of districts | Total (%) population* | Sample households | Taken during survey | Selected districts                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Barisal                                                       | 6                   | 6.3                   | 397               | 418                 | Barishal, Bhola                               |
| Chattogram                                                    | 11                  | 19.1                  | 1,203             | 1,203               | Cumilla, Chattogram, Chandpur, Cox's Bazar    |
| Dhaka                                                         | 13                  | 25.9                  | 1,631             | 1,632               | Tangail, Kishoreganj, Munshiganj, Narayanganj |
| Mymensingh                                                    | 4                   | 6.8                   | 428               | 428                 | Jamalpur                                      |
| Khulna                                                        | 10                  | 11.9                  | 750               | 750                 | Kushtia, Jessore, Khulna                      |
| Rajshahi                                                      | 8                   | 12.5                  | 788               | 788                 | Bogra, Chapai Nawabganj, Pabna                |
| Rangpur                                                       | 8                   | 11.3                  | 712               | 744                 | Dinajpur, Kurigram, Gaibandha                 |
| Sylhet                                                        | 4                   | 6.2                   | 391               | 407                 | Moulvibazar                                   |
| Total                                                         | 64                  | 100                   | 6,300             | 6,370               | 21                                            |
| * Population proportion is taken according to HIES 2010 (BBS) |                     |                       |                   |                     |                                               |

For qualitative inquiries, four migration-prone districts were selected for collecting data from four divisions. The selected locations are Shariatpur from the Dhaka division, Bogura from the Rajshahi division, Patuakhali from the Barisal division and Moulvibazar from the Sylhet division. Additionally, the research team collected data from Narsingdi and Narayanganj districts during the pre-test phase. Eight qualitative research assistants (four male and four female) were hired and trained to collect data. Two research assistants per group were sent to each location, where one of them collected data at peri-urban and secondary town and another in rural areas from January 13-20, 2021. In each district, ten in-depth Interviews (IDIs) following the 'river of life' method and two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted among returnee migrant men and women, local men and women, local representatives, teachers, and returnee migrant students.

For both quantitative and qualitative interviews, socially distant face-to-face interviews were arranged to ensure safety of enumerators and participants as well as the credibility of the data. The data enumerators were trained and equipped to collect data directly from the field by maintaining health safety measures. Moreover, prior to the respondents' interviews, the respondents' consent was obtained conveying that complete confidentiality of personal data will be strictly maintained. For the survey, the KOBO toolbox was used.

## 2.3 Data cleaning, coding and analysis

A team of researchers worked on cleaning and coding the collected data using Excel and STATA software, as appropriate. Analytical frameworks for data analysis were developed by research experts, which consists of relevant dependent, independent, and intervening variables. The survey data was analysed by research analysts under the supervision of a research team lead and advisor. Quantitative analysis was conducted using STATA to measure descriptive statistics and cross tabulation. Advanced quantitative techniques including significance tests have been performed to analyse the significance of the changes occurred, correlation, and association among variables to find concrete answers to the research questions. Qualitative data analysis has been performed to complement the findings of the quantitative analysis and provide deeper insights into the issues.

## 2.4 Limitations of the study

The study used quota sampling procedures to ensure adequate representation of female-headed households and returnee migrant households in the sample. As a result, it was not possible to maintain the randomness of the entire sample size. For this reason, extrapolating the results and findings of the quantitative data to the national level is not always possible. Secondly, the survey questionnaire was kept as short as possible considering the health and safety risks of both enumerators and respondents during an ongoing pandemic. For this reason, the study fails to provide answers to a few critical and relevant questions, such as the gender segregation of returnee migrant workers, when the return took place during the pandemic, how many internal and international returnee migrants have gone back to their migration destinations and how many stayed back for the entire duration of the pandemic, how many returnee children would enroll in schools in places they returned to as the schools remained closed for an unknown duration, and what would be the exact pressure on local education and health services due to the addition of population in rural and semi-urban locations. Thirdly, the study attempted to estimate the incidence of child marriage amid the ongoing pandemic during 2020. However, national data only refers to the prevalence of child marriage. Further, national official data on incidence of child marriage for any particular year or period is unavailable. This made it complicated to compare the data to the pre-pandemic child marriage situation. Fourthly, this study provides some indications about the demographic and socioeconomic changes based on a timeline. However, this might not always be applicable as population dynamics and socioeconomic situation have been changing frequently during the pandemic due to different factors. Therefore, additional similar studies would be helpful to further understand the unearthed dynamics and take appropriate policy decisions.

## 2.5 Key demographic characteristics of the surveyed households

**Area:** The survey was conducted in rural, urban, and peri-urban areas of 21 districts from eight divisions. Rural households comprise 60% of the sample, while 31% are from peri-urban areas and 9% from city corporation areas.<sup>29</sup>

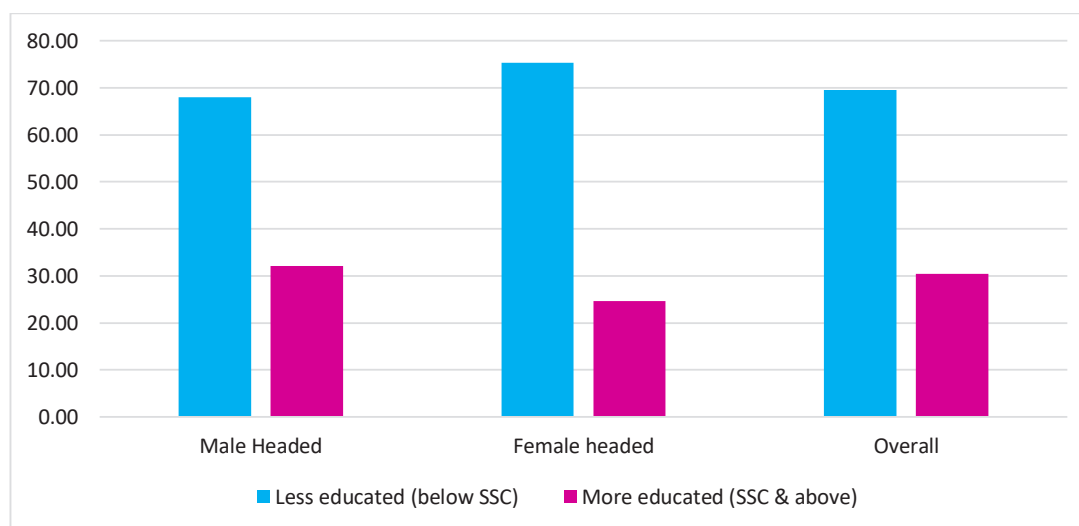
**Sex and age:** The ratio of male and female respondents is 50:50; and 22% of the responding households are female-headed whereas 78% are male-headed. The mean age of household heads is 43 years (41 years for female headed and 44 years for male headed households). The average households size was found to be 4.7.

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29 Since sample size from city corporation areas is not very significant, for ease of analysis, peri-urban and city corporation have been merged to form “urban” subsample.

**Education and religion:** A high majority (89.6%) of the household heads follow Islam as a religion, while 10% follow Hinduism, 0.13% follow Christianity, and 0.19% follow Buddhism. Only 0.17% responding households' heads were found to be an ethnic minority, while 99.8% are Bengali. In terms of the educational level of household heads, 13% did not have any formal education; 31% were found to not have completed primary education although they received some formal education; 24% were found to have studied beyond primary level education but did not complete secondary education. Secondary education was completed

*Figure 1: Education of household heads*

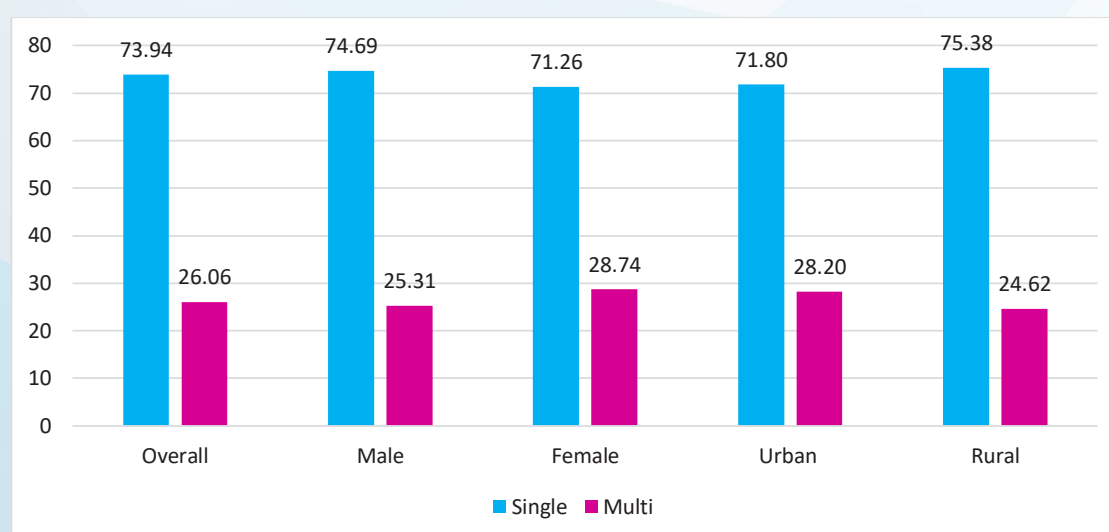


by 11.6%, while 18% were found to have completed education above a secondary level (SSC).

**Occupation:** The study collected data on occupation of all household members. Agricultural work was found to be the occupation of highest percentage of household members (40%). 27% of household members were found to be working in CMSME sectors, and 24.5% were job holders (govt. or private).

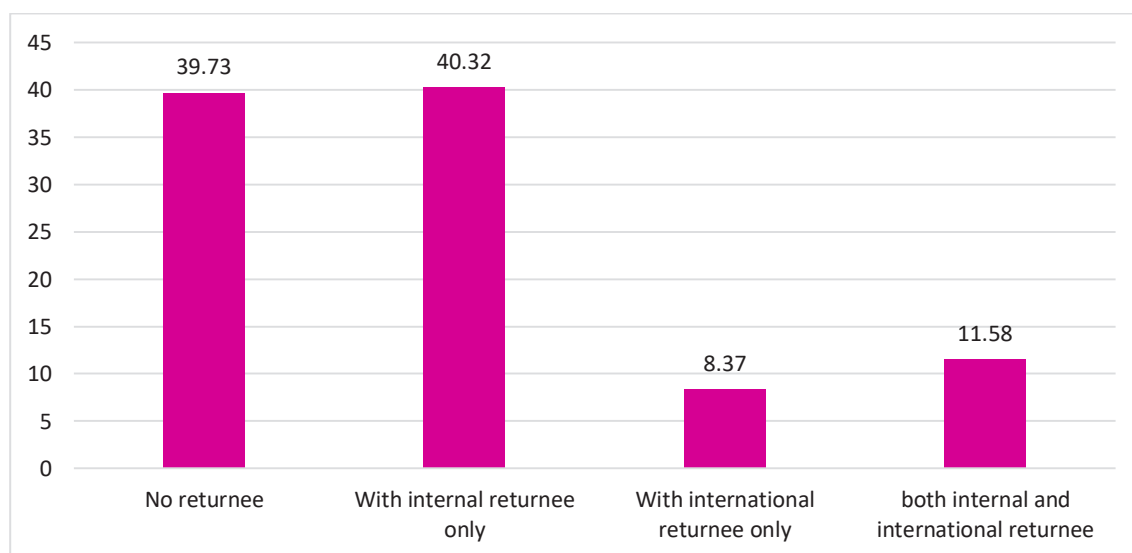
**Number of earning members:** 74% of households have a single earning member, while 26% are multi-earner households. Single earner households are more prevalent among male-headed households compared to female-headed ones and among rural households compared to urban ones.

*Figure 2: Number of earning members in surveyed households*



**Migrant households and returnee migrant households:** 26% of the sample households had migrants (1684 in number; and referred as 'migrant households' throughout the report), and 16% had returnee migrants (1015 in number; and referred as 'returnee migrant households' throughout the report). Among the households that have migrants (1684 households), 40% had no returnees, while 60% received returnee migrants during the study referral period amid the pandemic (40% had internal returnees only, 8.4% had international returnees only, and 11.6% had both internal and international returnees).

*Figure 3: Households with returnee migrants*



The mean age of internal returnees is 30 years, while international returnees have average age of 33 years. Among the internal returnees, 42% are 25-34 years of age; 20% are 19-24 years of age; and 31% are above 35 years. School age children (5-16 years) are 4.57%, 0.8% are of pre-school age (0-4 years), 2% are of 17-18 years of age. On the other hand, minimum age of international returnees is 19 years. 12% international returnees are 19-24 years of age; 44% are of 25-34 years; and 43.5% are above 35 years.

# Chapter 3



# Major findings of the study

## 3.1 Alarmingly high incidences of child marriage, higher still among returnee households

National data suggests that more than 51%<sup>30</sup> of Bangladeshi women are married before the age of 18,<sup>31</sup> and 18% are wedded before 15 years of age.<sup>32</sup> This data refers to the prevalence of child marriage, without providing data on the incidence of child marriage occurring in any particular year or period. As prevalence of child marriage is one of the major development challenges of Bangladesh, the study aimed to find out the incidence of child marriage during pandemic to understand the development impact of the pandemic.

The survey findings suggest that incidence of child marriage was alarmingly high during this pandemic. Among the surveyed households, 158 marriages took place within the seven months (April-October 2020) period the study refers to. In 39% of these marriages, the brides were reported to be below 18 years of age, and in 30% of them, the brides were reported to be below 16 years of age.

These figures are alarming in their own right. But since child marriage<sup>33</sup> is illegal under Bangladeshi law, the chance of overstating brides' ages is high. Therefore, the study also included a proxy question to estimate the actual age of brides in order to get an indication of the real picture of child marriage incidence. A proxy indicator was used to estimate the actual age at marriage by calculating age from the educational classes the brides attended at the time of their marriage. The survey questionnaire included a direct question about the age of the bride at the time of the marriage, and an indirect question about the educational classes they attended at the time of marriage to use as proxy indicator to estimate the actual age of the brides.

This estimation shows that the bride was under the age of 18 in 77% of the marriages that occurred in the surveyed households.<sup>34</sup> This rate is higher in rural areas than in urban locations (81% vs 70%). It is also higher in female-headed households (81%) than male-headed ones (76%) and households with returnee migrants (83%) compared to households without returnees (76%).

Even more alarming, 61% marriage incidences that took place during the survey referral period amid the pandemic had children under 16 years of age as brides. Under 16 marriages took place more in rural areas compared to urban locations (64% vs 54%). Such marriages also accounted for 62.5% of all marriages among female-headed households and 60% among male-headed ones. However, unlike the case of under 18 child marriage, under 16 child marriage occurred more in households with returnee migrants (62%), compared to households having one or more returnee migrants (55%).

30 <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/accelerated-action-needed-end-child-marriage-bangladesh-2030#:~:text=DHAKA%2C%20%20October%202020%20%E2%80%93%20A,marriage%20in%20Bangladesh%20by%202030.&text=As%20a%20result%2C%20the%20country,before%20the%20age%20of%2015.> (Accessed on 27 February 2021)

31 <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/media/4526/file/Bangladesh%20Child%20Marriage%20report%202020.pdf.pdf>

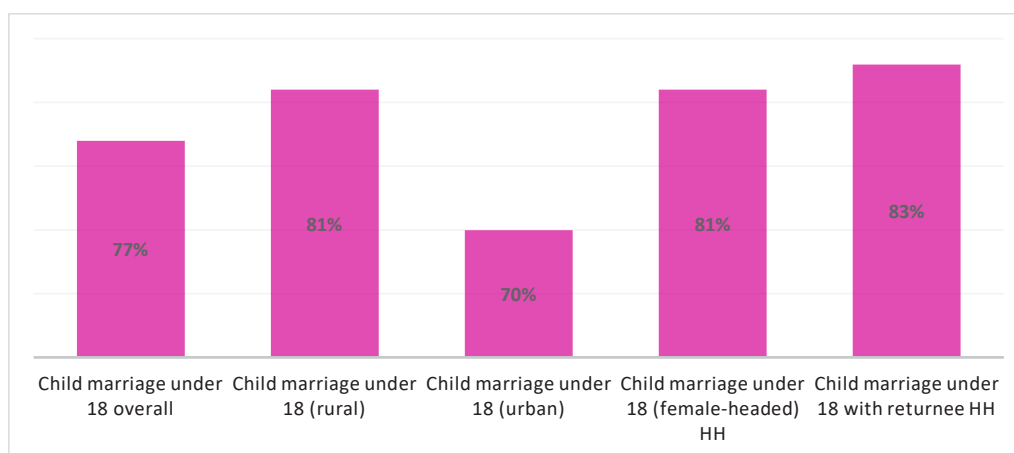
32 <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/ending-child-marriage> (Accessed on 27 February 2021)

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

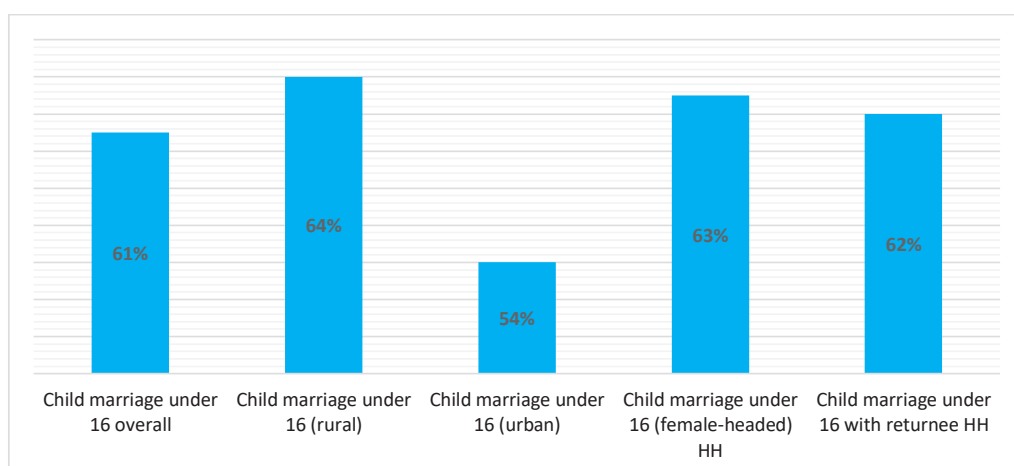
34 A proxy indicator was used to identify the incidence of child marriage. As people typically tend to hide the actual age at marriage for legal reason, the incidences of the child in Bangladesh remain underreported. Therefore, the respondents were asked what class the bride read during the marriage 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 during analyzing this proxy measurement.

Existing literature sheds light on the different social, cultural and economic factors which contribute to the higher rate of child marriage in Bangladesh. The most significant contributing factors of child marriage in

*Figure 4: Rate of the marriage of children under 18 in the surveyed households (using proxy indicator)*



*Figure 5: Rate of the marriage of children under 16 in surveyed households (using proxy indicator)*



the country are i) gendered social norms and harmful practices, ii) social insecurity and issues of safety of the female child; iii) perceived lower value of the female child, often compounded by poverty; and iv) unequal education and livelihood opportunities.<sup>35</sup>

The higher rate of child marriage in female-headed households and in rural areas is presumably because of security concerns regarding girls. The returnee migrants also feel the same security concern as they work or live far from their families. A separate BRAC study (BRAC, 2021)<sup>36</sup> suggests that parents were

35 [https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/media/236/file/ECM%20Report\\_v9\\_c.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/media/236/file/ECM%20Report_v9_c.pdf)

36 BRAC (2021) Potential Barriers to Going Back to Classroom in Post-COVID Situation: A rapid appraisal

concerned about their daughter's safety during the pandemic as the schools were closed. Some parents from Tahirpur of Sunamganj mentioned:

*Girls are sitting idle at homes, and it has been difficult for the parents to ensure their safety in many cases. As a result, they are marrying them off to avoid any unpleasant incident. If schools were open, these situations would not have arrived (FGD participants).<sup>37</sup>*

A local government representative in Bogura district mentioned some points on this issue:

*There is no denying that the number of child marriages in my area has increased during the Corona period. We tried a lot. Whenever such an incident came to my ears, I stopped it. But many have secretly married off their daughters. A significant group of them have lost their jobs and were forced to come back. They had to reduce their extra expenses and also be aware of the security of their daughters. So, finding no other alternative, many parents did so.*

A recent survey on 'Rapid Analysis of Child Marriage Status: Corona 2020' conducted by Manusher Jonno Foundation shows that almost 13,886 cases of child marriage took place in the last seven month in 21 districts.<sup>38</sup>

Literature suggests that child marriage increases the chance of giving more than three or four childbirths, decreases the age of first childbirth,<sup>39</sup> elevates the risk of unplanned pregnancies,<sup>40</sup> which may have significant impact on population growth rate in the long term.

### 3.2 Higher expected crude birth rate in surveyed households with returnee migrants

In April 2020, by which time COVID-19 had upended human life all over the world, UNFPA predicted that more than 47 million women worldwide could lose access to contraception, which would lead to 7 million unwanted pregnancies.<sup>41</sup> This prediction built on existing literature suggesting that while would-be parents in high-income countries become reluctant to conceive babies in disaster situations,<sup>42</sup> in low-income countries, the opposite trend often holds: in many cases, conception occurs even more frequently than in regular situations.<sup>43</sup> A major driver of this divergence is that in lower-income countries, family planning is a less privileged sector, and for that reason, people experience less access to birth control services, especially during emergencies. This leads to unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and maternal deaths.<sup>44</sup> In the case of COVID-19 specifically, lockdowns may also have provided enhanced intimacy to couples in the context of working from home, and many of them thought about bringing about a

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37 Ibid

38 [http://www.manusherjonno.org/latest\\_stories/13886-child-marriages-took-place-during-lockdown-last-year/](http://www.manusherjonno.org/latest_stories/13886-child-marriages-took-place-during-lockdown-last-year/)

39 The fertility rate in Bangladesh is 2.036 (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=BD>)

40 Kamal, 2012 Decline in Child Marriage and Changes in Its Effect on Reproductive Outcomes in Bangladesh ( [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232526312\\_Decline\\_in\\_Child\\_Marriage\\_and\\_Changes\\_in\\_Its\\_Effect\\_on\\_Reproductive\\_Outcomes\\_in\\_Bangladesh](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232526312_Decline_in_Child_Marriage_and_Changes_in_Its_Effect_on_Reproductive_Outcomes_in_Bangladesh))

41 <https://www.unfpa.org/pcm/node/24174> (Accessed on 28 February 2021)

42 Couples Forgoing Children Could Lead to Opposite of COVID-19 Baby Boom - Rolling Stone (Accessed on 28 February 2021)

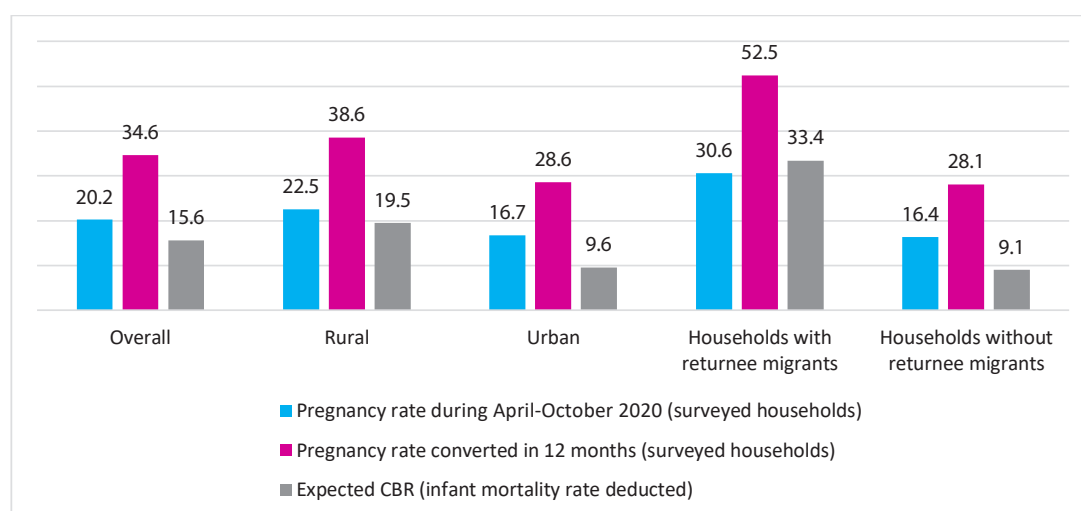
43 Aassve A, Cavalli N, Mencarini L, Plach S, Livi Bacci M Science. 2020 24 July; 369(6502):370-371. In Potential Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Future Birth Rate (nih.gov)

44 Aassve A, Cavalli N, Mencarini L, Plach S, Livi Bacci M Science. 2020 24 July; 369(6502):370-371. In Potential Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Future Birth Rate (nih.gov)

change in their life or felt the need for positive emotional support during the pandemic,<sup>45</sup> which might have contributed to some unplanned pregnancies.

Our survey data is in line with these predictions, however, not in all cases. The household survey identified 604 pregnant women among the surveyed households who conceived between April and October 2020 i.e. in seven months. Converting this to a 12 month measure, the yearly pregnancy rate in the surveyed households was found to be 34.63 per 1000 women of reproductive age (15-49 years). If the infant deaths per 1000 live births are counted (19.06 in 2019),<sup>46</sup> the expected crude birth rate would be 15.569.<sup>47</sup> That rate of expected crude birth is lower than the national crude birth rate that prevailed in 2018, of 18.184.<sup>48</sup> However, the expected crude birth rate is notably higher in households with returnee migrants (33.4 vs. 18.2). This is not entirely surprising, given the access to contraception, awareness about family planning, and sparse availability of relevant services in Bangladesh's rural areas compared to its urban locations, and COVID-19 has made such services rarer still. However, the survey data also suggests that reverse migration is a significant driver of increased fertility as the expected crude birth rate in the households that received returnee migrants is 33.4, compared to 9.1 among households without returnee migrants. Qualitative findings suggest that, in line with the literature noted above, many returnees had the chance to see their spouses after a long time, which might have contributed to higher pregnancy in their families.

**Figure 6: Pregnancy and expected crude birth rate in surveyed households (per 1000 women of reproductive age)**



45 Aassve A, Cavalli N, Mencarini L, Plach S, Livi Bacci M Science. 2020 24 July; 369(6502):370-371. In Potential Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Future Birth Rate (nih.gov)

46 [https://data.unicef.org/resources/data\\_explorer/unicef\\_f/?ag=UNICEF&df=GLOBAL\\_DATAFLOW&ver=1.0&dq=BGD.CME\\_MRM0.&startPeriod=1970&endPeriod=2021](https://data.unicef.org/resources/data_explorer/unicef_f/?ag=UNICEF&df=GLOBAL_DATAFLOW&ver=1.0&dq=BGD.CME_MRM0.&startPeriod=1970&endPeriod=2021) (Accessed on 1 June 2020)

47 The crude birth rate is the annual number of live births per 1,000 population

48 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CBRT.IN?locations=BD>

### **Box 1: Unwanted pregnancy left a workless migrant in a distress**

*A restaurant worker by profession, a migrant worker in Mirzaganj Upazila of Patuakhali district, Kamal (pseudo name) (30), while narrating his story, mentioned, "I was forced to come back to my paternal house in Patuakhali and started living with my brothers from last April. Before the pandemic, I worked in a Dhaka city restaurant and lived in the Begunbari slum area with my wife. I was recently married and had no intention of having a baby right then since I was struggling with my life. In May, my wife suddenly told me that her menstruation discontinued, and she felt like vomiting. We found it positive when we did a pregnancy test. It was such a crucial time no medical dispensary was opened in my locality due to Corona fear. Finding no other way, I decided to wait and after a few days of observing different symptoms of my wife, an older woman in my family informed me that my wife is pregnant. Hearing the news, I was shocked since I was totally jobless. After coming here, I did not get any way of buying contraceptive. I think that brought this unwanted pregnancy to my wife."*

### **3.3 International returnee migrants are stuck in the country, and many have scarce prospects of returning abroad, at least in the near-term**

5.3% of surveyed households received international returnee migrants. Among the international returnee migrants, working population groups aged 19-34 are the majority (56%). Qualitative inquiry suggests that international returnees in this age bracket may still have the desire to return abroad if the situation favours them. During in-depth interviews, a family member of a returnee migrant in Sonargaon of Narayanganj district mentioned that the returnee would prefer to return abroad if given the opportunity. During a qualitative inquiry in Narsingdi district, it was found that working-age returnee migrants who returned from a country where work opportunities had resumed and who maintained good connections with the said country had already started to go back after the international travel ban was lifted.

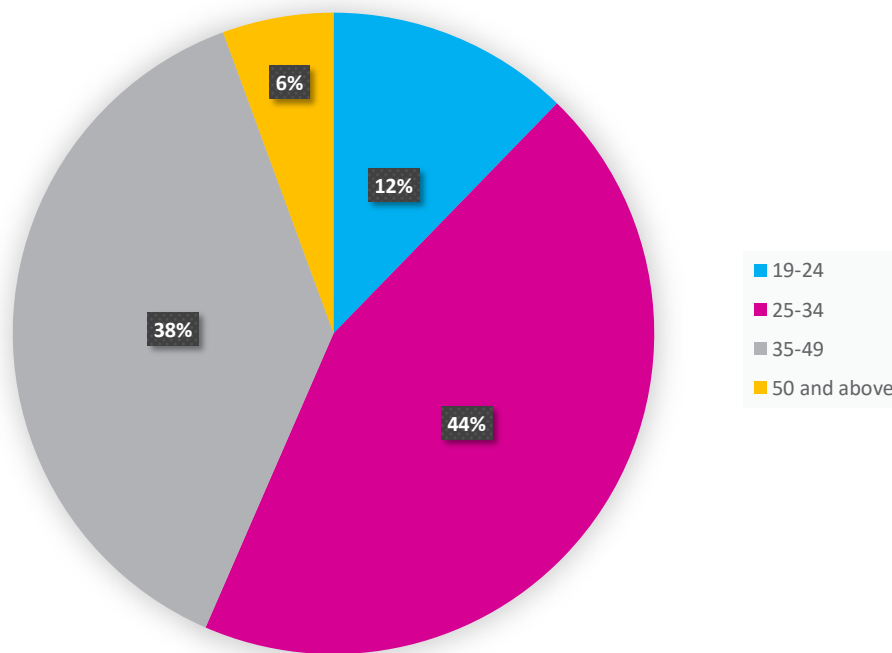
However, many returnee migrants were found to be stuck due to several reasons. A male returnee interviewed in Patuakhali district mentioned that those who returned from overseas countries could not migrate back and were stuck in their locality. Qualitative inquiry suggests that this is especially prominent for the higher age groups, women returnees, and less-skilled migrants. A female returnee migrant in Patuakhali district noted that she returned from Jordan during the lockdown, and as her visa expired, she lost her ability to go back. A male returnee migrant in Moulvibazar district who returned from Qatar and had stayed there for 30 years experienced the same problem. Another older male returnee in Narayanganj who had worked as a chef in Qatar also shared the same problem. Alternatively, he tried to set up a poultry business and seek a job in a restaurant in Dhaka. He was successful in establishing a small scale poultry firm though he has not started making a profit. However, he was not successful in getting a salaried chef position in a restaurant in Dhaka. A woman working in Shariatpur district who came back from Saudi Arabia mentioned that she wants to go back, but it is impossible for several reasons.

She said:

*I will go back if I get the chance. However, not in Saudi Arabia; I want to go anywhere else to get a better salary. I have a 'house visa' to go back to Saudi, but the work is challenging compared to the salary. I have to maintain 5-7 children, which is so crucial job. If any company offers me a good salary, I may think to go back. Otherwise, I will stay here with my husband, who is a farmer.*

Returnee migrants aged 35 and above are 44% of the overall sample of international returnees. As the qualitative inquiry suggests, they might have less scope to go back due to their age and other factors. Many of them returned to see their family members and got stuck amidst the pandemic, and their visa expired. Their short-term or long-term stay in Bangladesh might have contributed to bringing the desire to

Figure 7: Age distribution of international returnee migrants



give birth to babies. A study suggests that the aspiration for parenthood during the pandemic was more apparent among the higher age group (31–46 years)<sup>49</sup>. As the literature suggests, they might have wanted to bring some changes in life or positivity amid the disaster situation.

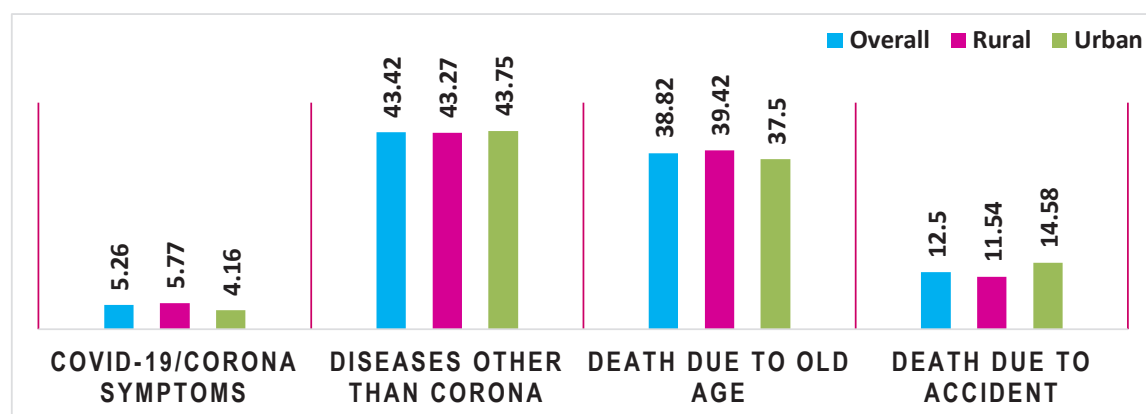
### 3.4 The decreased death rate in 2020

Study findings indicate that the death rate may have decreased in 2020. The finding is interesting considering the presence of the pandemic throughout the year. In the surveyed households, 152 persons died during the survey reference period, which implies a 5.1 death rate per 1000 people. Compared to the pre-pandemic death rate of 5.53 in Bangladesh (2018), this suggests a slightly lower death rate in 2020. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, COVID deaths remained the lowest reason for death in 2020, compared to deaths from other diseases, old age, or accident. Moreover, some other factors impacted the lower

49 Lindberg LD, VandeVusse A, Mueller J, Kirstein M. Early Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from the 2020 Guttmacher Survey of Reproductive Health Experiences. New York, NY: Guttmacher Institute; (2020). 10.1363/2020.31482

death rate. For example, the total number of traffic accident deaths in 2019 was 7,855,<sup>50</sup> which fell to 6,686<sup>51</sup> in 2020 – due to the lockdown and restriction of movements, the prevalence of road accidents fell down. Moreover, there is an assumption that death caused by water and vector-borne diseases also fell as people acquired the habit of washing their hands and maintaining hygiene. The death toll from drowning reduced in 2020. A report revealed that 769 people, most of which were minors, drowned in 2020,<sup>52</sup> which typically exceeds 10,000 children per year.<sup>53</sup> This is because the children were not allowed to go out due to

**Figure 8: Causes of death during the pandemic (n=152)**



coronavirus preventive measures, and parents had more time to look after their children. Moreover, water transports were also restricted during the lockdown. Thus accidents in waterways were reduced in 2020.

50 <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/road-accidents-kill-7855-people-in-2019-in-bangladesh-1852684>

51 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/01/09/report-18-people-killed-every-day-on-average-in-road-accidents-in-2020#:~:text=As%20many%20as%206%2C686%20people,accident%20monitoring%20report%20for%202020.>

52 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/12/31/769-mostly-minors-drowned-in-bangladesh-in-2020>

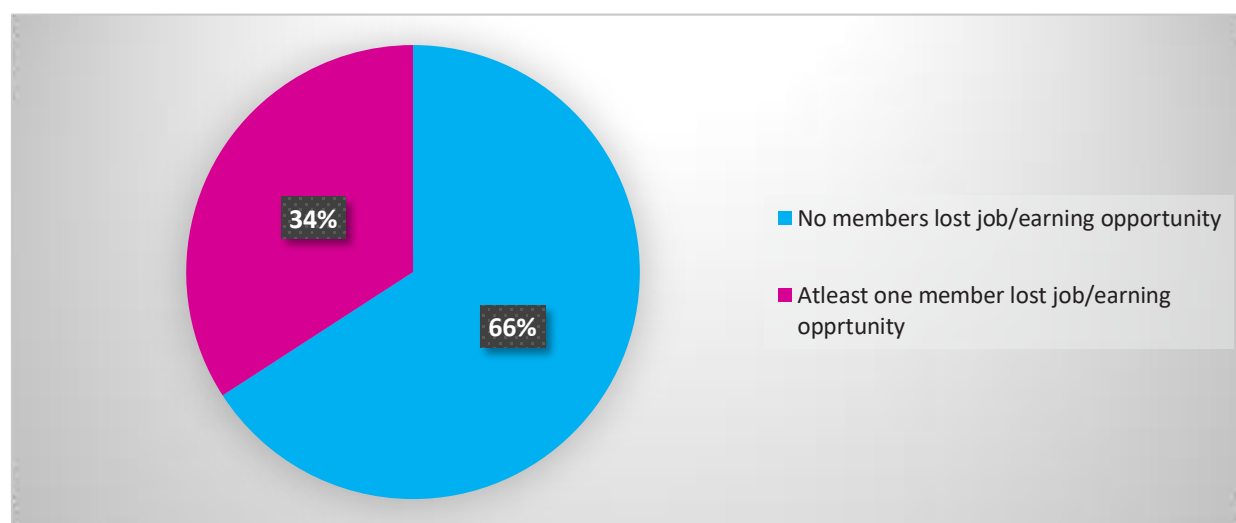
53 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2019/04/10/research-30-children-drown-every-day-in-bangladesh>

### 3.5 A drastic fall in income, remittances, and savings, and elevated indebtedness, caused by the pandemic

#### Employment and income

The pandemic and resulting health and safety measures pushed Bangladesh's economy into freefall. The economic disruptions caused many people to lose jobs and earning opportunities, especially in the informal economy. Around 34%<sup>54</sup> of all surveyed households had at least one member who lost jobs or earning capacity and became economically inactive (figure 1). Given that the overwhelming majority of households are single-earner households, such job losses represent a seismic welfare shock.

*Figure 9: Loss of jobs or earning opportunity during the pandemic*

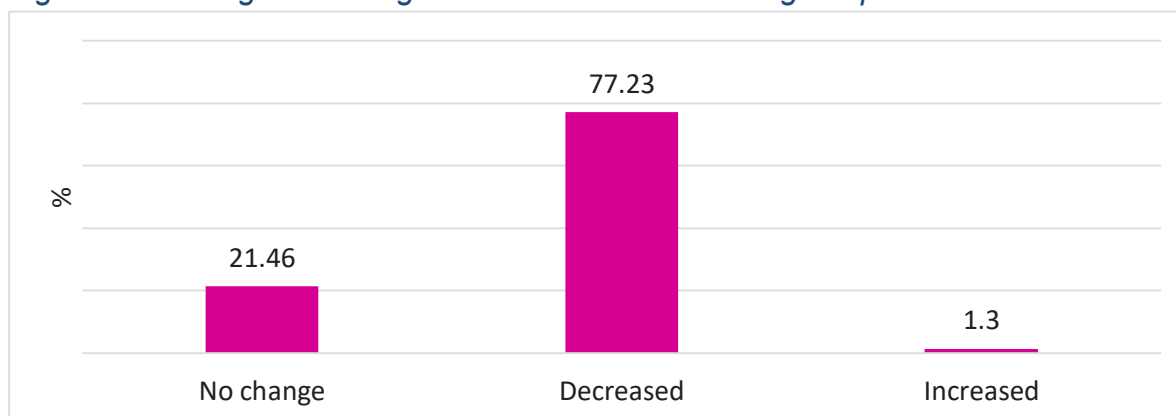


Indeed, the loss of jobs and income-earning opportunities caused a drastic fall in household income. Figure 10 depicts the changes in household income during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic. 77% of sample households saw a decrease in their average monthly income during the pandemic,<sup>55</sup> while only 1% reported an increase. This change was the same across rural and urban households. A higher percentage of households with returnees (80.8%) experienced a decrease in monthly average household income. A decrease in income may have occurred from reasons other than loss of job/work, such as loss of rent, remittances, delayed salary/wage, partial loss of work/earning opportunities, etc. Pearson's chi-square test of association reveals a significant association between the job loss and change in income. A statistically significant fall in the monthly average income of households occurred during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic. On average, surveyed households experienced a 29% fall in the average monthly income during this period.

<sup>54</sup> Several studies conducted during or right after the lockdown (April-May 2020) found a higher percentage of households facing job loss, especially those involved in the informal sector. However, after the lockdown was lifted, many started working again and therefore did not report losing a job when we surveyed in December 2020.

<sup>55</sup> during the pandemic period in the report refers to March 2020–November 2020, while the before pandemic period refers to the months before March 2020.

Figure 10: Change in average household income during the pandemic



## Remittances

Sample households also reported a significant fall in remittances. The surveyed households reportedly experienced a 58% decrease in monthly remittances received on average during the pandemic. Although national statistics show an increase in the (official) remittance inflow since the pandemic hit the country, the recipient households report a significant decrease in remittances. This, however, is not surprising, considering there have been several studies that suggest that over half of the remittances received by the Bangladeshi households are sent through informal channels, such as hundi, other travellers, or directly with migrant workers themselves.<sup>56</sup> During the pandemic, many of the unlawful hundi businesses were closed, and travel restrictions were imposed to contain the virus's spread. Hence, migrant workers who maintained employment were unable to send remittances through informal channels and were forced to use official, legal channels. Therefore the national statistics show an increase in remittance inflow even though recipient households report a dramatic decrease in average monthly remittances received.

A woman (65) from Narsingdi district shared:

*My two sons used to live abroad and sent me thirty thousand BDT per month before corona. During corona, one of my sons lost his job and came back home. My other son continued to send me twenty thousand takas per month. Since his salary reduced, he could not send the same amount of money. Besides, the son who came back recently got married. So, household members got increased and so has the expenditure. Now, I am spending from my savings, but that is running out.*

## Savings and debt

Households responded to the fall in income by depleting their savings and borrowing money to manage their daily expenses. The average monthly savings of households decreased by 62% on average, and household debt increased by 31%. Meanwhile, the average monthly expenditure fell by only 8.6%. The decrease in expenditure and savings and rise in household debt during the pandemic was statistically significant (at a 99% confidence interval) compared to before pandemic levels. The significant depletion of savings and rise in household debt-burden are likely to have long-term consequences on the economic vulnerability of these households.

<sup>56</sup> Barkat, A., Osman, A., Sen, S. K. (2014). "In the corridors of remittances: Cost and use of remittances in Bangladesh". ILO country office-Bangladesh, Dhaka.

A school teacher from Shariatpur district noted in this regard:

*Most of the families in my locality are facing an economic crisis due to corona. Many of them are bound to spend their cash and capital for survival. Most of the people in this region are immigrants, so remittance is the primary income source for the maximum household. The people here live mainly in Italy. The situation in Italy became terrible because of corona. Many of those who live abroad have lost their jobs or not received their salaries properly because of corona. So, they could not send money regularly. Besides, many people were forced to come back to locality due to income loss. They could not bring much money with them. Many households received extra members who joined from outside. So, daily expenses increased at a great rate. Besides, many people lost income-generating activities that also have an impact.*

Even those who managed to remain employed or self-employed are facing severe hardship. A farmer from Sylhet reported that many of his crops were ruined as he could not buy pesticides and fertiliser in time because he was unable to sell his other crops in the market due to low demand, travel restrictions, and limited market hours during the lockdown. Therefore he was unable to repay his previous loans and is still struggling to make payments.

## Urban versus rural

Although farmers and other rural workers have been hit hard, the economic impact of the pandemic was somewhat more limited on rural households compared to their urban counterparts. Although there was not a significant difference in the fall of income and savings between urban and rural households, the rise in household debt of urban households (47%) was significantly higher than that of rural households (22%) (at a 95% confidence interval). Moreover, urban households had a higher fall in expenditure (10%) than rural ones (7%). The difference in the economic impact between urban and rural households is mainly due to two significant reasons. First, lockdown and distancing measures were enforced in urban areas more than in rural areas. Consequently, the urban poor were hardest hit economically. Second, social safety net programmes have insufficient coverage for the urban poor (several other studies have also found that urban households had a more extensive economic fallout during pandemic compared to rural households).<sup>57</sup>

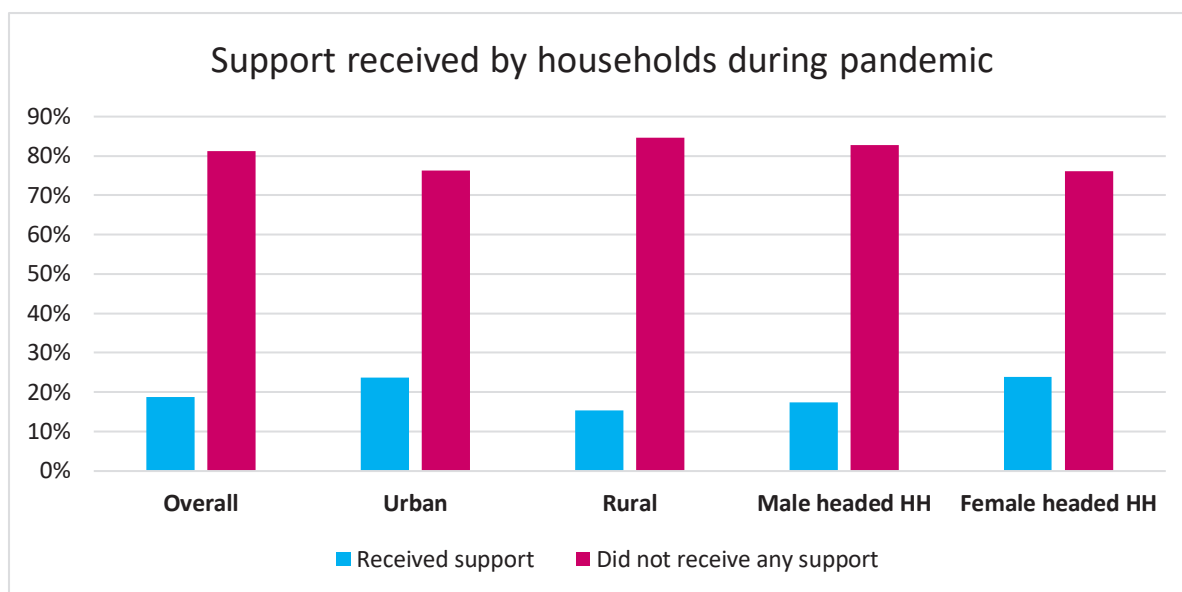
## Government and non-government assistance

In the face of the economic fallout of the pandemic, government and non-government support in food or cash assistance was crucial to ensuring food security for the worst impacted households. The government of Bangladesh provided both cash and food support to poor households. Some non-government bodies and individuals also made efforts to provide sustenance support to those in need during the pandemic. However, only 19% of responding households reported receiving assistance from government or non-government sources (figure 7). Urban households received more support (24%) compared to rural households (15%), while female-headed households (24%) received more support than their male counterparts (17%). Although the social safety net programmes of the government have greater coverage in rural areas, the impact of Covid-19, as well as the lockdown, was more severe in urban areas compared to rural areas, and hence more support was reportedly provided in urban areas from both government and non-government sources. The safety net programmes are also more targeted towards female-headed vulnerable households than male-headed ones.

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57 <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PPRC-BIGD-Final-April-Survey-Report.pdf>

Figure 11: Percentage of households who received govt. or non-govt. support during pandemic



### 3.6 The returnee migrants face grim economic prospects

#### Loss of jobs and low prospect of finding new job

Since the onset of the pandemic in December 2019, the global economy saw a slump in demand, causing a global economic crisis. Major destinations of Bangladeshi overseas workers also suffered economically from the demand crash. Many migrant workers lost sources of income and began to return since the beginning of the year 2020.

Among the surveyed households of the sample with migrant population, 60% had at least one migrant member who returned during the pandemic. Around 40% of the migrant households had one or more internal returnees only, 8% of migrant households had one or more international returnees only, and 12% had internal and international returnees.

Households without migrant workers<sup>58</sup> fared comparatively better during the pandemic than households with migrants. Remittances earned by migrant workers is one of the primary drivers of the economy and contributes to the economic growth of the country.<sup>59</sup> In light of this, migrant households are generally considered more resilient in a business-as-usual scenario. However, households with migrants in our sample experienced a significantly (at 95% confidence interval) higher fall in income than households without migrants. Equally concerning is that household debt among migrant households increased by 82.4%, significantly (at 95% confidence interval) higher than the 12.8% rise in household debt among households without migrants. Other studies yield similarly stark conclusions. A study on Bangladesh and Nepal, for

58 26% of households in the sample reported having migrant workers (either internal migrant, or international migrant, or both), while 74% of households reported not having any migrant workers.

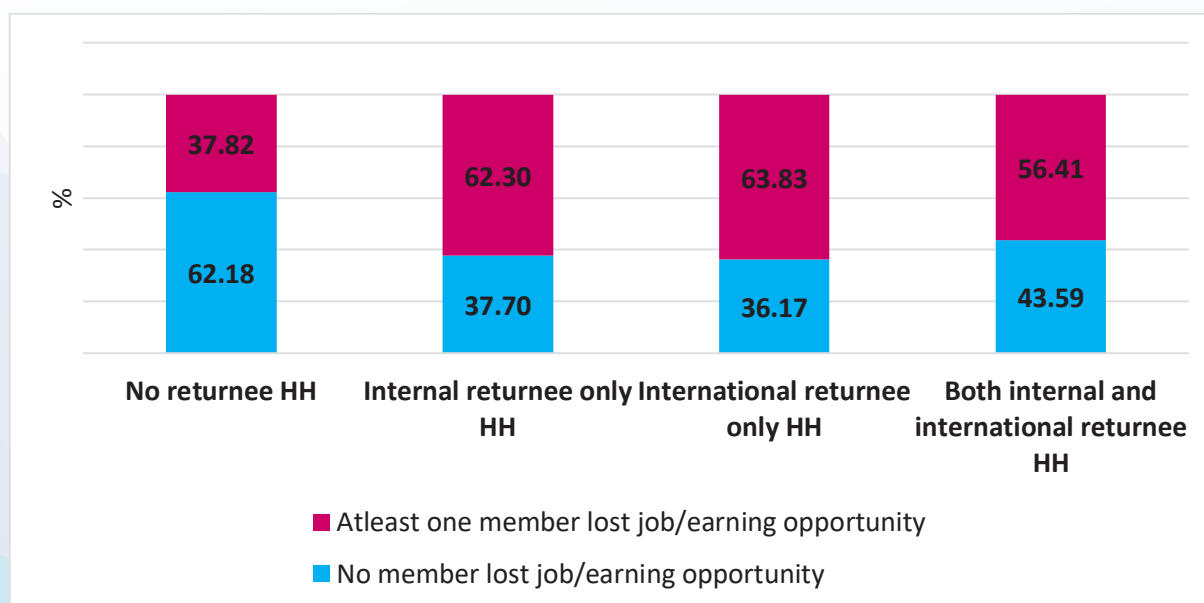
59 Abu Siddique, E. A. Selvanathan & Saroja Selvanathan (2012) Remittances and Economic Growth: Empirical Evidence from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, The Journal of Development Studies, 48:8, 1045-1062.

instance, found migrant households to be more vulnerable during the pandemic (Barker N. et al., 2020)<sup>60</sup>; reasons include a decline in remittances, a global economic crisis causing migrants to lose job and work, higher health risk associated with returnee migrants, not finding work after returning etc. Moreover, expert consultation provides insight into the vulnerability of migrant households during this pandemic. Migrant households are more vulnerable due to the fact that they lack knowledge of and experience with coping strategies. During previous shocks, such as the 2008 economic crisis, remittances were not disrupted (as evident by continued rise of GDP growth rate during the crisis years), hence the migrant households did not have the chance to build resilience and learn how to cope with such challenges.

Figure 12 shows that among the surveyed households only internal migrant returnees, 62% had at least one member who lost a job or earning opportunity during the pandemic. Among the surveyed households that had only international migrant returnees, 64% experienced a loss of job/income-earning opportunity during this period. Among the migrant households with both internal and international returnees, 56% experienced the same. On the other hand, 37.8% of migrant households without any returnee migrant experienced a loss of job/income-earning opportunity. Atiur Rahman (Pseudonym) (30), a returnee migrant from Oman at Shariakandi Upazila in Bogura, while narrating his story mentioned:

*My savings ruined just after two months of my coming back. Then I faced the most challenging reality of my life. I am forced to borrow from acquaintances. I was unemployed for a long time. I was mentally very restless and depressed. Finally, a couple of months ago, I started working as a day labourer in a brickfield. I don't know whether I will be able to go back to Oman again.*

Figure 12: Loss of jobs or earning opportunity among households with migrants



60 <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/migration-and-labour-market-impacts-covid-19>

## **Box 2: The misery of a returnee migrant from Italy**

*Marufur Rahman (pseudonym) (35) is a Kedarpur village resident in Naria Upazila of Shariatpur district. In February 2020, he returned from Italy to his village. After just two weeks of his vacation, the incidence of corona continued to rise. In this situation, he was trapped in his village. He could not return to Italy as all flights were cancelled due to corona. Marufur is the second of three brothers and four sisters. After studying up to eighth grade, he worked in agriculture with his father for some time. Then he worked in his elder brother's grocery store. Five years ago, he moved to Italy. At that time, some of the family's land was sold and mortgaged, and a loan from a bank was arranged to send him to Italy. He went to Italy and took a job in a restaurant. At that time, the local Bengali community supported him in various ways. He came to the country two years ago to get married. After the marriage, he left his wife at home with his parents. He used to send a large portion of his salary each month. This money was used to support his parents and wife. He also repaid bank loans. His life abroad was going well. The job was also regular. There was no difficulty. He came home with a three-month leave when the hotel authorities gave him leave. When he returned, he brought some money with him. He thought he could go back very soon. However, as the lockdown time continued to increase, his departure became uncertain.*

*On the other hand, after returning to the country, he spent his savings in the first four months. In the meantime, his wife got pregnant. He said, "I thought I'd go back to Italy after passing my vacation. But after coming to the country, I am sitting at home completely unemployed. I spent most of my savings to bear the living cost. Then, gradually the savings ran out. My wife is pregnant. Now I see only darkness in my eyes."*

Significant reasons for internal migrants returning are loss of job/work opportunity (61%), delayed wage, increased expenses, or decreased income (22%), and believing that villages are safer than cities from COVID-19 infection (10%). International migrants mainly returned due to loss of jobs/work (58%) and increased expenses/decreased income (20%), while 15% came to visit for various reasons and could not return due to travel restrictions. Pearson's chi-square test of association shows significant association (at a 99% confidence interval) between the loss of jobs or earning opportunity and the presence of returnees in migrant households.

### **Many returnees depleted their savings to cope with the financial shock**

Many migrant workers waited before returning to look for other work opportunities but failed, and exhausted much of their savings while waiting. One returnee migrant from Patuakhali reported that he lost his shop-keeping job in Qatar and returned to Bangladesh to find work. However, finding work in Bangladesh was especially difficult for returnee migrants, as they faced stigma in the local community that returnee migrants, especially international returnee migrants, pose a greater risk of spreading Covid-19. A qualitative inquiry suggests that as the pandemic broke out globally and countries closed their borders, the local community became scared that migrants returning from abroad would bring COVID with them. This fear intensified when news of the unavailability and non-compliance of returnees with institutional isolation reached the local communities via various media. This fear was especially prominent during the beginning of the pandemic in Bangladesh. Due to this fear among local communities, the returnees were socially isolated for longer periods than recommended by experts to contain spread of the virus and therefore found it difficult to find work in their respective localities in the short-term, upon returning. 77%

of respondents opined that job or work opportunities for returnee migrants are scarce. Mofiz, a returnee from Italy, has been unemployed for almost 7 months. Previously, he had worked in a local hotel and had a small roadside business in Italy for over 17 years.

Around 41% of returnee migrants could not get involved in income-generating work; some managed expenses by withdrawing from savings or using rent from their assets. A returnee migrant in Mirzaganj said:

*I lived off my savings during the first 3-4 months in Dubai and returned when I could not find any job.*

Another returnee migrant in Patuakhali said:

*I lost my job as a local shopkeeper in Qatar at the beginning of the pandemic starts; hence I came back to Bangladesh to find a source of income.*

In addition to job loss, households with returnees experienced a significantly larger fall in monthly average household income (at 99% confidence interval), expenditure (at 90% confidence interval), savings (at 95% confidence interval), remittances received (at 99% confidence interval), money received from internal migrants (at 99% confidence interval), and significant increase (at 90% confidence interval) in household debt, compared to households with no returnees. As a result, they fall into misery. A returnee migrant from Dubai expressed:

*We are living an extremely miserable life now. The worst part is local people do not want to believe that we lack now because they assume that migrants are economically solvent since they used to earn better in foreign countries for about 7 or 8 years.*

## **Outstanding migration loan adding to the sufferings**

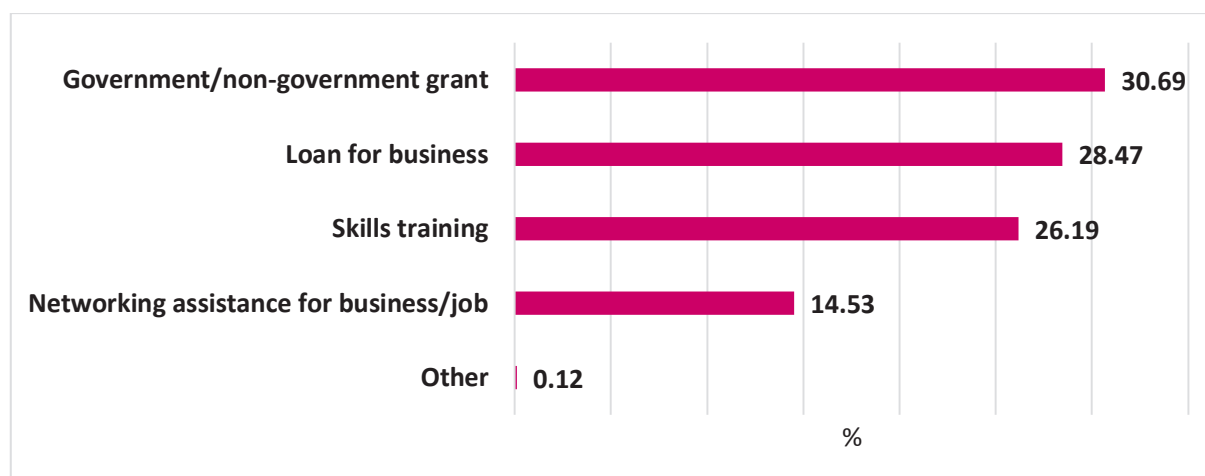
Apart from not being able to be as economically active as they would prefer to be, one of the major concerns of one-fourth of returnee migrant households is their outstanding migration loans. These average an amount of 76,000 BDT (around \$900 USD), and reach a maximum of 700,000 BDT (around \$8,300 USD). Migrant workers and their household members were hoping to pay off the loans from their income/remittances. However, now that the migrant workers have had to return, they face the burden of unpaid migration loans with little prospect of paying them off anytime soon.

## **Reintegration support needed**

Returnee migrants and their households will need support to recover from the economic vulnerabilities they are dealing with. The majority of returnee migrants (69%) reportedly need various support for business or enhancing earning capacity (e.g. loan, training, networking support etc.), while another 31% need grants support. A women returnee from Jordan said:

*I wish to start a small tailoring business but can't start it now because I do not have the money to buy a sewing machine and other required tailoring materials. I used to get paid 13,000 takas per month when I was in Jordan and have almost no savings. If I could get a small loan, I could also buy some chicken, ducks, cows or goats to start farming.*

Figure 13: Support needed for returnee migrants



### 3.7 Both the supply and demand side of education and healthcare could suffer if the returnees do not migrate again

#### Implications for education service

The household survey found that 4.57% of those who migrated during the pandemic were school-aged children (age 5 to 16 years). If these children do not return to their previous schools after reopening the schools, it could put extra pressure on the resources of the educational institutes in the ancestral areas. The current teacher-to-student ratio in primary level education (1:30)<sup>61</sup> and secondary level education (1:39)<sup>62</sup> might increase, especially in areas prone to high numbers of returnees.

A principal from a peri-urban area in Patuakhali district expressed his concern about resource allocation after reopening the school, which indicates the potential burden on the rural/peri-urban educational institutes: I have limited seats in my school for students to cope up with. It would be difficult for me to maintain social distancing and to arrange hand sanitiser, mask, and handwashing programmes within the school campus after the reopening of the school.

Students might also face problems coping with new friends in new schools. They might face difficulties understanding the lessons if laboratory, library, and school teachers are not well-qualified. The change of their living conditions and the financial state of their families' might affect the quality of their studies. A teacher from a rural area raised his concern that students who were used to reading in a single room in a flat/apartment may lose the quality of their education if they start living in a joint family in a village or peri-urban area.

A story of a migrant student who shifted from the capital city to a village captures this scenario:

*I am new in this locality, neither did anybody (fellow students) talk with me, nor did I get any help from the teachers. My current school is far away from my home. Madam of the school doesn't care about exams. I also didn't take their questions seriously, which were provided during the pandemic situation.*

## Implications for health services

The household survey found that 13.35% of returnees (both external and internal) are above 40 years of age, and of them, 4.56% are above 50 years of age. The 50+ population is less likely to return to their previous migration location, which has potential implication on health services, especially for services related to non-communicable diseases (NCD). The prevalence of hypertension and diabetes increases with age, and it increases substantially after the age of 40. In Bangladesh, the prevalence of raised blood pressure (BP) among adults aged 40-54 years is 34.4% and 46.9% among adults aged 55-69 years, whereas the prevalence of raised blood glucose among adult aged 40-54 years is 12.4% and 16.3% among adults aged 55-69 years. Most of the people seek care and treatment from private facilities (62.1% for blood glucose and 77.2% for BP),<sup>63</sup> which is less available in rural and peri-urban areas. So, the demand for usual and emergency care and treatment for NCD and other geriatric care might increase while the service might be less or unavailable.

Mental health challenges were a hidden pandemic that boomed during COVID-19. Stress and complexities have risen manifolds amid the pandemic situation not only because of loss of jobs/income opportunity and a dire financial crisis but also due to the loss of social status after returning home to a village with empty hands while carrying the burden of debt. While the present financial condition is pushing returnees to do any work that earns income, social positioning is restraining them from doing so. Some returnees said that though they became destitute, they were not yet ready to accept less prestigious jobs like rickshaw driving or van pulling, as they did not want to lose their social status in the locality. One returnee shared that he wanted to commit suicide out of tension. He expressed:

*While I had money, people respected me, but now I have no value to them.*

Another returnee said:

*I hear bad words from my mother and younger brother as I couldn't provide enough money. I go outside in the morning before my wife wakes up and come back after she goes to sleep as she used to do a lot of chatter.*

The household survey suggests that almost 80% of returnee migrants chose to migrate home due to financial reasons (83.06% internal and 78.13% international). Therefore, the mental health situation might get worse and the need for psychological support might increase sharply if the financial condition does not improve.

## 3.8 Impacts on female-headed households and female returnee migrants

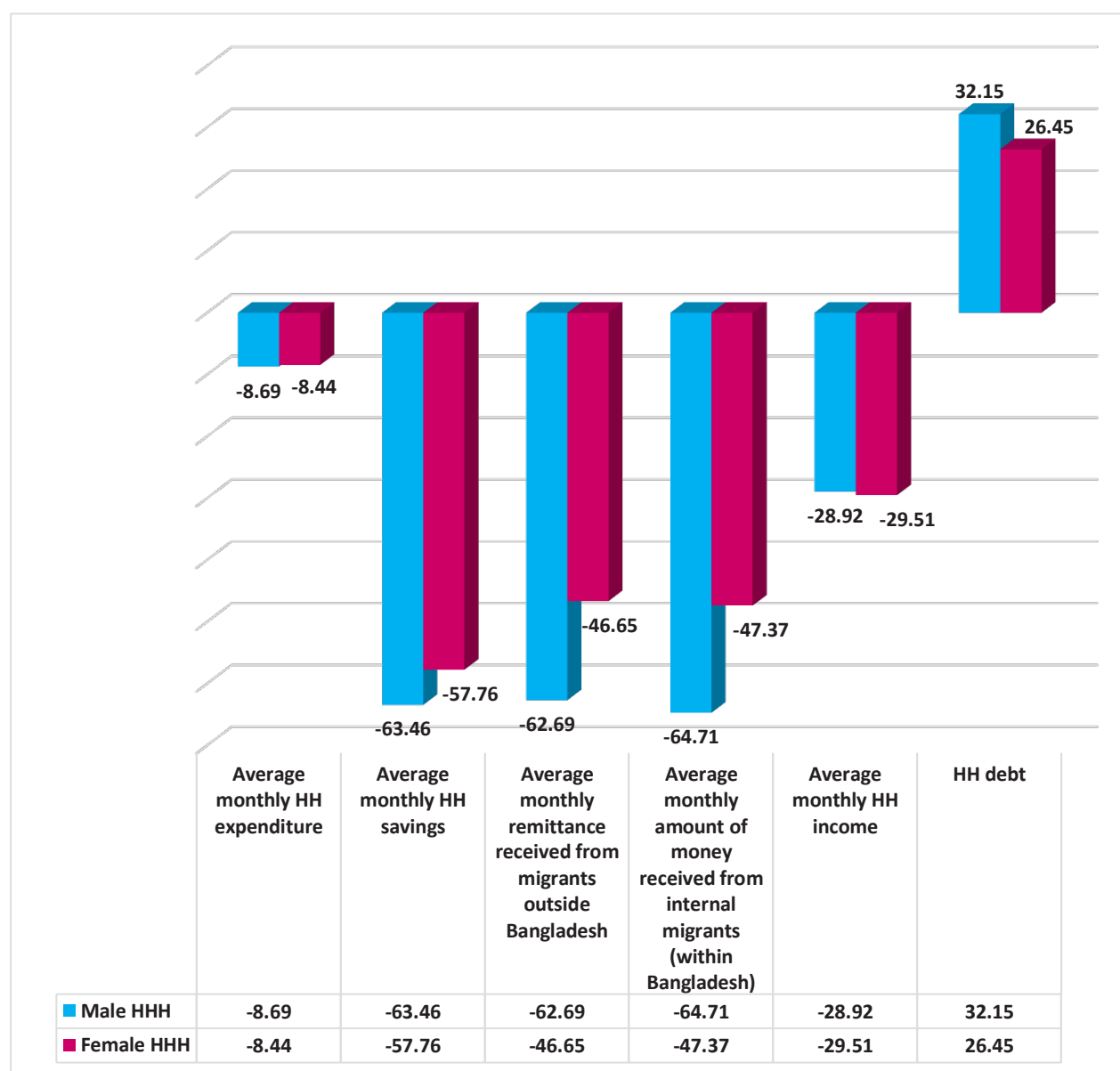
### Female-headed households managed the financial crisis better than their male counterparts

Female-headed households experienced significant (at 95% confidence interval) fall in income, expenditure, savings, remittances received, and increase in household debt during pandemic compared to their pre-pandemic levels. However, compared to male-headed households, female headed households were found to have coped better with the financial shock. The average monthly income of female-headed households

63 Islam M, Noor I, Zaman M, Rani M, Xu YY, Agarwal N, et al. National STEPS Survey for Non-communicable Diseases Risk Factors in Bangladesh 2018. 2020.

decreased by 29.5%, which is a slightly larger decrease than male-headed households (28.9%). The fall in monthly average remittances and savings of female-headed households were significantly lower (at 95% confidence interval) than that of male-headed ones. Remittances that the female-headed households received from overseas migrants decreased less than their male counterparts (46.65% vs 62.69%). Female-headed households that received money from family members working in towns within the country also experienced a drop in in-flow of money, but not as much as their male counterparts (47.37% vs 64.71%). Amid the drop in income, the female-headed households were found to be more resilient to the shock—their savings fell, but the fall was significantly (at 95% confidence interval) lower than their male counterparts (57.8% vs 63.4%). They had to borrow money to cope with the situation, however, not more than their male counterparts (26.45% vs 32.15% rise in household debt). One of the reasons behind this

**Figure 14: Average percentage change in household finances, pre-pandemic to during pandemic**



could be that many of their family members live outside the country, and many of them did not return during the pandemic while somehow continuing to send some money. Indeed, this is in many ways what defines a female-headed household during the pandemic: households where the male earner remained employed in the city or abroad. Moreover, the female-headed households appear to be more risk averse than male-headed ones in terms of financial decisions as they borrowed less. If pandemic induced economic slow-down is prolonged due to second and third waves and extended lockdowns, the risk averse behavior of female headed HHs is likely to turn out to be more favourable. However, female-headed households might have reduced their food expenditure as the coping strategy, consuming less protein, which might have a long term impact on nutrition and human capital development.

## Child marriage

As stated above, the child marriage rate is highest in female-headed households (81%). For the children under 16, this rate is more than triple for female-headed households (63%) compared to the pre-pandemic situation. As stated before, the higher rate of child marriage in female-headed households is due to a concern for girls' security. Other than the children, female students of college and universities also reported that they faced some pressure from their parents to marry despite protest and a preference to complete their education first. The parents tried to convince their daughters to get ready for marriage as they saw that colleges and universities would remain closed for a long time, and their daughters were sitting idle and at risk of harassment.

A university student said:

*I am now under tremendous pressure since I do not know till now when my master's final examination will be held...I want educational institutions to get reopened soon; otherwise, female students may get married soon.*

**Table 3: Challenges the female returnee migrants facing after coming back from abroad/other places of the country**

| Problems faced by the female returnees*                        | Frequency | Per cent |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Unable to do income-generating/productive work after returning | 398       | 53.1     |
| Cannot move freely in streets, markets, and in the hat-bazar   | 272       | 36.3     |
| Is not getting necessary employment opportunities              | 190       | 25.3     |
| Losing work skills/efficiency                                  | 162       | 21.6     |
| Problems in hygiene and sanitation                             | 110       | 14.7     |
| Unable to/ having trouble in coping with the local culture     | 104       | 13.9     |
| Problems in child-rearing and child education                  | 93        | 12.4     |

|                                                                        |    |      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|------|
| Having trouble taking care of the increased household chores           | 89 | 11.9 |
| Lack of sufficient entertainment/ difficulty in passing the time       | 63 | 8.4  |
| Subject to sexual violence and torture                                 | 52 | 6.9  |
| Subject to domestic violence/ verbal abuse                             | 41 | 5.5  |
| Absence of social utilities like entertainment centres, shopping malls | 37 | 4.9  |
| Subject to the anger of in-laws                                        | 24 | 3.2  |
| Others                                                                 | 26 | 3.5  |
| <i>*Multiple response</i>                                              |    |      |

### Problems faced by female returnee migrants

Female returnee migrants, mostly internal migrants, reported problems that they were facing in their day-to-day life in a new environment in village or peri-urban areas. The most common problems that the

#### **Box 3: The Story of a Female Internal Migrant from Patuakhali District**

*Shaila Akhter (pseudonym) (35) is a resident of Mirzaganj upazila in Patuakhali district. In June 2020, she moved to the village along with her family. Before corona started, she lived with her husband and two children in Dhaka. Her husband worked in a company, and she worked as a teacher in a kindergarten. When the government declared lockdown, her kindergarten was shutdown.*

*On the other hand, her husband's salary also went down. Unable to afford to stay in Dhaka, they decided to return to the village. When her husband's office reopened, her husband returned to Dhaka, leaving Shaila and her children to the village.*

*When her husband left, Shaila started facing different problems in the locality. One of the main problems she faced is to adjust to local culture. She needed to go to the market for various reasons, like buying daily commodities. However, neighbouring people could not take it easy. Besides, she had to maintain purdah while going outside. While living in Dhaka, she never faced such a problem. Her husband's elder brother once told her, "When you need anything, just let me know. You should not go outside frequently." Shaila said, "When I was in Dhaka, there was no such problem. I used to walk freely on the road. But after coming here, I cannot go out according to my wish. I have to maintain a lot of formalities and restrictions here. It seems that life became complicated here."*

*Shaila had a regular income in Dhaka. She had completed her HSC from a local college before her marriage. She was also an expert in sewing. But she found no income opportunities in the village. Besides, there is only one toilet in her house shared by all the family members, and it often remains dirty. So, the sanitation problem is another problem that she is facing now. Apart from this, she shared a shared kitchen with other family members. She missed urban facilities in the village. She said, "I cannot spend time here. There are none to gossip. The whole village remains silent at seven o'clock at night. My children also feel bored."*

returnee migrants reported included the inability to take income opportunities (53.1%), problems in moving freely in streets and markets (36.3%), lack of suitable employment opportunities (25.3%), the concern of losing skills (21.6%), problems in sanitation (14.7%), problems in adjusting with local culture (13.9%), and problems in child-rearing and ensuring their education (12.4%), etc.

The qualitative inquiries also suggest that the female migrant workers are facing some problems in the new environment. In Shariakandi of Bagura, a female migrant expressed:

*We often hear, ‘why does the woman walk into the Bazar area rather than her husband?’*

A local representative in Patuakhali said that if any women go outside wearing clothes that are non-conventional in the locality as they wore in towns/abroad, then it looks unacceptable to the local people.

### 3.9 The second and third waves

Several countries in the world experienced a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic when the infection curve dipped at the end of the first wave and began to rise after a while. As predicted by experts, a second wave also hit Bangladesh in March 2021 and the infection rate began to rise. Bangladesh began its vaccination drive on 07 February 2021, and the country saw lowest monthly death toll in the same month after first wave. Starting from the end of March, the second wave peaked in first week of April,<sup>64</sup> leading to a month long lockdown. For a while it seemed the lockdown and vaccination efforts were working and Bangladesh had brought the pandemic under control. However, as the Delta variant of the coronavirus spread in Bangladesh, the country began to experience the third wave of the pandemic.

The third wave is considerably different for Bangladesh than the preceding two. The Delta variant, which caused the third wave, is more transmissible than the Alpha variant of coronavirus. The first and second waves of the pandemic were more prominent in Dhaka and surrounding areas. However, since the Delta variant<sup>65</sup> was first identified in India in December 2020, the Bangladesh-India border districts were first affected with high rates of covid infection, and it quickly spread across the country. The country went into strict lockdown from the end of June, with reinforced vaccination drive.

64 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/04/17/experts-bangladesh-s-second-covid-wave-has-peaked-situation-likely-to-improve-in-may>

65 Yale Medicine describes the Delta variant as a “highly contagious SARS-Cov-2 virus strain”. The delta variant was first identified in India at the end of 2020 and quickly spread to Bangladesh, and other countries including UK and USA. URL: <https://www.yalemedicine.org/news/5-things-to-know-delta-variant-covid>

# Chapter 4



# Conclusions and Policy Insights

## 4.1 Conclusions

The study's findings suggest that the reverse migrations brought on by the COVID 19 pandemic contributed to significant changes in demographic, economic, and social environments in rural and semi-urban areas. The study's findings indicate that unexpected pregnancies increased during the pandemic among the households with returnee migrants, in turn contributing to an increased crude birth rate. This is also supported by literature that in underdeveloped economies, unexpected pregnancies increase due to factors such as lack of family planning services and measures, better intimacy developed between spouses during the pandemic, emerging hope of creating the next-generation amid the uncertainties, etc.<sup>66</sup> The findings further show that the death rate declined in 2020 despite deaths due to coronavirus. Other sources note that some common causes of death were less prevalent such as road accidents, accidents in waterways, drowning of children, death of infectious diseases, etc.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, the findings suggest that incidences of child marriage were terrifyingly higher in 2020. Higher child marriage incidences have long-term repercussions on population dynamics. Literature suggests that child marriage augments the chance of giving more childbirth than the expected fertility rate, lowers the age of first birth, raises the menace of unplanned pregnancies, etc.<sup>68</sup>

The findings suggest that reverse migrations during the pandemic contributed to population escalation in rural and peri-urban locations as the returnee migrants—both internal and international—rejoined their households. The average household size of the surveyed households was bigger than the national average which speaks to this trend. The findings also designate that many returnee migrants would not be able to go back to their previous destinations due to different factors such as old age, joblessness, or reduced income-earning opportunities.

The findings expose that many of the surveyed households encountered severe economic disruptions caused by joblessness and reduced earning opportunities, especially in the informal economy. The economic disruptions caused a radical reduction in household income. Many households that encountered a decrease in income had to draw on their savings and borrow money to manage family expenditures. Growing debt burdens could lead households into long-term economic vulnerability.

Economic adversity impacted most migrants, and therefore, forced them to return to their ancestral homes in villages and peri-urban locations. The study findings reveal that households with returnee migrant workers felt more economic pain during the pandemic than households without returnee migrants. These households did not have access to income from migrants or international as they did before the pandemic.

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66 Aassve A, Cavalli N, Mencarini L, Plach S, Livi Bacci M Science. 2020 24 July; 369(6502):370-371. In Potential Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Future Birth Rate (nih.gov)

67 <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/road-accidents-kill-7855-people-in-2019-in-bangladesh-1852684>; [https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/01/09/report-18-people-killed-every-day-on-average-in-road-accidents-in-2020#:~:text=As%20many%20as%206%2C686%20people,accident%20monitoring%20report%20for%202020.](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/01/09/report-18-people-killed-every-day-on-average-in-road-accidents-in-2020#:~:text=As%20many%20as%206%2C686%20people,accident%20monitoring%20report%20for%202020.;); <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/12/31/769-mostly-minors-drowned-in-bangladesh-in-2020>; <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2019/04/10/research-30-children-drown-every-day-in-bangladesh>

68 Yaya, S., Oduşina, E.K. & Bishwajit, G. Prevalence of child marriage and its impact on fertility outcomes in 34 sub-Saharan African countries. BMC Int Health Hum Rights 19, 33 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-019-0219-1>

Study findings also demonstrate that a good percentage of returnee migrants are school-aged children (5 to 16 years). If these children do not return to their previous schools after the resumption of normalcy, it might put additional pressure on the resources of local educational institutes in villages and peri-urban areas. The current teacher-to-student ratio in primary and secondary schools in rural and peri-urban areas might increase, especially in areas prone to high rates of returnees. Moreover, students might also face challenges to make new friends in new schools. They might also face difficulties understanding the lessons if laboratories, libraries, and schools are not well-equipped and teachers are not well-qualified.

Population above 50 years of age has a lower chance of returning to their previous migration destinations, which has a potential implication for health services, especially for services related to non-communicable diseases (NCD). Therefore, the demand for typical and emergency care and treatment for NCD and other geriatric care could rise and services diminish or become unavailable. Moreover, mental stress and complexities could have risen amid the pandemic, due to the loss of jobs or income-earning opportunities, facing a dire financial situations, or losing social positions after returning to village homes with empty hands and debt burdens. This might have long-term health consequences in rural and peri-urban areas.

Female-headed households have differential loss of earning opportunities and subsequent impacts. Many individuals dependent on remittances from overseas migrants confronted a decrease in the amount they were receiving. Female-headed households that received money from family members working in towns inside the country also experienced a decrease in money received. Female college and university students faced some unsolicited stress of early marriage despite their preference for completing their education first. Female returnee migrants, mostly internal migrants, faced particular problems associated with gender norms and freedoms that they encountered in their day-to-day lives in new environments in villages or peri-urban areas. The most common problems that they faced included the inability to take income-earning opportunities, problems in moving freely in streets and markets, lack of suitable employment opportunities, the concern of losing skills, problems in sanitation, problems in adjusting to local culture, and problems in child-rearing and ensuring their children's education.

## 4.2 Policy insights

The following policy insights can be extracted from the study findings:

The alarming rate of child marriage has severe implications for women and children's health, population growth, female school dropout rates and budget requirements for health, nutrition, food security, and education. Effective awareness and preventive measures should be taken to reduce the increased rate of child marriages and possible dropouts of women and girls. Local administration and NGOs can work together in this respect. Close monitoring and prompt action from local government agencies are needed to prevent such occurrences. Both public and private schools must be asked to report "back to school" attendances (gender disaggregated) in classes when schools reopen. Further studies can shed light on the change of schools, increase in drop out, and increase of burden on schools in rural and peri-urban areas, when the schools reopen.

Women have been subjected to heightened burden of unpaid care work during this pandemic. As people had to stay home for health safety practices, household chores increased substantially. The care burden for older family members, members with disability, and members with illnesses also increased due to various measures taken to contain the spread of the virus such as working from home, introducing duty-roster in offices and factories etc. The closure of educational institutions added to this burden as the responsibility of continuing children's regular education at home were placed upon women. Balancing household chores, child rearing, and children's education with income generating work has been difficult for working women. Budget allocations and investments are needed to expand available, affordable, and quality child care and elderly care homes. Bold and innovative initiatives such as a recognition and monetization of domestic

work and unpaid care work can help to overcome this challenge for women. Psychosocial support is also needed for the women to cope with the mental stress of these added burdens. Awareness and behaviour change campaigns must be taken to encourage the men and the other members in the household to share these burdens.

Returnee women migrants face some cultural shocks as well as problems associated with an inability to apply their skills and knowledge and find opportunities to engage in income-generating activities. They need psychosocial support. They can be engaged in social and economic activities to reduce their mental stress, and their knowledge, experience and skills gained from living in urban areas can be shared with people living in rural and semi-urban environments. The returnee migrants are facing adversities at both household and community levels. They are under severe psychological pressure from their families and society at large to stay in isolation upon returning and then returning to work as soon as possible. Further studies are needed to shed light on the impact of reverse migration and the decline in remittances on social and familial relationships.

Earning opportunities seem to be slim for returnee migrants during the pandemic, even as they have the desire to find work or establish businesses. Since they were abroad (in the case of international returnees) for a considerable period, they will need financial support to familiarise themselves with the local market, supply chain, and business environment. Skill development training may also be needed for those who intend to make a change of career. Programmes can be designed to target the creation of demand among returnees to receive training rather than receiving loans and to increase appetite for self-employment. Female returnee migrants should be provided with loans with fewer conditions. A focus should be placed on SMEs and their linkages to financial institutions need to be strengthened.

Rural and peri-urban areas have received returnee migrants, many of whom will not be able to go back to their migration destination. Hence, there will be an unintended burden of sharing existing resources and services at the local level. Therefore, the government needs to closely monitor the increased need for resources in education and health sectors, especially for rural and peri-urban areas. Additional resources must be allocated in these sectors where necessary to accommodate the increased need for services caused by the potential increase in number of students, the elderly, newborn babies, and people with mental stresses at the local level.

Government agencies, the private sector, and NGOs need to provide the necessary support for reintegrating the returnee migrants. The mental stress and psychological, as well as physical, trauma needs policy attention to ensure mental health facilities and service provision for returnees.

Internal returnee migrants, on the other hand, will need support to get back to work as soon as possible while maintaining the necessary health safety and hygiene rules. The return of women workers to their pre-pandemic workplaces should also be facilitated and encouraged by government initiatives.

The government should undertake a comprehensive and well thought out recovery plan for all sectors. The informal sector and cottage, micro, small, and medium entrepreneurs (CMSME sector) have been hit hard during the pandemic, and recovery of these sectors has been slow compared to large manufacturing sectors. Government support will be needed for these sectors to recover fast and thoroughly. The stimulus packages declared for these sectors need to be made more accessible for informal and CMSME sector workers and businesses by minimising institutional barriers to avail the loans under these stimulus packages. The cottage, micro and small businesses owned by women entrepreneurs have to be promoted by government initiatives. Tax incentives can be provided to women entrepreneurs to increase their competitiveness.

Many international migrant workers want to go back to their previous destinations. However, they have lost their savings and become burdened with loans and other problems. Some international returnee migrants are still eligible to migrate again in order to work and send remittances to Bangladesh.

Therefore, the government should provide support to international returnee migrants to go back to their previous destinations.

A significant fall in income and savings depletion has increased household debt burden. Such structural changes, once occurred, have long-term implications for poverty and the ability for individuals to recover. Short term microloans can help these individuals avoid falling deeper into poverty, but only if they are paired with initiatives that can boost income sustainably; otherwise they may simply add to debt levels. NGOs have essential roles to play in this regard. Careful monitoring, mentoring, and training will be needed besides loans to bring about a sustainable solution.

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