

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bangladeshi women migrants amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: Revisiting globalization, dependency and gendered precarity in South–South labour migration

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered unprecedented societal disruption and disproportionately affected global mobility dynamics. Within such a troubled and intensifying crisis, the intersection of migration and gender is even more unsettling. Since the pandemic outbreak, Bangladesh witnessed a colossal crisis among millions of Bangladeshi migrants working overseas—a considerable section of them are women. By highlighting the plight of the Bangladeshi women migrants in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, this study expands the emerging literature that addresses the nexus among migration, pandemic fallout and gendered labour. Redrawing our understanding of globalization from below, the study attempts to further advance the theoretical perspectives on the predicaments of globalization and gendered precarity in contract labour migration. The study argues that the focus on the power asymmetry between the host and sending countries remains too limited to provide a comprehensive understanding of how inequalities are reproduced and transformed. Instead, it suggests that the challenges and disadvantages women migrants endure are embedded in the asymmetries of deep-rooted

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economic and social structures in tandem with the systemic practice of otherness and exclusion.

KEYWORDS

asymmetrical dependency, Bangladesh, gender and COVID-19, globalization, labour migration

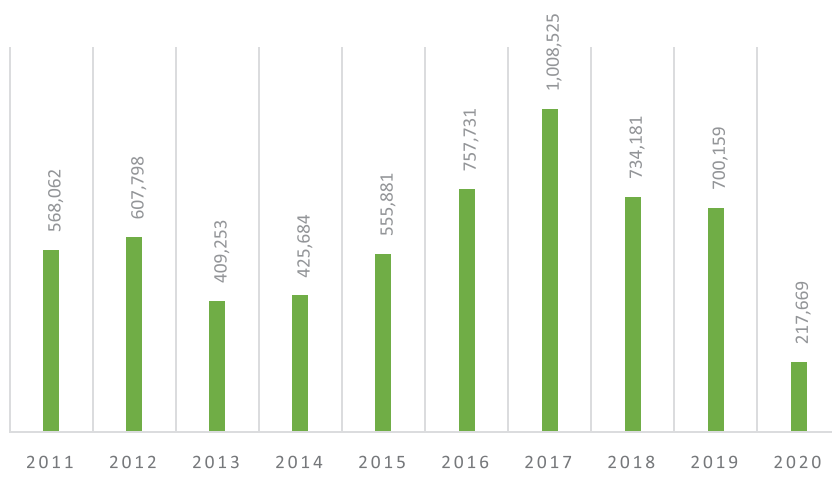
INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as one of the most profound challenges in the 21st century. Along with a severe impact on public health, people across the globe found themselves entangled in a web of drastic economic, political and social changes instigated by this upheaval. The pandemic and its reverberation brought the economic, social and structural inequalities and disparities that overwhelmingly affected certain cohorts, that is, the migrant workers, into full view. While this extraordinary situation has presented a new set of challenges for the cross-sectoral mobility of workers across the globe, in the global South—particularly in the South Asia-Gulf migration corridor—it has been manifested in extreme ways due to the fragile migration governance and lack of adequate protection mechanism in both ends (Jamil & Dutta, 2021; Karim et al., 2020; Patel, 2021).

In light of such troubling circumstances, gender has emerged as one of the most crucial intersecting factors to underline how the COVID-19 pandemic has acutely exposed and deepened socio-economic and structural inequalities globally (Arora & Majumdar, 2021; Kabeer et al., 2021; Siddiqui, 2021). Once famously depicted as the 'servants of Globalisation' (Parreñas, 2015), there is growing global evidence of how discrimination, inequalities and gender-based violence against migrant women has increased manifold amid the pandemic (Al-Ali, 2020; Aoun, 2020; Azeez et al., 2021; Bahn et al., 2020; Foley & Piper, 2020; Lokot & Bhatia, 2020; Sharma & Borah, 2020). The latest research shows how the intersections of gender, nationalities, power hierarchies and identities affect women's labour market participation—particularly the migrant women from the global South employed in precarious labour force such as care, cleaning and domestic work (Ahmed et al., 2020; Lokot & Bhatia, 2020). Broadly, these studies reveal how the pandemic has exposed the deep-seated racial, gender and class inequalities in the world of labour that have long been neglected.

In a similar vein, several studies have already started tracing the gendered experiences of both internal and international women migrants in South Asia (i.e. Arora & Majumdar, 2021; Bhagat et al., 2020; de Haan, 2020; Jesline et al., 2021; Patel, 2021; Weeraratne, 2020). These studies broadly outline how the pandemic has exacerbated their living and working conditions in their place of destination concerning the gross violation of labour standards, health risk, arbitrary return, unequal wages, long working hours, wage-theft and violation of fundamental human rights. Thus, on the one hand, the unfolding stories unveil the manifold precarity embedded in the life and livelihoods of migrant women. On the other hand, it reveals the 'transnational ruptures' (Nolin, 2017, p. 142) in the globalization process, which is tied to feminized cheap labour, characterized by precarity, insecurity and dependency that has been existing as a constitutive element of the international political economy long before the pandemic.

Lately, a few studies (i.e. Jamil & Dutta, 2021; Karim et al., 2020; Siddiqui, 2021) also documented the trends of gendered labour precarities amid the COVID-19 pandemic from the Bangladeshi women migrants' perspective. However, a critical reflection on the persistent inequalities in the South-South labour migration regime and the place of women migrants within the current spectrum of the globalization process remain inadequate. Such obscure references hinder the basis for a broader understanding of how gendered vulnerabilities are reproduced and transformed. In this context, I try to unpack the manifold precarities of Bangladeshi women migrants and situate their pandemic experiences within the larger literature on globalization and gendered precarity. In so doing, it contributes to further the theoretical perspectives on the predicaments of globalization and gendered labour migration. It does so by addressing how

TABLE 1 Yearwise international labour migration from Bangladesh (2011–2020)

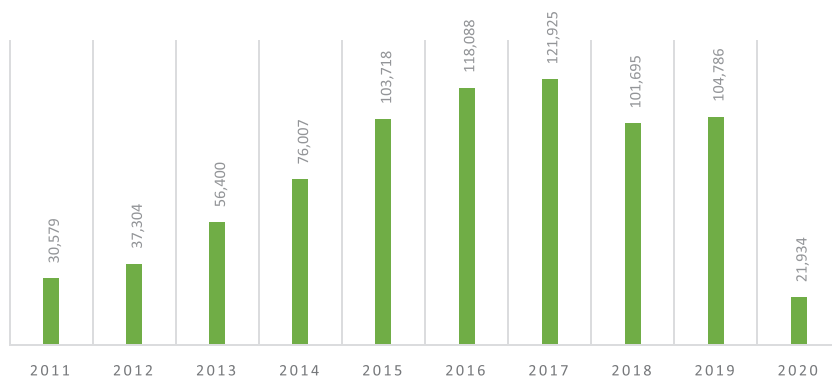
structural discrimination including social norms, attitudes, gendered stereotypes and discriminatory policies both in sending and receiving countries have become foregrounded in the labour system that perpetuate the vulnerabilities and exploitations of women migrants. My intention here is to demonstrate that inequalities and the vulnerabilities of women migrants are not merely the results of power asymmetry between the host and receiving states or the globalization process itself. Grounding on the empirical evidence, I argue that the disadvantages Bangladeshi women face are entrenched in the asymmetries of deep-rooted economic and social structures in tandem with the systemic practice of otherness and exclusion in the world of labour.

PANDEMIC-LED DISRUPTION IN LABOUR MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH

Labour migration has long been a prominent poverty alleviation and development strategy for Bangladesh since its independence in 1971 (Siddiqui, 2016). The restructuring of the global economy has increased contract labour migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf and South-East Asian countries. Annually, around half a million Bangladeshi leave the country to work overseas, and the remittance sent by the migrants is pivotal for Bangladesh's economy. There has been a consistent growth in remittance, and in 2020, it stands at \$21.75 billion—an increase of 18.4% from 2019. International remittance accounted for 6.6% of Bangladesh's GDP in 2020, placing it at the eighth position among the largest remittance-receiving countries of the world, which underlines the importance of labour migration in the Bangladesh context (Ratha et al., 2020).

However, since mid-2020, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this consistent flow of migration and the remittance-development nexus has come to a crossroad. With its all-out impact on mobility and labour, the pandemic has prompted a significant change in Bangladesh's standing and statistics on migration. The country has observed a staggering decrease of 69% in sending labour forces overseas compared to 2019, the year before the pandemic. While in 2019, more than 700,000 Bangladeshi migrated as guest workers, this figure dropped to 217,669 in 2020 (see Table 1).¹ In the case of women migration, the drop in statistics is even higher. A total of 21,934 female workers migrated from Bangladesh as guest workers in 2020, which was 104,786 in 2019—almost four times higher and fell by 79% compared with the previous year (see Table 2).

During the same period, Bangladesh has also received a record number of returnee migrants owing to job loss, arbitrary dismissal and forced deportation. According to the Bangladesh Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment, a total of 408,000 migrant workers returned to the country in 2020. Thus, around 2000 migrant workers

TABLE 2 Yearwise overseas employment of women migrants from Bangladesh (2011–2020)

returned to Bangladesh daily since the pandemic's beginning. However, there lacks comprehensive official statistics on returnee migrants, which only reaffirm the state's sheer ignorance and reluctant attitude towards ensuring migrants rights and protection. Moreover, approximately 100,000 potential migrants, who had completed all of the procedures before the pandemic, eventually failed to migrate overseas due to the global disruption (Siddiqui, 2021, p. 14).

GLOBALIZATION AND THE FEMINIZATION OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

The globalization process has emerged as an inevitable yet complex force of the current world with the transnational mobility of capital, ideas, discourses and labour (Moghadam, 1999). Despite being heralded with enthusiasm and caution, this interconnectivity has failed mainly in access to and equal distribution of resources, triggering increased global disparity and poverty (Stiglitz, 2007). Nevertheless, prompted by this rapid interconnectedness and interdependence among the states, international migration has become a salient feature of globalization (Kolářová, 2006; Rai, 2002).

Amidst this growing yet conditional interconnectedness, women migration emerged as a constitutive globalization subject and practice (Huang et al., 2012; Parreñas, 2015; Piper, 2008), creating 'an international service class of female employees' (Tinsman, 1992, p. 42). As a result, women constitute a significant proportion in overall migration trends, and some labour sectors are almost entirely comprised of women workers—particularly in domestic work, cleaning, entertainment and a large part of care work (Browne & Braun, 2008; Pettman, 1998). Such gendered segregation of labour also suggests that despite having similar rights, women migrants labour rights are less likely to be enforced compared to their male counterparts (Kawar, 2004).

Often, the invisibility and the isolating nature of work coupled with women's lack of access to information and rights contribute to this condition. Therefore, the intersection of gender norms and market economics embraces several 'gendered advantages' that make women migrants particularly suitable for these precarious jobs. For instance, women of relatively young age, docile and coming from rural areas in the developing countries, ready to accept low wages, and uncomplaining while performing monotonous work, trivial or non-existent participation in labour unions—all these characteristics make women migrant workers preferable for specific labour-intensive sectors (Balakrishnan, 2002; Benería et al., 2015; Kolářová, 2006).

This new global order and the restructuring of the global economy have also increased short-term contract female labour migration from Bangladesh. The mounting demand for jobs in highly 'feminized' sectors (i.e. health care, domestic help, manufacturing) and relatively cheaper wages compared to the female workers from the Philippines, Sri Lanka or India admittedly makes Bangladesh an ideal source of supplying inexpensive female workers to the Gulf States and other developed Asian countries (Siddiqui & Ansar, 2020). Bangladeshi women are mainly placed in jobs that are

considered to be at the bottom of the service sector, such as domestic help, care work and cleaning, which typically involve culturally devalued tasks and receive limited socio-legal recognition both in the destination and at home (Rashid, 2013; Siddiqui, 2001).

In this changing milieu, the gendered dimension in the everyday experiences of migrants has become an important feature to look into migration and its impact analysis within the context of globalisation. However, the theoretical debate around women migration remains primarily concentrated around South-North migration, and 'there continues to be relatively little understanding of South-South migration dynamics although many of the highly feminised, yet hyper-precarious, migration flows occur intra-regionally and within the global South' (Bastia & Piper, 2019, p.16).

Amid such an inescapable hegemony of the market-driven economic paradigm, the pandemic and the changing socio-economic realities across the globe put this nexus between globalization, gender and migration at a crossroad (Kabeer et al., 2021). In the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a myriad of inequalities and discrepancies at every stage of migration appears to resurface (de Haan, 2020). What we see is a significant crisis of globalization, and to grasp a holistic overview of the plights of women migrants, it is imperative to focus on how a section of the society, despite actively contributing to the promises of globalization, is alienated and crushed by its distributional dynamics (Phillips, 2017; Suhardiman et al., 2021). This also opens up a set of questions pertaining to for whom the globalization system works and who benefits from it, eventually. Taking each of these asymmetries and their interactions into consideration, I add the experience of Bangladeshi migrant women to expand this critical conversation further.

METHODOLOGY

The COVID-19 pandemic has put tremendous pressure on producing momentous and policy-oriented research given the challenges of time constraints and physical distancing (Tremblay et al., 2021). However, research endeavours that generate information in a short period necessitate flexibilities and broader collaboration on various fronts—a strategy employed in preparing this study. As the study deals with an ongoing crisis that has been continuously evolving, it does not claim to provide a comprehensive pandemic-led impact analysis on migrant women's lives. Instead, it aims to underline the deep-seated flaws and challenges in the existing migration governance within the South-South migration corridor that hopes to bring more clarity and accountability in labour migration governance in the future. From April to November 2020, it looked at the period when Bangladesh witnessed myriads of labour migrants returning from the Gulf and other Southeast Asian countries. The analysis presented here is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected by conducting in-depth interviews with migrant domestic workers. Secondary data consist of newspaper reports, government statistics, NGO reports and recent academic publications. A total of 35 in-depth interviews with returnee and current women migrant domestic workers were conducted using the Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration (BCSM) platform and its member organizations. The BCSM members created several hotlines where Bangladeshi migrant workers could make toll-free calls seeking help and advice at the pandemic's beginning. The platform also set up a help desk at the Dhaka International Airport for overseas migrant workers. Therefore, the information compiled in this study is credited to this largest network of migrants' rights organizations in Bangladesh. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and its strict use in expanding critical scholarship in migration studies and positive policy framing on contract labour migration. For anonymity, the actual names of the respondents have been changed throughout the study.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON BANGLADESHI WOMEN MIGRANTS

The pandemic mayhem unveils how the gendered, economic and social asymmetry in labour migration has profound consequences on women migrants' labour market experience. The narratives of the migrant women reveal how their

entitlements and rights are further compromised and ignored pushing them towards hyper-precarities. The nature and extent of the exploitation range from long and tedious working hours, arbitrary dismissal from jobs and forced return, social stigma in the home country, lack of structural supports, inadequate access to health care, lower wages, poor living conditions, the abrupt abolishment of contracts and physical and sexual abuses. The following section illustrates the particular experience that Bangladeshi women migrants have endured and, to a large extent, are still living through.

Overworked, isolated and overlooked

While the confinement and lockdown reduced the work pressure for the labour force employed in some sectors, including home office arrangements, it was not the privilege to be given to the migrant domestic workers. Nearly all the respondents interviewed were overworked in varied forms. Several respondents claimed, in extreme cases, they had to work almost 20 h daily as the number of regular residents in the household increased during the pandemic restrictions and lockdowns. Since domestic work is not regulated under the national labour laws in the Gulf countries, there are practically no limits to the working hours, let alone any weekend or paid sick leave. Since the pandemic outbreak, most of the respondents were required to engage in extra duties of cleaning, cooking and disinfecting homes in addition to their regular workload. Only a single respondent claimed that she has been working 10 h a day, and the fact that the corona situation has not brought much of a change in her daily work schedule. This exception is due to her employment in a household where she only looks after an old couple and is not forced to take any additional responsibility.

Furthermore, during the holy month of Ramadan, the workload was increased threefold than the regular months because of the employer's inability to hire supplementary workers. For example, Tahera (35), a single mother of two daughters, has worked in Saudi Arabia since 2007. For her, the working experience during Ramadan was like an 'additional punishment while imprisoned'. She was not even allowed to talk to her daughters back home for 6 weeks as her employer's wife was apprehensive about the fact that talking to the family members 'back home would distract her focus'.

Wage theft, economic hardship and the lack of alternatives

Non-payment of unpaid salaries, wage theft and the inability to send remittances back home has been another significant challenge for migrant workers. Almost every respondent has at least three dependent family members in Bangladesh, and the inability to send money back home caused severe stress. Many of them are worried about the family members and managing household maintenance costs. Eight respondents could not send any remittance back to Bangladesh during May–July 2020, the occasion of the Eid festival. Shamima (38) regrets saying, 'it is the first time I could not send money for my kids to buy new clothes for Eid since I came abroad for work in 2016'. A total of six respondents have not received their due salary since April 2020, and five others received only a partial payment. Four respondents who wanted to return home due to abusive working conditions and non-payment of their wages could not do so due to employers' confiscation of their passports.

For returnee migrants, without any savings, financial resources and social protection, the jobless situation further increased their vulnerabilities. Seven returnees remain indebted due to their inability to pay the loan they received from local microcredit associations to facilitate their migration costs. Moreover, several structural and circumstantial challenges, including the lack of preparedness by the government agencies, present profound constraints in the economic integration of the returnee labour migrants. Besides, inadequate institutional capacity and the Bangladesh government's falling human and financial resources due to the pandemic also resulted in a chaotic situation. Furthermore, the stigmatization of women migrants often makes it extremely difficult to reintegrate financially and socially due to the prejudice associated with female migration as domestic workers that are often characterized as cheap, intimate, disposable, and sub-standard jobs.

Movement restriction and exclusion from state announced emergency services

Apart from home confinement due to lockdown and restrictions imposed by the employers, the exclusion of migrant domestic workers from the pandemic response plan by the GCC countries also led to the workers being disqualified from retrieving the COVID-19 protection measures executed by the host countries. None of the workers interviewed in this study could contact social workers or the Bangladesh embassy officials in their respective destinations to seek help and link them up with the state announced social supports and incentives. Several respondents also claim that despite having some symptoms of COVID-19, they were barred from going to the health clinic and get tested. Usually, the employer is responsible for medical bills and other treatment costs. Therefore, 'they (employers) simply wanted to avoid any additional cost for us (the domestic workers) as if our life does not matter at all',—one respondent claims, who has been working in Saudi Arabia since 2018 under the same employer. Moreover, structural barriers stemming from their confinement within the employer's house, movement restrictions, language barriers, insufficient knowledge of their rights under the local immigration and employment laws put female migrants outside of the scope of social support, economic incentives and urgent healthcare provisions amid the pandemic.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Several international reports have already documented numerous pieces of evidence of sexual abuse and physical violence that migrant domestic workers were exposed to during the lockdown in the Arab countries, in addition to excessive workload (Amnesty International, 2019; UN Women, 2020). In a similar observation, all but two respondents pointed out their experience of sexual and gender-based violence including, physical torture, sexual abuse, and received misogynists and racially derogatory remarks. Many of them were physically tortured and beaten more than twice during the confinement. Ironically in three cases, the female members of the employers' families were also part of abusing and torturing the female workers. Noor-e-Jannat (41) shares her plights in this way:

My employer's daughter beat me because I was late preparing food, and she had to wait a few minutes for dinner to be served. I am used to getting beaten by memsahib (female head of the household), but by her daughter was such a shame that I felt I should commit suicide. But then I thought, what will happen to my family back home.

The precarious nature of the return migration with inadequate preparation for the female returnees increased their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation. Several respondents claimed being exposed to physical harassment and abuses by the airport security guards even upon return to Bangladesh. Many of them found themselves in utter helplessness in the middle of the night when they landed at the airport and had no idea how to go to their natal village amid strict nationwide lockdown.

At the pandemic's beginning, returnee migrants had to go through compulsory institutional quarantine in *Hajj* camp, a government facility near the Dhaka international airport. For many of them, the situation inside the camp resembled what they experienced in their employers' houses. For example, Mahina (31), a returnee from Saudi Arabia, describes:

I asked the authority more than 10 times that the toilet flush where we were staying was not working. After this repeated query, one of them responded to me, saying the condition (of camp) is a five-star hotel for us, compared to where we stayed previously and where we will go. It was devastating hearing that response from your fellow countrymen. We have no respect there (in the Gulf) and here (Bangladesh) is also no exception.

The arbitrary return of the female migrants also led to interpersonal violence within their family as several of them found themselves un-welcomed and a burden for the family amidst the post-lockdown poverty situation in Bangladesh.

Arbitrary and empty-handed return

Like other previous crises, the GCC countries have used in(voluntary) return of the migrants to their countries of origin as one of the mechanisms in addressing the ongoing pandemic. According to the Wage Earners Welfare Board (WEWB) under the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry in Bangladesh, a record number of 17,182 women migrants have returned to Bangladesh between April 1 and October 3 2020, mainly from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon and Qatar (Bhuyan, 2020). Besides, there is a lack of clear information on how many workers were deported and how many returned voluntarily. Notwithstanding, none of the returnees who participated in this study returned voluntarily.

Nevertheless, instead of being paid for the surplus working hours, many women were not even paid the agreed salaries in their contracts. Bilkis (28), who worked in the United Arab Emirates for 5 years, claims her employer refused to pay her the last 4 months' salary before returning to Bangladesh. The unpaid dues amount to US\$ 1200. She further explains: 'I met every demand of my employer and his family members. However, they did not pay my wages. Each time I asked for my salary, I was beaten and tortured by the employer and other family members.'

A vast majority of the respondents did not receive their expected salary before return. Around 10 respondents returned home empty-handed, and five others got only partial wage. 'Each time I claimed my salary, I was physically tortured', Shamima (40), who returned from Kuwait in July 2020, recalls claiming her total unpaid wages would be approximately US\$ 2500. Moreover, when they approached the responsible recruiting agencies upon return, hardly any support was provided. Instead, the recruiter threatened one respondent saying she would face a theft charge at her employer's residence in Dubai if she dared to complain.

Psychosocial problems and stigmatization upon arrival

Immediately after the first COVID-19 infection case reported by Bangladesh in March 2020, the returnee migrants were the first to put on the radar to blame on. A sudden panic around the country spreads, which leads to rushed and inexpedient measures to 'contain' the returnee migrants as if they are the 'moving body of infections'. At the height of the pandemic, national media also reported on how the returnee migrants have been subjected to the ordeal of stigmatization and discrimination in their local communities. Hoping the return 'would perhaps be the best option to be around the family members in this crisis period', as one respondent anticipated, nonetheless, many found themselves in a state of hopelessness and failure gave the humiliation they endured upon return to Bangladesh. Among the 15 respondents, seven were denied treatment in the local hospital and in five cases, neighbours complained against their 'homecoming' to the local police station, which led to police harassment and incitement to hatred. Three respondents eventually found themselves in a situation of 'house arrest' by their neighbours who put a red flag in front of their house, pointing as if they brought the virus from abroad and likely to 'infect the villagers'.

Setara (26) explains: 'After I lost my job in Kuwait, I thought returning home was the best option. At least, even if I die due to corona, I will be able to be buried in my natal village. Nevertheless, returning home, which I perceived a better alternative, turned out to be a nightmare once I landed at the airport'.

Upon arrival, the immediate shock contributes to psychological distress in various degrees, especially among those with a 'complicated' marital status. For instance, after her divorce from a brief and troubled marriage Aparna (30) migrated to the United Arab Emirates to start afresh, and she was doing well abroad. However, with the deteriorating economic situation, when she returned, she suddenly discovered that her family is 'happy as long as they get the dollars from abroad and they do not want me around'. Thus, the prolonged separation from families and the challenging

conditions upon return, including quarantine and stigmatization, have triggered various psychological stresses on already devastated returnee migrants.

Lack of access to legal grievance and compensation

Accessing the right information and a clear guideline appeared as another significant challenge for women migrants. Due to the disruption in regular services by different government and civil organizations, it was nearly impossible for the migrant workers to lodge complain or file their grievances to the responsible authorities, against the employer in the destination countries or, when relevant, against the local recruiting agencies.

None of the returnees interviewed in this study received formal or informal support from the relevant government agencies in Bangladesh and the embassies and the labour attaché offices abroad. Five respondents interviewed in this study came to Dhaka to lodge a formal complaint against their employers and the local recruiting agencies at the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), the key government body that deals with migrant workers. However, none of them managed to get the correct information on registering complaints. Therefore, wage theft, arbitrary dismissal from job, physical and sexual abuses—all remain unreported. In addition, the absence of male members to accompany, disruption in public transportation due to countrywide lockdown, and inefficiency in dealing with the government bureaucracy hindered many returnees from seeking grievances.

REVISITING GENDERED PRECARITY, STRUCTURAL PREDICAMENTS AND ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCY

Through the above accounts, this study explores the varied experiences of precarity, wounding and exploitation of the Bangladeshi migrant women both in the Gulf countries and upon their arbitrary return to Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their narratives were not simply about adding more cases to the long list of women's gendered vulnerabilities, as we have witnessed plethora of such evidence around the globe. What these stories intend to unpack is how women's social and economic background, class, origin, education and marital status perpetuates their systemic exclusion and marginalization.

As the findings inform, several factors have contributed to this intensified vulnerability among women migrants. In South Asia and the GCC migration corridor, deep-rooted asymmetrical dependency between the supply and receiving side of labour migration, the fractured and uneven globalization process and the entangled discretionary power-relations between the workers and the employers have (re)created a threat to migrant workers' livelihood options and rendering them as distressed. The ruptures caused by the pandemic are the outcomes of entrenched structural inequalities, arbitrary recruitment practices and othering of women migrants at every stage of the migration process that starts long before their migration journey. In the following section, I elucidate the interactions of these dimensions and explain how such structural inequalities, gendered precarity and asymmetrical dependency have become the defining feature of the migration experience of Bangladeshi women that takes place in disguise of globalization and interconnectedness.

At origin: how women migrants are recruited and placed in specific occupations is a subject of long-standing debate. The immigration policy, gender-segregated recruitment process and the conditions associated with it coalesce so that women have limited scopes to migrate and have a say about the terms and conditions regarding their overseas employment (Hennebry, 2017; Handapangoda, 2014). The dominant perception of Bangladeshi migrant workers about their inherent qualities of being easily controlled and less assertive often place them at the bottom of the labour hierarchy, where they are easily exposed to precarious and exploitative work. In addition, largely debt-financed migration, outsourcing through brokers, layers of sub-contracting and middleman dominance, the ambiguous role of government

agencies during the recruitment process keep the workers in a state of confusion and categorically dependent on their recruitment agencies and the middleman in charge.

Moreover, as evident among the respondents interviewed in this study, the background of the women also contributes to the phenomenon of a structural disadvantage where women often find themselves in docile positions. For instance, all the respondents interviewed in this study hail from rural areas, lack adequate skills, language, training, and on top, a sizable number of women are either widowed or divorced. Thus, on the one hand, they lack the know-how and the ability to cover migration expenses; on the other hand, the dearth in social and individual capital deriving from their 'complex marital status' in a largely patriarchal society also place them in a precarious situation even before making the migration decision. As a result, such personal and structural predicaments at the entry point prevent them from making an informed migration decision. The consolidation of all these factors affects their choice and standing in the employment sectors and, subsequently, their access to protection and services.

In the destination: the nexus between the *Kafala* (sponsorship) system and migrants' access to protection remains another major stumbling block in bringing clarity and justice to the plights of Bangladeshi domestic workers in the Gulf countries. In this arrangement, the relationship between employers (*Kafeel*) and migrant workers is regulated through a restrictive sponsorship system by effectively abolishing their route to settlement and limiting the duration of their visa to a fixed term (Dermitzaki & Riewendt, 2020). Scholars have criticized this system widely because of its inherent exploitative nature and for producing an uneven power relationship between employers (*Kafeel*) and migrants (Mahdavi, 2013; Pande, 2013; Siddiqui & Ansar, 2020). Due to the *Kafala* system's exclusion from the national labour legislation in the GCC countries, the welfare and protection of the women migrants largely rest on their employers' benevolence (Huda, 2006).

Emerging literature also suggests that conditions for female migrant workers within the framework of the *Kafala* system have further deteriorated during the pandemic (Aoun, 2020; OECD, 2021). Bangladeshi women also predominantly fall under this system which effectively excludes them from all possible forms of labour protection and effectively renders them to domestic servitude. Due to the isolationist nature of their work and the restrictive living and working conditions, Bangladeshi women have limited access to information and social support. In addition to the power imbalance between employers and workers, cultural isolation and language barrier, the lack of legal and social recourse exposes women to various forms of right violation and exploitation. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that most of the work is positioned 'in a strange in-between space, between the public and the private, the domestic and the market' and as a result, they 'suffer the triple disadvantage, as foreign, as women, and as workers in menial or disreputable occupations' (Pettman, 1998, p. 398). Thus, temporality, ambiguity and precarious immigration status stemming from the *Kafala* system, the uneven dependency on the employers and recruiting agencies, the invisibility of the migrant women and prohibition in forming labour and trade unions in the Gulf Countries make them readily disposable and vulnerable.

Moreover, women migrants' inability to join the decision-making or policy processes like other domestic workers in the GCC states, their positioning at the bottom of the social order makes them incapable of challenging the status quo. Consequently, they become the first to drop out of the support system in case of an emergency, as we have witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notwithstanding, since its inception, transnational labour migration in the South Asia-Gulf corridor has long been considered as contract labour, which is all about 'taking the labour but resisting the labourer, in classic guest worker mode' (Pettman, 1998, p. 397). Along these lines, labour migration, particularly women, largely remains disempowering, deskilling and entangled in unfreedom (Davidson, 2015; Handapangoda, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic and its multifarious consequences are simply the continuation of this precarious and uncertain journey. To date, despite numerous global initiatives to tackle the pandemic consequences, there lacks a coordinated global response to understand what is most needed from the perspective of migrant domestic workers (Liem et al., 2020). This profound marginalization of women migrants is also well manifested in the absence of consolidated official data on returnee Bangladeshi women migrants, the pattern of their return and their current situation. As it stands, the government and other stakeholders have continued to take this contract labour migration for granted, refusing their fundamental

rights, space for belonging and scope for reintegration. Therefore, alongside immediate actions to ensure social protection, any policy in the post-pandemic world needs to address the persistent systemic barriers that keep profiting from migrants' precariousities.

LOOKING FORWARD: WOMEN MIGRATION IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Indisputably, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to retrospect and revisit many of the prevailing policies around labour mobility, particularly in the South–South migration corridors. Gender, labour sector and nationality form a critical pre-condition to reinforce inequality and precarity amid the pandemic—as we observed in the case of Bangladeshi migrant women. Women migrants' social dislocation and marginalization in a predominantly patriarchal social and economic setting position them as highly vulnerable compared to their male counterparts (Arora, 2020). Considering migrant women's role in domestic work, such intersection of class, gender and identity is perhaps more consequential due to their invisibility and power asymmetry between them and their employers (Arora & Majumdar, 2021).

Additionally, despite some promising development and concerted global effort around migration governance in recent years, there is a caveat regarding the bilateral agreements between the states that facilitate migration. In such a regulatory framework, particularly in the context of the South Asia–Gulf migration corridor, receiving countries tend to be in a commanding position, 'aiming to maximise the contribution of migrant workers to the destination economy while paying little attention to improving labour conditions or security' (Bastia & Piper, 2019, p. 19). Such brutal submission to the receiving countries needs to be reexamined to reimagine a better future for migrant women and for a globalization process that ensures just transition and reinvigorates the issue of social and economic justice.

As illustrated in this study, the experiences of Bangladeshi women migrants provide a vivid example of the inherent challenges in the current globalization process and how labour exploitation becomes the hallmark of this interconnectivity. The issues of arbitrary dismissal, forced deportation and rejecting the payment of migrant workers' unpaid wages are not merely the revelation of the pre-existing fault-lines entangled in the recruitment process, employment strategies and living conditions of migrant workers. The narratives of the workers clearly demonstrate that it is indeed a part of a broader cycle of inequality and injustice that excels and triumphs within the framework of the globalization of production, which needs to be re-inspected.

Through a gender lens, the study attempts to observe the current pandemic's gendered impact closely. It offers a compelling account of what it means to be a female migrant in this time of pandemic and exposes the particular vulnerabilities of migrant women working in the GCC countries. The findings also reiterate the fact that without addressing the root cause that lies in the socio-economic marginalization of women, any attempt to treat the social disorder would remain incomplete. There needs to be a pluralistic, comprehensive and all-encompassing approach in labour migration and in the process itself. A critical review of socio-economic factors in the countries of origin is also crucial to work on the factors that produce and reproduce the vulnerability in the first place. Such grounded evaluation is incumbent to address the lack of preparedness and coordination among the countries and actors involved in dealing with the emergency within the already fragile migration governance system.

By elucidating the multi-layered consequences of the pandemic on the life and livelihoods of Bangladeshi migrant women, this study hopes to propose a new outlook on the predicaments in women migrants' life that arguably prevent them from avoiding exploitative labour arrangements and put them into an asymmetrical dependency relationship. Focusing on the expanding conditions of precarity, this study intended to look at the point where globalization and gender studies interconnect and contribute to debate on labour mobility in the post-pandemic world order.

The inescapable fact to this extent is that the pandemic has raised broader questions of local inequalities, exclusion and marginalization that are being reproduced and transformed at a global scale. To change such a paradigm, a compelling vision is needed that is inclusive and capable of addressing the ingrained structural inequalities in both ends of migration.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 marks an era of unprecedented complexity with consequential socio-political and economic transformation likely to reshuffle the world of labour and migration. It is, in many ways, a reckoning of the long-standing inequality in the socio-economic system that shapes the migration trajectories between Bangladesh and the GCC countries that functions and prevails in the disguise of globalization and interconnectedness. With its empirical notes, this study unpacks how the pandemic-led disruptions have amplified the existing gender disparities for Bangladeshi women migrants. It shows the inherent state of precarities and collective vulnerabilities of migrant women that has always been there even long before the pandemic. By redrawing our understanding of globalization from below, it further advances the theoretical perspectives on the predicaments of this process and gendered precarity in contract labour migration. Highlighting the inherent weaknesses and marginalization manifested in the lack of social protection of migrants in the South Asia-Gulf migration corridor, this study calls for a retrospect of globalization order and gendered labour migration, arguing that it is the system that needs to be revisited and reinstalled. Without such grounded and radical reimagining of labour migration, gender and global socio-economic order, any proposed future responses would be insufficient.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing personal information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Statistics Available at the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) at the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Website (<http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>).

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