

A statement from civil society and academia on the situation of international migrant workers from India during Covid19 Pandemic

Covid19 pandemic is no more a health crisis. It threatens the health, livelihood and income of workers and employers globally. The increasing impact of the virus in major destination countries such as the GCC region and European countries, the limited mobility by air and the impact on the economy and employment affects international migrant workers to a great extent. Now, every country in the world has implemented border closures, travel restrictions, prohibitions on arrivals from certain areas, and heightened screening. It has affected millions of migrants working or studying abroad and stranded away from home, with unequal or uncertain access to health and other critical services.

As the origin country of one of the largest migrant populations in the world, India has many reasons to worry. Temporary labour migrants from the country are increasingly vulnerable due to the loss of employment, lack of access to healthcare and other basic services - especially in GCC countries where almost 50 percent of Indian migrants are located. Undocumented workers, especially women domestic workers and casual workers are the most vulnerable. Due to the fear of getting caught, they do not access health facilities. Absence of healthcare and an access firewall for undocumented workers make them most vulnerable. Indian women migrant workers, especially nurses and domestic workers play a key role in the current crisis across the globe as caregivers and medical personnel. However, the extensive workload, while governments still struggle to provide protective equipment, make them vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. Many healthcare professionals from the country are already affected by the virus, in Europe, UK, USA, Canada and Gulf countries. Family members of migrant workers, some of whom are afflicted with severe health conditions including pregnancy, age-related and other life-style diseases are also affected by the closure of borders since the workers are unable to travel back home. Even though stakeholders including the government have limited understanding about the severity of problems faced by migrant workers in the destination country, everyone unanimously agrees that migrant workers and their living and health conditions are increasingly vulnerable. Rescue missions and repatriation efforts carried out by the national government so far were helpful for a section of migrants in the current context of low international mobility. The Indian missions in destination countries, especially in the Gulf countries also began to respond to the needs of migrant workers. However, an increased government intervention is necessary, considering the volume of migrant workers and the looming economic crises which may further lead to large-scale loss of employment and income in destination countries. Moreover, all these accumulated uncertainties created an overwhelming situation of fear and anxiety among Indian workers. As academicians and migrant activists, we would like to offer the following suggestions to the government at this critical juncture.

Immediate solutions

As a country of Origin, the Indian government should:

- The difficulty in repatriation of all workers notwithstanding, the government needs to facilitate the return of migrant workers who lost their jobs during the crisis, who suffer from various health conditions such as pregnancy, severe lifestyle diseases, and at-risk elderly on visit visas as soon as possible. The emergency repatriation should either be free or at a subsidised cost.
- Announce financial aid for state governments to support medical testing and quarantine facilities for returnees and to provide immediate financial assistance to migrants and their families.
- Negotiate with the host countries to extend all categories of visas, address the bonded nature of labour contracts of the employees to their employers, and guarantee access to health and social services for the duration of the crisis.
- Effectively and efficiently communicate all decisions of the Indian government to migrants on temporary visas, migrant communities, employers of migrant workers and educational institutions with international students. Circulate Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) advisories in all Indian languages to workers in order to reduce the fear and panic among them.
- Prevention of discrimination, exclusion and stigmatisation – The government may negotiate for strict actions against discrimination in the current scenario and provide legal protections to migrants at the home country as well.
- Set up exclusive hotline numbers for visa expiry related cases, undocumented workers and workers on visiting visa.
- Indian missions should conduct immediate visits to all labour camps and collect the data of workers in crisis and assist them with free COVID19 testing, food, shelter and a survival allowance.
- The high cost of essential medicines at destinations usually lead to migrants carrying medicines from India. The travel ban has affected the availability of low-cost medicines for Indians, especially in the Gulf. The government should make arrangements to ensure regular supply of medicines through Indian missions.

- We are aware of the recent attempts by Indian missions to set up quarantine facilities in Gulf countries. The government should coordinate efforts with the support of registered diaspora organisations and state governments. Moreover, the Indian government may continue to announce its willingness to send medical teams similar to the 'Rapid response team to Kuwait' in order to support efforts in countries which have large Indian populations.
- There are many undocumented workers in destination countries. The government may negotiate with the host countries for the provision of healthcare access to all migrants regardless of their migrant status. Shelter homes of Indian missions should be used as quarantine facilities for undocumented workers.
- A co-ordination committee of embassy officials and Indian community workers should be set up to facilitate the recently announced amnesty programs in the Gulf countries. The government has to demand inclusion of people on 'visit visa' in the already announced amnesty schemes and negotiate with the host countries to include whoever wants to return using the amnesty schemes.
- Communicate, and negotiate with employers who have registered in the eMigrate website to address and ensure access to healthcare and shelter. The list of major employers in the destination countries can be collected from recruitment agencies and Indian missions could coordinate with these employers for better provisions for workers.
- Provide free Covid19 testing kits for Indian workers.
- Provide one-time financial assistance for the return migrants during registration upon arrival
- Announce three-months moratorium on repayment of banks loans and private borrowings by returnee migrant workers.

Long term solutions

- The national government does not recognise the reintegration of return migrants as a responsibility of the Central government. Considering the current situation in the destination countries, large-scale return of Indian workers will happen after travel bans are lifted. So, the national government should announce reintegration packages for all the workers and implement it with the support of state governments.

- Specifically, the government should collect the data of the return migrants based on their skills and experience and provide quota for the returnee migrant workers in the job market. Instead of the existing one-time assistance schemes, the government should consider about developing sustainable projects for reintegration with the support of state governments. Those projects should be gender-sensitive.
- The undocumented returnee migrant workers should also be included in the reintegration projects of both state and national governments.
- Appoint more Labour Attaches in all ECR countries to manage post-covid19 labour welfare and to conduct labour camps visits once in week with medical practitioners, lawyers and psychologists.
- Develop a separate fund such as the ICWF (Indian Community Welfare Fund) to exclusively deal with migrant worker health concerns and establish a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to save the lives of Indian workers during such crises in the future.
- Availability of data is important for developing concrete welfare programs for migrants. The government should release and share the available data on migrants with state governments. The data collection initiated by the Indian missions during the current crisis should be continued and it should be shared with state governments as well. Apart from the official data sharing, the government should replicate scientific sample surveys such as Kerala Migration Survey in other states.
- A co-ordination committee of state government departments, the overseas Indian affairs department and non-government actors should be set up for effective management of international migration.
- The current situation of migrants in destination countries underlines the fact that the clauses and regulations in the newly drafted bill are not ample enough to protect the rights and welfare of the migrant workers. The Central government should be ready to redraft the bill by considering the changes yet to occur in the post-COVID19 migration scenario.
- Clauses in the Pravasi Bhartiya Bima Yojana (PBBY) insurance scheme should be inclusive of the loss of employment and health hazards due to pandemic such as COVID-19.

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