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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Implications of Covid-19 on Migration and Cross-Border Trafficking in South Asia

There is no doubt that Covid-19 strongly affected the livelihoods of people all across the globe. Border closures, lock-downs and travel restrictions hindered the free movement of people and put international migration on hold. However, despite the constraints in terms of cross-border travel, trafficking in human beings did not stop with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Quite the contrary, the business of trading people across borders continued even under these circumstances. This study gives an insight into the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on international migration and trafficking in human beings with a particular focus on South Asia.

South Asia is known for an astonishingly high impact of remittances on national economies. Many South Asian migrant workers reside in the Gulf countries and the money they send back home contributes to the GDPs of their countries of origin to a large degree. Due to Covid-19, many migrant workers were left jobless abroad or had to return to their countries of origin without many prospects for reintegration into the labor market. This placed many of them in a difficult position and in dire need of new job opportunities and made them vulnerable to human trafficking. This study explores the examples of Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh through the lens of migration experts and provides important insights for future policies as it shows the importance of looking at migration developments from an all-encompassing perspective.

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Foreword

By Dr La Toya Waha[1]

The Problem at Hand

Despite relaxation in some countries, the Covid-19 pandemic still impacts social, economic, and political developments in states and societies worldwide. Thereby, many of the pandemic's detrimental effects appear to be perfectly obvious, such as losses in human lives. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has proven to present an overly complex problem with various implications for diverse political, economic and social phenomena beyond the obvious effects. The complexity of the issue at hand arises, among others, due to the interrelations and interdependencies of various variables affected in one way or the other by the global spread of the disease as well as by the measures taken against its further spread, such as lockdowns and restrictions of travel. Many of these interdependencies are not obvious or at times even counter-intuitive.

The continuation of transnational trafficking in human beings and other migration-related issues are among those not obvious, even counter-intuitive effects of the current health crisis. With lockdowns, border-closures, and travel restrictions in most countries of the world, how can the business of trading people across borders flourish? While it might not be apparent why at the first glance, it however did.

The importance of these topics cannot be iterated enough. And while the relevance of migration-related issues and the necessity of tackling trafficking in human beings need no further explanation, we however see ample resources and most of the attention is directed elsewhere.

About this Publication

This publication seeks to shed some light on the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on migration and cross-border trafficking in human beings. It thereby concentrates on a region characterised by diverse forms of migration on the one hand and different links to trafficking in human beings on the other: South Asia.

The publication brings together short analyses and contributions by experts from various disciplines on the impact the global pandemic had on migration and trafficking in human beings in the context of South Asia and South Asian international migration. The contributions are the result of a hybrid seminar with the same title which took place in September 2021 and follows a series of events and publications at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung concerned with trafficking in human beings and migration related crimes.[2]

Key Takeaways from Event and Publication

The presentations, subsequent discussions, and the written contributions show that while (regular) migration was significantly constrained and diminished during the Covid-19 pandemic, trafficking in human beings – even across national borders – continued and at times even was catalysed by the global crisis. While the continuation of cross-border trafficking during border closures and lockdowns appears to be counterintuitive at the first glance, the problem lays open the relation of irregular migration – taking places without state control and without knowing the persons crossing borders – and the phenomenon of the transnational trade of human beings with the aim of exploitation.

In the context of regular migration, the often-lacking institutional entrenchment of international migrants to their state of origin furthermore allows that even in regular contexts exploitation appears with sad frequency. Several experts have pointed to the many cases of South Asian migrants being traded and exploited in one of their major destinations – the Gulf States.

But also the dependencies on migration, which result from lacking alternatives of gainful employment within the country of origin – both for migrants' families and at times entire communities as well as for national economies, serve as a "fruitful" basis for exploitation and trafficking in human beings within the country and across its borders. Sadly, the expected return of migration after the pandemic does not promise to change that.

It requires, next to resources, primarily the sending states' will to support and protect their migrants as well as border regimes which document the entry and exit of all persons crossing the borders, hence allowing to contribute to prevent persons' disappearance into the dark unknown.

As one can draw from the experts' analyses, it however also requires alternatives of gainful employment within the own country to resist incentives, which dangerous work offers abroad despite the often known exploitative and brutal situations it provides. The meaning of migrants' remittances for many South Asian economies – as is pointed out frequently by the experts – and the consequences of their absence, yet allow a glance into how difficult such a change will be.

Relevance beyond South Asia

While this publication's regional focus is on South Asia, the treated issues are of great relevance for European states and the European Union as well. South Asian migrants have been victims of trafficking in Europe and rising numbers of irregular migrants from South Asia seeking to cross European borders as well as the strength of transnational criminal networks along their migration routes make a rise in trafficking cases very likely.[3] The existence of what is frequently called "modern slavery" within Europe is not only a question of whether the EU and its Member States are able to protect and uphold basic European values. Trafficking in human beings often is related to security issues, to the expansion and strengthening of transnational organised crime and to the undermining of social and security standards – such as minimum wages and occupational safety standards. It, thus, is a vital interest to continue the fight against trafficking in human beings. To know more about the phenomenon may serve as the basis for further national and multilateral engagement for its prevention.

Acknowledgment

This publication is the result of a continued cooperation between the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT). I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr Nishchal Pandey for his continued engagement and the always great and productive collaboration. I would also like to thank Pascale Reinke-Schreiber, Phd, Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), for her insightful introduction at the conference and her support. Furthermore, we are grateful to the speakers and authors, Bilesha Weeraratne, PhD, Prof D. Suba Chandran, Jehan Perera, Lewe Paul, Maj. Gen. Md. Emdad Ul Bari, Dr Mehwish Raza, Prof Sanjay K. Bhardwaj, Suswopna Rimal and Ujjwal Upadhaya, for their valuable contributions.

Finally, I would like to thank the teams in Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, CSAS and COSATT, without whose support neither the event nor the publication would have been possible. Particularly, I would like to thank Dr Andreas Jacobs, Lewe Paul, Ira Tsiflidis, and Dr Annette Ranko for their support.

Endnotes

1 Dr La Toya Waha is Advisor for Flight and Migration at Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Berlin.

2 For further details see the relevant Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung website: https://www.kas.de/en/migration-und-integration.

3 Waha, La Toya (2021). *"Selling Migrants? How Transnational Smuggling Networks Further Trafficking in Human Beings in Europe and Beyond"*. In: *Facts & Findings*, No 451 (July 2021).

Implication of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Migration and Cross-Border Trafficking in South Asia

By Dr Nishchal N. Pandey[1]

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has not only had a devastating impact on migrant workers but has negatively affected all sectors of the South Asian societies. Societal costs and economic consequences of this pandemic will be assessed for years on. The impact on migrant workers and their dependent families, however, is particularly significant, which will be discussed in this short paper. It is a heartening fact to be noted that the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung joined hands for an important discussion on this subject with South Asian and European experts sharing their insights. This publication follows a joint hybrid seminar and will be useful for policymakers, academics, ILO, UN specialised agencies, and the media for understanding the pandemic's impact on migration flows and cross-border trafficking in human beings. In this context, special thanks to Dr La Toya Waha for taking this initiative.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on economies, businesses, and workers, with migrant workers being among the most affected throughout the world. The situation in South Asian countries is more acute than elsewhere as these countries face severe challenges posed by large populations, weak health facilities, high poverty rates, low socio-economic conditions, and poor social protection systems. The impact of the pandemic in the region has heightened and further exposed the special vulnerability of migrant workers. Millions of people were forced to return home, while thousands more were left jobless and stranded abroad. South Asian economies are highly dependent on remittances sent by migrant workers from abroad. This article highlights the potential challenges that the region might face soon as not all countries are able to provide employment opportunities to an outsized scale of the population that has returned back because of the pandemic. Countries, such as Nepal, have already seen a situation, wherein migrant workers that had come from India in the wake of the lockdowns, began returning to India again in search of work. While migration and remittances have played a key role in improving well-being, stimulating economic growth, and reducing poverty in the region, they also had some detrimental societal consequences. In this context, the economic and social costs of the Covid-19 outbreak are therefore likely to be significant and long-lasting in South Asia.

Impact on Remittances

As soon as the pandemic hit the South Asian countries, both the origin and destination nations announced closure of flights. In the case of South Asia, closing of flights to the Persian Gulf, Malaysia, and the Republic of Korea, which are main destinations of South Asian labour migration, meant despair and great anxiety to millions of families. Remittances that migrant workers in these countries send contribute a sizeable portion of the overall Gross Domestic product (GDP). In the case of India, it was 2.7 per cent in 2017,[2] but for Nepal, it is as big as 28 per cent[3] of the total GDP, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators. During the initial months of the pandemic, migrant worker deployment and outflows decreased across the region. Simultaneously, in response to the virus' spread, host countries imposed all sorts of restrictions, including lockdowns, which led to the return of thousands of migrant workers to their home countries. South Asian governments had to arrange rescue flights to bring them back. Some employers even asked them to leave without adequate attention given and sympathy shown on how they would return.

South Asia is estimated to be the largest recipient of remittances in the world.[4] Between 2015 and 2019, over one-fifth of global remittances went to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, with India receiving close to 360 billion US dollar,[5] making it the world's largest recipient. Remittances account for most financial inflows in South Asia. It often exceeds Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) or aid disbursements from multilateral and bilateral donors. As mentioned above, Nepal has the largest remittance inflow as a share of GDP in the region, and the fifth in the world (one third of GDP from 2015–2019); similarly, Sri Lanka (8.3 per cent of GDP), Pakistan (7.1 per cent), and Bangladesh (6.2 per cent), followed by India (2.9 per cent), Bhutan (1.8 per cent), and the Maldives (0.1 per cent).[6]

Further, most of South Asian remittances come from the Gulf.[7] The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) host the bulk of South Asian migrants and account for more than half of all remittances to South Asia (59 per cent).[8] Other significant contributors include the United States (12 per cent), United Kingdom (6 per cent), and the European Union (4 per cent). Intra-regional transfers are also important: nearly a tenth of remittances to South Asian countries comes from within the region, including 5 per cent from India.[9]

During the pandemic, the remittance inflow did not show a decline, but as of October 2021 it has started to decline significantly. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on economies, businesses, and workers, with migrant workers and workers in the informal sector, such as house cleaners, drivers, caregivers, beauticians, and security guards being the most affected. In India, there was great distress when the government imposed a strict lockdown, as migrants returning from the urban centres were trapped on their way to the rural hinterlands. With no money and desperately looking for trains or vehicles to take them home, they additionally put themselves and others at risk of spreading the virus. Another worrying issue is that due to substandard and overcrowding housing and transport, migrant workers are at a higher risk of contracting the virus. Also, in terms of social protection, relief, and income support migrant workers and refugees are regularly excluded.

Measures to financially support and medically assist migrants rely heavily on destination countries where migrant labourers are employed. These often were not forthcoming. South Asia's own support services for returning migrant workers during the pandemic were, unfortunately, woefully inadequate.

Plight of South Asian Migrants in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

Most of the migrants from South Asia work in the GCC countries where low-paid migrant workers are exploited. They live and work in precarious conditions and this precarity was further exacerbated by the pandemic. Similarly, domestic migrant workers, particularly women, who were already vulnerable, witnessed restrictions on movement, resulting in longer working hours, no days off, delayed or withheld wages, and, in some cases, physical abuse. Even more, due to the host

countries' various physical and economic restrictions imposed to bring the pandemic under control, most of the migrant labourers became jobless in the wake of the pandemic. Given the importance labour migration to the GCC has for South Asian migrants, their families and the sending countries' economy, the impromptu dismissals severely impact various social, economic, and hence political realms within South Asia. At the same time, the individual migrants kept in already vulnerable situations within the GCC countries have become even more prone to exploitation and violent abuse.

Reintegration of Migrant Workers

In addition to the challenges the prospect of reducing remittances pose for the economy and poverty, South Asian governments now need to plan for the reintegration of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in economies which are already under severe stress. Governments have been hitherto unable to put in place immediate strategies to assist migrant workers. Below are some of the country examples from the region. The focus of the brief overview is put on Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan as the main small South Asian labour sending nations.

Nepal

As the number of new cases of infection increased in India and the Gulf countries, Nepal began to see a significant influx of migrant returnees. Nepali migrant workers coming from abroad, including the Gulf, Malaysia, and India frequently struggled to return home due to the paucity of flights. Thousands of Nepalese labourers working in India hence walked hundreds of miles to reach the border towns to enter Nepal at one of the 20 designated border crossing points.

Even after they returned to Nepal, their situation remained hazardous. Their livelihoods had come to a halt, and the migrants, before often central to their family's income, were unable to meet even their own, let alone their family's daily needs. Consequently, many sought to return back to India again in search of work. According to the border check post data, around 200 to 400 Nepali migrant workers used to cross the border point into India every day. Similarly, those migrants who returned from South Korea, Japan, and Malaysia are likewise keenly seeking to go back to those countries in the face of massive unemployment in Nepal. As the threat of the virus persists and many of these host countries might have to cope with other virus variants in the future, it will be more challenging for countries like Nepal to export labour and likewise to keep migrants safe. Therefore, now it is a critical time to frame mechanisms and proper policies to safeguard the rights of migrant workers.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has successfully expanded its labour market across borders by exporting labour services to countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. But the pandemic has affected 13 million Bangladeshi migrant workers and nearly 30 million dependents.[10] While Bangladesh's economy has benefited greatly from the contributions of migrant workers, there is risk that without financial security and social safety nets, these migrant workers would be using reserve funds or facing unemployment in the middle or long-term. Over half a million Bangladeshi workers are employed in foreign countries each year,[11] alleviating significant pressure on the domestic labour market and contributing to Bangladesh's economic development due to the massive remittances these migrant workers send home. However, various challenges including the Covid-19 pandemic have hampered the inflow of these massive remittances, as thousands have lost their jobs because of the economic crises and lockdowns in the destination countries. This has numerous negative socio-economic consequences for migrant workers, their dependents, but also the wider economy and development in Bangladesh.

Pakistan

The pandemic has had a severe impact on migrant workers of Pakistan also. Pakistan is one of the top ten recipients of international remittances. In 2019, Pakistan received 21.8 billion Pakistani rupee foreign remittances, accounting for about 8 per cent of its GDP. In the post-Covid era, it can expect that job opportunities in destination countries, particularly in the Gulf, will plummet, especially for unskilled and low-skilled workers, who make up most Pakistani migrants.

Besides the challenge posed by the pandemic, Pakistan also faces the possibility of an influx of a new wave of Afghan refugees, triggered by Taliban's recent takeover. It has been hosting the world's largest population of Afghan refugees – estimated to be nearly 3 million,[12] half of them unregistered, for decades. Adding more refugees would be another challenge for the country's economy – particularly against the backdrop of the pandemic. Many Afghans have sought asylum across borders of other neighbouring countries. The UNHCR has urged Afghanistan's neighbours to keep their borders open and accept refugees, citing the country's precarious security situation. However, countries in the region might not be forthcoming to welcome additional refugees. Recently, some Afghan nationals have also entered Nepal illegally,[13] and the country is concerned that more refugees will seek refuge in Nepal. Afghan students in India are struggling to renew their visas and those that had gone back to Afghanistan for holidays are finding it difficult to re-enter. Protecting the lives of Afghan nationals and providing them safe asylum has now become a major concern globally and particularly for South Asia.

SAARC: A Joint Response?

Although the 18th SAARC summit held in Kathmandu in 2014 had agreed to "collaborate and cooperate on safe, orderly and responsible management of labour migration from South Asia [and] ensure safety, security and wellbeing of their migrant workers in the destination countries outside the region", little has been done for a collective response to the problems faced by the region's migrant population. A virtual summit held in 2020 agreed to setup an emergency Covid-19 fund,[14,15] but still the member states continued to rely on bilateral mechanisms to grant financial support. Being a least developed and an over-populous region, South Asia needs a robust institutional mechanism within SAARC to address newer challenges emanating from the pandemic, particularly relating to migration as it is a major contributor to the economies and people's livelihoods. Looking at the developments since 2014, expectations, however, remain deplorable.

Conclusion

For a large number of migrant workers and their families in South Asia overseas employment and remittances are essential sources of income. This inflow of remittances has benefited the region in a variety of ways, including bolstering foreign exchange reserves

and lowering poverty levels. Often overlooked are then the negative societal costs, such as rising divorce rates,[16] absence of the bread-earner for a long time out of the country, and sometimes even death of migrant workers under mysterious circumstances. In the case of Nepal, studies have shown that three to four bodies of Nepali migrant workers arrive in body bags at the Kathmandu airport each day. At least 7,467 migrant workers have died abroad since 2008, according to figures from the government's Labour Migration Report. Seven-hundred-fifty of those deaths were reported between 2018 and 2019.[17] Likewise, the focus on economic consequences of the pandemic might lead to the ignorance of the increase of vulnerabilities and cases of trafficking in human beings, both within countries and across borders. In parallel to the significant economic challenges expected to result from the pandemic, thus, the chances of a drastic rise in human trafficking, particularly in women and children, needs to be addressed by the region with support of donor nations.

It needs to be noted that the Covid-19 outbreak and consequent lockdown have caused havoc throughout the region and that they have a direct and dearly felt impact on the working class and poor people's daily lives. These vulnerable groups are in dire need of financial support to sustain themselves, which is where human traffickers establish their business.

As human trafficking is not confined to national borders and affects more than one country, it necessitates a regional and collaborative response to address this collective threat. Thereby, it is critical to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on remittances and overseas employment opportunities, as well as to take initiative-taking and coordinated measures to reduce the long-term negative effects on migrant workers to South Asian countries. Monitoring the pandemic's socio-economic impacts on South Asia is critical to address people's specific vulnerabilities and ensure their well-being.

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1 Dr. Nishchal Pandey is Director of the Center for South Asian Studies in Kathmandu, Nepal.

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14 Covid-19 Emergency Fund: In order to combat Covid-19 in the region, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi proposed creation of a Covid-19 Emergency Fund based on voluntary contributions from all the SAARC member countries. The fund can be used by any of the partner countries to meet the cost of immediate actions.

15 Also see the video link of the virtual conference of the SAARC leaders on combating Covid-19: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5n3oULHFCfE (last accessed on 15 March 2022).

16 Related news: https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/foreign-jobs-blamed-increasing-divorce-rates (last accessed on 15 March 2022).

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Implications of Covid-19 on Migration and Cross-Border Trafficking in South Asia Insights from Pakistan

By Dr Mehwish Raza[1]

Introduction

Dating back to 1970, an estimated 11 million Pakistani nationals have legally proceeded abroad in pursuit of livelihood opportunities within the continuum of skilled[2] to unskilled[3] work lines. Statistics place Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as the top destination for legal migration with an estimated 96 per cent migration rate and over 6.5 million emigrants from all over Pakistan.[4]

Apart from legal migration, there is massive irregular migration[5] from Pakistan through different networks and with variant modalities, especially to Europe. Although the number of irregular migrants is unknown, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and International Centre for Migration Policy Development's (ICMPD) assert that between 300,000 to 500,000 Pakistanis annually travel abroad by using irregular means. The most frequently used route for irregular migrant handlers to enter destinations in Europe has been outlined as Pakistan-Iran-Turkey-Greece-Spain.[6] There have been several responsible factors identified as agents of nurturing a culture of cross-border illegal migrant smuggling: Chain migration or emulation instigated because of prevailing poverty and projected socio-economic achievements of already illegally migrated individuals;[7] limited livelihood opportunities available in Pakistan for the prospective migrants; elevated social prestige in a shorter time; and escaping family feuds (specifically reported from the region of Gujrat, Punjab).[8]

Pakistan provides an exciting locus to study different patterns of migration in contemporary and temporal settings, such as amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper briefly examines the impact of Covid-19 on cross-border trafficking in Pakistan and interventions in place to curtail the illegal practices.

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Legal Migrants

The Covid-19 pandemic intensified economic contraction of GCC countries by 7.6 per cent in 2020 with an evident downturn in tourism, aviation, and oil sectors, due to the decreased global demand for these services and resources. In response, some Gulf businesses transferred the cost of the Covid-19-induced recession on to vulnerable workers by imposing unilateral pay-cuts and replacing migrants with nationals, thus, most adversely affecting semi- and unskilled South Asian migrants in GCC countries who were forced to repatriate to their home countries.[9] Augmented with this trend, Pakistan observed a counter-intuitive growth in its remittances for 2020. This can be well-attributed to several factors specific to Pakistan, in particular: increased numbers of unemployed returnees bringing their savings home; increased use of *formal* channels due to travel restrictions and tax laws in the country; increased remittances due to depreciation of the value of PKR; and decreased spending on Hajj.[10] The State Bank of Pakistan reported that two-thirds of the recorded remittances received in 2020 came from GCC countries, with over half coming from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Experts assert that the high influx of remittances indicates a return of most migrants from these regions. While Pakistan has observed a strong increase in remittances in 2020, the overwhelming repatriation of migrants from GCC countries is likely to result in significantly low remittances in the following years.

Moreover, for the first time in the last two decades the number of Pakistanis processed for emigration abroad dipped below 300,000 as emigration processes in Pakistan came to a halt in 2020.[11]

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Illegal Cross-Border Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking

Many factors shape the dynamics of Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants (TIP and SOM) in Pakistan, including: the international political and security landscape; macro socio-economic dynamics; and the national labour capacity.[12]

In Pakistan, all these factors are currently impacted by the pandemic, consequent lockdowns, closure of point of exits, and widespread economic depression. With respect to TIP, while the state is struggling to inculcate capacity of authorities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide essential services to the victims of this crime, criminals are adjusting their business models to the *'new normal'*, among others by using modern communication technologies.[13]

The pandemic has exacerbated and brought to the forefront the systemic and deeply entrenched economic and social inequalities that are among the root causes of human trafficking. Furthermore, it appears likely that transnational handlers have already capitalised on the desperation of illegal migrants currently stranded en-route to destination countries, by upping the prices, not only given the challenges to transport them. They can fairly add to the suffering of these migrants by abandoning them. Identifying victims and potential victims of human trafficking is expected to be more difficult under current circumstances. The lockdowns have enabled traffickers to take even better control of their victims, both physically and emotionally. Such situations allow for more extreme forms of abuse (including sexual abuse) and deny victims opportunities to escape, but also hinder their identification and public reporting. Ongoing preventive measures are likely to reduce in the coming few weeks, as the Covid-19 situation normalises. This will cause a sudden relapse of irregular migration (and related smuggling) driven by economic factors, as well as an increase of regular asylum migrations.

Migrant smugglers have also borne exponential financial losses due to the lockdowns. Further extensions may push them to resume TIP and SOM activities by adopting more clandestine routes to bypass the current travel restrictions enforced by Pakistan and its neighboring countries.

While articulating the plight of migrants who transit between illegal cross-border channels into the foreign lands, especially to Europe, researchers report that the pandemic has accentuated tight living spaces for irregular emigrants where maintaining social distancing is impossible. In the context of the pandemic, these conditions served as beacons for spreading virus among the irregular migrants.

Interventions in Place

In May 2020, UNODC Country Office Pakistan (COPAK) under the Global Program ensued to enhance the capacity of Pakistan's Law Enforcement authorities to effectively prevent, detect, investigate, and prosecute trafficking and smuggling crimes through diversified training and sharing of international best practices. Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, Pakistan in collaboration with COPAK is progressing to achieve the following:

- Developing rapid assessment tools to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on essential services for human trafficking victims.
- Identifying NGOs to receive grants through the UN Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking[14] and offer rescue services to victims who need more support during the global health crisis.

- Increasing awareness of trafficking and smuggling perils among "high-risk" groups, minors, and the public through information dissemination campaigns.
- Improving capacities of provincial social welfare and labour departments, provincial commissions of status of women and children as well as federal government and provincial shelters to assist the various groups of trafficking victims and vulnerable smuggled migrants through specialised training.
- Establishing a Women's Leaders Network[15] under UNODC Global Action against TIP and SOM for the Middle East and Asia that will also look at the vulnerabilities of women to trafficking in persons during the pandemic.
- Developing SOPs and Guidelines for Immigration and Anti-Human Trafficking Unit to enable their safe interaction with the public during the pandemic and especially with victims.

Conclusion

The current crisis requires, more than before, scaling-up of Pakistan's combat against illicit trafficking and smuggling. This includes to strengthen border management, peace, and development. The situation warrants Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) to safely manage testing for those crossing borders, but also to be better prepared to identify and tackle new forms of cross-border criminal opportunism associated with the pandemic. Operational capacities of the Pakistani LEAs can be enhanced by improving their personal protective measures; strengthening of interconnectivity – to facilitate data sharing and joint analysis; and operational planning and coordination – to facilitate integrated domestic and regional responses against various forms of trafficking, smuggling, and other TOC. These measures will facilitate Pakistan in curtailing cross-border trafficking spreading with the on-set of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Endnotes

1 Dr Mehwish Raza is the Dean of the Faculty of Education – Forman Christian College University Pakistan.

2 Among the 42 per cent skilled workers, most pursue semi-skilled work lines such as welders, secretaries, masons, carpenters, and plumbers (Arif, Farooq and Iqbal 2020).

3 Unskilled workers comprise up to 39 per cent and mostly engage in raw labor in host countries.

4 Approximately 52 per cent of migrant workers from Punjab, 26 per cent from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and 9.5 per cent from Sindh.

5 5 The irregular migration includes people, (i) who enter a country's border without proper permission; (ii) who may have entered a country by following legal procedures but have remained there after expiry of visa or work permit; and (iii) who are facilitated by migrant smugglers or human traffickers in their cross-border movement.

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14 The fund was initiated in 2010. By far 100 NGO projects have been funded through Small Grants Programs, totaling up to 4.0 million US dollar for projects in over 50 countries, including Pakistan.

15 A four-year (2018–2022) joint initiative with a funding of 12 million euro by the European Union (EU) and UNODC being implemented in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in four countries: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Iraq and Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

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Migration and Trafficking during Covid-19: Experience from Sri Lanka

By Bilesha Weeraratne, PhD[1]

Introduction

International migration for employment has been a prominent feature of the economies of South Asia including Sri Lanka in the recent decades. Cross-border movement of labour has provided opportunities for households to access higher income in international labour markets, while also providing a source of foreign exchange for the national economy. Yet, a sizeable portion of these migrant workers face the threat of forced labour and human trafficking due to the nature of the work that is carried out as low or semi-skilled work. The Covid-19 pandemic related economic crisis and public health restrictions have had a severe impact on labour migration increasing migrant workers' vulnerability to human trafficking. It is necessary to identify the far-reaching implications of this pandemic to better protect migrant workers, their families and the economies that rely on their remittances.

Migration and Trafficking prior to the Pandemic

Migration and Remittances

South Asia is an important region of origin sending migrant workers to the rest of the world. Recent trends in international labour migration indicated in Table 1 suggest that annual departures for labour migration from the South Asian region declined significantly due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the decline in departures for foreign employment, the associated inflow of workers' remittances to the region experienced a growth during the first year of the pandemic in 2020. Specifically, compared to 2019, the receipt of remittances in 2020 showed a 5.2 per cent growth to reach an estimated 147 billion US dollar.[2] Among South Asian states, in countries such as Nepal and Pakistan, remittances account for a sizeable portion of the Gross Domestic Production (GDP). Despite relatively lower in value and as a share of the GDP, the remittances received by Sri Lanka play a significant role in the domestic economy.

Table 1. Recent Trends in Migration and Remittances in South Asia

Country	Departures		Remittances in 2020	
	2019	2020	Billion US-dollar	Percentage of GDP
Bangladesh	700,159	218,000	21.7	6.6
India	368,048	–	83.1	3.1
Nepal	236,208	–	8.1	23.5
Pakistan	625,203	225,000	26.1	9.9
Sri Lanka	203,186	53,713	7.1	8.8

Source: Author's tabulation based on Weeraratne (2020)[3] and KNOMAD (2021).[4]

Remittance flows have consistently been a major source of foreign exchange to the economy of Sri Lanka. In 2020, Sri Lanka received 7.1 billion US-dollar worth of remittances. During the last two decades, remittances on average accounted for 8.0 per cent of the GDP and over 80 per cent of the annual external trade deficit. These inflows are remitted by the migrant workers leaving the country, which averages at around 200,000 departures per year. As of recently over 60 per cent of departing migrant workers are males, while over 85 per cent head to the Middle Eastern region. Furthermore, over 55 per cent of these migrant workers are low skilled, while 30 per cent represent female domestic workers. These specific characteristics of migrant workers leaving Sri Lanka, such as occupations as well as working and living conditions in the destination countries translate into various vulnerabilities in the countries of destination (CODs). Despite these known unfavourable conditions for migrant workers, a large number of migrant workers continue to migrate due to a variety of push and pull factors, such as conflicts, poverty, and inequality in countries of origin, as well as better employment with high wages and a demand for migrant labour in destination countries.

Migration and Trafficking

Human trafficking is defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime as "The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception with the aim of exploiting them for profit."[5] The nuances associated with human trafficking, the characteristics of migrant workers of Sri Lankan origin, and the associated recruitment process opens many loopholes for trafficking in human beings. For instance, the recruitment processes for low skilled migrant workers are often riddled with deception about terms of employment, working and living conditions. Moreover, low skilled workers', such as female domestic workers', place of employment and place of accommodation are the employers' residence, which has scope for isolation, intimidation, and abuse. Similarly, low-skilled migrant workers, such as those in the construction sector, are often accommodated in labour camps run by employers with restricted mobility, abusive working conditions, and poor living standards. Another common facet of labour migration to the Middle East, where most Sri Lankans head to, is the retention of identity documents by employers upon arrival in the COD. Such absence of identity documents limits the freedom and voice of migrant workers and their ability to seek help, making them susceptible to intimidation by employers.

Experiences during the Pandemic

Vulnerability to Trafficking

The detrimental conditions faced by migrant workers have been exacerbated with the Covid-19 pandemic. With the economic downturn that followed the lockdowns, many low and semi-skilled workers faced job insecurity, job loss or were forced to work without compensation. In situations where accommodation was tied to employment, unemployment has resulted in homelessness, while migrant workers who had their jobs were unable to leave their employer's home or labour camps due to the pandemic related mobility restrictions. These adverse outcomes were further exacerbated due to the conditions in the CODs, which lack or deprive migrant workers of available labour laws and protective mechanisms. Similarly, undocumented migrant workers/irregular migrant workers are highly likely to face exploitation as they are reluctant to seek support from official channels.

Return and Reintegration

During the pandemic, a large number of migrant workers required safe and prompt passage back to Sri Lanka and reintegration support. By early January 2021, a total of 128,470 Sri Lankans expressed an intention to return, while only 60,470 or 47 per cent had been repatriated at the time.[6] Such delays are attributed to the closure of national borders to curtail the pandemic, difficulties in coordinating the sheer volume of sudden repatriation requests, high cost of airfare during the early stages of the pandemic, limited facilities for quarantining and medical care as well as challenges in repatriating undocumented workers.[7] In addition to return and repatriation of migrant workers, it is important to provide support toward economic, social, and psychosocial reintegration. Similarly, families of migrant workers who thus far relied on worker remittances also needed support to adjust to the decrease or stop in the flow of remittances.

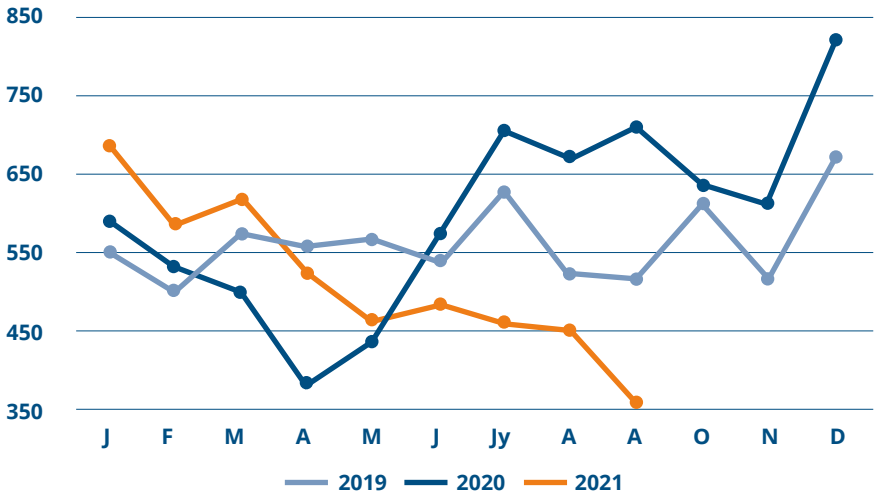
Recent Performance of Remittances

Despite the growth in remittances in 2020, since March 2021 monthly remittances to Sri Lanka have experienced a declining trend. As seen in Figure 1, monthly remittances have declined since March 2021 dipping below pre-pandemic levels and nearing the second lowest monthly remittances received during the peak of the lockdowns in April 2020. This decline in remittances due to the lagged effects of the pandemic is likely to bottom out toward the end of 2021 and early 2022 before departures may improve soon.

Migration during the Pandemic and after

With the Covid-19 pandemic being in existence since March 2020, the global economy is adapting and the gradual economic recovery, vaccination, management of the pandemic, opening up of borders, and easing of travel restrictions have resulted in many economies seeking migrant workers again.

Figure 1. Monthly Remittances to Sri Lanka



Source: Author's tabulation based on data from Central Bank of Sri Lanka.

While opportunities for foreign employment are re-emerging, potential migrant workers now face a new set of challenges in accessing foreign employment. These challenges are not limited to the complex migration procedures, such as the requirement of a negative PCR-test taken within 72 hours prior to departure and pre-arranged quarantines at the country of destination. Additionally, the global travel situation is extremely dynamic with rules and regulations being revised frequently. Complicating matters further, the vaccination requirements vary by countries. Even though in theory all vaccinations approved by the World Health Organization (WHO) should be accepted by all countries, specific countries have their own vaccination requirements and related quarantine procedures by type of vaccination. For instance, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait do not accept Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine, which was the most administered in Sri Lanka, before a specific vaccination drive was introduced to potential migrant workers as recent as July 2021. Similarly, some countries do not accept passengers/migrants if the vaccination received was mentioned as Covishield instead of AstraZeneca. The method of proof of vaccination is a digital vaccination card, which needs to be received after a convoluted process with delays.

Amidst all these confusions and dynamisms, there is no mechanism to provide updated country specific information to potential migrant workers planning to leave. As a result, it was observed that some potential migrant workers were attempting to determine the type of vaccination needed to be received to enter a specific country, by consulting fellow potential migrants or medical personnel at the vaccination centre for potential migrant workers – i. e. Narahenpita Army Hospital. Those vaccinated are required to show proof of vaccination as a digital vaccination card, which is complicated to access for an average migrant worker. As such, the delays in vaccinating potential migrant workers due to protracted national vaccination programmes, difficulties in complying with specific vaccine requirements and insufficient income to fund additional expenses associated with migrating during the pandemic, such as medical testing and hotel quarantine, are weighing down on migrant workers.

This economic uncertainty, lack of proper information dissemination channels, complex procedures, and additional costs have created an environment for false adverting and deception associated with opportunities for human trafficking.[8]

Conclusion and Recommendations

Successfully navigating the Covid-19 pandemic, while ensuring the safety of migrant workers requires addressing the challenges outlined above. Recommendations for supporting migrant workers, who wish to return, include introducing consistent, returnee-friendly travel and quarantine processes; introducing effective reintegration programmes; introducing a social protection scheme for vulnerable migrant households and minimising opportunities for trafficking. Support for potential migrant workers should aim at improving access to and information on migration procedures, vaccination requirements, as well as guidance on pandemic-safe travel, foreign employment, and lifestyle. The combination of these recommendations would curtail misinformation and vulnerability-led instances of trafficking.

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Status of Migration, Remittance, and Human Trafficking in Nepal amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic

By Ujjwal Upadhyay[1]

Introduction

Since the past decade and a half, remittance has become a major economic source in Nepal. Its significant economic contribution was particularly highlighted when Nepal underwent three major political changes, including the violent armed Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), the royal massacre (2001) followed by the abolishment of monarchy and the people's movement (2006). Although Nepal has achieved relative stability, it continues to politically struggle with maintaining consistent and sustainable economic growth.[2] Despite having an adequate potential for rapid industrialisation, particularly in terms of resource extraction and mining, Nepal continues to rely upon raised taxes, revenues, and custom duties to meet even the government's general operational costs and to undertake basic development activities. Even more, international aid has become a source helping required for these basic operations.

In this context, amid poverty, limited job opportunities, and growing unemployment youths aged between 19 to 41 years annually leave Nepal in large numbers and migrate to foreign destinations. These migrants have become an important economic factor due to the remittances they send home. More than two million Nepali migrants work in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia contribute to 86 per cent of Nepal's total remittances.[3] Around one million Nepalese people work in India and contribute to approximately 11 per cent of remittances (3.5 billion US dollar) annually.[4] However, determining the exact number of Nepali migrants to India remains a nearly impossible task due to shared open borders and free movement between the two countries. Therefore, it is assumed that the remittance inflow from India is far higher. The money migrants send back home has largely supported the country's economy of around 35 billion US dollar. In every corner of Nepal, youths, even literate ones, and those having a higher education degree, are found talking about going to GCC countries and Malaysia for employment. The manpower companies sending people abroad are mushrooming and their agents are found everywhere to influence and facilitate Nepalese migration. Some agencies are solid, whereas some have been found to conduct malpractices, because of which people are cheated and remain unable to earn what they were promised. Apart from many youths finding legal means to migrate to as prescribed and permitted, some people take the illegal ways. People have been found going to restricted countries, such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Libya among others. Thereby, people using illegal means of migration often fall victim to traffickers, who recruit them with false promises of good earnings.

Changes in Remittances

Starting from the early 1990s, Nepal's dependence on remittances kept increasing and escalated in the early 2000s. Growing political and economic uncertainties engulfed the country, forcing people to out-migrate for sustenance amidst increasing unemployment in the country. As a result, remittances reached even the most rural and geographically secluded regions of the country in the early 2000s. During the People's War (1996–2006), remittance became the only income source for rural communities which later turned into a solid economic pillar for them.[5] However, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, meeting the objective of bringing in more remittances for Nepal has become much more challenging.

In early 2020, it was projected that the employment rate would decline by 13 per cent in the GCC countries. The South Asian region was expected to face a reduction of four per cent in remittance.[6] Growing reverse migration was anticipated to also have negative effects on the inflow of remittances in the country. Since 40 per cent of all remittances go to rural households in South Asia, without other adequate income sources to rely on, the impediment of Nepal's economy continues to force millions of people into poverty.[7]

Amidst the worsening conditions of labour out-migrants with stringent lockdown measures in host countries, recovering the Nepali workers was prioritised. Along with other South Asian countries, Nepal sought to bring its people safely back to the country. Given the indefinite temporary freeze of the global economy at that time, numbers of Nepali migrants reduced drastically. The number of out-migrants dropped to 166,698 migrants; the lowest number recorded over the past 16 years.[8]

In general, flow variables and stock variables can be used as indicators to understand the Nepali labour market. The number of out-migrants and the inflow of remittance is expected to be directly proportional to each other.

But, during the early stages of the pandemic, they had a negative correlation in Nepal, with Nepal experiencing its record-high money transfer since the past two decades. The country received a total of approximately 9 billion US dollar in the last fiscal year, ending mid-July 2021.[9] There was an unexpected negative correlation between the number of migrants and the inflow of remittances in Nepal during the early stages of the pandemic. This is mainly because of the following reasons.

First, there are approximately three million Nepali migrants living as stock labourers abroad who have adequate social and financial security. As a result, despite the drop in outbound migrants – the flow variables – the country continued receiving remittances, more than usual, from stock labourers to help their families curb the crisis in Nepal.

Second, the global crisis completely halted informal channels of remittance flow due to very limited cross-border connectivity. Limited conduction of international business also resulted in the temporary closure of *informal* transboundary cash flows like *hundi* and *hawala.* As a result, only formal channels, that is authorised financial institutions, were employed for money transfer to Nepal, increasing the *recorded* amount of remittance flow.

Although Nepal's macro-economy was not as affected at first, the restricted outbound and reverse migration has, however, affected the individual households which has particularly impacted the socio-economy of rural households.

The Deterioration of Conditions and the Increase in Cross-Border Trafficking in Human Beings

The dependency on remittances and lack of alternative sources of income, particularly in rural Nepal, on the one hand, and the deterioration of conditions in several host countries during the pandemic, have made Nepali migrants prone to diverse forms of trafficking in human beings. In many countries of destinations, particularly the Gulf countries, excessive work hours with no day off, delayed or withheld wages as well as physical and emotional abuse appear exacerbated under the given circumstances.

But the deterioration of economic conditions in Nepal also appears to have furthered

cross-border trafficking, particularly of women and girls. Thereby, the trafficking situation in Nepal has been significant even prior to the pandemic. Nepal's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) estimated that around 50 women from Nepal are trafficked to India each day and that 1.5 million people in Nepal are vulnerable to being trafficked to India alone. The ongoing pandemic and the furthered economic hardship mainly derived from unemployment have increased the chances of trafficking of Nepalese youths.

Trafficking from Nepal is not only limited to India and neighbouring countries. Multiple cases of rescues from South America, the Middle East, and North Africa were reported.[10]

However, the discovery of a group of women and girls who were about to be trafficked to India in July 2020 serves as an exemplary case in point.[11] Despite their discovery, yet the lack of appropriate agreements between India and Nepal for the safe return of trafficking victims, prevented them from being brought back home. Again, the need for bilateral agreements focused on the wellbeing of trafficking victims has become clear. Anti-trafficking agreements, such as between India and Bangladesh, are required.

Conclusion

Remittance has been the consistent support to the country amid unstable political conditions and the fragile economic state. Now that the economy, including trade, businesses and service sectors, is badly impacted by the pandemic and given that most of other economic activities are lagging, consistent flows of remittances have retained and even increased in their importance for Nepal, despite the challenges which arise from the impact the pandemic had on the economies of the migrants' host countries where the money is sent from. Until the country finds reliable alternate sources of consistent income, outmigration and remittances seem to continue keeping the economic life of the country going. However, the pandemic has affected the micro-economy of many households due to the job loss-induced reverse migration and the limited outbound. These may result in increased poverty, food insecurity affecting health and education of people in general and children in particular.

Adding to this, cases of human trafficking have also increased as people have started to seek for alternatives of foreign employment through illegal means. The country and its people, both are looking forward to the easy outbound and more availability of foreign employment opportunities in days and weeks to come.

To a significant number of the population, remittances are the source of their survival. With millions of migrants out-migrating every year globally, their physical security and emotional and mental well-being needs to be prioritised by both the host countries and the home countries. Mechanisms of migration focused policies to facilitate smooth and safe migration globally, even in the pandemic situation, need to be developed with utmost priority.

Endnotes

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Sri Lanka: Human Trafficking Trends amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

By Jehan Perera[1]

From March 2020 Sri Lankans witnessed the difficulties associated with being international migrant workers when tens of thousands of Sri Lankan workers abroad sought to return home. The spread of Covid-19 in the countries in which they worked saw them losing their jobs, not having access to medical care, and compel them to return. They faced a double tragedy at the outset of the pandemic itself as the government closed the airports to prevent persons infected with the virus abroad entering the country. This effectively shut the door on migrant workers as well. The local media carried accounts and images of hapless Sri Lankan migrant workers setting up camps outside of Sri Lankan embassies abroad pleading for their repatriation.

The influx of returnees up to mid-March comprised mainly workers in Middle Eastern countries, South Korea, Italy, and other European countries. In 2019, over 200,000 Sri Lankans left for foreign employment, 85 per cent headed to the Middle East. The pandemic caused worker migration to decrease by 56 per cent in the first half of 2020 compared to 2019. By October 2020 over 54,000 Sri Lankans were repatriated, including nearly 18,000 migrant workers from the Middle East. At least 40,000 more were waiting to be repatriated.[2]

Civil society organisations, such as the National Peace Council (NPC), took action on the ground to provide Covid-19 relief to the affected people. NPC issued a statement on May 29 that called for a more compassionate government policy. It pointed out that

> "Major dislocations have been caused to large segments of the population especially those workers who have lost their jobs to their workplaces either shutting down or having to downsize which has compelled them to return to their hometowns and villages. This applies also to migrant workers. In time to come our society will be judged by how we treated the least fortunate among us including those waiting to return to Sri Lanka from abroad."[3]

Inability to Cope

One of the earliest repatriation flights was that of students studying in the coronavirus origin of Wuhan. This was touted as a major achievement, but it was soon dispelled when the issue of migrant workers wanting to return arose.[4]

The process of repatriating the Sri Lankans abroad was a patchy one that proceeded in fits and starts, as both access to flights was problematic and the closure of international airports made difficult. The government had to make the difficult decision of phasing out repatriations due to limitations regarding capacities at local quarantine facilities, national health infrastructure, and the number of healthcare professionals taking also into consideration the local Covid-19 transmission situation. There was a need to coordinate large-scale repatriation missions to bring home different categories of migrants – such as students, pilgrims, and workers.

Sri Lanka imposed a restriction on inbound passengers from six Middle Eastern countries as a large number of returnees tested positive for Covid-19 on arrival despite airlines clearing their documents. The countries were Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Many Sri Lankan migrant workers remain stranded mostly in the Gulf States with little or no money, a lot of health issues and premature job terminations, while social media reports claimed that these workers are neglected by the local missions in host countries.[5]

The consulate office in Dubai closed due to infections, while the rest of the staff are working from home. In some countries, for example Kuwait, Oman, and UAE, the labour sections were infected with Covid-19 because they closely work with the people there. Mainly because of this Covid-19 issue, these respective missions have restricted people from visiting their office and they work online but have not given up their services. As a result, however, some migrant workers are facing difficulties getting the services done from these missions.[6]

General Economic Downturn

Like in other countries, the pandemic reduced employment levels and worsened employment conditions in Sri Lanka. According to quarterly Labour Force Survey data (LFS data) of the Department of Census and Statistics, from 2019 (Q4) to 2020 (Q4), employment levels reduced by 1.8 per cent (or 150,209 jobs).[7] This decrease is mainly due to contractions in the service and manufacturing sectors, and the private sector as a whole. This implied a deterioration of employment conditions as a large share (92 per cent) of agriculture workers are informal workers, who earn less compared to workers in the industry and services sectors. Further across diverse types of workers, employees are more likely to be covered by social security compared to the self-employed and the family workers.[8]

A recent survey has shown that a sizeable proportion of youth of all communities want to emigrate if they have the opportunity.[9] This is indicative of the fact that Sri Lanka's economy is unable to meet with their aspirations. The labour market in Sri Lanka has been feeling the impact of Covid-19 in many ways. Hundreds of thousands of informal sector workers immediately became unemployed or underemployed with the economic shutdown on 20 March 2020. Private sector employees were hit by the unemployment/underemployment wave. In short, even without factoring in the returning and the "would-have–been" migrant workers, the Sri Lankan labour market was already in turmoil from Covid-19.[10]

Bilesha Weeraratne has pointed out that many returned with minimal savings, and also faced difficulties in resuming employment after their return. Migrant workers generally return with accumulated savings and new skills. But the economic implications of migration for the home country depend on how these savings and new skills are used. It was found that returnees can contribute to the economy more than migrant workers if the returnees are successfully reintegrated. However, if reintegration is not successful, it can cause destabilising effects on the country and can result in migrants going back abroad repeatedly. The ability of returnees to impact a country's development depends on both, the conditions of return as well as their reintegration experiences.

A study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) based on a survey done by ILO returnee migrants, showed that a majority of the returnee migrants had not successfully reintegrated upon their return. Of the sample of 1.981 respondents in the survey, only 21 per cent improved their family's economic situation, only 6.3 per cent improved the possession of productive assets, only 47 per cent are currently employed, only 26 per cent successfully reintegrated with their immediate families, and only five per cent successfully reintegrated with their extended families. Interviews with returnees indicated that some of the key challenges faced by them

included difficulties in finding employment, lack of funds for self-employment, and a lack of information and documentation required to access loans and other business opportunities.[11]

Trafficking and Other Issues

According to the US State Department's 2021 Report on Trafficking, Sri Lanka is a Tier 2 country. Tier 1 is the best ranking, while Tier 3 is the worst. There are two middle ranks: Tier 2 and Tier 2 Watch List. Sri Lanka remains on Tier 2 Watch List for the third consecutive year. Countries placed in Tier 3 can be penalised with sanctions, limited access to the United States, and international foreign assistance.[12]

The report stated that the government of Sri Lanka does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included increasing prosecutions and investigating allegations of sexual exploitation of children at a state-run orphanage. The government also continued to work with international organisations on anti-trafficking training and awareness raising. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity.

The government did not report efforts to investigate some allegations of official complicity, including those from previous years. The government investigated allegations of sexual exploitation of children at orphanages, but some allegations of child sexual abuse, possibly involving child sex trafficking, persisted in state-run and private orphanages.[13]

The government achieved fewer convictions and its efforts to identify Sri Lankan forced labour victims abroad remained inadequate. Moreover, the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) continued to manage some migrant labour complaints administratively, many of which may have had indicators of forced labour, instead of referring these cases to police for criminal investigation for potential trafficking crimes. Because the government has devoted sufficient resources to a written plan that, if implemented, would constitute significant efforts to meet the minimum standards, Sri Lanka was granted a waiver per the Trafficking Victims Protection Act from an otherwise required downgrade to Tier 3. Only therefore, Sri Lanka remained on Tier 2 Watch List for the third consecutive year.

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Sri Lanka, and traffickers exploit victims from Sri Lanka abroad. Most Sri Lankan trafficking cases involve traffickers forcing Sri Lankan migrant workers into labour overseas. Traffickers exploit Sri Lankan men, women, and children in forced labour in the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the United States in the construction, garment, and domestic service sectors. Approximately 1.5 million Sri Lankans work in the Middle East, predominately in construction and domestic work, as well as in professional services. Many Sri Lankan female migrant workers seek employment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Japan, and South Korea, and authorities have identified labour trafficking victims among these workers.[14,15]

Before leaving Sri Lanka, many migrant workers accumulate debt to pay high recruitment fees imposed by labour recruitment agencies – most of them members of Sri Lanka's association of licensed foreign employment agencies – and their unlicensed sub-agents. For labour trafficking in domestic work, some traffickers target Sri Lankan women with existing debts and use promises of a large advance to defraud them into accepting the positions. Within Sri Lanka, traffickers exploit men, women, and children in forced labour and sex trafficking. Traffickers recruit women from rural areas with promises of urban jobs in the hospitality sector, salons, spas, and domestic work but exploit some in forced labour or commercial sex.[16]

Due to the pandemic, observers reported increasingly unethical labour recruitment practices within the local labour market, especially targeting women, as illegal sub-agent recruiters shift their focus from overseas jobs. Additionally, observers stated they believe more young women and girls were engaged in commercial sex due to pandemic related economic hardships.[17]

Recommendations

More reforms for strengthening workers and migrants' rights are needed in Sri Lanka. Merely having policies and ratifying conventions by the government are not enough to curtain the trafficking issue. The government needs to effectively implement the policies and laws and identify shortcomings and lacuna in policies, laws, and implementation.[18]

Strengthen Punitive Measures

- Improve efforts to vigorously investigate and prosecute suspected traffickers, including isolated reports of officials allegedly complicit in trafficking, with fair trials, convict and sentence traffickers to adequate penalties involving significant prison terms.
- Use Section 360 (C) of the penal code to prosecute child sex traffickers.
- Increase regular monitoring of licensed recruitment agencies and refer allegations of criminal violations to law enforcement.

Increase Protections for Victims

- Increase efforts to proactively identify trafficking victims, including among undocumented migrant workers abroad and women in commercial sex.
- Ensure victims are not penalised for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, including through increased training of law enforcement and the judiciary.
- Provide support to victims who participate in trials against their traffickers, including the cost of lodging and travel expenses during trials.
- Improve victim services, including their quality and accessibility, and ensure shelter and specialised services are available for all identified victims, including men and victims exploited abroad.

Improve Preventive Measures

- Improve efforts to address child sex tourism, including initiative-taking identification of victims, engagement with hotels and tourism operators, and investigation of establishments and intermediaries who allegedly facilitate the crime.
- Expand the foreign employment bureau's mandate to include regulation of sub-agents.
- Promote safe and legal migration, ensure migration regulations do not discriminate based on gender, and increase awareness among prospective migrants of the steps necessary for safe migration and resources available abroad.

The Covid-induced economic challenges together with poor governance in Sri Lanka has led Sri Lankan youth in large numbers to get ready to go overseas for foreign employment. The Institute for Health Policy (IHP) released the first results from the Sri Lanka Opinion Tracker Survey (SLOTS) that was launched to assess public opinion as the country recovers from Covid-19.[19] The opinion survey findings confirm recent observations by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa that the youth who had voted for the government are now queuing up to obtain passports to go abroad. This is on account of large lines that form outside the passport office daily to apply for passports.

The new survey shows that increasing numbers of Sri Lankans want to leave the country, probably more than at any time in the past five years. The survey showed that about 27 per cent of Sri Lankans would like to emigrate if they got opportunities. The youth and the educated want to migrate the most, with around one in two of them wanting to leave the country. This suggests that migration and human trafficking will be growing challenges to be dealt with for which Sri Lanka, and the international community, need to be prepared.

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