



Demographic and Socio-economic Changes Induced by the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh: *Dynamics and challenges of new circumstances*

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Cover photo: The Financial Express

Research questions

- What are the changes in demographic, economic, and social environments in secondary towns, peri-urban (upazilla) and rural areas brought on by the reverse migrations during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the challenges facing local people and migrated people for the 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 returnee migrants and their families to overcome their economic, social and psychological hardship while co-existing in a changed environment?
- What can the government do to manage the current demographic and socio-economic transition induced by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What can the NGOs do to help the local and migrated people to overcome their economic, social and psychological hardship?

Methodology

- Mixed methods: Quantitative and qualitative methods
- Quantitative: Sample survey in **21** districts (focusing on migration-prone districts) with **6,370** households (Average household size: **4.7**; Rural: **60%**, Urban: **40%**; Female-headed households: **22%**; Migrant households **26%**; Returnee migrant households: **16%**)
- Qualitative: Key informant interviews, focus group discussions, life stories/river of life in four districts
- Data collection period: 10-25 **December** 2020
- Reference period: **April-November** 2020



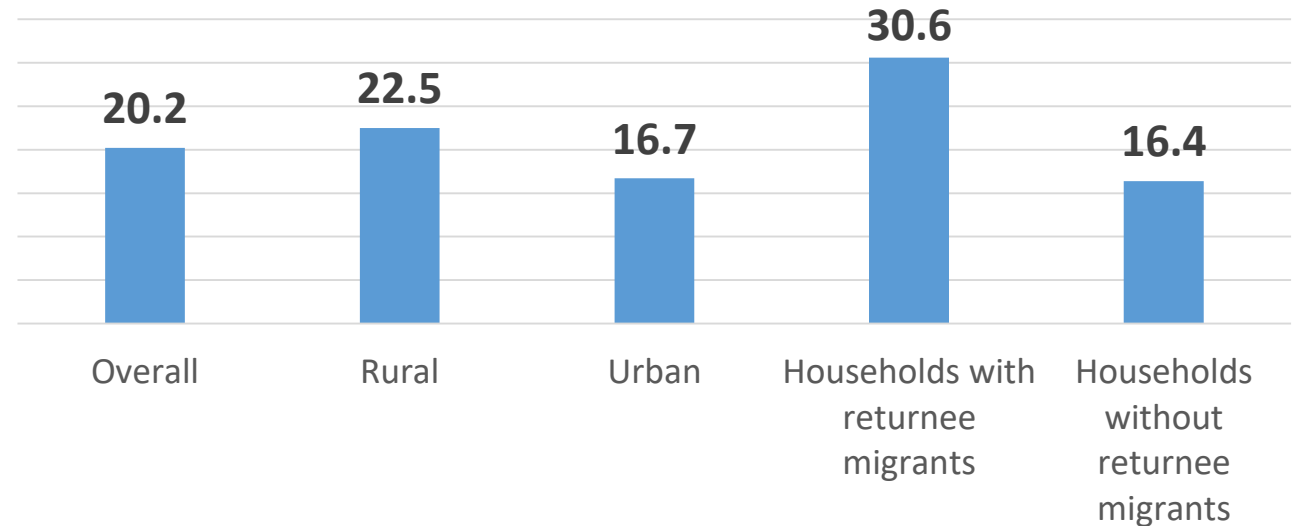
Major Findings

An indication of population increase in 2021 which exceeds the expected rate

- Higher expected crude birth rate (CBR) in surveyed households in 2021
- Higher incidences of child marriage during pandemic
- Many returnee migrants have less chance of re-migration
- Decreased death rate in 2020

Higher expected CBR in 2021: Pandemic population boom?

- **604** pregnant women identified among the surveyed households, implying an expected CBR of **20.2** (per 1000 people) among the population of surveyed households
- Higher expected CBR in rural areas compared to the urban areas, and in the households that received migrants (**30.6** vs. 16.4)
- Current CBR in Bangladesh is **18.184** (2018); expected CBR in surveyed households suggests a probability of higher CBR in 2021

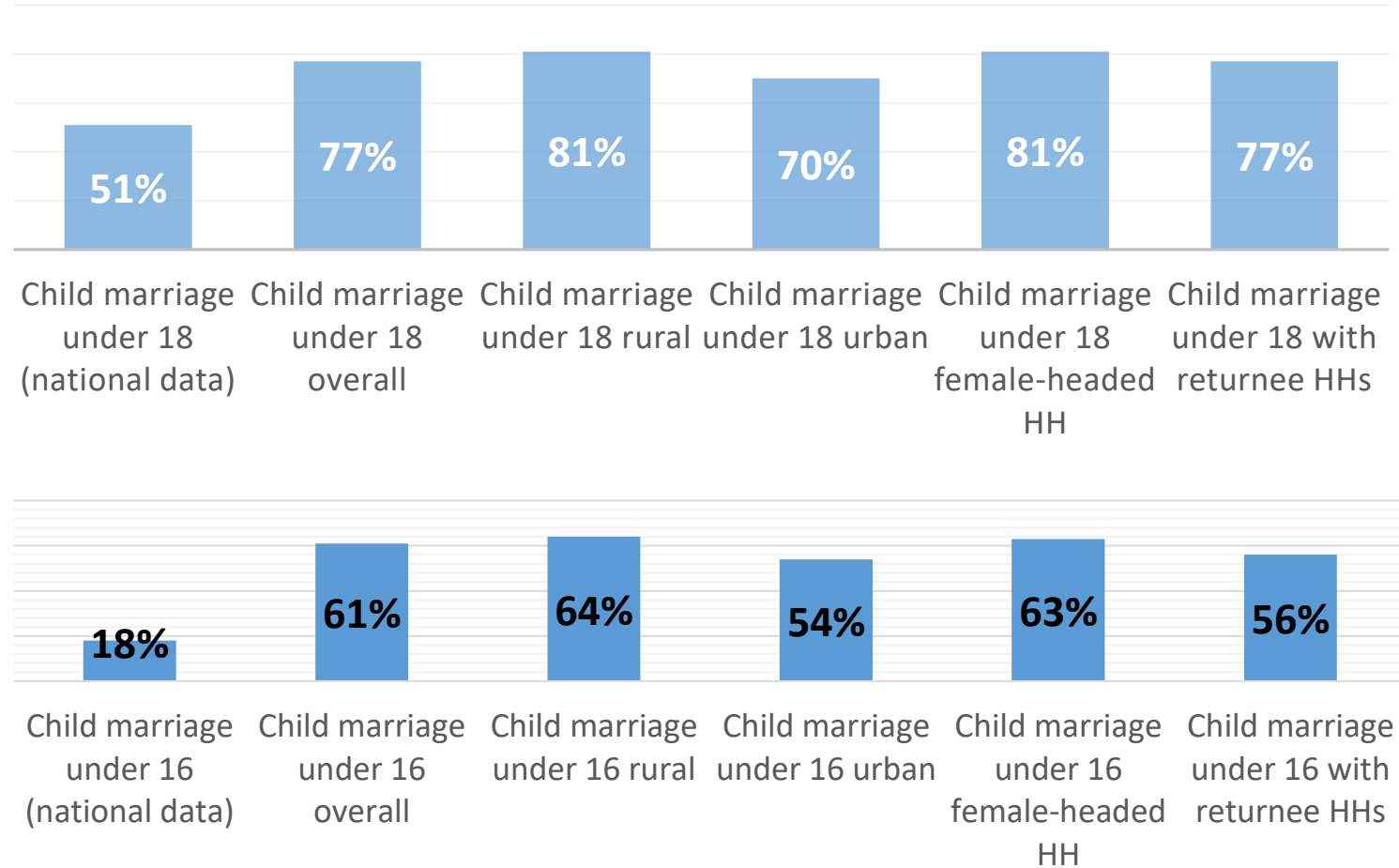


The United Nations predicted that in **114 LMICs**, 47 million women will be unable to access modern contraceptives due to lockdown measures and lead to **116 million unwanted babies**. The prediction built on existing literature suggesting that while would-be parents in high-income countries become reluctant to conceive babies in disaster situations, in LICs, the opposite trend often holds; in many cases, conception occurs even more frequently than in the regular situation.

Story: Unwanted pregnancy left a workless migrant in a distress

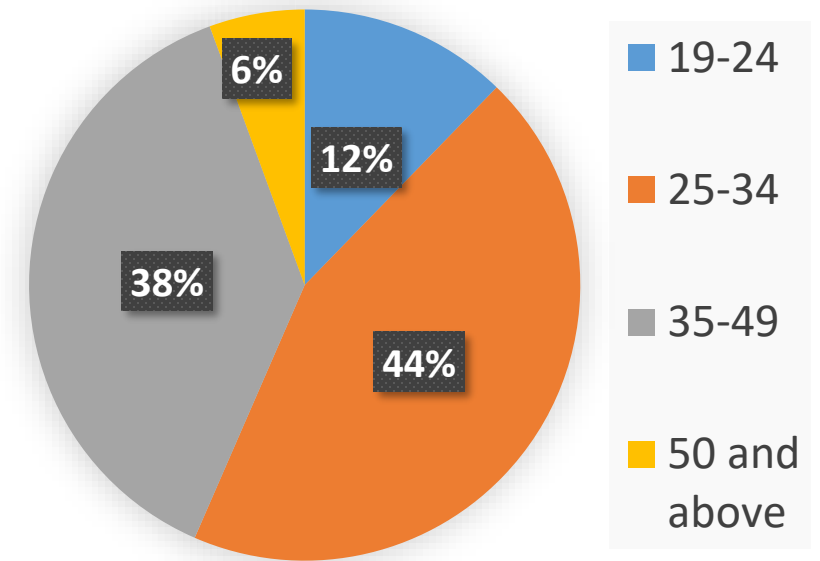
Higher incidences of child marriage during pandemic

- Child marriage increased during the pandemic (proxy indicator)
- **77%** marriages took place before 18 and **61%** marriages even before 16 years
- Higher in rural areas (**81%** vs. 70% for under 18 and **64%** vs. 54% for under 16)
- National data suggests that more than half (**51%**) of Bangladeshi women are married before 18 and **18%** before 15 years of age
- Dire implications for female student dropout, child and maternal health, VAW, women's economic empowerment, and population growth in near future



Many returnee migrants have low chance to re-migrate

- Among the international returnee migrants, younger returnees (19-34 yrs) are the majority (**56%**) – they have higher chance of re-migration
- The returnee migrants aged 35 and above are **44%** -- they might have less chance to go back due to their age related risk aversion and other factors
- Many migrants returned to see their family members and got stuck due to pandemic related travel restrictions and visa expiration
- The return of these migrants might have contributed to higher conception rate – higher expected CBR in the HHs having returnee migrants (30.6 vs 16.4)



“Those who returned from overseas countries couldn’t return till now and are stuck in the locality.” - A participant in Patuakhali

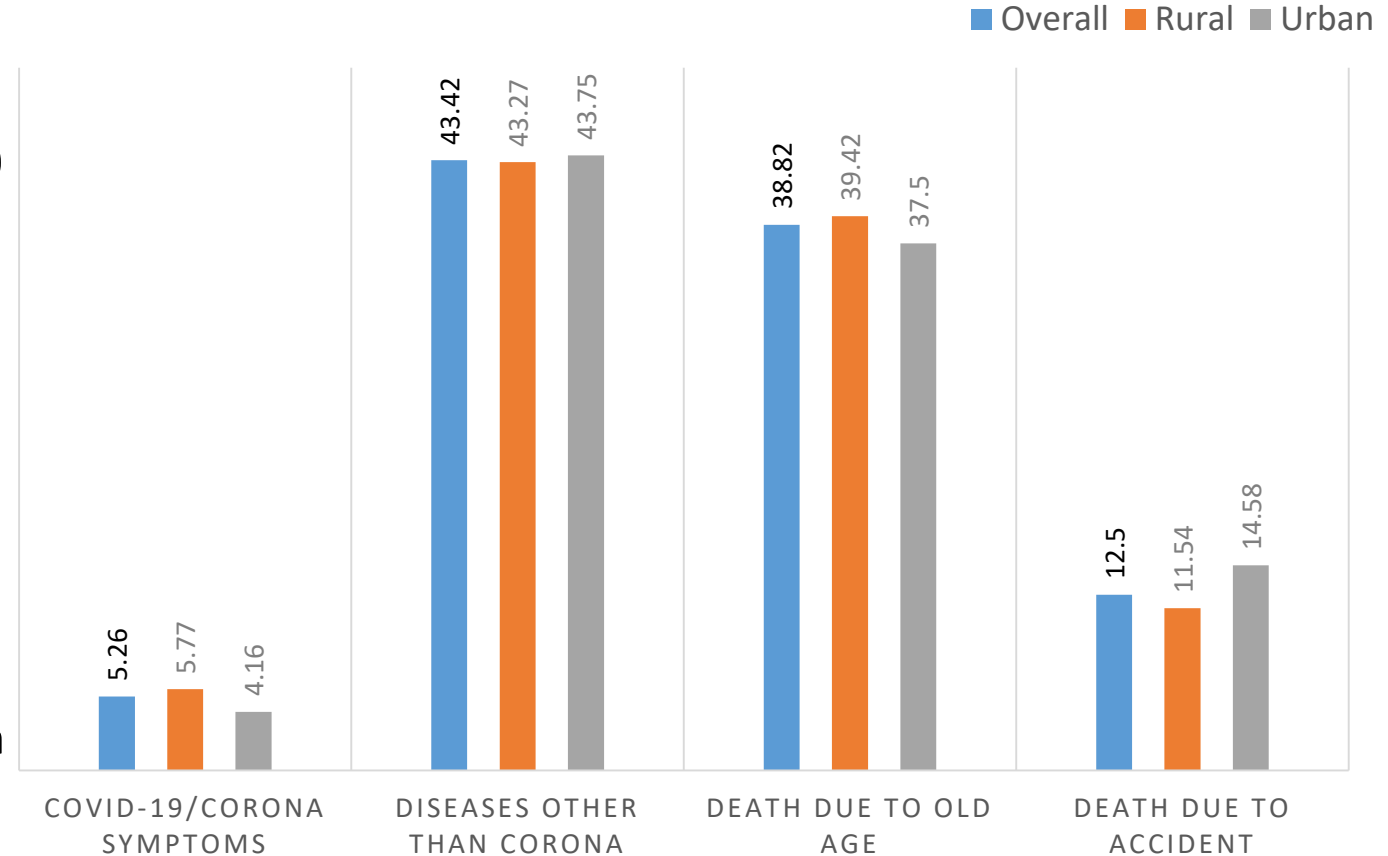
“I have brought corn seeds from Malaysia which are being cultivated in the land of my friend. If its production is successful, then I want to expand this business here.” - A returnee migrant from Malaysia

“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.” – A female returnee migrant from Saudi Arabia

Decreased death rate in 2020

- **152** persons died in the surveyed households – **5.077** death rate (per 1000 people) among the population of surveyed households
- Current death rate in Bangladesh is **5.529** (2018) – death rate in surveyed households suggesting slightly a lower death rate in 2020
- Despite the pandemic corona death remained the lowest reason for death in 2020
- Deaths caused by water and vector-borne diseases also fell, presumably because of the habit to washing hands and maintaining hygiene
- Accident death in 2019 was 7,855, which dropped to 6,686 in 2020 – due to lockdown and restriction of movements
- Death toll from drowning in water reduced in 2020 – a report revealed that 769 people, mostly minors, drowned in water in 2020, which exceeds 10,000 children per year

Causes of death in surveyed households (%)



Population increased in rural and semi-urban locations, caused by reverse migration

- Average household size in Bangladesh is **4.06** (BBS 2018)
- Average size of the surveyed households is **4.7**, which shows an increase in population in the surveyed households (**0.64** increase on average)
- This increase took place due to reverse migration—both from cities and abroad people got back to their places of origin in villages and peri-urban areas

Implications of reverse migration for social sectors

- Potential impact on education services
- Impact on health services



Potential impact on education services

- **4.57%** school/college level children found among the returnee migrants
- Returnee migrant students having problems in coping with new circumstances at villages/peri-urban areas
- Difficulties to understand/attend lessons because of unavailability of laboratory and library facilities, uninterrupted internet
- Students who were used to read in single room are having difficulty with studies as they are now having to live in a joint family
- These problems will be more persistent if students cannot return to their usual places of living when schools reopen
- Possible rise in dropout rate

“I have limited seats in my school for students to cope up with. It would be difficult for me to maintain social distancing and arranging hand sanitizer, mask and hand washing programmes within school campus after reopening of the school.” – A principal of a peri-urban level school in Patuakhali

“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.” - A migrant student

Impact on health services

- **4.56%** of returnee migrants are of age 50 years and above, having implication for health services, especially on the services related to non-communicable diseases
- Psycho-social pressure on the returnee migrants -- caused by the ongoing pandemic, the resulting economic impact, and in turn their social disposition
 - Mental pressure and complexities have risen amid the pandemic since many migrants returned with empty hands; **80%** of the returnee migrants came back due to financial reasons (83.06% internal and 78.13% international)
 - Psychological pressure giving rise to suicidal thoughts in many returnees
 - Psycho-social counselling and support needed for returnee migrants, as well as those badly impacted by pandemic

“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.” - A returnee migrant

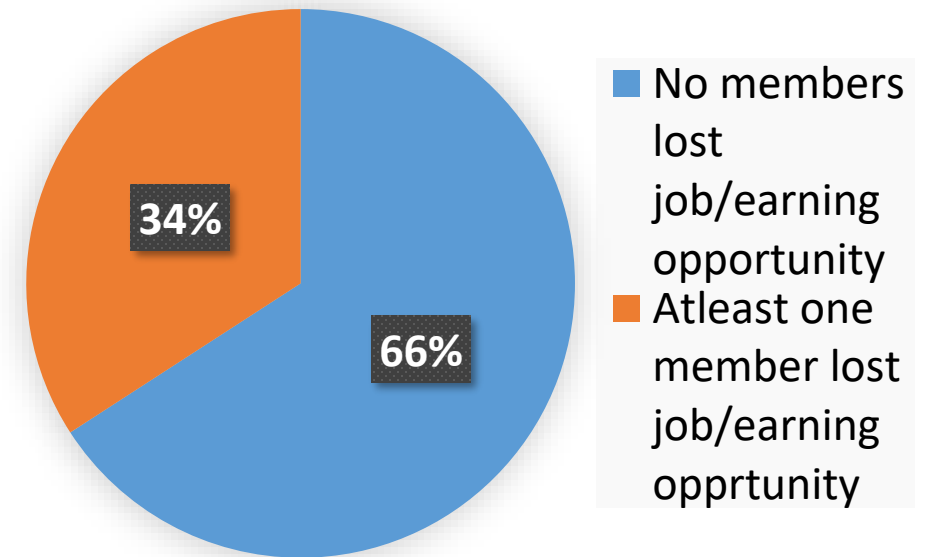
“While I had money people used to respect me but now I have no value to them.”
- A returnee migrant who wanted to commit suicide out of tension during corona

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

- Job loss during the pandemic
- Fall in income, expenditure and savings
- Fall in remittances received by the households
- Increase in household debt

Loss of jobs during pandemic

- **34%** HHs had at least one member who lost job/income/earning opportunity (same for rural-urban and male headed-female headed households)
- Higher among migrant HHs (**52%**) compared to without migrant HHs (28%)
- Higher among returnee migrant HHs (**61%** vs 32%)
- There is statistically significant (at 1% level) association between loss of job/income and HHs with returnee migrants (any type)

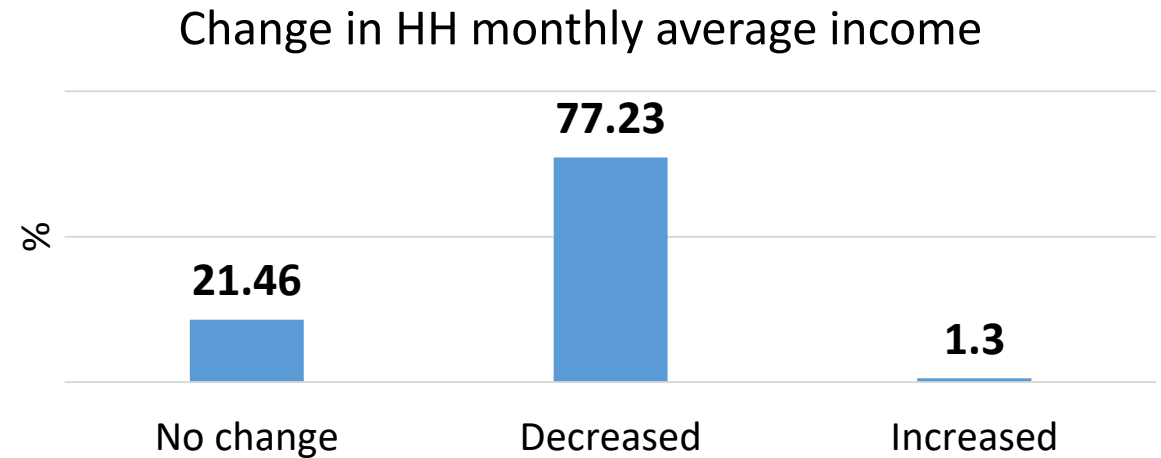


“I lived off my savings during first 3-4 months in Dubai and returned when I could not find any job.” - A returnee migrant

“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.” - A returnee migrant

Significant fall in income, expenditure and savings

- There was a significant (at 5% level) decrease in income, expenditure, savings and increase in household debt during pandemic compared to before pandemic
- HHs in urban areas experienced more income downfall than rural areas (statistically significant at 5% level)
- HHs with migrant workers had a larger fall in income than HHs without migrants (significantly) [Barker, N. et al. (2020)]



Percent change in expenditure	-8.63
Percent change in savings	-62.31
Percent change in income	-29.05

Significant fall in remittances received by households

- There was a significant fall in remittances received during pandemic compared to that before pandemic (at 1% level)
- The mean percentage decrease in remittances received is **57.5%**
- Contrast between survey data and national data
 - Remittance sent through unofficial channels are same, if not more, than remittances sent through official channels
 - Most unofficial channels were unavailable during pandemic
 - Due to travel restrictions, remittance inflow through official channels further increased
 - Therefore, the receivers of unofficially sent remittances (i.e. sample households) report decrease in remittances received by them during pandemic, while national data shows an increase in officially sent remittances

“My two sons used to live abroad and sent me 30,000 BDT per month before corona. During corona, one of my sons lost his job and came back home. Other son continued to send me 20,000 BDT 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 as the expenditure. Now, I am spending from my savings, but that is running out.”

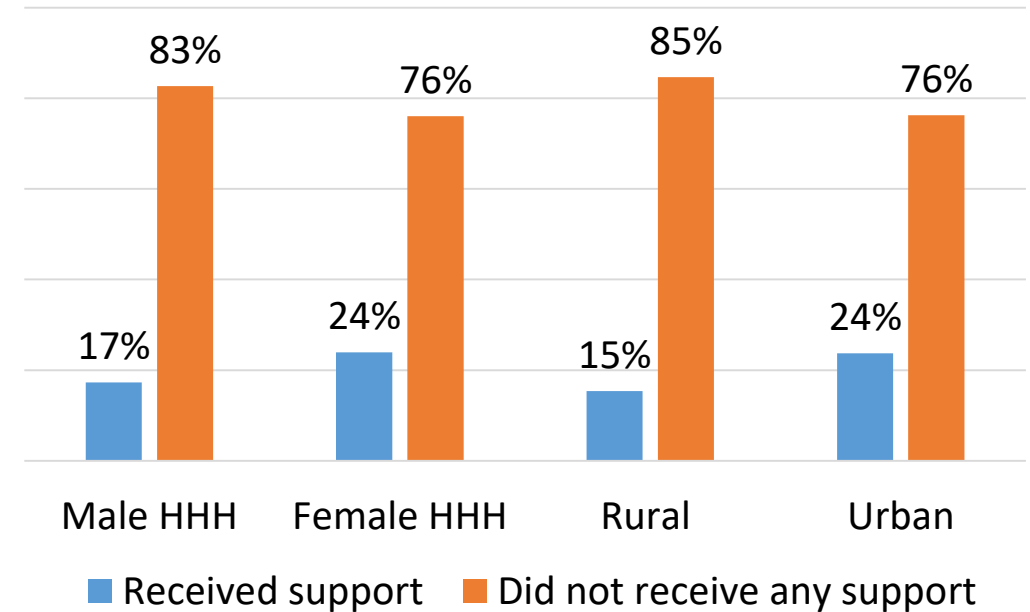
- A woman in Narsingdi

Increased indebtedness

- Household debt increased by **31%**
- The rise in household debt of urban households (**47%**) was significantly (at 95% confidence interval) higher than that of rural households (22%) – lockdown and distancing measures were enforced in urban areas more than in rural areas; social safety net programmes have insufficient coverage for the urban poor
- Household debt in migrant households increased by **82.4%**, significantly (at 95% confidence interval) higher than the 12.8% rise in household debt without migrant households – households with migrants in our sample experienced a significantly (at 95% confidence interval) higher fall in income than households without migrants
- More than a year into this crisis, BoP households are having to resort to spending from savings and taking loans – financial support is needed for BoP households to prevent structural changes through loss of productive assets

Low coverage of external support

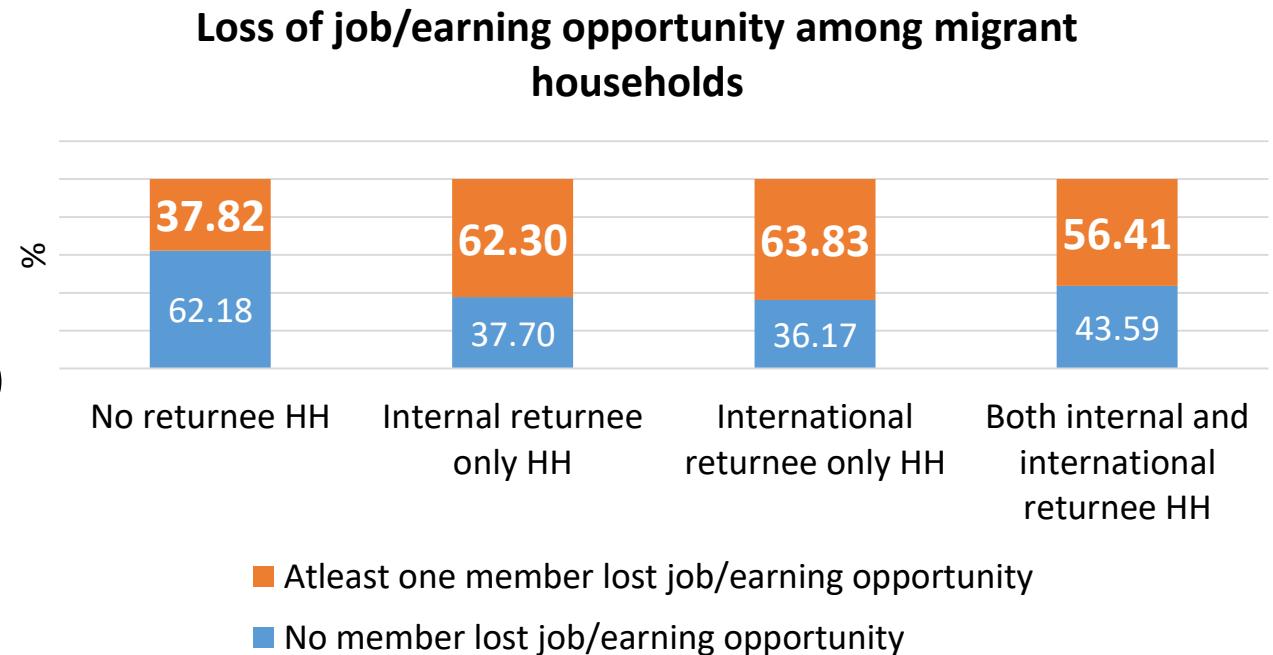
- External support could reduce debt burden, however, only **19%** HHs received support
- Higher percentage of urban households (24%) reported receiving support compared to rural ones (15%)
- Female headed households received more support (24%) compared to male headed ones (17%) as well
- As we extend the lockdown, a greater coverage of govt. and non-govt. support is needed for the BoP HHs



“We are living an extremely miserable life now. The worst part is local people don’t want to believe that we are poor now because they assume that migrants are economically solvent since they used to earn better in foreign countries for about 7 or 8 years.” - A returnee migrant

The returnee migrants face grim economic prospects

- Loss of jobs was higher for returnee migrant HHs
- HH debt increased significantly compared to before pandemic level
- **25%** HHs with returnee have outstanding migration loan/debt – average amount of migration debt is **BDT 76,229** (around USD 900) ranging from min BDT 5,000- max BDT 700,000
- Loss of jobs, fall in income, and increase in HH debt altogether indicate a tougher time for returnee migrant households- they are in immediate need of economic reintegration support

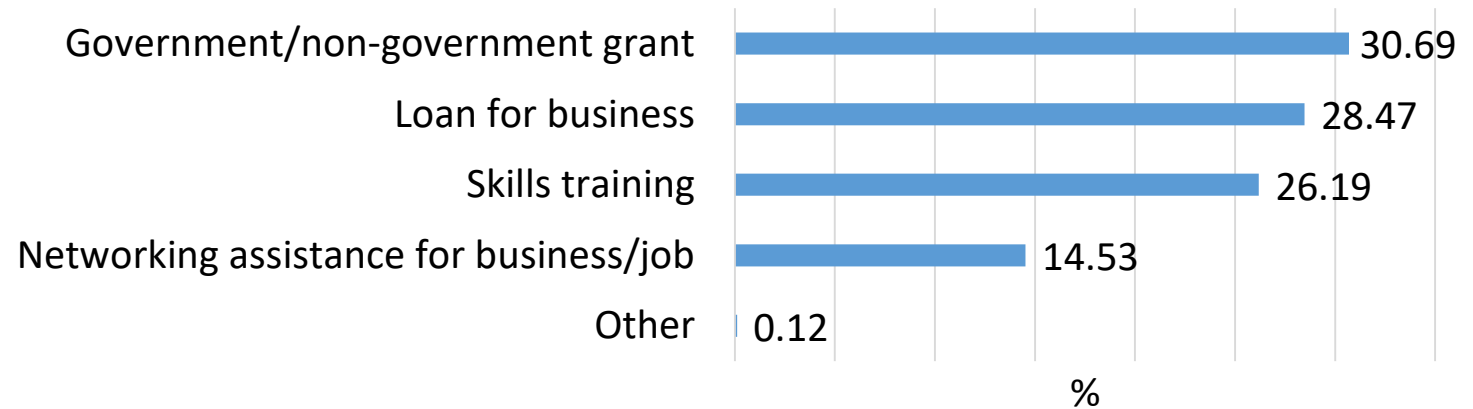


"I thought I'd go back to Italy after passing my vacation. But after coming to the country, I am sitting at home completely unemployed. I spent most of my savings to bear the living cost. Then, gradually the savings ran out. My wife is pregnant. Now I see only darkness in my eyes." – A returnee migrant

The returnee migrants need support for reintegration

- **77%** respondents think there is no scope for work for returnee migrants
- **69%** returnee migrants need various support for business or enhancing earning capacity (loan, training, networking support etc.), while 31% need grants support
- Without support for their reintegration, returnee migrants will lose efficiency, and fall into a cycle of debt

Support needed for returnee migrants



“It’s a migrant inhabited area. Almost every house has at least one returnee who is now in serious trouble since their main source of income is closed off due to COVID-19 pandemic and they were unable to return to their previous working place.” - A local representative in Moulavibazar

“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 Tk. 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.” – A female returnee migrant

Impact on female-headed households

- Female headed HHs had a significantly (statistically) lower fall in savings, compared to male headed ones
- Male headed HHs experienced larger increase in HH debt than female headed ones
- Female headed households appear to be more risk averse than male headed ones in terms of financial decisions
- If pandemic induced economic slow-down is prolonged due to second wave and extended lockdowns, the risk averse behavior of female headed HHs is likely to turn out to be more sustainable than male headed ones
- However, female headed HHs might have reduced their consumption cost as the coping strategy, which has a long term impact on mother and child health

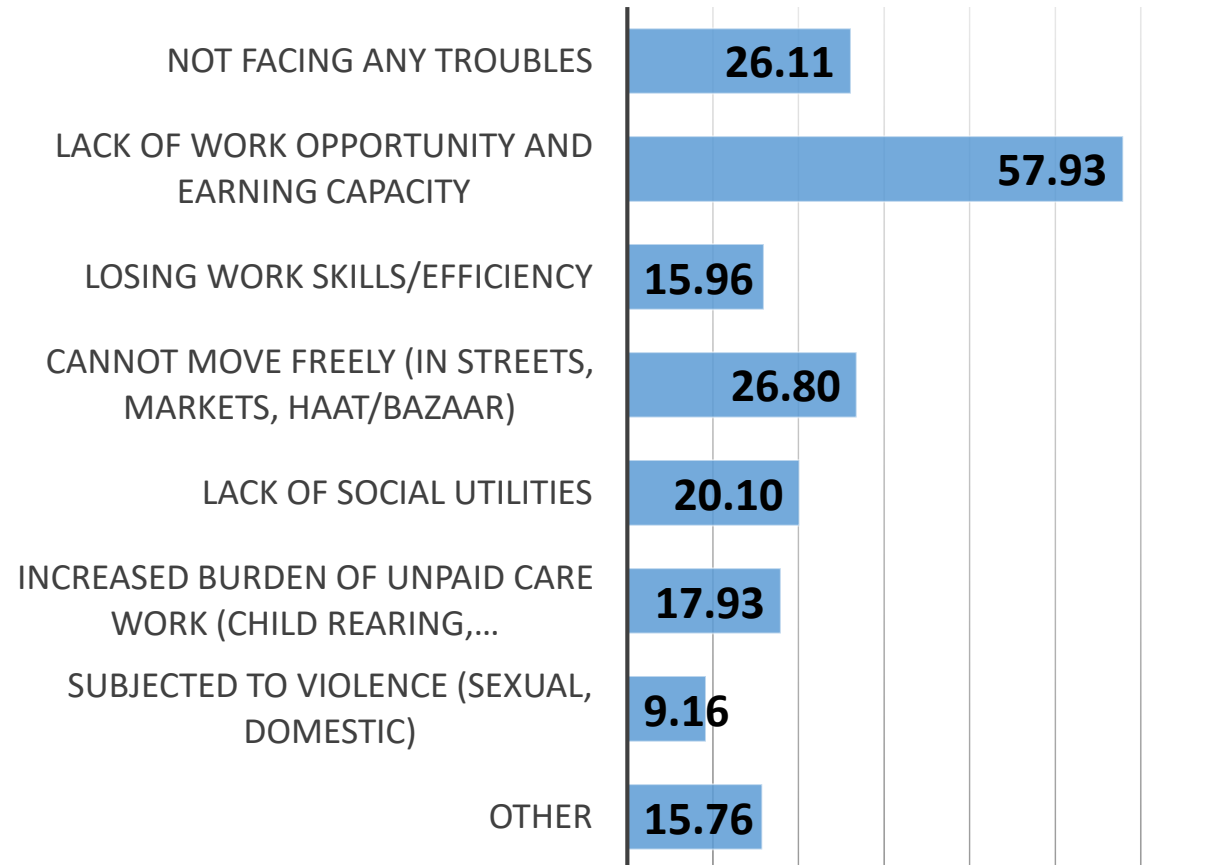
	Male headed HH	Female headed HH
Percent change in income	-28.92	-29.51
Percent change in remittance received*	-62.69	-46.65
Percent change in expenditure	-8.69	-8.44
Percent change in savings*	-63.46	-57.76
Percent change in HH debt	32.15	26.45
	*statistically significant	

Social adversities faced by female returnee migrants

- Most of female returnee migrants (**58%**) mention the **lack of work opportunity**
- More than one-fourth (**27%**) mention the **lack of environment to move freely** – a female migrants often heard, *“Why does the woman walk into bazar area rather than his husband?”*
- Other problems include **lack of proper sanitation, increased burden of household chores, VAW** etc.

“Women are being discriminated from every aspect. I have to work all day long while my younger brother is playing video games in mobile phone. Men are easily allowed to go outside but women can’t go outside freely, there is a restriction on their movement and can’t get enough scope for refreshment.” – A female returnee migrant

Problems faced by female returnees



Policy priorities

Economic and social reintegration of returnee migrants

Policy support for female headed households

Awareness and strict enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act

Facilitating smooth return of internal, international migrants and students

Allocation of additional resources for rural and peri-urban areas to accommodate additional population and service needs



Thank You