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MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EVIDENCE FROM SRI LANKANS ABROAD

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ABSTRACT

Migrant Workers and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from Sri Lankans Abroad

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the unfair and vulnerable situations endured by migrant workers. This article explores the realities of migrant workers stranded overseas during the pandemic. Focusing on evidence from the experiences of Sri Lankan migrants, it aims to create better policies and frameworks to improve their conditions. This study uses qualitative and quantitative data collected from Sri Lankan migrant workers. The analysis of migrants' nuanced experiences overseas during the pandemic, in terms of employment outcomes and social and psychological experiences, shows mixed evidence. While the positive experiences are comforting, the negative experiences give direction for further attention.

KEYWORDS: migration, pandemic, COVID-19, migrant rights

IZVLEČEK

Delavci migranti in pandemija bolezni Covid-19: primer Šrilančanov v tujini

Pandemija bolezni Covid-19 je razkrila nepravilne in ranljive razmere, v katerih živijo delavci migranti. Članek na primeru izkušenj migrantskih delavcev iz Šrilanke proučuje stvarnost delavcev migrantov, ki so med pandemijo ostali ujeti v tujini, za oblikovanje boljših politik in okvirov za izboljšanje njihovega položaja. V študiji so bili uporabljeni tako kvalitativni kot kvantitativni podatki zbrani pri migrantskih delavcih iz Šrilanke. Z analizo mnogovrstnih izkušenj migrantov na delu v tujini med pandemijo koronavirusa so bili v smislu posledic za zaposlitev ter socialnih in psiholoških izkušenj pridobljeni mešani podatki. Na eni strani so bile prisotne pozitivne, na drugi strani pa negativne, ki jim je treba posvetiti dodatno pozornost.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: migracije, pandemija, Covid-19, pravice migrantov

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many far-reaching implications for migrant workers. Their migratory status relative to natives amplified the adverse implications faced. When most economies experienced massive layoffs as part of the economic fallout due to the pandemic, migrant workers were more vulnerable than native workers (Borjas & Cassidy, 2020). Similarly, most migrant workers are employed in occupations less suited for work from home (Borjas & Cassidy, 2020). Likewise, the irregular arrangements endured by many migrant workers translate into poor housing and working conditions with no access to healthcare or social protection and a higher risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 (FAO, 2020; Sanfelici, 2021; Pandey et al., 2021). At the same time, border closures and travel restrictions prevented many international migrant workers from leaving their countries of destination and returning home (ILO, 2020; Weeraratne, 2020). Some of these stranded migrant workers could maintain their jobs abroad, while others experienced layoffs, wage cuts, or were compelled to take unpaid leave (Içduygu, 2020; Bhagat et al., 2020). Most had to sustain themselves overseas during the pandemic with lower or no income by tapping into their savings if they had any, relying on others, or ending up helpless.

The experiences endured by migrant workers in the countries of destination during the pandemic were neither unheard of nor unexpected. Over time, migrant workers have been discriminated against, marginalized, and made vulnerable, and the pandemic heightened these issues. While there are various efforts, i.e., Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), the outcomes during the pandemic underscore the need for more protection for migrant workers in host countries.

In this context, this article aims to contribute to the small, emerging pool of literature that provides scientific evidence on migrant workers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its goal is to shape future interventions to improve the plight of migrant workers overseas. The study uses evidence from the experiences of Sri Lankan migrants abroad during the pandemic, who were at greater vulnerability due to delays in government-facilitated repatriation missions. As such, Sri Lankans abroad were affected by pandemic-induced twin forces: unfavorable employment conditions and the inability to return home. When analyzed using a descriptive approach with qualitative data and an interpretive approach with quantitative data, these twin forces expose various new nuances of labor migration.

BACKGROUND

As identified in the literature, “a critical feature of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it generated simultaneous supply and demand shocks that rapidly increased unemployment levels, health risks, and income losses” across countries (Bossavie et al., 2020). The massive impact of the pandemic on labor markets left asymmetric implications across occupational and population groups, such as migrants (Della Poppa & Perocco, 2021). Bonizzoni and Dotsey (2021) show how the pandemic-induced prolonged suspension of the legal status of migrants negatively affected several aspects of their personal and familial lives, while undocumented immigrants are at greater risk (Kukreja, 2021). Similarly, Sanfelici (2021) elaborates on how immigration policies and neoliberal labor markets caused migrant workers in Italy to struggle during the pandemic. Similarly, emergent literature shows that migrant workers are typically more exposed to the economic and health shocks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic than comparable native workers (Yasenov, 2020).

The current article contributes to the growing pool of literature on the experiences of migrant workers during the pandemic by confirming these various aspects of the implications of the pandemic on migrant workers. The detailed and diverse pandemic-related experiences of migrant workers from relatively understudied migration corridors originating from Sri Lanka (to the Middle East or the Maldives, to name a few) confirm the widespread nature of immigrants’ experiences across regions. This firsthand evidence of the nuances of the employment, social, and psychosocial experiences of migrant workers during the pandemic strengthens the arguments for immediate improvements in their conditions. It provides a strong foundation for the long-term measures that global level frameworks, such as the SDG and GCM, must bring about.

DATA AND METHODS

This depiction of Sri Lankan migrant workers’ experience during the pandemic is based on primary quantitative and qualitative data collected from a sample of returnees and current migrants overseas. For the quantitative survey, a random sample¹ of 143 returnee migrants was interviewed by telephone in April 2021 using a structured questionnaire. The survey sample included 78% males and 22% females, while their ages ranged from 20 to 62 years, with an average age of 38.64 years. The sample consists of returnees from 17 countries. Indicating the relatively higher level of education in this sample, 48% had passed the 12th grade General Certificate in Advanced Level examination or had a university degree. Only 12% of the sample

1 Randomly sampled from the SLBE returnee registry.

had an education lower than passing the 10th grade. In this sample, the average duration of the last migration is 1.64 years.

The qualitative analysis stems from in-depth telephone interviews with 22 returned and current migrant workers in May and November 2020, and April 2021. The migrants interviewed in 2021 were randomly sampled from the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment returnee registry, while those in 2020 were purposively sampled to ensure maximum variation. Hence, this sample included those who migrated for employment through formal and informal channels. The sample also includes those who were undocumented at the time of the pandemic and returned. The skill levels range from low-skilled to high-skilled. The two females and twenty males interviewed in the sample were from eight countries, and the telephone interviews ranged from 31 to 68 minutes in duration.

A descriptive analysis approach is adopted in analyzing the quantitative data, while the qualitative data is analyzed by adopting an interpretive approach. In describing experiences of specific respondents in qualitative data, respondents are identified by the letter R followed by the respondent's number in the qualitative dataset (R1 to R22).

MIGRANT WORKERS' EXPERIENCES

Layoffs and job losses

In the quantitative survey of 143 returnees, 56% indicated that they lost their jobs due to the pandemic. In terms of the timing, in this sample, most layoffs in 2020 took place in March, which accounted for 33% layoffs, while other months accounted for 3–18% of all layoffs. The concentration of a large share of layoffs in March 2020—the early stage of the pandemic—supports the claim that “migrant workers are often first to be laid-off” during a crisis (ILO, 2020: 2). Under normal conditions, the average foreign employment contracts are for 2 years, yet the average duration of the last foreign employment in this sample was 1.64 years. The lower average duration in this sample compared to the average contract period under normal conditions hints at the possibility of a “last-in-first-out” policy in layoffs (Von Below & Thoursie, 2010), in which relatively recent migrants are disproportionately targeted in adverse employment outcomes in destination countries.

The layoffs of these workers took place in various ways. The qualitative data shows that workers in the hospitality sector across countries received different types of advanced notice. For instance, R10, a 51-year-old male migrant worker with 11 years of experience, was formally informed by his employer in Saudi Arabia that his job as a kitchen helper would end once his visa expired in a few months. Similarly, R3, a 36-year-old chef in the Maldives with 11 years of experience, was told by his employer that in the future, there would be no guests patronizing the hotel, and in

such event, no wages would be paid. For R16, a 30-year-old male employed as a chef in the Maldives, the employer continued to pay the basic salary without any service charge. In the case of Saudi Arabia, as per R10, his employer gave employees the option to either terminate employment or obtain a 6-month unpaid leave. For R11, a 27-year-old male hotel supervisor from the Maldives, the layoff was so unexpected and rushed that he did not have any time to even make an appeal to the employer.

Migrant workers in other sectors experienced further diversity. R5, a 25-year-old female apparel factory worker in Jordan, was rendered unemployed when her factory closed down, and the employer attempted to convince employees to transfer to a different factory so that the employer could benefit by transferring these visas. Nevertheless, these workers refused to transfer, and the initial employer later hired them at a per-output rate to stitch masks (JOD 12 per 500 masks). The experiences of R6, a house driver in Saudi Arabia, show that his employer gave him the option to leave the employer or stay back in the household without a job and remuneration until things improved. Conversely, reflecting a very rare case, R8, a 23-year-old factory mechanic in the Maldives, was offered a higher wage by his employer when he voluntarily decided to leave his job due to the spread of the pandemic. Similarly, R15, a 25-year-old robotics engineer from the United Kingdom, was able to negotiate a remote working arrangement before his temporary leave of absence from work to return to Sri Lanka. These findings show the diversity in experiences regarding migrant workers' employment contracts during the pandemic.

Among the 44% in the sample who returned for reasons other than being laid off, the main reasons for return were the end of the employment contract or the expiration of visas. Qualitative data reveals that many migrant workers had problems retaining their jobs due to issues in the timely extension of their passports or visas. For instance, R14, a 36-year-old finance manager with 15 years of experience in Dubai, had to return to Sri Lanka because he could not renew his visa. Another 30-year-old male forklift operator (R12) could not find a new job post layoff due to delays in replacing his lost passport. Similarly, R18, a 51-year-old sales manager in Abu Dhabi, was extremely anxious when his passport renewal was delayed during the pandemic. Without a passport valid for a further six months, he feared his visa would not be renewed in time, making him vulnerable to being prioritized for being laid off. At the same time, the qualitative sample shows that some companies, for example, in Dubai, resorted to laying-off migrant workers without canceling their visas so that such migrant workers could find an alternative job. Similarly, in South Korea, for R2, a 30-year-old fishing sector worker, the employer had extended his visa to ensure he remained legally in Korea until his departure.

Foregone evidence shows that layoffs or job losses during the pandemic ranged from giving prior notice to a sudden termination to leave without wages to voluntary resignations or remote working arrangements. Similarly, difficulties extending visas and passports created an additional dimension to the issues faced by migrant workers to retain or find employment.

Pending wages, terminal benefits, and remittances

As per the International Labour Organizations' (ILO) Termination of Employment Convention (C158), termination of employment contracts or layoffs should ideally involve payment of any pending wages, benefits, and possibly a severance package (ILO, 1982). In this quantitative sample, only 28% of the workers laid off during the pandemic had received severance pay from employers. The average severance pay received was LKR 321,785.90. Some workers also received other benefits from employers, such as paid leave, food, and accommodation. Qualitative evidence shows various reasons for migrant workers not receiving such financial dues and benefits from their employers. For instance, R3 returned to Sri Lanka with the intention of going back to the same employer in the Maldives once the pandemic improved and did not pursue the severance package or wages due, as he planned to obtain the same employment in the future.

Qualitative data further indicated that severance packages and pending wages were offset by employers against migrant workers' return air tickets and/or accommodation provided after the termination of employment (R3, R5). As indicated by survey data, 33% of returnees said their employers had paid for the return travel. This group may include employers with a contractual agreement to pay for these costs and those whose financial obligations were offset against air tickets. In this context, qualitative data raise concerns about the accuracy of dues calculations and offsetting the same by employers. Specifically, due to the stressful mindset of returnees before departing from their destination countries (see discussion under psychosocial aspects), many migrant workers could not pay more attention to the accuracy of these calculations. For instance, R10, the kitchen helper from Saudi Arabia, was only paid half of all his pending wages and benefits due. Still, he was glad to have received at least half, as most companies were closed in Saudi Arabia, and employees were not allowed to meet or discuss with the employer about such payments. R11, a hotel supervisor from the Maldives, indicated that he did not receive the LKR 450,000 due to him, the service letter, or the return air ticket, which was part of the employment contract. Instead, the employer informed R11 that they would provide these once the worker returned to Sri Lanka. Moreover, R19, a banker in Dubai, reflected on how the employer of his highly-skilled friend in Dubai asked his friend to resign and deferred his gratuity payment indefinitely until the company was able to pay. At the same time, some migrants, such as R9, a 49-year-old factory mechanic in Saudi Arabia, received all wages and benefits due before return.

Qualitative data (R20) further reflects how, in general, long-serving high-skilled workers in the Middle East region received large sums of money as severance pay. The literature considers that such one-time terminal benefits may have contributed to propping up remittances to Sri Lanka during 2020 (Weeraratne, 2021). As per quantitative data during the pre-pandemic period, a majority (71%) remitted monthly, while the average pre-pandemic monthly remittances were LKR 98,443.18,

and the most common channel of remittances was Money Transfer Operators, such as Western Union. During the pandemic, as per quantitative data, 75% of respondents had not been able to remit at the same frequency due to loss of employment (48%), wage cuts (39%), and difficulties in remitting money (8%). Similarly, 75% of the sample could not remit the same amount as before because of being laid off or experiencing wage cuts.

Food, accommodation, and other social support

In this quantitative sample, 78% had returned because of the pandemic. The return decision was a personal decision for 73%, and for 19% of the returnees, the employer told them to return. On average, a returnee in this sample spent four months between deciding to return and actually returning.² For most migrant workers, the expenditure in the destination country during this time was unplanned.

During this extended and unprepared period of stay in the destination countries, migrants underwent various experiences in terms of their food and accommodation arrangements. For instance, R1, a 39-year-old female child care worker in Kuwait, was planning before the pandemic to return because her contract was ending. She received accommodation and rations for cooking from her employer until the day of her return. Similarly, R13, a 34-year-old male undocumented migrant in Azerbaijan, received food and accommodation from his informal employer during the pandemic. R5, the female apparel factory worker, and her colleagues in Jordan were allowed to continue to live in the employer-provided accommodation, but their meal arrangements deteriorated during the pandemic. As highlighted, she and her colleagues were served the same meal—dhal curry and rice, for all three meals for several consecutive days.

In the case of hospitality sector workers, they were provided accommodation with varied arrangements for food. R10, the 51-year-old kitchen helper in Saudi Arabia, indicated that the employer cared well for him and other workers, where accommodation included all pre-pandemic facilities such as Wi-Fi, television, and regular meals. On the contrary, the experience of the R3, a 36-year-old chef of a resort in the Maldives, was disturbing. The archipelagic geography in the Maldives isolated this island resort when lockdown measures stopped boats and seaplanes engaging in transportation. With the depletion of food and other stocks, this previously perfect employer changed for the worst in its attempt to sustain a staff of 270. The drastic measures adopted included rationing generators that supplied electricity for only six hours a day in the evenings, shutting down Wi-Fi and A/C, and assigning tasks in exchange for the meals and accommodation provided. These tasks included picking coconuts, fishing in the ocean, helping in the garden, repairs, maintenance, and construction work, which were challenging to the respondent (R3), a trained

2 This delay in return is mainly due to the shortage of repatriation flights.

and qualified chef. Moreover, due to the shortage of ingredients, the respondent and others had to survive mainly on unseasoned boiled fish and rice for all meals on most days during the lockdown period. In contrast, the employer (a hotel) of R16 in the Maldives experienced issues maintaining its staff but did not resort to assigning employees to work in unrelated fields in exchange for the food and accommodation provided. Nevertheless, on most days, staff was served fish and dhal and had to pay for drinking water bottles.

The social experiences of undocumented migrant workers were further nuanced as they faced more challenges during the pandemic due to their undercover existence. Guadagno (2020) notes that lack of awareness of locally recommended prevention measures and overreliance on informal communication were common among illegal migrant workers during the pandemic. Confirming this, R13, a 34-year-old undocumented Sri Lankan migrant worker in Azerbaijan, could not access official pandemic-related preventive information as he did not have a sim/telephone registered in his name. Hence, when social distancing-related time allocations for stepping outdoors were made and communicated to each individual in Azerbaijan, R13 did not have an allocation. Moreover, he did not receive the first message sent by the Sri Lankan Embassy in Iran³ to facilitate his return. Similarly, R12, the 30-year-old forklift operator in Dubai, had entered on a visit visa and lost his passport before the pandemic and then could not pay his fine for overstaying. While he initially did odd jobs ranging from repairing ACs and working in shops to cleaning, it became impossible to find such jobs without a valid passport or visa, leaving him unable to pay for his food and accommodation.

Support from the government in the country of origin

Among the surveyed returnees, 42% had sought support from the Sri Lankan embassies/missions/consulates in their host countries, primarily for their return passage. The qualitative data show mixed evidence about returnees' level of satisfaction. For instance, R7, a 32-year-old male hotel supervisor who returned from Dubai, believed that the consulate staff in Dubai served the stranded Sri Lankan migrant workers to the maximum they could under the circumstances. Similarly, R12, who, as an illegal immigrant in Dubai, was grateful for food and accommodation provided by the consulate until his return. R5, a female apparel factory worker from Jordan, elaborated how the Sri Lankan Embassy in Jordan attempted to protect these workers by requesting employers to pay half of their monthly wages.⁴

Nevertheless, many respondents in the qualitative sample were not satisfied with the protection and services provided by the respective Sri Lankan embassies.

3 Azerbaijan does not have a Sri Lankan embassy and the Sri Lankan Embassy in Iran serves Sri Lankans in Azerbaijan.

4 The employer had refused this request.

For instance, R3, the chef stranded on an island in the Maldives, underscored that the Sri Lankan Embassy did not answer his telephone calls and that he got his family in Sri Lanka to call the Sri Lankan Embassy in the Maldives. At the same time, most returnees had expected that the embassies would coordinate their return sooner. Specifically, returnees from the Maldives (R3, R8, R11, R16) underscored how sad, helpless, and let down they felt when colleagues from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh were repatriated by special ships sent by their respective countries. Similarly, returnees from the Middle East (as highlighted by R10) stressed they had to spend their remaining savings and brave the pandemic to visit the embassy repeatedly in person. In contrast, R5, the female returnee from an apparel factory in Jordan, elaborated that they had to send YouTube videos to authorities and media in Sri Lanka before the embassy arranged their return.

In addition to officials from the country of origin, some migrant workers received help from philanthropists and well-wishers. R19 underscores how an Indian national in Dubai supplied food for stranded Sri Lankans and bought return air tickets for 10 Sri Lankans stranded in Dubai. Similarly, R12, the illegal immigrant forklift operator in Dubai, was helped by an American citizen with his return ticket expenses after the Sri Lankan met the American when the latter was distributing food for stranded Sri Lankans near the Dubai consulate. Moreover, R19 revealed that many Sri Lankans provided washroom facilities in their homes to the fellow Sri Lankan migrant workers camping in a park near the Sri Lankan consulate in Dubai.

Psychological stress and support

Sri Lankan migrant workers endured tremendous psychological stress because of all these socioeconomic experiences overseas during the pandemic. This stress was multifaceted and stemmed from various aspects of the pandemic. One part of the stress was the fear of contracting the virus. By March 2021, 4,431 Sri Lankans abroad had contracted the virus, and 122 had died (Ranasinghe, 2021). At the same time, migrant workers abroad were concerned about the spread of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. In this context, Sri Lankan migrant workers overseas had to deal with pandemic-related information connected to both the destination country and Sri Lanka and navigate their fears and concerns across an overload of information.

Other fears during the pandemic included not getting treatment if they contracted the virus, not having funds to pay for treatment, and not being able to see their loved ones again. R11, a 27-year-old hotel supervisor from the Maldives, indicated that adjoining his accommodation was accommodation for COVID-19 patients. As such, he was very worried about contracting the virus. His stress level became further elevated as there were shortages of medical and food supplies due to the lockdowns. In this context, he felt like a prisoner with no way out. Similarly, the illegal migrant worker in Azerbaijan noted that when contracted cases were not seeking treatment in hospitals in Azerbaijan, the armed forces stormed such houses

and hospitalized patients by force. This made him very fearful about the possibility of his contracting the virus and the implications for himself and his informal sector employer, who had also given him accommodation. In some cases, migrant workers could not maintain normal communication with their families back home. For instance, R3, the stranded chef in the Maldives, indicated that his stress level would have been lower if he could have seen and talked to his family over the phone as he usually did before the pandemic.

Nevertheless, while stranded overseas, the migrants were fully supported by their families back home. All respondents in the qualitative sample indicated how their family exhibited unwavering support, were eager for their return, helped them keep their spirits and hopes high, and financially supported them during this difficult period. For instance, R9, a 49-year-old male mechanical worker from Saudi Arabia, indicated that his emotional stability improved when his family in Sri Lanka carried out religious activities to bless him. However, the loss of income and related struggles for food and accommodation at the destination, costs of return air and quarantine, and the family at home's struggles due to the loss of regular remittances and or concern for the safe return of the migrant worker, continued to contribute toward migrant workers' psychological distress. In the quantitative sample, 47% self-financed their return air ticket, while for 32%, the employer paid it. For another 10%, the government of Sri Lanka paid for the return, while for 4%, the host government paid it. For most repatriation flights, the return air costs were much higher than under normal circumstances. Additionally, for many, there were the costs of quarantine. R10, a returnee from Saudi Arabia, had to suddenly find LKR 300,000 to secure a spot on a repatriation flight. To help him, his family borrowed this amount from an informal money lender at an interest rate of LKR 3,000 per day. Similarly, R11, the 27-year-old hotel supervisor from the Maldives, had his cousin in Dubai wire transfer funds. In terms of quarantine costs, 48% paid on their own, 35% used free quarantine facilities, while for nearly 8%, their employer paid these costs. The paid quarantine started from LKR 7,500 per day on a twin-sharing basis running to a minimum of LKR 105,000 for 14 days per person. Compared to the average pre-pandemic wage of LKR 145,861 in this sample, the quarantine costs were unaffordable for many.

Returning with unfulfilled migration plans and empty-handed created an added dimension of stress for migrant workers. For instance, R6, the 51-year-old house driver from Kuwait, emphasized that he usually brought many gifts for his wife and children. However, this time, he was neither able to shop before his return nor did his repatriation flight allow more than one piece of luggage. Similarly, R3, the 36-year-old chef, returned from the Maldives during the pandemic with only USD 21 in hand. Therefore, many migrants had several concerns weighing down their spirits during their return.

The emotional cost of the pandemic also affected migrants' relationships. The female apparel sector worker (R5) from Jordan highlighted how inmates in her

dormitory got into arguments due to their restless nature. Similarly, R11, a hospitality sector returnee from the Maldives, ended his relationship with his fiancée, a fellow Sri Lankan employed in the same sector in the Maldives, due to disagreements and arguments triggered during the stressful period of being stranded overseas. As discussed above, Sri Lankan migrant workers endured an unimagined level of emotional hardship and pressure during the pandemic, with nearly no psychological support provided except by their respective households.

CORE FINDINGS AND THE WAY FORWARD

The above highlights the mixed evidence of the experiences of migrant workers' employment outcomes and social and psychological experiences overseas during the pandemic. While the positive experiences are comforting, the negative experiences give direction for further attention. Some findings that need further attention are as follows.

The findings highlight the importance of comprehensive support mechanisms to protect migrant workers overseas until their return if the employer refuses food and accommodation, especially for those in isolated locations or those undocumented. Similarly, it is crucial to facilitate migrant workers to maintain a valid visa after layoff to support legal pathways for re-employment overseas and timely renewals of employment visas and passports, with support structures and capacity in diplomatic missions improved. Bi-lateral agreements should introduce an automatic concessionary extension of visas during times of crisis.

Moreover, better protective clauses about prior notice and continued protection and accommodation till departure from the country of destination or change of employment are needed for employer-provided accommodation. Such clauses would ensure that vulnerable migrant workers are not disproportionately affected by external shocks and other unforeseen issues. A special focus on extra protective measures is needed for migrant workers during the first two years of employment, as newly-arrived migrants are vulnerable to exploitation and other difficulties. To aid this process, migrants should also be educated on building and maintaining networks in their host country. This would also help them gain and share information, network, create a means of social support, and be re-employed.

Introducing an international mechanism to support migrant workers who are currently abroad or returned in quantifying and verifying the calculations of the pending wages and terminal benefits and ensuring their receipt would help. Additionally, introducing international laws and regulations, i.e., tied to ILO conventions, to streamline setting off the above payments and prevent employers from committing wage theft is important.

To minimize the negative repercussions of unchecked stress, destination countries should take on a greater role in providing psychological support to migrant

workers in their countries, especially during crises. Such stresses and problems could also be minimized if the employer and the host country's government collectively ensured access to communication facilities.

Factoring in the above recommendations into the indicators of the SDGs and the objectives of the GCM can contribute to improving the outcomes for migrant workers during future crises, promote greater protection, and ensure that migrant workers are not disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation and injustice. With such, destination countries would benefit by becoming more attractive to migrant workers. In addition, countries of origin would benefit from a fairer sharing of responsibility for the well-being of migrant workers overseas.

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POVZETEK

DELAVCI MIGRANTI IN PANDEMIJA BOLEZNI COVID-19: PRIMER ŠRILANČANOV V TUJINI Bilesha WEERARATNE

Pandemija bolezni Covid-19 je močno negativno vplivala na življenja številnih delavcev, zlasti mednarodnih delavcev migrantov. Prehodna narava delavcev migrantov v državah gostiteljicah ter nenadne gospodarske posledice pandemije so njihove socialne in psihosocialne težave še povečale. Članek preučuje dejanske razmere delavcev migrantov, ki so ob začetku pandemije bolezni Covid-19 obtičali v tujini, ter na tej podlagi predlaga oblikovanje politik in okvirov za izboljšanje njihovega položaja.

Avtorica se s pomočjo kvalitativnih in kvantitativnih podatkov osredotoča na položaj šrilanških migrantov in pride do mešanih ugotovitev. Odpuščanje delavcev migrantov med pandemijo je obsegalo vse od predhodnih obvestil o prenehanju delovnega razmerja do nenadnih odpovedi zaposlitve, odpuščanj kot prvih odzivov na pandemijo ter politik »zadnji pride, prvi gre«. Zaradi pandemije in obdobja zaprtja javnega življenja je prišlo do zamud pri obnavljanju njihovega migrantskega statusa. Nekateri delodajalci so se izogibali plačevanju tekočih plač delavcem migrantom oziroma odpravnin in jih nadomeščali s storitvami ali infrastrukturo, ki so jo zagotavljali, pri čemer njihovi izračuni niso bili jasni.

Avtorica med drugim priporoča vzpostavitev celovitega podpornega mehanizma za zaščito delavcev migrantov v tujini, dokler se ne vrnejo domov, če jim njihovi delodajalci ne zagotavljajo hrane in namestitve; namenjanje posebne pozornosti dodatnim zaščitnim ukrepom za delavce migrante v prvih dveh letih njihove zaposlitve; pravočasno podaljševanje delovnih vizumov in potnih listov v državah izvora in v ciljnih državah; vzpostavitev mednarodnih mehanizmov za pomoč delavcem migrantom pri pridobivanju ustreznih potrdil, določanje višine in preverjanje izračunov neizplačanih plač in odpravnin, poenostavitev obračunavanja zgoraj navedenih vrst izplačil in preprečevanje kraje plač; ter zagotavljanje dostopa do komunikacije s strani delodajalca in vlade države gostiteljice.

Vključitev zgoraj navedenih priporočil v cilje in kazalnike ciljev trajnostnega razvoja ter v cilje globalnega dogovora o migracijah bi pripomogla k izboljšanju položaja delavcev migrantov med prihodnjimi krizami obenem pa bi spodbudila večjo zaščito in zagotovila, da delavci migranti ne bodo nesorazmerno podvrženi izkoriščanju in krivicam.