

Psycho-Social Health Condition of Returnee Migrants during Post COVID-19: A Study in Moulvibazar District of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Migrants have been hit the hardest by the global pandemic. During the pandemic around 1.55 lakh Bangladeshi migrants returned home after losing jobs. A global statistical revolution demonstrated the unprecedented changes of the mental health condition of returnee migrants of Bangladesh after the pandemic. This situation bound them to face a psycho social environment in their country of origin and that ultimately leaded them to confront their health hazards. But the way to overcome the watershed is far away since in Bangladesh there is no enough activities like counseling or community base group support to minimize or address the phenomenon. Though in today's world, the concept psycho-social health has become one of the concerning issues, it's been neglected and is not prioritized at all like physical health. Like other affected countries, Covid-19 evidenced a remarkable example of ill mental health and social disorganizations among the persons who returned to Bangladesh and intended to stay for at least a year. In this aspect, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative method to find out the reality of present psycho social health situation of the participants. The study found that the returnee migrants face several challenges like losing of work, the unavailability of organizational and governmental facilities, family's financial crisis and disorganization. Moreover, they have to face several types of mental health problem, losing of hopes, and harsh experiences of lives and livelihoods. In many aspects, they become unable to meet their household expenditures, repay loans, maintain social life, and to meet their children's educational expenses. However, they need to get support from the government and other entities to have financial support, vocational training and psychosocial counseling to play a pivotal role to overcome this situation.

Keyword: Psycho-social health, Returnee migrants, COVID-19, Counseling, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is the 6th top origin country of international migrants. Total 13.08 million migrants were sent to different countries as labors during the period of 1976-2021. In a single year in 2019, the amount of labor migrants were 700,159. At present, 164 million migrants have been working in several countries of the world and the major source areas of international migration in 2022 are Cumilla, Chattogram, Brahmanbaria, Noakhali, Chandpur, Tangail, Kishoreganj, Sylhet, Dhaka and Narsingdi in Bangladesh (Siddiqui et al., 2023:1). People from the Sylhet division of Bangladesh—particularly those from Moulvibazar District—have shown a strong interest and long-standing tradition of working abroad. They have engaged in various occupations across European nations, as well as affluent countries in America and Asia, including the USA, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. Like migrants from many other countries, Bangladeshi workers often leave their homeland in pursuit of improved income and better job opportunities, frequently leaving their

families behind. In numerous cases, these families become partially or fully dependent on the remittances sent by their migrant relatives. And the remittance sent by migrants has a significant economic growth and impact in a developing country like Bangladesh (Uddin, 2023). Remittances from abroad are the key source of Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, as a result of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, numerous migrants were compelled to return to their home countries, either voluntarily or through forced repatriation, after losing their jobs. In regions such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America, migrants were often viewed as security risks and unfairly blamed for the spread of the virus. (Sikder et al., 2025). During the period a large number of migrants lost their jobs as well as their lives due to being affected by COVID and fear caused by these unwanted circumstances. In the first phase of COVID a total of 408,408 migrants returned to Bangladesh from April- December 2020, whereas 87.80% were male and 12.20% were female. Additionally, According to estimates by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as many as 4.8 million Bangladeshi migrant workers were expected to return home by 2021 due to the impact of the global pandemic. In fact, approximately 450,000 Bangladeshi migrants came back to the country during 2020 and 2021 as a result of COVID-19. (Siddiqui, 2023). The BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BRAC-IGD) reported that around 466,000 migrants came back to Bangladesh at the peak of the pandemic, spanning the years 2021 to 2022 (Nahida, 2024).

Losing or unavailability of work, forced return, unable to repay the debt as migration cost, financial crisis, problems among family members, not getting government aid affected psycho-social health condition of returnee migrants (Chowdhury, 2021). Considering the COVID-19 global psycho-social health crisis, Bangladeshi returnee migrants suffered the most specially, in Moulvibazar district of the country. During the pandemic, Bangladesh received a large number of returnee migrants from various counties. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, returnee migrants lost their jobs, being low-paid and precarious, depression, fear and frustration arose. A study by Nawaz and Tanny (2019) suggests that insufficient access to information and training is a key reason for the difficulties migrants face throughout the entire migration process. Additionally, 89 percent of returnee migrants reportedly struggle with patriarchal norms and low social acceptance upon returning home. These issues have significantly affected their economic conditions and disrupted the flow of remittances, leading to a notable impact on Bangladesh's GDP growth rate. As a result the pandemic affected badly on lives and livelihoods of the people of study area, as they are mostly dependent on foreign remittances.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been acknowledged as a biological catastrophe that resulted in extensive human, social, and economic losses worldwide (Chan, 2020). Amid the outbreak and the enforcement of restrictions on daily life to ensure social distancing and control the virus's spread, large numbers of migrant workers began returning to their home regions. In this regard, the study highlights the psycho-social health impacts and hazards of COVID-19 to returnee migrants, re-employment, income generating activities, economic instability, family crisis, security and social protection among the migrants who live in Moulvibazar district of Bangladesh and found some miseries of the returnees and their family members (Chan, 2020).

Objectives of the study

1. To find out the psycho-social scenario of returnee migrants after pandemic and during pandemic.
2. To explore the effect of the COVID-19 on returnee migrants lives and livelihoods.
3. To have recommendations from the returnees to fight psycho social and financial hardship.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to find out the reality of psycho social and financial situation of the participants during and after COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were both types of returnee migrants including men and women who had been working and earning abroad and intended to stay for at least a year in their whom country, Bangladesh to spend vacation when visited here. Interview schedules and checklist were used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from 30 participants of 15 villages using a purposive sampling procedure. The interviews for quantitative data took places following a structured interview schedule. One Focus Group Discussion (FGD) has been conducted with eight (8) participants who were seemed resourceful and interested to talk for providing qualitative data using a semi-structured interview schedule from the participants who attended providing quantitative data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Information

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Literacy (Class)	Religion	Marital Status	Family Status in Bangladesh	Migrated countries & occupation
1	45	Male	BSS	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	KSA, Driver
2	32	Female	Seven	Muslim	Married	Joint	Singapore, Construction labor
3	55	Male	HSC	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	UK, Sells' man
4	30	Male	Nine	Muslim	Unmarried	Joint	
5	37	Male	BSS	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	Soudi Arab, Driver
6	38	Male	MBA	Muslim	Married	Joint	Kuwait, Cleaners
7	30	Female	BSS	Muslim	Unmarried	Joint	Canada, Academics and researchers
8	35	Female	Illiterate	Muslim	Married	Joint	
9	25	Female	BSS	Muslim	Unmarried	Joint	Australia, Students (leading to skilled migration)
10	52	Male	HSC	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	India, Small business owners
11	41	Female	SSC	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	Kuwait, Driver
12	48	Male	Illiterate	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	Greece, small businesses
13	34	Female	MSS	Hindu	Married	Joint	London, Academic and research
14	35	Female	Eight	Muslim	Married	Joint	Malaysia, Factory workers
15	44	Male	HSC	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	Malaysia, Plantation workers
16	53	Male	SSC	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	Saudi Arabia, Drivers
17	45	Male	SSC	Muslim	Married	Joint	Singapore, Construction workers
18	50	Male	Eight	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	Singapore, Construction workers
19	47	Female	Six	Hindu	Married	Nuclear	India, Small business
20	41	Female	Illiterate	Muslim	Married	Joint	Malaysia, Plantation workers
21	44	Male	SSC	Muslim	Married	Joint	Qatar, Mechanics
22	40	Male	Five	Muslim	Married	Joint	Malaysia, Agriculture and farm labor
23	53	Male	SSC	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	Bahrain, Construction workers
24	35	Female	BSS	Muslim	Married	Joint	Canada, Small business owners
25	46	Male	Seven	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	UK, Taxi drivers
26	33	Female	Illiterate	Hindu	Married	Joint	Itali, agriculture and farm labor
27	42	Male	MSS	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	UK, Healthcare assistants
28	52	Male	HSC	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	UAE, Factory work
29	50	Female	SSC	Muslim	Married	Nuclear	UK, Sells' man
30	30	Female	BA	Muslim	Unmarried	Joint	Oman, Hospitality and restaurant staff

Current situation of the returnee migrants

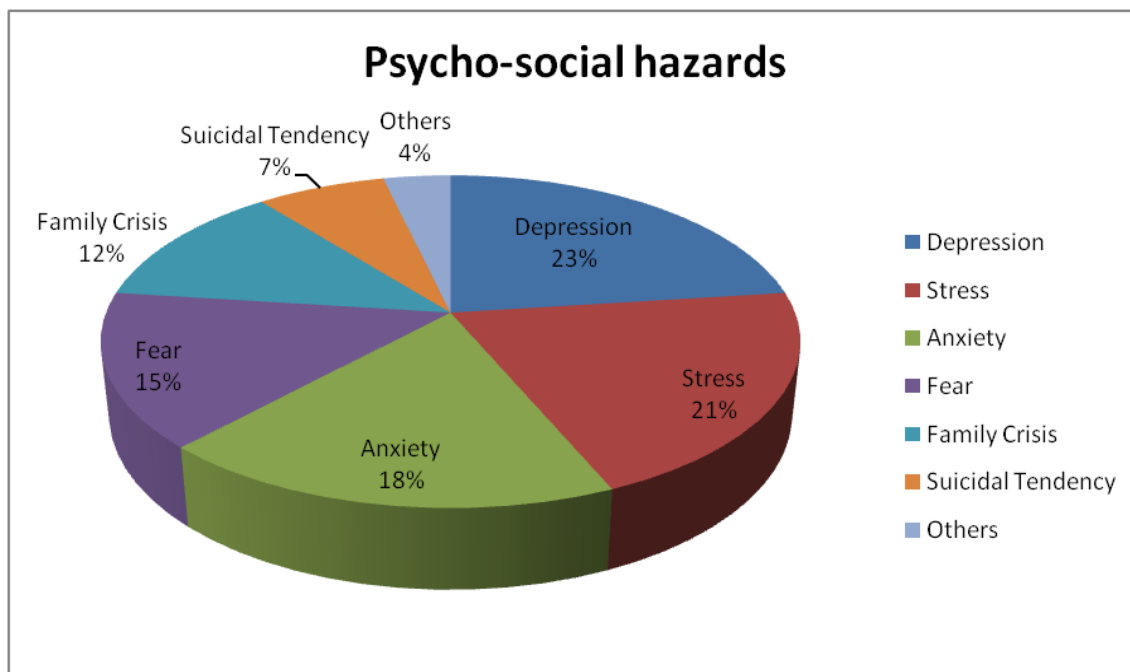
After returning home during COVID-19, most of the returnees faced several social problems. Total 70% of the migrants who returned from abroad between February and June 2020, were unemployed during the pandemic. They neither find a job nor re-migrate. A significant number of participants reported that they were forced to return home because of restricted opportunities for income generation, inadequate social services, weak healthcare systems, and a lack of social support in their host countries even before the COVID-19 outbreak. Additionally, 64% of the returnee migrants stated that after the onset of the pandemic, they faced difficulties in accessing information, healthcare services, and even basic communication while abroad. 21% said that they had to return because their family was terrified due to COVID and they wanted them to return home. Some were afraid about the closing of borders and flights; 7% returned for this. Participants were questioned about their aspirations for the future during the interviews. Nearly 74% of respondents said they wanted to re-

immigrate, and 97% of those migrants would decide to return to the nation where they had been employed before the COVID-19 outbreak. 60 percent of respondents said they wanted to improve their skill sets in order to land better-paying jobs. Almost every participant said that they are not warmly accepted by the community they belong to like before.

Psycho-social Hazards

Whether they chose to return to their countries of origin or not, many returnees face discrimination. Returning migrants are experiencing anxiety and stress as a result of these difficulties, which can cause feelings of frustration, anxiety, shame, and fear. Their ability to cope with other considerable reintegration process challenges, like finding employment, is negatively impacted by these common psychological consequences. Both before and after the actual return, returnees who have access to psychosocial counseling are likely to find it easier to deal with the effects. For migrants who belong to vulnerable groups or who have experienced violence, this is in particular crucial. 23% of returnees felt depression, 21% felt stressed, 18% felt anxiety, 15% fear and 12% felt family crisis. Among 7% of the respondents, suicidal tendency is found. Their psychology and behavior were significantly impacted by this. Additionally, they went through psychological shock, as a result of their employers' exploitation and forced return. Besides, the returnee migrants gradually became isolated and cut off from their families because they are unable to communicate with them while residing at the home of their foreign employers.

Figure 1: Psycho-social effects



A migrant from KSA expressed,

I am at a loss for words to adequately describe the hardships I experienced upon returning to Bangladesh. I'm constantly held accountable by society for actions I never took during my whole migration period. As I arrived home before the end of my contract period, it felt like I committed a serious crime or I killed somebody. Because of how individuals view me adversely in my society, I am unable to even perform everyday tasks. It hurts me a lot, makes me depressed and stressful that sometimes I think it will be better to commit suicide.

Almost each participant shared that. An unmarried female returnee migrant from the middle east explains her difficulties in re-establishing contact with her parents.

My father questioned me, "Why did you go abroad and why have you returned," after my unexpected forced return. "You are to blame for the social standing of our family." He declined. In spite of the blame and criticism I've received from others. At present, I reside away from my parents.

Family Crisis

Nearly 40% of respondents said that arguments with family members happen frequently. It occasionally leads to undesirable circumstances. The family's expenses cannot be properly met because there is not enough economic wealth available. The relationship among the family members gets worse consequently. As a result, it stimulates domestic violence, torture, and divorce. One of the participants from Qatar said,

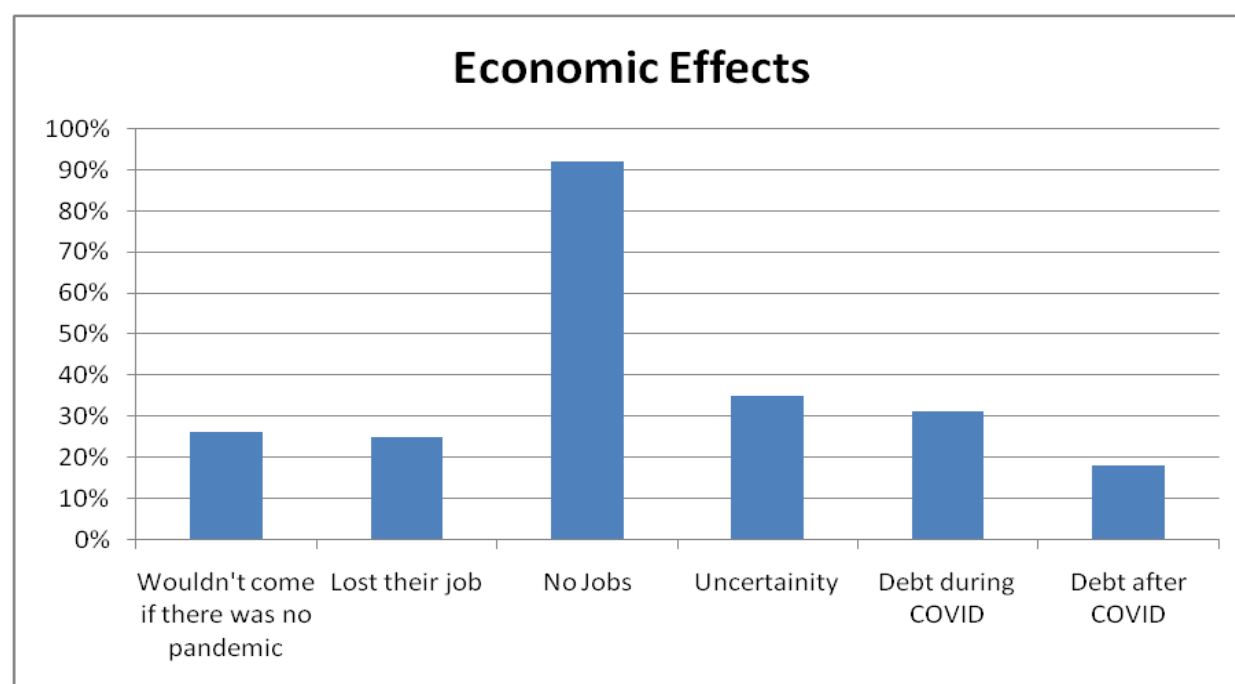
During my migration period the relationship with my wife was really very good. I regularly sent money to her. During the COVID period I lost my job. I was forced to return home. I had no option. During the time of lockdown, my wife argued with me about why I returned. After three months she abandoned me.

Economic Effects

The economic impact is found most among the participants. Right out of the returnees in our sample, around 22% returned before March, 8.5% returned in subsequent March, while 69.5% of them returned in March 2020. Almost 26% of the respondents might not have returned if there were no pandemic. Almost 25% of the returnee migrants lost their jobs, and among those who were nonetheless employed, 92% did not get any salaries. We also discovered increased uncertainty among the list of returnees, with 35% of returnee migrants uncertain about their work. Most of them are the only earning members of their household. So, it was very hard to meet all the expenses of the family.

During the period of COVID-19 most of them didn't have the savings to survive. They took loans of various amounts from others to sustain their lives. Gradually, the loans became too huge that went beyond their repayment. Most of the migrant workers financed their migration through some form of borrowing, who still owe cash to their lenders. Their unpredictable return, coupled with the reduction of job and income, and increased uncertainty of their comeback, only exacerbates the situation because they always borrow more to sustain their livelihoods and boost their long-term indebtedness. Unlike non-migrant employees, they have to wait much longer to begin earning as reintegration might take longer. 31% of respondents said that they were in debt during the COVID-19 and 18% were in debt to arrange the migration cost.

Figure 2: Economic effects



Effects on Re-migration

Migration costs are much higher for Bangladeshi migrants than the others. During COVID-19 who were stranded in Bangladesh due to lockdown and lost their jobs, it was really a great challenge to re-migrate.

Companies and the government of the host countries were not interested in taking them again. Without any valid reason and pre-announcement, they were losing their jobs. The government of Bangladesh was not well equipped to resend that huge number of migrants. 78% respondents reported that they were facing challenges to re-migrate due to they were neither willing to receive them as workers nor the government had taken any necessary steps to send them. A respondent expressed,

I came to Bangladesh to spend my vacation just before the pandemic. But I couldn't go. I lost my job and became frustrated. Everyday my wife quarreled with me. I took a huge amount of money as debt thinking that I would go abroad soon and be able to repay the loan. I gave money to a broker, and contacted different agencies to arrange my migration. But I couldn't go. The time was just like a nightmare to me.

Another participant added as,

We have been suffering with double burdens including unemployment and risks of having our previous jobs. Most of us have not enough money to maintain all the procedures to be re-migrated in our migrated countries. The employers are not interested to receive us or provide the previous jobs back.

Effects of Counseling during and after COVID-19

A few Bangladeshi Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) provided psycho-social counseling services to the majority of the study's respondents. They claimed that receiving professional counseling had a significant positive impact on their troubles both during and after COVID-19. During the pandemic, 53% of respondents said they received tele-counseling, and after the lockdown ended, 67% of them received counseling on a regular basis as beneficiaries. Almost 88% of the participants who received counseling said their mental health has significantly improved. A participant during FGD disclosed as,

My husband became infuriated when he returned home. Nevertheless, there are a number of causes. Losing of his job, financial crisis, worldwide fear of pandemic- everything devoured us. Sometimes he acted insane. We became very afraid. Frequently he used to beat me, tortured me. Meanwhile, we became connected with a counselor of an NGO. The designated counselor started counseling him, including me. That time my husband's mental health condition got better and stable.

Another participant added as,

Our family members and neighbors provided us mental support. Without fearing the possibilities of infecting by the virus they helped us and provided foods, primary healthcare facilities including medicines and counseling.

Recommendations of the Participants

The research tried to find out the opinions of participants about their psycho-social satisfaction and financial rehabilitation. Majority of the participants (53.34%) disclosed their wishes to be rehabilitated through having financial support as well as re-recruitment and healthcare facilities from the authority where they had been employed with the help of Bangladesh government. Some (36.67%) of them wish to have financial support from the government of Bangladesh and/or Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). Very few (10%) wanted to have just psycho-social support and healthcare facilities from the authority or voluntary organizations of their native country. One of the senior female participants who had been working in United Kingdom recommended as,

I was working in UK as a sells' girl with green card with dignity and handsome salary; but now it is dream to have my job back. The owner of the shop, even don't receive my phone call now. I want nothing but my job back and the owner should communicate with me providing financial support for my day to day and healthcare related expenditure as I had a profited fund and job security commitment there.

Another male participant told as,

I just want to have support from the government of Bangladesh and NGOs working here as I have no right to have my job back from my company where I had been working as my visa and work permit has been expired. Now-a-days I am completely jobless and hopeless. And I have no way to survive with my family without the help of others.

One of the young male participants added as,

I am not interested to go back to my work place anymore. The authority where I had been engaged for breads is not interested to take me returned. I had been suffering from COVID 19 and now completely cured. But people don't want to meet with me and my family. Now I need to include ourselves in greater society and social activities. I will be happy if I can be served with medical facilities from the authority.

All the participants of this study were not psychologically and socially fit as we observed them during collecting data. The research team tried to meet the participants and collect the actual data from them with the help of their neighbors and family members sometimes. As the pandemic was available at some areas, the research team had to take risks during field work. Local people and the family of participants were not interested to communicate and provide information easily. In this regard the team had to build rapport with them first and then collected information. All these challenges and effort had been taken to conduct this study carefully so far.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh serves as a key center for migration, where labor migration has emerged as a strategic factor in shaping bilateral relations between origin and destination countries. With globalization, diverse opportunities have become available for both male and female migrants. Throughout the last few years, Bangladesh has seen a dramatic increase in migration. After overcoming nearly all obstacles and hardship, our migrants sent huge remittances, attained success. However, the global pandemic has engulfed this largest earning sector of Bangladesh. During COVID, a large number of returnees backed to their homeland with an empty hand. Based on limited data, this study analyzed the psycho-social effect of COVID- 19 on the returnee migrants of Bangladesh and found untold sufferings and hardships that returnee migrants experience while abroad, and after returning home (Uddin, 2023). The study also found that COVID- 19's fast spread has wreaked chaos on everything and most of them lost their jobs. The reintegration process faces significant obstacles due to psychological and behavioral changes during and post COVID-19 period. Communication gaps between returnee migrants and their family members arose and bound them face frustration, and pushed them back to their native land. Typically, migrants are not well known to the communities in which they temporarily reside. In such unfamiliar environments, they often face a range of psycho-social and emotional challenges, driven by fears of being ignored by locals and anxiety over the safety and wellbeing of their families back home. Many of these migrants come from marginalized, low-income backgrounds, with both they and their families relying on daily earnings to survive. And in time of their hard psycho-social distress, we need to show sympathy towards them and to their families. Immediate action plan and activities should be taken to solve all the problems and hardships relate to food, shelter and healthcare.

As the study result demands, we need to go deeper in the found situation behind the job losses of our migrants and government along with the authorities of their recruitment should move forward for migrant rights. As a prompt response, it is essential to provide returnee migrants and their families with healthcare, shelter, and relief supplies. Failure to do so may soon lead Bangladesh into a critical and challenging situation.

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