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## Locked up under lockdown: The COVID-19 pandemic and the migrant population

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

COVID-19  
Migration  
Pandemic  
Lockdown  
Refugee

### ABSTRACT

Almost all countries in the world have now enforced coronavirus-related travel restrictions and border shutdowns. Migrant populations in the world are now considered the worst victims of COVID-19, and the spreaders too. This article aims to investigate the impacts that COVID-19 has on population migration. Informal interviews were conducted with the respondents who were stranded in different parts of the world via Skype and WhatsApp between February and November 2020. COVID-19 poses a threat to the millions who were caught between home and their final destinations – and are now living in overcrowded refugee camps where the terms ‘stay home’ ‘stay safe’ and ‘social distancing’ carries very little meaning.

### 1. Introduction: a new world and different realities

The year 2020 is a lost year for all of us. The Coronavirus has been storming the entire world since January 2020. In order to thwart the spread of the virus, most countries in the world imposed either full or partial lockdown, which left millions stranded. More than one-third of the world's population is under some form of restriction. More people are now in lockdown than were alive during World War II (Ullah & Huque, 2014). Scholars predicted that the consequences of this pandemic for migration would not be that grave, but the reality has been different.

We slept in one world and woke up in another. The sky has become pitch-black with nothing that shines – bereft of stars. Our hopes are crumbling into rubble as a day passes by. The Coronavirus forced us to believe that great wars do not need great causes (Sufian, 2020). A few consequences we can imagine have exacerbated global disparity, migrants as the scapegoats for the spread of the virus and increased cross-border crimes (Ullah, 2016b). For example, Italy's Matteo Salvini blames African migrants for spreading this virus; Hungary's Viktor Orban holds the Iranian migrants responsible for the escalation of this virus; and Donald Trump termed it the ‘China virus’ (Asami et al., 2020; Center for Migration Stud, 2020; Condon, 2020). With about 89 million infected and more than 1,906,693 dead so far (M-Migration. Travel, 2020), the situation has turned devastating (Ullah, 2011)- one of the most precariously impending crises the world has not witnessed many times in recent history.

COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on the people migrating out across the globe. In 2016 that there were about 3.6 billion people who travelled (short or long distances) (Ullah & Chattoraj, 2018) excluding passengers moving by train and road transportation. On average, about one million passengers fly per day by airplane. This tells us how mobile people are today. About 90 per cent of these travellers have stopped moving. It is imaginable how big the size of the population that the COVID-19 made stranded is (M-Migration. Travel, 2020; Sirkeci & Yücesahin, 2020; Mayer, 2000; Anthamatten & Hazen, 2011). The dynamics of international migration have changed dramatically with a vast majority of airlines grounded and travel restrictions imposed, confining people to their homes (Hopkins University, 2020) and the entire global population has been forced to change the way of life: “stay home, stay safe” (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011; Hopkins University, 2020; Kampf, Todt, Pfaender, & Steinmann, 2020; Sirkeci & Yücesahin, 2020; WHO, 2020a).

Anecdotally, the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic is Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020a). The travel density and the volume of passengers from Wuhan to the main regional travel hubs across China, along with the final destinations worldwide, are considered significant passages for spreading the virus. Some people link the travel volumes to the Chinese immigrant populations in the destination countries (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011; World Health Organization, 2020a). The outbreak has given a leeway to the nationalists to use migrants as scapegoats in order to make their anti-migration stance stronger. This is because the overwhelming majority of the cases are detected in the migrant-receiving countries (for

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example, the USA, the UK, Italy, France and Spain) (Ullah, 2018).

It is estimated that around 75 million jobs (International Labour Orga, 2020; UllahHossain and Chatteraj, 2020) would disappear worldwide, and the migrants would be the worst victims (Bizimungu, 2020). Jet fuel prices dropped sharply. Major airlines worldwide have been forced to suspend flights or modify their service as the outbreak continues to gain momentum (Pressroom. Updates C, 2020). About 200,000 flights got cancelled only within China in the first couple of weeks from the beginning of the pandemic. The way of life and how we do business, previously normally done via travelling, is replaced by virtual modes, e.g., conferences and meetings are now done via Skype. The combination of trip cancellations and country-specific restrictions on international flights has cost the industry \$880 billion (World Health Organization, 2020b). IATA estimates that the industry may lose up to \$113 billion in revenue in 2020 (Graham-Harrison, Giuffrida, Smith, & Ford, 2020).

Under this backdrop, policymakers, scientists and researchers are caught up with formulating prevention strategies, cure mechanisms and clinical trials of Avigan. However, little attention has been paid to the woes the millions of migrant populations around the world are going through (Center for Migration Stud, 2020; IOM, 2018; Ullah, 2018a). This article looks into how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of the migrant populations.

We do not mean to undermine the lockdown decisions. There is no doubt that immobility is essential to stop or to minimize the spread of the virus. Countries like Singapore, Brunei, Thailand and Malaysia and some others claim that the number of affected people grew as they welcomed their citizens from COVID-19-prone countries. The predicament is, however, that migrant-receiving countries want them to leave while the origin countries seem to be unwelcoming to them. However, Sirkeci and Yüceşahin (Sirkeci & Yüceşahin, 2020) show that the volume of migration increases over time through migration corridors. The volume can be measured by examining the volume of travel between destinations and places of origin.

## 2. Objectives and methodology

The gravity of the pandemic has eclipsed the woes of about one billion migrant people. This article aims at investigating the impacts that COVID-19 has on the mobility of migrant populations. The current study reveals the complexities of migration debates and raises new questions such as how pervasive is the consequence?

Our Internet research (Chatteraj, 2017) provided with a range of online reports, documents and newspaper articles. Internet research allowed us to gather our secondary data on migrants worldwide and about the grave situation, they have been in due to lockdowns. As time advanced from the onslaught of the pandemic, much scientific work has been published in journals. We did extensive reviews of the literature on the pandemic, its long-term impact on the migrants, human mobility/migration and studies on the spatial spread of diseases.

We conducted 37 informal interviews (via Skype and WhatsApp) with migrant populations living or stuck in Singapore, Brunei, Hong Kong, Macau, Italy, Spain, the USA (Maryland, New York, Newark, Florida, Atlanta, Ohio), Dusseldorf (Germany), Amsterdam (Netherlands), Copenhagen (Denmark), Italy, France, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from Mid-February to November 2020. These respondents were selected based on snowball technique. Our focus has been on the low-skilled and semi-skilled migrants who are more prone to be affected in various ways by COVID-19. Given the lack of a pre-existing taxonomy of issues for COVID-19, impacts on migrants are difficult to measure (M. 2020.D-19 and S, 2020; M. 2020a.D - 19, 2020a)). Questions we asked were about how the situation was like in their place/country (in terms of their job, contract, health services received, contacts with the families, income, the possibility to go back home, any hindrances, etc.), how are their lives affected? Do they fear job loss due to this crisis? When do they feel they can again see their families back home?

## 3. COVID-19, lockdown and migration dynamics

A significant number of the total 272 million international and about 700 million domestic migrants (from low to semiskilled and unskilled workers) who live under conditions that pose concerns of social overcrowding and not ideal for a pandemic situation (Koh, 2020; Sohini & K Jha, 2020). Koh (2020) goes on to say that COVID-19 has highlighted the vulnerability of migrant workers as an occupational group. Reductions and disruptions of travels have implications for the family, economy, and food security. Most of our respondents, irrespective of the destinations, expressed a common concern about the potential food scarcity and xenophobic outburst. Migrants began fleeing the cities out of fear of COVID-19 infection. They left on foot due to transport lockdown. The initial government response to prevent migrant movement towards their homes was informed by the fear that they would carry the contagious Coronavirus to their hometowns and villages, leading to community transmission of the COVID-19 (Chen, 2020).

For domestic migrants, for example, millions of Indian migrants began their long trek home, carrying children, clutching their meagre possessions, crowding disrupted transport networks, resourceless, after the sudden lockdown in the wake of the pandemic, they faced hunger, destitution, the wrath of the police and suspicion of communities and tragic death (Ghosh, 2020; Jadhav, 2020; K JhaPankaj and Samaddar, 2020). Migrants began fleeing the cities out of fear of COVID-19 infection. They left on foot due to transport lockdown. The initial government response to prevent migrant movement towards their homes was informed by the fear that they would carry the contagious Coronavirus to their hometowns and villages, leading to community transmission of the COVID-19 (Chen, 2020).

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a sudden proclamation of the national lockdown to break the chain of transmission of the Coronavirus caused panic among millions of migrant workers in many cities that are homes to migrants. The lockdown represents a massive logistical challenge given the population size infected and affected. The WHO claims that the spread of the virus was accelerated by human migration. In order to minimize the rapid growth of cases via human-to-human transmission, the governments decided on lockdown (Avato, Koettl, & Sabates-Wheeler, 2010; Dustmann, Glitz, & Vogel, 2010; Sanchez & Achilli, 2020; United Nations, 2020).

The IOM (M. 2020a.D - 19, 2020a) confirmed that until July 2020, an estimated 2,751,454 migrants were stranded. We do not have the latest estimate, though. The crisis sparked by the COVID-19 has overshadowed the existing migration debates because the COVID-19 crisis has altered the whole gamut of debates about migration (M. 2020a.D - 19, 2020a). Most member states of the European Union (EU) have suspended any relocation, return and resettlement provisions due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Condon, 2020) and have begun to cut the services meant for migrants (Abramsky, 2020; Jones et al., 2008; Bloomberg, 2020). Austria, Greece, Belgium, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic have already started rejecting migrant quotas (RoslanLabour, 2020).

A total of 219 countries, territories and areas have imposed 60,711 restrictions, which is unprecedented historically (M. 2020.D-19 and S, 2020). Many countries have taken strict measures (border closures, quarantines, expulsions, and lockdowns of migrant worker communities and refugee camps) against migrants, refugees, and other displaced persons in response to the pandemic (Griffin et al., 2020; Piyash, 2020; Human Mobility and Human Rights, 2020). In India, for example, 400 million workers in the informal economy have been at risk of falling deeper into poverty. Outraged by the condition of the migrant workers, public policy academics have described the COVID-19 lockdown as 'the choice between virus and starvation (Chen, 2020).

Today, the global economy hugely relies on migrant workers (Business Insider, 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Rothe et al., 2020; Ullah, 2018a). As COVID-19 has dismantled the normalcy and pushed the world to a new order, about 196 countries have imposed mobility restrictions in varying degrees [International Air Transport Association (IATA), 2012, Legrain,

2020]. About 1.5 billion young people, over 90 per cent of the world's students, in 188 countries have had their education disrupted (United Nations, 2020). The reductions in wages of migrant and refugee workers as a result of the pandemic led to the decline of remittances by USD\$109 billion. Remittances account for over 10 per cent of the GDP of 30 countries in the world (Sharma & Saaliq, 2020; Ullah and Huque, 2014, 2019) and are a critical source of income for over 800 million people (Chan et al., 2020; Ullah, 2010; United Nations, 2020).

The most common answer to our "How are you?" question from our respondents, who are stranded in different parts of the world, is "We are stuck here," "We are spending our times staying home watching movies and getting connected to others via social sites." "We are going out once in two weeks to get our groceries." Respondents from Brunei seemed to be in a quite relaxed mood. Respondents in Singapore were quite scared of the recurrence of the crisis and the growing number of infected persons. While some governments in the Southeast and East Asia are in favour of domestic helpers, some respondents (mostly domestic helpers-DH) from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao and Singapore said that their employers were reluctant about their health issues. The DHs were made to stand in a queue for masks and hand sanitizers for hours by their employers, yet those masks are meant only for their employers, not for themselves. A few of them said that it was as if they did not deserve to be protected. Many countries have announced blatantly that they would not take care of the foreigners in their countries, which means that the foreigners have to bear all the costs if affected by COVID-19.

Some are in a position to work from home during this surreal time, while many migrant workers—especially the low-skilled ones—do not have the choice to work from home. They must physically go to work, which puts them at a greater risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 (Taylor, 2020; Ullah et al., 2015, 2020).

Migrants are stranded for various reasons, including, but not only, restrictions on travel and the related drop in international flights. Loss of jobs and income, lack of employment, loss of residence permits and lack of resources to return home have all impacted mobility. As visas and permits expire, migrants are also facing deportation (M. 2020.D-19 and S, 2020). The lockdown measures led them to lose their jobs, having had their wages withheld or being unable to find employment. This leaves them in difficult conditions, including homelessness, and also affects remittances needed by families in countries of origin (M. 2020.D-19 and S, 2020; M. 2020a.D - 19, 2020a). Tens of thousands of migrant workers are either waiting to return home or are caught up in the middle of their journey. The Philippine government has just braced for the arrival of about 27,000 Filipino workers from overseas (Coronavirus, 2020). The country estimates that, in the next six months, around half a million Filipinos would return home because of job-loss (Coronavirus, 2020).

With countries imposing quarantines, curfews and border closures to stem the escalation of Coronavirus, many migrants now are trapped. Millions of Venezuelan migrants in Latin American countries are threatened for their mere survival (Winkleman & Debinski, 2020; Rahman, 2020). In Colombia and Mexico, only emergency medical care is available to Venezuelan migrants who have irregular immigration status. A few of our respondents from Italy, France and Spain said that without documents, they couldn't go out for grocery which implies that those who are without documents have no choice but to suffer from hunger and poverty.

Most respondents facing the same situation lamented that they would not die from the virus, but they would die of hunger. To fight the spread of the virus, drastic and swift lockdown measures are necessary; however, the decision to lockdown was too sudden for the migrants whose jobs disappeared overnight. About 90 million domestic workers, tens of millions of migrant construction workers and roughly 10 million street vendors in India migrating to work in middle-class urban homes are cruelly affected (Mueller, 2020). These populations entered the rural areas unchecked. Bangladesh—the world's second-largest garment exporter—is rapidly losing orders and millions of jobs are at stake. These millions of garment workers are internal migrants from rural Bangladesh.

The country's garment sector depends hugely on export orders, which have drastically decreased. So far, Bangladesh has lost around \$1.5 billion (€1.4 billion), which has impacted some 1.2 million migrant workers (M and TheMigration Age, 2020; Brady, 2020; Yan, 2020; Ministry of Manpower, 2020; East Coast Daily and 2020. M, 2020; Lai et al., 2019).

Trafficking in human and smuggling and transnational criminal networks tend to emerge in the aftermath of border closures. During the COVID-19 lockdown the number of people smuggled and fallen victims of human trafficking kept rising (Sanchez & Achilli, 2020). At least 310,000 migrant workers have returned to Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar, the vast majority from Thailand, during the March–June period (including more than 90,000 to Cambodia, close to 120,000 to Lao People's Democratic Republic and another 100,000 to Myanmar). The majority of all migrant workers remain in Thailand due to border closures (O. 2020.D-19: Impa, 2020). Many are feared missing to the hands of human traffickers.

The woes of the 70 million people displaced by war and social collapse (Chan et al., 2020; Koh, 2020; Rothe et al., 2020) are more telling. Already at risk of COVID-19, these populations are stuck in or near dangerous places. Their dense geographical proximity, overcrowded accommodations, lack of sanitation and hygiene facilities and lack of access to healthcare services in the host communities (Mahmood, 2020; Reidy, 2020) put them in the most dangerous condition. The slogan "stay safe, stay at home" in effect precludes them. More than a million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, for example, are terrified for their lives (KarimIslam and Talukder, 2020). Their defenselessness against the pandemic may make the camps "death trap" (UllahHossain and Chatteraj, 2020; M-Migration and 2020., 2020). The refugee camps that house 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, 289,000 in Iraq, 232,000 South Sudanese in Uganda and 189,000 in Kenya are no exception (Chatteraj, 2017; Morris, 2020; Ullah, 2018a; Chan et al., 2020; Koh, 2020; Sohini & K Jha, 2020; K JhaPankaj and Samaddar, 2020; Jadhav, 2020; Ghosh, 2020; Chen, 2020).

#### 4. Potential changes in migration policy

This pandemic that knows no border has brought into focus the intersection of migration and public health policy. The pandemic will surely change the domain of global migration, and so will the policies. The world has changed, so did the [im]migration policies. The governments of many receiving countries have been seen to make drastic changes in their migration policies. Immigrant receiving countries have swiftly made decisions on [im]migration policies to adjust to the current situation. Enforcement of policies is already underway. For example, many countries are extending the stay permit for those third-country nationals who were already in the destination country. The European Commission had encouraged member states to treat seasonal workers as essential workers who should be allowed to travel.

Some countries have made strong use of migration and mobility policies supposedly for managing the outbreak of COVID-19. Greek authorities are going for border closures and a stop of asylum processing, and South Africa is going to build a fence along the border with Zimbabwe to prevent undocumented migrants who are a potential threat to coronavirus escalation (Condon, 2020; Islam, 2020; The New Arab, 2020; Ullah, Mohamad, Hassan, & Chatteraj, 2019). Australia has announced that the government would only take care of the citizens, and all the foreigners holding temporary visas are advised to take care of their own expenses; if affected with COVID-19, otherwise they may leave the country. This brings in difficulty for the hundreds of thousands of foreigners and students staying in Australia (Latifi & Heydari, 2020).

The US has issued an Order to prohibit entering asylum-seekers, which severely limits access to asylum in the US. Unaccompanied alien children, who are not subject to immediate deportation under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008, are being detained and sent back. Travels from many countries such as

China, the Schengen area of Europe, England, Ireland and Iran are banned (Fasani & Mazza, 2020). The US Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) has suspended in-person interviews for immigration, naturalization, permanent residence and asylum. This could place immigrants in the precarious position of overstaying their visas and being at risk of deportation (Fasani & Mazza, 2020).

Many of the US companies are set to lay off employees under H1B visas. Many other companies are reconsidering their employee hiring and retention decisions. The H1B workforce layoffs are indicative of a greater immigration problem in the years to come (Ullah & Huque, 2019). The UAE has suspended work visas and visa-on-arrival following the pandemic (Landau, 2020). No 'new' migrant workers are allowed to enter destination countries such as Singapore and Brunei (Crawley, 2020; Mashal et al., 2020; Slater & Masih, 2020; Yoyboke, 2020). No new work permits will be issued to foreign workers in Singapore (Ahmed & Deshingkar, 2020) until further notice.

There is growing evidence that as many as 100 million migrants chose irregular routes to migrate out because there are too few regular means through which they can travel (Piyash, 2020; Ullah et al., 2015; Ullah, 2018a; Sohini & K Jha, 2020; M. 2020a.D - 19, 2020a). In the current scenario, the desperate migrants seek irregular means to migrate by using smugglers, traffickers and other illicit groups (Legrain, 2020). Irregular migrants cross international boundaries without documentation or health checks. Although many migration pathways will reopen after the threat of COVID-19 disappears, some political leaders see current migration restrictions as an opportunity to reinforce broader, longer-term agendas built around xenophobia and 'othering' of migrants (Center for Migration Stud, 2020; Ullah, 2014; Ullah, 2016a; Ullah & Huque, 2019; Ullah et al., 2015)

Some scholars and policymakers see a ray of hope out of this pandemic. It is that the lockdown is making people stay home. This helps clean the environment. The deficiencies of health professionals might lead to job opportunities for asylum seekers and migrant populations. The Portuguese government, for example, is granting citizenship rights to all migrants and asylum seekers who have residency applications underway. The move is intended to ensure that everybody who needs it has access to social security and health care while the country battles the spread of Coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020b). Some industries in Europe, such as agriculture, currently fear further economic losses due to travel restrictions causing few migrants to come. The agriculture sector in Germany, is highly dependent on migrant workers from Bulgaria, Poland or Romania, fears that this year's harvest could fall in jeopardy due to border closures. Other migrants are being considered to come to join the rescue effort. Hence Germany's agricultural minister suggested that asylum seekers could be given temporary work permits (Condon, 2020).

## 5. Conclusions

Initially, lockdown has been the best option for thwarting the spread of the virus due to the fact that nature if the virus was unknown to most scientists. The suddenness and the pervasiveness of the emergence of the virus transpired the flaws in managing this pandemic, no matter how resourceful the country is making every single individual vulnerable. The vulnerabilities, however, are not equally strewn (Ullah & Haque, 2020). The migrant population in the host countries is already in a vulnerable situation for a myriad of reasons. This vulnerability has been exacerbated in the pandemic and triggered by government-imposed lockdowns (Avato et al., 2010; Dustmann et al., 2010; Fasani & Mazza, 2020). Due to restrictions on mobility, migrants are losing their work, and hence they were getting indebted. As days pass by, the scenario is likely to worsen.

Cases of xenophobia, discrimination and stigmatization have been common. In some incidents, migrants were not allowed to enter hotels nor access supermarkets and restaurants or have been evicted from their hotels/apartments as they were stigmatized as major spreaders of the virus. Issues of discrimination are prevalent where migrants are believed

to be carriers of the virus. This is also the case for migrants who returned to their countries of origin and experienced stigma as they were viewed as the carriers of the virus.

Migrant populations, including refugees, displaced persons and asylum seekers, have been caught up between health crisis and food crisis; between the uncertainty of job retention and desire to return home; between stay home to be safe and urgency to go out for survival. Migrants and people living in crowded shelters and camps or camp-like settings face increasing health risks as COVID-19 cases continue to emerge in their cramped living quarters, which often include overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, poor nutrition, and limited access to health care facilities.

In most South Asian, Latin American and African countries, lockdown has been strictly enforced since late March 2020, before which they seemed to have resorted to "wait and see" approach. The respondents mentioned that public gatherings have been common in densely populated and democratic countries. Some respondents said that respect for lockdown had got something to do with the political system the country is under (Ullah, 2014, 2016a). However, leadership plays a great role in handling the pandemic. New Zealand and the USA are the best examples of two extremes (Gosh, 2020).

While the pandemic has dismantled the normalcy, we may assume some positive speculations. The economic slowdown as a result of the COVID-19 implies less trade, less travel, less commerce and fewer emissions (Jayaram, 2020), which in turn contribute to a better natural climate, and the migrant population will have a great opportunity to revisit their future plans. They had an opportunity to earn resilience. This pandemic could be a wake-up call for the policymakers. Calls are being ringed louder than before to beef up the health system so that they are ready to handle future catastrophes of any scale.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**AKM Ahsan Ullah:** Conceptualization, Methodology, interview, writing, Writing - review & editing, analyzing, Writing - original draft.  
**Faraha Nawaz:** Interviews, helping in drafting, reviewing the findings.  
**Diotima Chattoraj:** Literature search and literature review.

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