

COVID-19 Pandemics and Women Migrant Workers:

Service Delivery Mechanism
and Way forward



BNSK

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1.0 Introduction:

Labor migration is an important driving factor for economic growth and development of Bangladesh. Human development Index of a nation mostly depends on the utilization factor of the human resources through appropriate employment arrangement. Bangladesh is getting nearly 2.2 million entrants in national work force each year with mostly with less/no skills. Nearly 500,000 young Bangladeshi workers adopt overseas migration as an alternative livelihood option. Bangladesh is one of the major labors sending country in the world. During the last twenty seven years (1991-2018) Bangladesh has sent 8, 60,333 women workers in different parts of the world (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET>). According to the World Migration Report 2020, the number of international migrants in 2019 was 272 million, equivalent to 3.5% of the world's population. Women accounted for 48% of the total global migrants. Half of the population of the country is women, their participation in labor force is essential to achieve the targeted growth and development. In that consideration, migration of women in overseas countries is equally important for the country.

Although labor migration is very important source of remittance for Bangladesh, it comes at a great cost. Female migrants, especially domestic workers, frequently remain vulnerable to various kinds of exploitation and abuse in the home country and in the destination country at every stage of migration. Bangladesh migration situation is characterized by weak presence of public and private service providers, lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the private service providers, lack of strong execution of rules and regulations and weak enforcement to monitor and make everyone accountable. So it is essential to dig into the root causes of the service delivery systems and the symptoms of the enrooted problems in women migration of Bangladesh especially after migration in destination. Ironically, however, the migration of women fails to be at the center of policy making.

Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK), a women migrant rights organization has been receiving repetitive phone calls from migrant women (working in destination countries and the returnees) to ease their problems as women and migrant. BNSK has been assisting women migrants overseas as well as upon their return in Bangladesh with supports and services to make her migration worthy psychologically, socially and economically. BNSK has also been following up and working with private and government agencies on the implementation of the recommendations of the Joint committee.

1.1 Objectives of the Research:

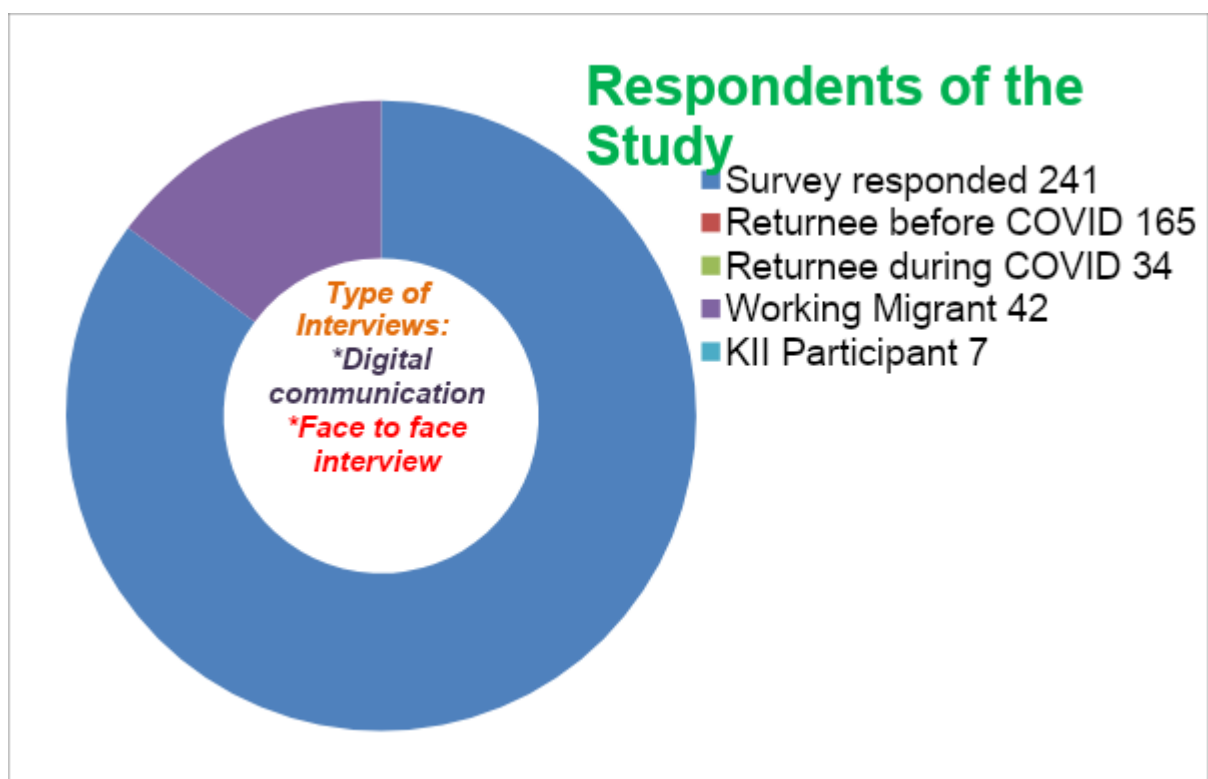
To understand the reality in the ground, BNSK conducted a survey among the women migrant workers working in destinations and the returnees here in Bangladesh with the following objectives:

- a. Challenges women migrants are facing at destination and in Bangladesh after their return;

- b. Loss of life and livelihoods due to COVID-19 pandemic;
- c. Situation of their income and remittances transferred;
- d. State and standard of freedom of movement;
- e. Situation of Violence against women migrant workers;
- f. Social protection perspectives for women migrant workers and their family members in destination and in country of origin; and
- g. To put forward some recommendations for female migrant worker and migration process.

1.2 Methodology:

The methodology of the research includes field level data collection through the questionnaire survey by digital communications and field level information by interview. The data used to address the central issues of service delivery mechanism for women migrant workers during this COVID-19 Pandemic. A total of 241 migrant workers (Fig.1) were interviewed in March to May, 2020. Among them 165 were returnee migrant worker before COVID-19, 34 were returning migrants worker during COVID-19 and 42 were working migrants worker in destination countries. 07 persons KII were conducted to understand the views and experience of women migrants. Surveys were administered with three different question sets to collect experiences of a large group of female migrants- with both working migrants and returnee migrants. In this research survey, the respondent returnee female migrant workers geographical coverage was 7 districts in Bangladesh. The districts were Dhaka, Mainkgonj, Gopalganj, Barishal, Faridpur, Jessore, Sylhet and Bramhonbaria. And the countries covered for working migrant's women interview: KSA, Oman, Jordan, Lebanon, UAE, and Kuwait. All collected data and information was statistically analyzed and represented through various diagrams and graphs. The collected information of the main part of the research explained by graphs then the outcome of the research is explained from those graphs.



2.0 Features of Violence against Working Migrant Women alike Modern Slavery

Gender-based violence (GBV) is usually thought of as an issue affecting primarily women and Women are negatively and disproportionately impacted by disasters and conflict. In the context of Women Migrants during this COVID-19 Pandemic, the Women migrant workers around the world are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. They work in essential but low-paid and vulnerable jobs, as health and care workers, nurses, cleaners and laundry workers, placing them at high risk of exposure to corona virus. Women migrant workers face a higher risk of losing their livelihoods, having their labor and human rights violated and contracting Corona virus. They are likely to work in the informal economy, especially domestic service and the care sector, with insecure contracts and no paid leave or ability to work from home. They are also more likely to be engaged in short-term, part-time work. Their jobs are generally excluded from contributory social insurance a scheme, which means limited or no social safety nets to compensate for lost income and limited or no access to health care and maternity protection. Even after return in Bangladesh, they face discriminated socially, economically and psychologically to be reintegrated. To understand the features of violence against migrant women the study sets three type of questionnaire. These are: returnee before COVID, returnee during COVID and workers on job in destination (Working Migrant).

2.1 Working Women Migrant:

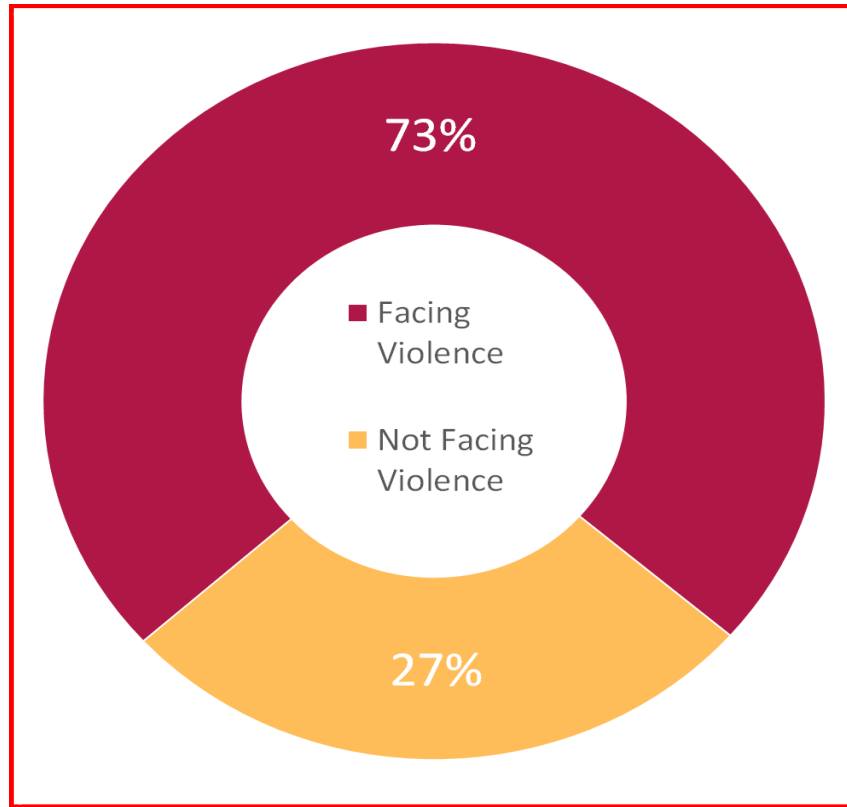
Migration is an effective livelihood strategy for the people of Bangladesh. Today, the country's economy largely depends on remittances sent by the migrant workers. Women workforce constitutes half of the population of the country with a huge potential to contribute towards the economic development of Bangladesh. Significant female migration has become more of a reality for people in Bangladesh now. Bangladeshi migrant women are often employed as domestic workers. But Domestic workers are frequently become victims of various exploitations in destination countries. In this research, a total of 241 migrant workers (Fig.1) were interviewed. Among them 42 (Fig.1) women was working migrant. The women are facing different kinds of violence. In that consideration, the research endeavor to find out the reality.

2.1.1 Physical Violence

In destination country, domestic workers frequently become victims of various exploitations. Working long hours, non-payment or irregular payment of wages, sleep and food deprivation, dirty and insufficient living space are common forms of exploitation that domestic workers face from employer's part. In this research, the study has found that 73% (Fig 2.1) of the women migrant workers are facing physical violence during this lock-down period. According to the respondents only 27% (Fig 2.1) women migrant workers are not facing

physical violence in the country of destination. Following such exploitation, many workers become exhausted enough to consider suicide.

Fig 2.1: Physical Violence

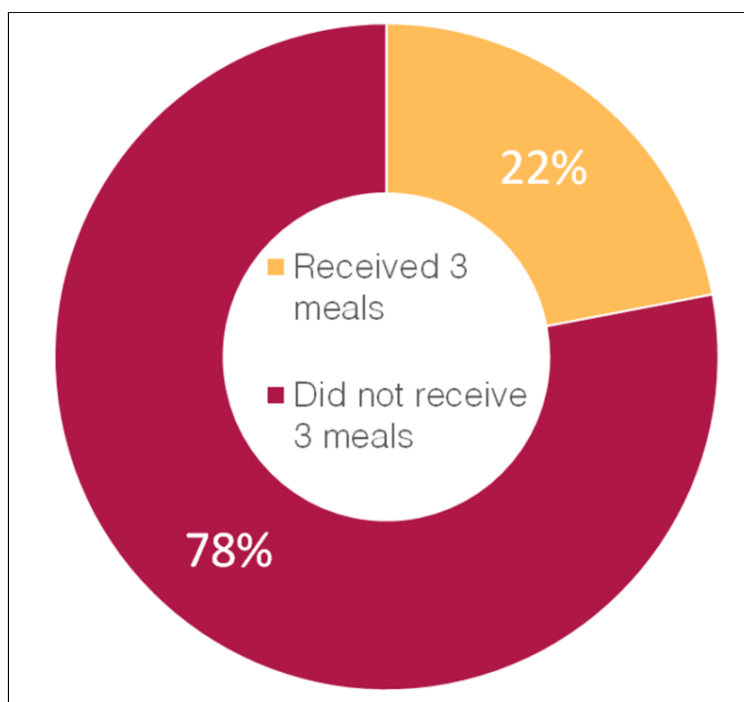


Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/ March-May

2.1.2 Food Security

To reduce disease transmission all tools must be employed to keep migrant workers safe including the sufficient healthy food to boost their immune system. Food is a critical need for human. Migrant women were asked if they had enough food and only 22% (Fig.2.2) of the domestic workers said that they are receiving at least 3 time meals a day during this Pandemic. But their workload increased 62 per cent (Fig. 2.4) over that of previous time (pre-outbreak) due to lockdown, imposed by the host countries. According to the research, 78% percent (Fig.2.2) of the respondents are not receiving at least 3 times meals a day during this Pandemic.

Fig. 2 2: Meals

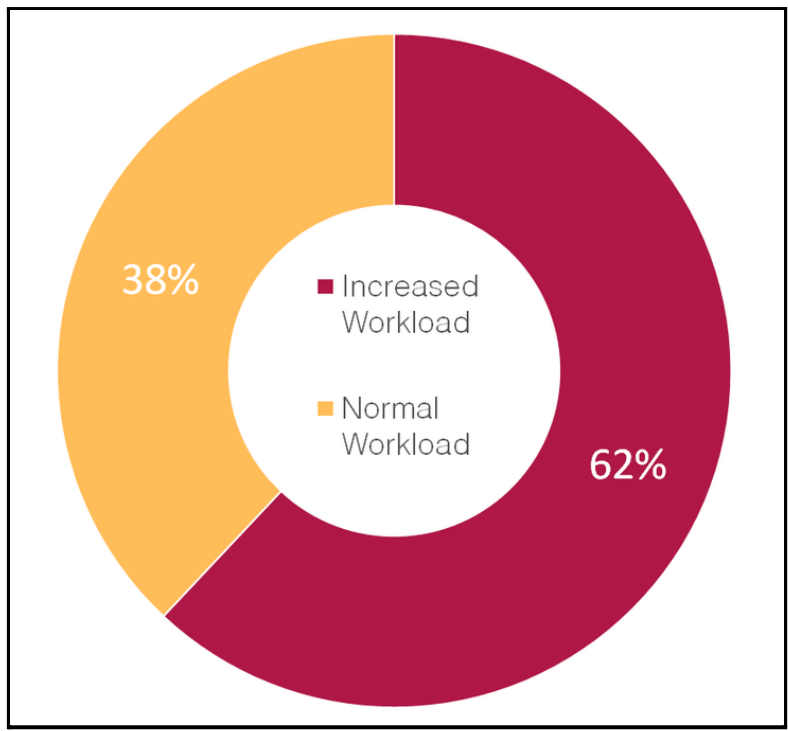


Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/ March-May

2.2.3 Pattern of Work load

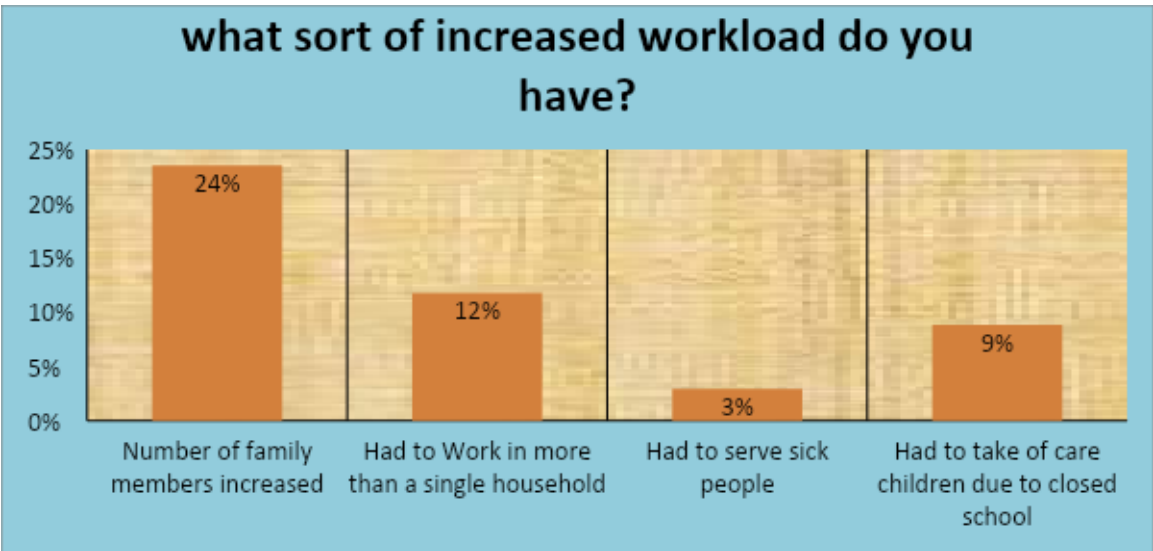
Workload has increased for 62% (Fig. 2.3) of the worker due to this lock-down. A worker is supposed to work for only 8 hours a day according to Int. Labour Law, so for domestic-migrant worker from around 5AM to 1 PM. Bangladesh domestic workers are ending up working 18 hours every day from 5AM to 1AM, getting only 4 hours of rest. And these workers do not have any weekend off. So these workers have to work every day with only 4 hours of rest as long as their multi-year contracts. But their workload increased 62 per cent (Fig. 2.4) over that of previous time (pre-outbreak) due to lockdown, imposed by the host countries. On the other hand, only 22 per cent of the workers said they received meals regularly. Bangladeshi women domestic helps are forced to take extra workload in their job destination countries during the Covid-19 pandemic, although many of them remain unpaid. Because of restriction on movements, almost all family members of foreign employers are now staying home. So, women workers' work pressure abroad has increased manifold. Respondents were asked about the type of workload. According to respondents report, 24% (Fig. 2.4) mentioned the increased of workload for numbers of family members increased. 3% (Fig. 2.4) had to serve sick people. 12% (Fig. 2.4) had to work in more than a single household. The workers' situation is like that of 'bonded laborers'. The governments from both receiving and sending countries should take immediate measures to ensure their rights.

Fig. 2.3: Work load



Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/ March-May

Fig. 2 4: Type of Work load



Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/ March-May

3.0 CUREENT STATUS OF RETURNEE MIGRANT WOMEN AND COVIID-19 PANDEMIC

3.0 Covid-19 Pandemic and Returnee Migrant Women

The outbreak of coronavirus COVID-19 is the worst reality of the present time, as the virus has already spread to more than 210 countries of the world claiming thousands of lives every day. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak as Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Apprehending multipronged effects of the COVID-19 attack, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General termed the situation as the most challenging crisis of the time since after the Second World War. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic when the virus spread to over 100 countries affecting more than 100,000 people within a few months.

Bangladesh is no exception to this reality. On 8 March 2020, Bangladesh confirmed the first cases of COVID 19 and after 10 days of the first detection, on 18 March 2020, the country experienced the first death from COVID-19 where the number of the confirmed coronavirus patients increased to 14 amid the testing of a limited number of suspected patients.

According to the report of the Department of Health in Bangladesh on 11 June, 2020, the total COVID 19 infected people in Bangladesh are 1, 05,535 and total death from COVID-19 is 1,388.

Unlike many other emergencies, COVID-19 is different for many considerations. The virus spread at a storm speed and crossed state borders within a short span of time. This is no longer a sole issue of public health, as people across the world has been enduring economic and social crisis due to different preventive and protective measures taken to stop the spread of the virus. Knowingly, the emergence of the coronavirus is disproportionately affecting the lives of the female migrant worker.

3.1 Returnee before COVID

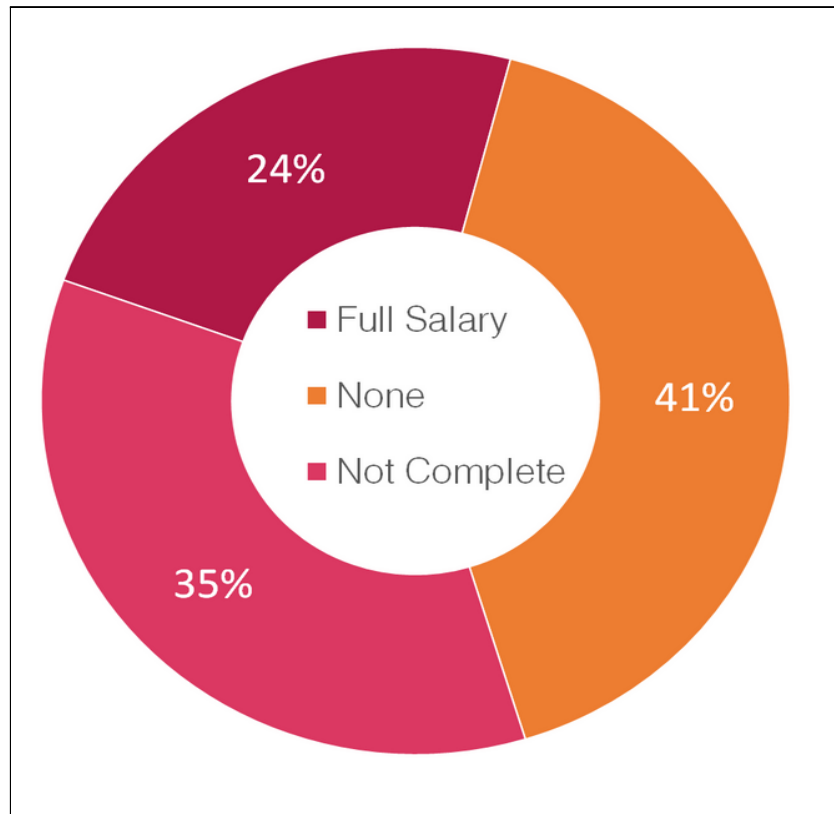
Domestic workers are highly dependent on their employer for their working and living conditions. Non-payment or irregular payment of wages is common forms of exploitation that domestic workers face from employer's part. Among the 241 migrant workers (Fig.1), 165 returnee migrant women who return before COVID were interviewed about their salary, non-payment or irregular payment of wages and expenses. In this research, the study has found that less than one fourth of the returnee women migrants are received their full salary.

3.1.1 Salary

Of all the women migrants who returned during the Pandemic, only 24 % received full salary. The figure showed that about 41 per cent of the women migrants, who returned home before

the Coronavirus outbreak, did not get full wage from their employers and 35 % of the respondent reported that they did not get any wages.

Fig. 3.1.: Salary

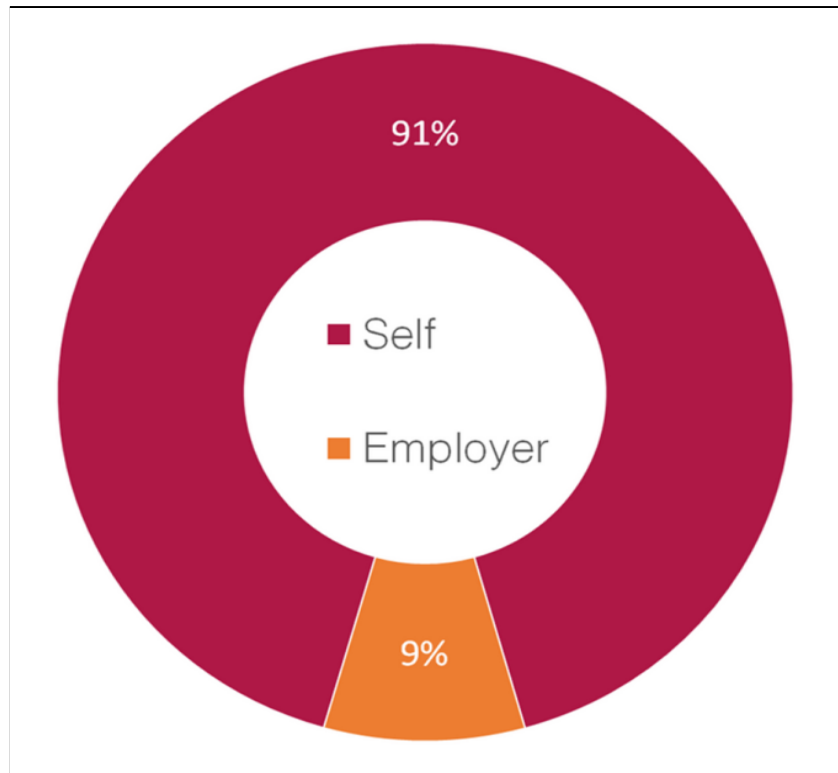


Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/ March-May

3.1.2 Expenses

Low-wage migrant workers were asked who bear their personal expenses. 91% of them answered that they bear their personal expenses by themselves. Only 9% of the migrants' expenses (like phone bills and clothing) were bear by the employer.

Fig. 3.2.: Expenses



Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/ March-May

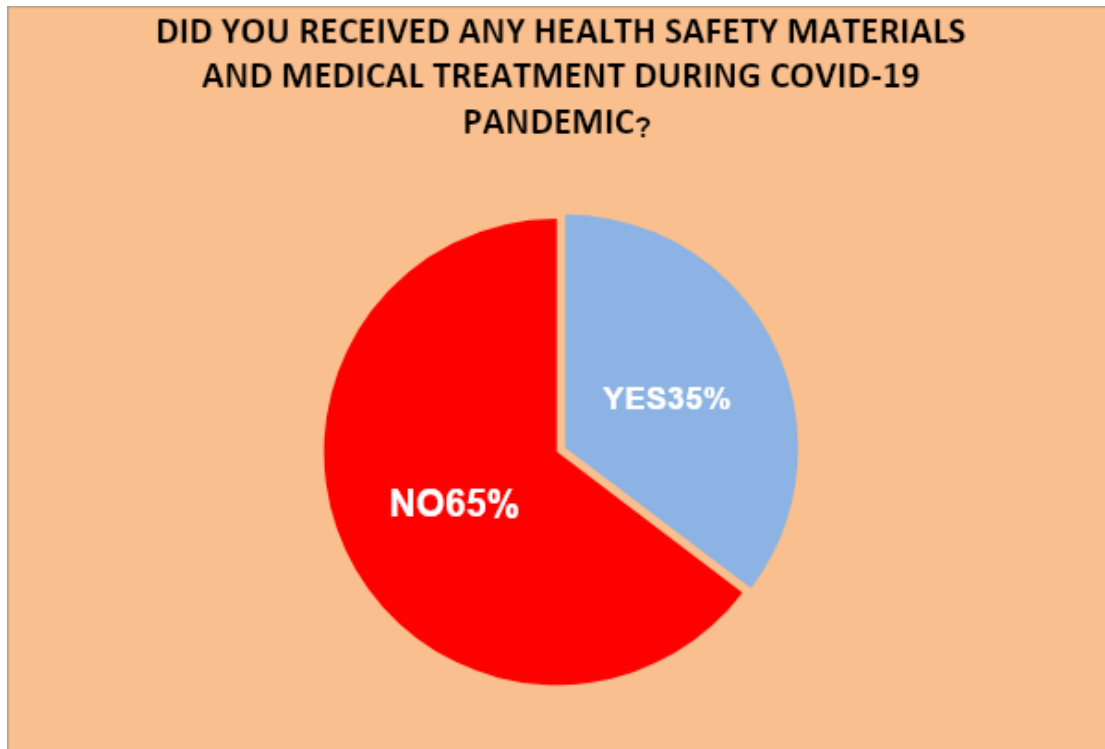
3.2 Returnee during COVID

Among the 241 migrant workers (Fig.1), 34 migrant women return during COVID. 44% of the returnee workers had to take care of sick people before and after the Pandemic started.

3.2.1 Health Safety materials

All equipment must be employed to keep migrant workers safe in order to stay free of Covid and reduce the spread of disease ; a sanitary environment, provision of free soap for frequent handwashing to prevent the spread of the disease; sufficient healthy food to boost their immune system; access to free voluntary COVID-19 tests and treatment. In this research, respondents were asked about the health safety materials and medical treatment during covid-19 pandemic. According to respondent, only 35% (Fig. 3.3) received health safety materials and 65% (Fig. 3.3) returnee worker reported that they did not received any health safety materials during covid-19 pandemic

Fig. 3.3.: Health Safety materials

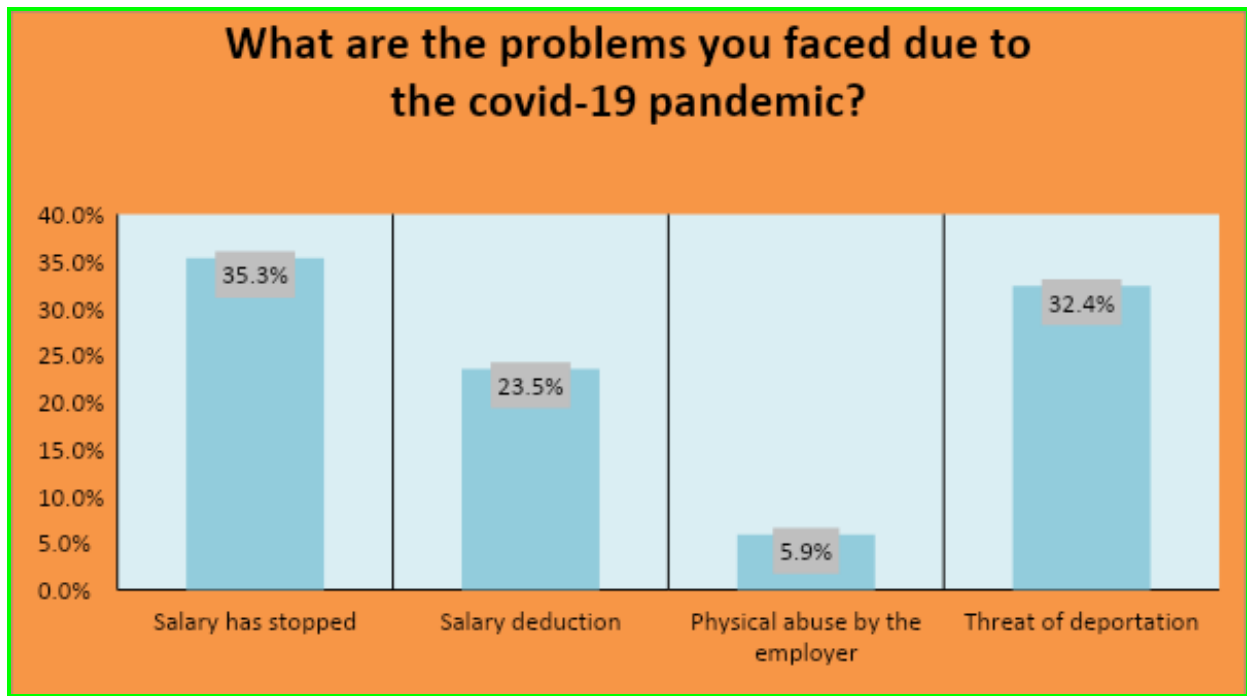


Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/ March-May

3.2.2 Facing major problems

According to the ILO convention (ILO, 2011), domestic workers are entitled to the same basic rights as those available for other workers according to the national labour law in the country they work in, such as – work hour limit, weekly day off, overtime compensation, minimum wage coverage social security and clear information on the terms and conditions of employment (<https://www.ilo.org>). In this research, the study has found that the women migrants are faced various kinds of violation of their rights by their employers when they were working abroad. The bar chart (Fig 3.4) demonstrates that what the problems that they had faced during covid-19 pandemic. According to the respondent 35% (Fig 3.4) of returnee women answered that their salary had stopped, 23.5% (Fig 3.4) of women answered that their salary was deducted. 5.9% (Fig 3.4) of the women migrants were physically abused by the employer and 32% (Fig 3.4) were threatened to deportation.

Fig. 3.4.: Facing major problems



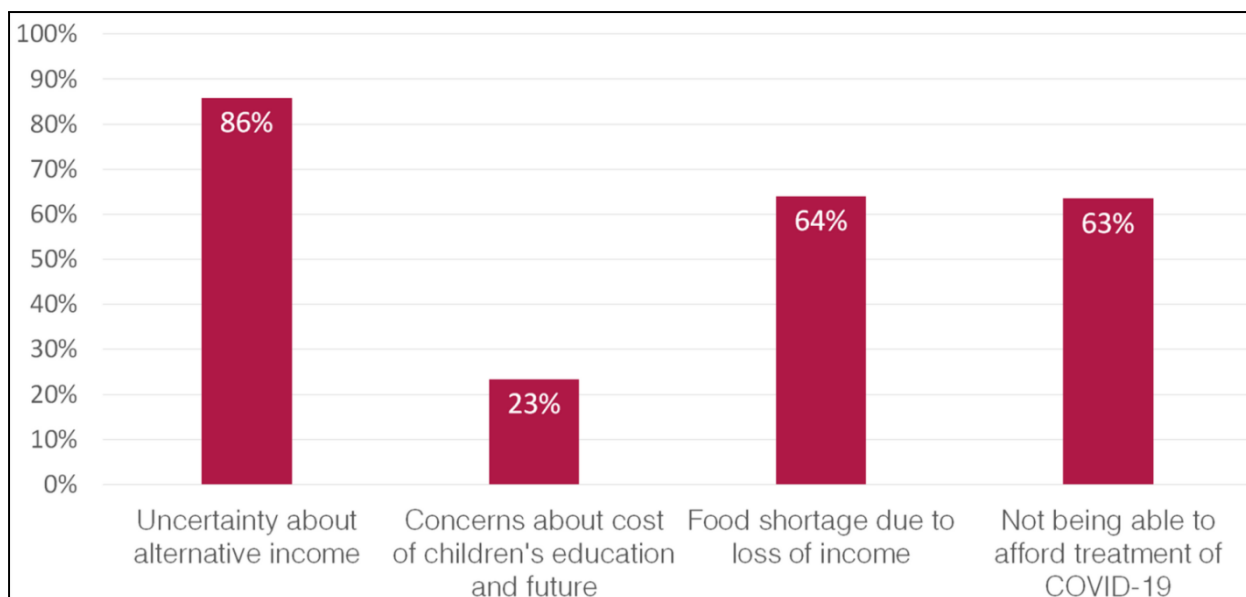
Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/

March-May

3.2.3 Concern things for Pandemic

Social security is a universal human right to which everyone in any society should have access to; including migrant workers who are often excluded or significantly limited in their coverage. Many low-wage migrant workers are anxious about becoming unwell, especially because they fear for their future economic security in the global recession. The bar chart shows what the things all returnee workers are worried about. 86% of the respondents are worried about uncertainty of alternative income. 64% are worried about food shortage due to loss of income. 23% of the respondents are concerns about cost of children's education and future. This chart also shows that 63% are not being able to afford treatment of COVID-19. These uncertainties will lead to increased social instability. As a result gender-based violence will also be increased in the society because gender based violence is already an under-reported social pandemic which will only exacerbate in any circumstances of no prevention measures, adequate support services and potential social instability.

Fig. 3.5: Things all Returnee workers are worried about



Source: Questionnaire survey-2020/ March-May

Due to poverty, a large number of women in Bangladesh migrate abroad to improve their and their families' standard of living. But now Women migrant workers face a higher risk of losing their livelihoods, having their labour and human rights violated and risk contracting Corona virus. During the global spread of COVID 19 pandemic –it is necessary to take immediate step to protect of this female migrant workers health and the fundamental right to human life.

4.0 Analysis of Existing Act, Rules and Circular in Bangladesh and Findings of the Research

The government of Bangladesh has enacted laws and undertook various policies to stipulate safeguards for workers both at home and abroad. Some notable initiatives of these are enactment of Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013, Recruiting Agents Conduct rules 2002, Overseas Employment policy 2006, National skill development policy 2012 and formulation of Overseas Employment policy 2016. The Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013 requires registration of migrant workers, including female domestic workers, and stipulate recruitment agents to provide an employment contract between the worker and the employer stating all conditions and privileges of employment. The Act also imposes penalties for sending migrant workers overseas in an unlawful manner, charging unlawful amounts of fees, using unfair means in the recruitment process. It entitles migrant workers the right to information, the right to file a civil suit, and the right to return home. Furthermore, through this Act the Government of Bangladesh reserves the right of restricting migration to a

particular country if government is sure that migration of Bangladeshi citizens to that country will jeopardize the health and safety of the migrants. To facilitate further protection for migrant workers the Act stipulates to establish Labor Welfare Wing in the Bangladesh mission in the concerned country to provide all kinds of assistance to distressed workers. Till January of 2019, Labor Welfare Wing has been established in 30 cities in Bangladesh Missions abroad.

In favor of female migrant workers, Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy, 2016 describes,

2.4.2 An initiatives will be taken to set up a permanent wing or branch under the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment for the integrated implementation of possible programs adopted and possible through further facilitation of labor migration process for women migrant workers.

2.4.4 In order to increase the participation of women in the labor migration process and to create heterogeneous employment opportunities for them, an initiative will be taken to increase the allocation in the budget for gender-responsive activities

2.4.6 At the time of signing the Bilateral Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding, equality of wages of men and women and other rights of workers will be ensured. Equality and fair and safe working environment will be ensured. In this case, the examples of countries with adequate systems to protect women's rights will be highlighted regularly.

Act, 2018

Welfare Board Act, 30 of 2018, describes,

9. The special responsibilities of the Board for the welfare of women migrant workers shall be as follows,

(A) If a female migrant worker working abroad is tortured, injured in an accident, ill or endangered for any other reason, rescue, repatriate, provide legal and medical assistance and collect compensation and management of help desks and safe homes for this purpose in the country and abroad;

(B) And Adoption and implementation of projects for social and economic rehabilitation and reintegrate of returning female migrant workers in the country.

Circular, 2019

A circular has been issued on 10 December 2019 to take measures to ensure greater protection for expatriate women.

The important points of the circular are:

1. Recruiting agencies that send female workers to Saudi Arabia without proper training and medical examination, showing more or less age, will be investigated and strict action will be taken against them.
2. The recruiting agency will provide every female employee with a smartphone before going abroad.
3. The recruiting agency must translate the contract into Bengali to the concerned female worker and refer them to the subject matter mentioned in the contract. Whether the female worker has been given a contract or not should be checked regularly on the basis of random selection at the time of approval in the Musaned System from BMET and at the time of exit clearance.
4. If for any reason a female worker takes refuge in the safe house of the embassy, the Labor Welfare Wing will send a statement to the Ministry and the female worker safety cell of BMET.
5. The Vigilance Task Force comprising the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment and various agencies will monitor the process of migration of women workers at least twice a month and submit a report to the Secretary.
6. The board for the welfare of women migrant workers will set up a re-integration cell near the airport within a month of the issuance of this circular to provide appropriate assistance and advice to women workers when they return home. From here they will get necessary legal, financial and other assistance.

7. Detailed information about the status of women workers sent abroad every month should be sent to the Ministry and BMET's Women Workers Protection Cell in the form of a table by the 15th of next month. The Security Cell will verify the status of women workers through the District Employment and Manpower Office and the concerned embassies.

After issuing the circular a cell was formed on 12th December 2019 for Ensuring Further Protection of Expatriate Women Workers.

4.1 Findings of the Research

Though of all these protection mechanisms have existed but the women migrant workers are still facing some problems. From this research major findings are given in below-

1. 24- hour hotline services not available in destination countries - like SOS while women workers are facing gender based violation at workplace and in the office of the recruiting agencies;
2. Unavailability/Scarce Monitoring mechanisms in destination countries to oversee women workers' issues.
3. Salary and wages are stopped/ irregular due to COVID-19 but workload is double/ triple than normal time.
4. Working in more than one house though contract does not permit
5. No rest time and overtime pay for extra hour works though entitled in contract.
6. The COVID-19 protection facilities among the migrant workers are absent.

4.2 Recommendations

The research recommended focusing on gender-friendly programme. Steps should be taken for increasing budget and human resource allocation for food and shelter for the women workers staying in job destination countries, it added.

1. Increasing budget and human resources for food and shelter for migrant workers especially for women
2. The accountability of the recruiting agency needs to be further enhanced
3. The number of safe houses needs to be increased
4. Require support for economic empowerment in country of origin
5. Need support to accept increasing age limit for the experienced domestic workers to migrate as Care worker, house manager.
6. Need support for technical skill training, financial assistance and remigration support to prevent women from any form of exploitation and trafficking
7. Special arrangement is essential to meet the emergency needs like soap and sanitization materials along with PPEs for the women migrants.