

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sri Lankan Migrant Workers in the Gulf Region



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by

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations	viii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The unfolding of COVID-19 in the GCC	3
2.1 Policies on migrant workers implemented by Gulf countries ..	5
during the pandemic	
3. Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf.....	7
4. Methodology	9
4.1 In-depth interviews	9
4.2 Descriptive data	10
4.3 Limitations.....	11
5. Discussion	11
5.1 Pandemic-related challenges faced by migrant workers	11
in the Gulf region	
5.1.2 Pandemic-induced financial challenges	11
5.1.3 Health-related challenges brought about by the	
pandemic	15
5.2 Coping mechanisms adapted by migrants	18
5.3 The impact of GoSL’s pandemic containment policies on	21
migrant workers	
5.4 Support provided to migrant workers by the GoSL.....	23
5.4.1 Support while in the host Gulf country	23
5.4.2 Support extended to pandemic-affected migran	25
returnees	
5.5 Conclusion	26
5.6 Recommendations	29
References	31

Abbreviations

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SLBFE	Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment
UAE	United Arab Emirates

01. Introduction

As the Gulf War of 1991, the Lebanon war of 2006, the global financial crisis in the late 2000s, and the recent Lebanese financial crisis indicate, at times of turmoil in host countries, Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Middle East, similar to those from other South Asian countries, tend to face extreme hardships (Gamburd, 2003; Kynaston, 2022; Ranjitha, 2006; Weeraratna, 2020). Among other factors, discriminatory policies implemented to protect native workers, lack of resources allocated to support migrant workers, migrants' limited understanding of the native Arabic language, and the restrictive sponsorship system in the region make them vulnerable, particularly during emergencies. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans into crisis, was extremely challenging for Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Middle East, including those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region.

Even though the GCC region, comprising Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Bahrain, where the vast majority of Sri Lankan migrant workers reside, did not experience as many cases of COVID-19 at the onset of the pandemic as regions such as Europe, Northern America and Latin America, Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf faced severe financial issues in addition to the health challenges of the pandemic.

At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the crowded labour camps, where most Sri Lankan low-wage migrant workers in the Gulf resided, became breeding grounds for COVID-19 and had to be placed in isolation with entry and exit barred. As the year 2020 progressed, lockdowns and other COVID-19 containment measures imposed, coupled with

the contraction of Gulf economies caused by the pandemic-led drastic decline in oil prices in the world market, resulted in lay-offs, pay-cuts, delays in payments and other financial issues for migrants belonging to all skill levels (Ekanayake, 2020). Furthermore, while certain Gulf countries implemented policies to provide financial support to help their populations affected by the pandemic, most of these were geared towards benefiting only citizens and local businesses, and migrant workers were given limited financial assistance (Equidem, 2020). As a result, the pandemic severely affected Sri Lankan migrant workers and their families that depend on the remittances they send home.

While the Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf region were negatively affected by the pandemic-related policies implemented by their host governments, their adverse situation was further exacerbated by some of the measures taken by the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) that were geared toward controlling the spread of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. For instance, Sri Lanka's border closure from 19 March 2020, expensive private quarantine packages, and the long waiting list for free government quarantine facilities that were in place until April 2021 left thousands of migrant workers, predominantly low-income earning semi-skilled and low-skilled workers, stranded in the Gulf for approximately a year.

While a few reports have been published on how the pandemic has affected Sri Lankan migrant workers (Weeraratna, 2020), these have mainly looked at the economic impact of the pandemic. Hence, this study that will assess the economic and socio-psychological impact of the pandemic and the policies of the GoSL on migrant workers during the pandemic will add to the existing literature in four main ways:

- 1) It examines the challenges Sri Lankan migrant workers faced due to the pandemic, making comparisons based on their skill level and gender.
- 2) It evaluates the coping mechanisms Sri Lankan migrant workers employed to overcome the economic and psycho-social challenges brought about by the pandemic while in their host countries.
- 3) It assesses the impact of the GoSL's COVID-19-related policies on the challenges faced by the migrant workers in the Gulf.
- 4) It examines the support, if any, offered to pandemic-affected Sri Lankan migrant workers by Sri Lankan government organisations while in the host countries as well as after their return to Sri Lanka.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: the next section focuses on how the pandemic unfolded in the Gulf region, while the third section provides an overview of Sri Lankan migrants in the Gulf region. Section four is on methodology and descriptive data. This is followed by the discussion in section five. Finally, we provide concluding remarks and recommendations.

02. The unfolding of COVID-19 in the GCC

The first case of COVID-19 in the Gulf region was reported on 27th January, 2020 in the UAE (UN News, 2020), and by mid-March 2020, it developed into a massive outbreak with the spread of the disease in cramped labour camps across the region (Equidem, 2020). Even though, in the beginning, the spread of COVID-19 in the region was mainly concentrated in areas where low-income earning migrant workers resided, such as the Doha Industrial Area in Qatar (Amnesty International, 2020) and Duqm Special Economic Zone in Oman (Owtram & Hayek, 2020), it

soon became rampant throughout the region. By May 2020, the region had reported 118,739 cases of COVID-19, with two countries in the region, namely Bahrain and Qatar, having reported the highest per capita COVID-19 infections in the world (Gambrell, 2020b).

While the proportionately young population in the GCC helped keep the region's COVID-19 mortality rate at a comparatively low level and the region performed relatively well from a health perspective (Rimawi & Rimawi, 2021), just like many other regions and countries, the GCC region was severely affected by the economic impact of the pandemic. This was partly because, from March 2020, GCC governments implemented strict containment measures, such as lockdowns, to combat the rising infection that curtailed the region's economic activities (Equidem, 2020). However, the main economic issue faced by the GCC region due to COVID-19 was the unprecedented drastic reduction in global demand for oil. As factories had to operate far below the optimal capacity and fewer vehicles were on the road due to lockdowns imposed worldwide, by April 2020, the demand for oil experienced the most profound fall in twenty-five years (Ambrose, 2020). This was a severe blow for the oil revenue-dependent GCC economies.

Apart from the oil sector, the non-oil industries of the region also experienced shocks akin to other COVID-19 affected countries all around the world. For instance, tourism, a vital sector of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, was particularly affected due to travel bans and suspension of flights. As a result, the Dubai Expo 2020, a world exhibition planned to commence in late 2020, had to be postponed to October 2021, affecting the UAE's plans to boost its tourism and hospitality industry (Gambrell, 2020a). Also, Saudi Arabia had to halt the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage seasons which bring in the bulk of their annual tourism income of approximately

USD 12 billion (The Economic Times, 2020). On the other hand, in Qatar, the lockdown of the industrial area from mid-March to early May 2020, where many construction workers and materials for construction sites were located, disrupted many construction projects (Collier, 2020).

In order to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic on their economies, the governments of GCC countries introduced various stimulus packages. For instance, the Central Bank of UAE implemented an AED 100 billion support scheme for retail and corporate customers affected by the pandemic. At the same time, the Abu Dhabi Executive Council allocated AED three billion to the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) Guarantee Scheme (Government of the UAE, 2020). Similarly, Qatar's Supreme Committee for Crisis Management (SCCM) declared a stimulus package of Qatar Riyal 75 billion (USD 20.5 billion) for the private sector, while the Government of Qatar increased its investments in the Qatar Stock Exchange by Qatar Riyal 10 billion to boost the market (*Qatar Tackles Coronavirus with Stimulus Package*, 2020). However, according to the World Bank, even with increased government stimulus packages to reduce the economic impact of the pandemic, the region's economy experienced a contraction of 4.8 per cent in 2020 (World Bank, 2021).

2.1 Policies on migrant workers implemented by Gulf countries during the pandemic

The spread of COVID-19 in the GCC in 2020 severely impacted its migrant population, which accounts for around 70 per cent of the region's workforce (Equidem, 2020). At the early stage of the pandemic, the migrants most affected were low-skilled and semi-skilled workers, especially those residing in the cramped accommodations in the industrial areas of the region (Ekanayake, 2020). However, as the pandemic began to spread

and the economic activities in the region were halted, migrants belonging to all skill levels began to feel the economic impact of the pandemic. For example, by June 2020, Emirates and Qatar Airways, the GCC region's two leading airlines, terminated the services of many workers (Cornwell & Lema, 2020; Tahir & Bhatti, 2020), most of whom were migrants.

While the health impact of the pandemic was felt by both GCC citizens and foreign guest workers, when it comes to the economic impact, in most sectors, migrants had to bear the brunt of the pandemic. For instance, in Oman, the pandemic resulted in an intensification of nationalisation efforts, with the Government of Oman ordering its state-sector companies to replace all migrant workers with Omanis (Reuters Staff, 2020). In Qatar, the Ministry of Finance instructed all entities that are 100 per cent state-funded to cut spending on their foreign employees by 30 per cent either through pay cuts or layoffs, while for Qatari citizens, only their allowances were slashed (Abadi, 2020; Foxman, 2020; HRK News Bureau, 2020). On the other hand, the UAE and Saudi Arabia provided financial relief to their citizens and local businesses affected by the pandemic, while little attention was paid to migrant workers (Equidem, 2020).

While the GCC governments prioritised shielding their citizens over migrant workers from the economic impact of the pandemic, when it came to accessing healthcare, particularly access to COVID-19 vaccines, all GCC countries, except for the Sultanate of Oman, treated both citizens and foreign guest workers more or less equally (*Oman's Discriminatory Vaccine Policies*, 2021). Moreover, even the Sultanate of Oman, which at the beginning offered free vaccines only to its citizens, extended the free vaccines to migrants by June 2021 (Amnesty International, 2021).

03. Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf

Since the oil boom in the mid-1970s, the GCC region has been a popular destination among Sri Lankans seeking overseas employment. The high tax-free salaries offered and the relative ease of obtaining jobs in this region compared to in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have resulted in an increasing number of Sri Lankans migrating to this region over the years (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2019).

Currently, Sri Lankan migrant workers in the GCC constitute a substantial portion of the country's overseas workforce (Attanayake, 2020) of approximately 1.6 million to 2 million migrants (Withers, 2019). According to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), over the past four decades, the Gulf region has remained the most common destination among Sri Lankan migrant workers, accounting for around 87 per cent of total departures for foreign employment between 2014 and 2018 (SLBFE, 2014, 2016, 2019). Qatar attracted the highest number of migrant workers, with 50,774 Sri Lankans (24 per cent) departing for Qatar for work in 2018. It is followed by 22 per cent migrants to Kuwait, 17 per cent migrants to Saudi Arabia, and 15.5 per cent migrants to the UAE. The other two nations in the GCC, Oman and Bahrain, attract relatively small numbers of migrant workers from Sri Lanka (4 and 1.3 per cent respectively).

In the beginning, the vast majority of Sri Lankans who migrated to the Gulf were males who found work in the region's booming construction sector (Sriskandarajah, 2002). However, with the increase in the Gulf citizens' wealth, the demand for domestic workers in the region soon began to surge (Wickramarachchi, 2020). Hence, by the late 1980s,

approximately two-thirds of Sri Lankan migrant workers in the GCC were female domestic workers, which led to a feminisation of the country's migrant workforce (Hettige et al., 2012; Sriskandarajah, 2002).

Female domestic workers dominated Sri Lanka's migrant workforce throughout the 1990s and 2000s. However, a shift in the policies of the Sri Lankan Government in the mid-2000s, which intended to increase skilled male workers and reduce female domestic workers, has led to a decline in the proportion of female migrant workers in recent years (Weeraratne, 2018). As a result, skilled male workers accounted for most departures to the Gulf in recent years, making up approximately 30.2 per cent of total departures between 2014 and 2018. However, female domestic workers still constitute a significant portion of total departures for foreign employment, with domestic workers accounting for 28.2 per cent in the 2014-2018 period. They were closely followed by other low-skilled workers, who made up 27.8 per cent of total departures (SLBFE, 2019). On the other hand, the percentage of both professionals and middle-level workers remained less than 4 per cent during the same period, while clerical and related workers accounted for 4 to 5 per cent of total departures (SLBFE, 2019).

Over the years, migrant workers, particularly those in the Gulf, have contributed to the Sri Lankan economy in several ways. Their most significant contribution has been the remittances they send to their families, which help address the foreign exchange needs of the country. It is estimated that Sri Lanka received LKR 1,138,124 (6,253,428,571 USD at 1USD=182LKR) as remittances from foreign employment in 2018, which amounted to 65 per cent of the total foreign exchange earnings (SLBFE, 2019), making it the highest foreign exchange earner in the country (International Labour Organization, 201; Withers, 2019). Sri

Lankan migrant workers in the Middle East, particularly those in the GCC, contribute the bulk of remittances received by the country and it is estimated that they were responsible for 51 per cent of total remittances received in 2008 (SLBFE, 2019).

04. Methodology

The study is mainly based on primary data gathered through 15 in-depth interviews with migrant workers and migrant returnees from four of the six Gulf countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Oman. In addition, a review of newspaper articles, media releases and policy documents was conducted to gather information about the GoSL's policies on containing COVID-19 in Sri Lanka and repatriating Sri Lankans stranded abroad.

4.1 In-depth interviews

The fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted virtually in two segments using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) calls. The first set of nine interviews was conducted in September 2020 with migrant workers who were based in Qatar at the time. The second cluster of interviews was conducted between November 2021 and February 2022 with six migrant workers who returned to Sri Lanka from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar and the UAE between September 2020 and July 2021. At the time of our interviews with them, two of these returnees had re-migrated to their former host countries. The rest were in Sri Lanka.

All interview participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure that the interviews covered the experiences of migrants belonging to different skill levels and facing varying levels of impact of the pandemic.

We used a semi-structured approach for the in-depth interviews. Depending on the participants' preferences, the interviews were conducted in either Sinhala, Tamil or English and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 20-50 minutes. The interview guide included questions about the respondents' motivations for migration, working conditions prior to the pandemic, pandemic-induced challenges they face, the support they received from the GoSL to overcome the pandemic-induced challenges, and their plans for returning to Sri Lanka.

At the conclusion of all interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach. The analysis included both deductive and inductive approaches.

4.2 Descriptive data

The fifteen in-depth interviews comprised 11 male and four female respondents. Eight respondents were between 41 and 50 years of age, while seven were between 31 and 40 years. Ten of the respondents were migrant workers in Qatar, three in Saudi Arabia, and there was one each from Oman and the UAE.

Five respondents were highly skilled, four were low-skilled, while both skilled and semi-skilled categories had three migrants each. The five high-skilled workers included two quantity surveyors, two managers and an engineer, and the three skilled workers included a restaurant captain, an assistant computer engineer and a skilled migrant worker involved in airline operations. The three semi-skilled workers included a driver and two automobile technicians, while the four low-skilled workers included three domestic workers and a loading and unloading helper.

4.3 *Limitations*

As with any study based on qualitative interviews alone, the key limitations of this study are the small sample size and the potential bias in answers given by respondents. While we attempted to minimise this by selecting participants belonging to all four skill levels and different occupational categories, we acknowledge that our sample includes a large number of migrant workers from Qatar and hence is skewed towards their experiences.

05. Discussion

5.1 *Pandemic-related challenges faced by migrant workers in the Gulf region*

The in-depth interviews indicate that Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf region faced a multitude of challenges due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and policies undertaken to contain its spread both in their host Gulf countries and in Sri Lanka. These pandemic-induced challenges can be broadly classified into two categories: financial and health-related difficulties.

5.1.2 *Pandemic-induced financial challenges*

As can be expected, overall, we found that Sri Lankan low-skilled and semi-skilled workers encountered more financial hardships than workers of the skilled and the highly-skilled categories. While four of the low-skilled and semi-skilled workers in the sample reported that they were faced with extreme financial hardships due to the pandemic, only two from the skilled and highly skilled groups indicated significant financial challenges.

The most common pandemic-induced financial challenge reported by Sri Lankan migrant workers across the skill spectrum was pay cuts, followed by delays in salary payments, cuts and delays in payment of allowances and gratuity, and job losses. In addition, some semi-skilled and low-skilled migrant workers, such as drivers, automobile technicians and loading and unloading helpers, reported that they faced more severe financial pitfalls in the form of difficulties in covering the costs of food, accommodation and other day-to-day basic needs, making them destitute in their host Gulf countries.

The in-depth interviews suggested that the pay cuts faced by Sri Lankan migrant workers varied between approximately five per cent to above 50 per cent of their total remuneration packages and, on average, lasted for six months in 2020. Due to the volatile economic conditions caused by the pandemic, most migrant workers anticipated that the financial stability of their employers would deteriorate throughout 2020. Hence, most of the respondents in our sample stated that they were willing to accept a reasonable pay cut over having their employers face bankruptcy, which would result in the loss of their jobs. However, some migrant workers who faced extreme pay cuts chose to resign from their occupations rather than continue working under deteriorated conditions. For instance, 48-year-old Mohamed, who was working as a Restaurant Captain in a hotel in the UAE at the onset of the pandemic, stated that he, along with twenty other colleagues, resigned from their posts as they considered their fifty-per cent pay slash beginning in March 2020 to be unfair.

As the pandemic containment policies in Gulf countries eased towards the latter part of 2020, these pay cuts were gradually abolished and the pre-pandemic salaries reinstated for most migrant workers. However, none of the interviewees who had faced pay cuts in our sample reported

that they were compensated for the loss of income they incurred during the early months of the pandemic.

Overall, we found that Sri Lankan migrant workers who had to undergo the most financial struggles were low-skilled workers whose contracts were terminated after the closure of the Sri Lankan border on 19th March, 2020. Some of these migrants had submitted their resignation letters in February and early March 2020, complying with their employers' one-month notice requirement, hoping to return to Sri Lanka at the end of March or early April 2020. As the contract termination process had already commenced, these migrant workers could not extend their work contracts even if they so desired. The rest were either laid off or had resigned amid the pandemic due to deteriorating working conditions or their desire to be with their families in Sri Lanka during the unprecedented health crisis. Even though the contracts of these migrants were terminated, resulting in the expiration of their visas, they could not immediately return to Sri Lanka at first due to the closure of Sri Lankan borders and later on due to the lack of space at government-run cost-free quarantine facilities and their inability to afford to quarantine at a paid facility in Sri Lanka. As a result, these migrants faced immense financial hardships throughout 2020, with some cases cascading into early 2021.

For instance, 32-year-old Kamal, a delivery driver in Qatar, planned to leave Qatar on 27th March, 2020. However, as the GoSL closed the country's borders on 19th March, 2020, Kamal was stranded in Qatar with an expired visa and no source of income. Even though his former sponsor continued to provide him with free accommodation, he had to cover the cost of food and other essentials on his own. At the time of our interview with him in September 2020, he had run through all his savings and was struggling to cover his basic living costs.

Even though some of these stranded migrants were provided free accommodation by their former employers, the others had to find their own lodging, aggravating their financial woes. For instance, 48-year-old Shivaraj, a loading worker in Saudi Arabia, planned to return to Sri Lanka in April 2020. However, as the borders were closed, he got stranded in Saudi Arabia for ten months and had to take care of his lodging, food and other basic needs all on his own. During this period, his family in Sri Lanka borrowed money to use for their daily essentials, and even at the time of our interview with him in November 2021, Shivaraj was still repaying these loans.

The financial struggles of these stranded migrants were further exacerbated by the additional expenses they had to incur for their eventual return to Sri Lanka, such as pre-departure and post-arrival PCR testing and increased air ticket prices. The price of a pre-departure PCR test varied from one Gulf country to another and changed during the course of the pandemic. However, irrespective of the country and time, the cost of PCR tests accounted for a significant percentage of a low-skilled migrant worker's monthly salary. On the other hand, the air ticket prices had soared mainly because most repatriation flights to Sri Lanka in 2020 were special charter flights which were more expensive than regular flights.

While some sponsors, especially employers of domestic workers, bore the costs of increased air tickets and pre-departure PCR tests, other migrant workers seeking to return home had to bear these additional expenses on their own. For instance, Piyal, who was stranded in Qatar at the time of our interview with him in September 2020, stated that the cost of a charter flight was QAR 2200, while the maximum allowance he received from his company for the air ticket was QAR 1700, and that he had to fund the difference in price himself.

Overall, from a gender perspective, we found that male migrant workers encountered more financial issues than females during the pandemic. This could be partly because most of our sample of female migrants were domestic workers. While the lockdowns and other COVID-19 containment measures imposed by Gulf countries significantly affected the job security of male migrant workers, these measures seemed not to have affected the job security of domestic workers to the same extent as domestic workers could continue their work inside their sponsors' premises during the pandemic, carrying on as they had done prior to the pandemic. While the job security of domestic workers who live out or whose employers faced severe financial difficulties could have been volatile, our sample did not include either of these types preventing further analysis on these groups of domestic workers.

5.1.3 Health-related challenges brought about by the pandemic

The health impact of the pandemic on Sri Lankan migrant workers includes both physical health-related and mental health-related challenges. The in-depth interviews revealed that, while only four of the respondents faced pandemic-related physical health challenges, all of them had faced varying levels of mental health challenges as a result of the pandemic, indicating that the psychological impact of the pandemic has been much more pervasive among Sri Lankan migrant workers than its physical health impact.

All migrant workers we interviewed stated they were under immense stress during the first few months of the pandemic. For some, the stress factors were mainly due to the financial challenges they faced that were discussed in the preceding section. For the others, fear of contracting COVID-19, fear of their family members in Sri Lanka contracting COVID-19, and their inability to be with their families during this unprecedented global

event were the stress factors. For instance, 41-year-old Shazna,¹ who worked in Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker for ten years until her return in July 2021, stated, “My employer and his son contracted COVID-19. I was worried and crying all the time. It was a tough time for me. I video-called my husband [in Kuwait] all the time. I was also worried about my daughter in Sri Lanka a lot.” Likewise, 41-year-old Fathima, who was employed as a domestic worker in Oman at the onset of the pandemic, stated that she was tense due to the spiralling death toll of the pandemic and wished that she could be with her daughters in Sri Lanka.

Three of the migrant workers who stated that they had physical health challenges due to the pandemic attributed those mainly to contracting COVID-19. While none of them had required hospitalisation, they stated they had been extremely unwell for several days. Two of them had resorted to home remedies and over-the-counter medicine to alleviate their symptoms, while one migrant worker who contracted COVID-19 had visited a health centre. Incidentally, he was the only respondent in the sample who had confirmed their diagnosis using a medical test.

While most Gulf countries provided healthcare access to migrant workers who had contracted COVID-19 irrespective of their visa status in the country (Equidem, 2020), Sri Lankan migrant workers with expired visas, just like those from other countries, reported hesitation in visiting hospitals to obtain treatment. For instance, Shivaraj, who was stranded in Saudi Arabia without a job at the time of contracting COVID-19, stated that he did not seek help from a health professional because he did not have a valid visa or insurance to cover the medical expenses. Similarly, Kamal, who was stranded in Qatar when he got infected with COVID-19, stated that he did not visit a hospital as his visa had expired. Both migrants

¹ All names of the respondents are anonymised to ensure their privacy

were unaware that they could access healthcare for COVID-19 in their host countries despite their irregular visa status.

While most migrant workers who faced physical health issues due to the pandemic attributed them to contracting COVID-19, the others, particularly the domestic workers who experienced health challenges during the first few months of the pandemic, attributed them to an increased workload. For instance, Shazna, who was working in Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker at the onset of the pandemic, stated that her workload had drastically increased as the lockdown imposed in Saudi Arabia forced her employers to stay at home. She stated that, as her employer and his family stayed at home all day during the lockdown, she had to cook and clean more than usual, causing her to develop health problems that required medical treatment.

While the respondents in our sample indicated minimal physical health-related issues caused by the pandemic, we do not by any means intend to downplay the deaths and acute physical health issues faced by some Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf region.² However, we argue that the absence of respondents reporting severe physical ailments in our sample is most probably because our sample includes relatively young migrant workers who are between the ages of 30 to 50, which is the average age range of the Sri Lankan migrant worker population in the Gulf. The vast majority of Sri Lankans in the Gulf region are young workers due to the labour recruitment policies of Gulf countries which have stringent rules regarding employing migrants above 60 years of age.

² According to the Sri Lankan Ministry of Labour, by April 2021, 113 Sri Lankans had died in the Gulf from COVID-19, while more than 4,000 had contracted the virus (South Asia Monitor, 2021).

5.2 *Coping mechanisms adopted by migrants*

The in-depth interviews revealed that migrant workers resorted to various coping mechanisms to deal with the financial and health challenges posed by the pandemic. While regular contact with family members in Sri Lanka in the form of audio and video calls was the common coping mechanism employed to overcome the mental health-related challenges of the pandemic, tapping into savings, borrowing, moving to accommodation with lower rentals, sharing accommodation, and cutting down on food and other expenses were the common coping mechanisms employed to offset the financial hit.

For instance, Shivaraj, a loading-unloading helper stranded in Saudi Arabia for ten months after the termination of his employment contract in April 2020, stated that he relied on multiple coping strategies to survive in his host country without a job. As he had to leave his company-provided accommodation at the termination of his employment contract, he moved in with some of his friends, who provided him with free lodging. While he could manage his food and other essential expenses in the first few months by using the money he had saved for emergency purposes, even that became a massive challenge for him as the months passed. As a result, he posted about the difficulties he faced on a social media site, and a Sri Lankan residing in Saudi Arabia provided him with SAR 250 in cash and dry rations. Shivaraj said he would never forget that generous gesture as it enabled him to survive a few more months in Saudi Arabia until his return to Sri Lanka at the beginning of 2021.

We found through the in-depth interviews that some migrant workers took extreme measures to reduce their expenses to cope with their financial difficulties. For instance, Farooq, an automobile technician who

was stranded in Qatar without a job for six months at the time of our interview with him in September 2020, stated that he had resorted to eating *kuboos* bread, an Arabic pita bread which costs 10 Qatar Dirhams (less than 1 USD cents), to minimise his food expenses. Likewise, Asiri, a skilled-worker in airline operations, stated at the time of our interview with him in September 2020, that he had cut down his travel expenses to cope with the income loss due to pay cuts. Though Asiri's financial situation was far better than most migrant workers in Qatar despite his 15% pay slash, he reduced his expenses to maintain his pre-pandemic remittances level to Sri Lanka. Asiri stated:

I have always remitted to Sri Lanka a fixed amount. That did not change because of COVID-19. It was because I cut down my expenditure in Qatar. For example, I started going to places on foot to reduce transportation expenses rather than taking a taxi. I walk to the supermarket, which is around 2.5kms away from my home. Then, I come back with the groceries on foot instead of taking a taxi. I do not want to reduce the amount I remit to Sri Lanka due to external factors as I have to settle my housing loan in Sri Lanka.

Even though some Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf successfully coped with the financial struggles brought about by the pandemic by cutting down their expenses, others were not as lucky. Several migrants, mainly low-skilled and semi-skilled workers, who lost their jobs had to resort to seeking help from their families. For instance, Sunil, a delivery driver in Qatar who resigned from his job in early March 2020 intending to return to Sri Lanka, stated at the time of our interview with him in September 2020 that he could no longer bear his expenses in Qatar and had to ask his wife in Sri Lanka to pawn her necklace and send him money. Likewise, Shazna, who worked as a domestic helper in Saudi

Arabia until July 2021, stated that her husband was stranded in Kuwait for eight months after losing his job as a hotel worker and that he had to rely on the remittances that Shazna sent from Saudi Arabia as he had struggled to meet his food expenses.

As can be expected, compared to semi-skilled and low-skilled workers, skilled and highly-skilled workers who were laid off or faced with pay cuts or delays in payments were able to cope with the financial strain of the pandemic more easily due to their accumulated savings. For instance, Ramesh, a senior manager of a floriculture company in Qatar, despite being unable to operate his business for months and not receiving a salary, stated at the time of our interview with him in September 2020 that he was able to cover his living costs in Qatar and the expenses of his family in Sri Lanka by drawing from his savings.

Even though some high-skilled migrants who lost their jobs could not afford to stay in Qatar and look for other job opportunities, they could utilise their prior savings to pay for the expensive quarantine process in Sri Lanka and return home. This spared them months of agonising financial difficulties in their host country while awaiting a place at a free quarantine facility. Though they might not have been able to find a job immediately upon their return to Sri Lanka, their accumulated savings were likely to help them sustain their lives for a more extended period in Sri Lanka as the cost of living in Sri Lanka was lower than that of Qatar.

However, unlike high-skilled migrants with accumulated savings, semi-skilled migrants generally do not have accumulated savings to support them during an extended period of unemployment. In general, their salaries in the Gulf are used to purchase consumer durables and meet everyday household expenses (Athukorala, 1990; Shaw, 2010). For

example, Farooq, the automobile technician stranded in Qatar for six months, stated that life in Qatar was a struggle due to the pandemic. As he did not have sufficient savings to sustain long periods of joblessness, he struggled to provide for his family in Sri Lanka, who were dependent solely on the remittances he sent. Similarly, Shivaraj, who was stranded in Saudi Arabia for ten months, had to borrow money to provide for his family in Sri Lanka, and at the time of our interview with him in November 2021, he was continuing to repay this debt.

5.3 The impact of GoSL's pandemic containment policies on migrant workers

The in-depth interviews suggest that while lockdowns and other pandemic containment measures undertaken by the host Gulf countries accounted for a significant percentage of challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrant workers, the most severe challenges these migrants faced were a result of COVID-19 containment policies implemented by the GoSL from March 2020 to April 2021.

The closure of Sri Lankan borders on 19th March, 2020, which was deemed necessary at the time to control the spread of COVID-19 within Sri Lanka and to prevent overburdening the country's healthcare system, prevented overseas Sri Lankans, the majority of whom were migrant workers in the Gulf, from returning home. The in-depth interviews suggest that this measure initially mainly affected Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf who were planning a permanent return to Sri Lanka in March and April 2020. As the border closure was unexpected, migrant workers who had already submitted their resignations had no option but to stay in their host Gulf nation with neither an occupation nor a source of income. With lockdowns and other containment measures imposed by the Gulf countries, Sri Lankan migrant workers, similar to migrant workers from

other countries, were subjected to lay-offs, further increasing the number of Sri Lankans stranded in the Gulf without a source of income.

While the Sri Lankan Government arranged several repatriation flights to bring stranded Sri Lankans home soon after the airport was closed, the priority was given to students, those on short visits, pilgrimages and government training abroad (Razick, 2020). The repatriation of migrant workers from the Gulf commenced only in May 2020. However, even after this long delay in commencing the repatriation of migrant workers from the Gulf, the process was inefficient and disorganised and seemed to lack any consideration for the wellbeing of migrant workers (Alphonsus, 2020). For instance, the 466 Sri Lankan irregular migrants who had received amnesty from Kuwait³ were allowed to return in May 2020 only after the Government of Kuwait forced the GoSL to approve their transfer, and Kuwait bore the cost of the repatriation flights. Moreover, whenever new clusters of COVID-19 emerged in Sri Lanka, such as the Kandakadu cluster in July 2020 and the Minuwangoda cluster in October 2020, the Government of Sri Lanka temporarily halted or limited the repatriation of migrant workers, especially those from the Gulf, citing inadequate quarantine capacity as the reason (Alphonsus, 2020). Hence, even by September 2020, there were 25,000-30,000 migrant workers awaiting repatriation (Kumarasinghe, 2020)

Part of the problem was that at the beginning, the GoSL only allowed returnees to quarantine at one of the 32 government-run quarantine facilities (Rajapaksa et al., 2022), which created capacity constraints and long waiting lists in host Gulf countries. However, following the examples

3 From 1 to 30 April 2020, the Kuwaiti Government declared an amnesty for irregular migrant workers in Kuwait who do not have any ban on departure to leave the country without paying any penalties. Migrants who had overstayed their visas or were otherwise undocumented in Kuwait were allowed to apply for amnesty. The amnesty also allows these irregular migrants the possibility to return to Kuwait in the future with the necessary documents.

of other countries, from August 2020, the GoSL allowed migrants to quarantine at hotels at a fee. As the number of COVID-19 cases identified within Sri Lanka began to rise after the discovery of the Minuwangoda cluster in October 2020, the government quarantine facilities were solely dedicated to quarantining those in the country (Alphonsus, 2020), making hotel quarantine the only viable option for returning migrants during the last quarter of 2020.

However, the GoSL-approved hotels that allowed quarantine facilities were semi-luxury and luxury hotels that, according to the in-depth interviews, charged a minimum of LKR 105,000 for the fortnight government-mandated quarantine period. This was an extremely high amount for most semi-skilled and low-skilled migrant workers in the Gulf region, even at the best of times. However, with job losses, pay cuts, and delays in salary payments caused by the pandemic, most low-income migrants in the region could not afford that amount. As a result, they waited a very long time for vacancies at government-run quarantine facilities. For instance, Shivaraj, who was stranded in Saudi Arabia without a job since April 2020, could find a vacancy at a government-run quarantine place only in February 2021.

5.4 Support provided to migrant workers by the GoSL

5.4.1 Support while in the host Gulf country

In June 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka declared that it had disbursed LKR 42.6 million to Sri Lankan overseas missions in the Middle-Eastern region to provide basic rations, medicines and safety equipment to pandemic-affected migrant workers (Aryasinha, 2020). However, the in-depth interviews indicate a paucity of support, indifference, and apathy by the Sri Lankan missions in Gulf countries

towards the plight of migrant workers during the pandemic, particularly that of low-skilled workers who faced severe pandemic-induced challenges in their host countries.

One of the main complaints raised by the respondents about the support extended by Sri Lankan missions in their host countries was that they were not provided information about the availability of repatriation flights and quarantine facilities in an efficient manner. For instance, migrant workers in Qatar and Saudi Arabia complained that they were made to stand for hours in long queues in front of the Sri Lankan embassies in these countries in the Middle-Eastern summer heat to get information about government-organised repatriation facilities. They also complained about the disorderly nature of data collection from migrant workers seeking to return to Sri Lanka. For instance, Shivaraj, who was stranded in Saudi Arabia for ten months, stated, “I do not think the embassy even computerised our serial number. Whenever we called, they asked for all the information again. This happened for several months.”

Another complaint of migrant workers was that the embassy officials and the GoSL prioritised the repatriation of those who could afford to pay for charter flights and quarantine at luxury hotels, while ignoring low-skilled and semi-skilled workers, some of whom had lost their jobs and were faced with immense financial hardships, and in some cases, various health issues. For instance, Shivaraj stated, “The embassy said that I could quickly return if I pay LKR 500,000. But, how can I pay that amount?” Similarly, during our September 2020 interview, Kamal, a delivery driver in Qatar, complained that he could not return to Sri Lanka even though he needed medical care:

The embassy is useless. They take complaints only the way they want. [There is] no support from the embassy. Even though [some

officers at the embassy] said they would support me to get medicine, it did not happen. I even sent my medical certificates. But, no response from them. I did not get a cent from them. My wife even visited the Immigration Department in Sri Lanka and told them about my illness. They said that they had informed the embassy. But, it did not happen. Nobody was supportive.

While most migrant workers were unhappy about how they were treated by the staff of Sri Lankan missions, others believed that the staff was helpless due to the policies implemented by the GoSL. For instance, Mohamed, who was stranded in the UAE, stated, “The embassy staff gave the maximum support. But, they could not do anything as the airport was closed. Every time I visited, they showed that my name was there [on the list].”

Some migrant workers highlighted personal support extended by some staff members at Sri Lankan missions in the Gulf. For instance, Saroja, a domestic worker in Oman, who was seeking to return to Sri Lanka at the end of her employment contract in August 2020, stated that while most embassy officers were unhelpful, one officer whom she found through a personal connection kept her updated about repatriation flight schedules via WhatsApp messages. Similarly, Shivaraj, who was stranded in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic, stated that an officer at the embassy provided him with cooking essentials as a personal goodwill gesture.

5.4.2 Support extended to pandemic-affected migrant returnees

The in-depth interviews and desk review of available literature on Sri Lankan returnee migrant workers during the pandemic indicate that the support given to pandemic-affected returnee migrant workers was almost non-existent.

While all returnee migrants in the sample stated that they were treated well by the tri-forces managing the quarantine process, they did not receive any special attention from the SLBFE or any other institution based on their status as migrant returnees. Moreover, though the SLBFE had announced on its official website that it had collected information on returnee migrant workers at quarantine centres (SLBFE, 2020), all the returnee migrant workers we interviewed stated that their information had not been collected at the quarantine centres as advertised by the SLBFE, indicating that the information gathering on pandemic-affected returnees was not done efficiently. Moreover, among the six returnees, only one was aware of the existence of a proposed support programme. Sivaraja, the only migrant returnee aware of this programme, stated that, after completing his quarantine, he had visited the Divisional Secretariat office in his hometown and provided the SLBFE Development Officer at the office with his information. However, though Sivaraja returned to Sri Lanka without any savings after being stranded in Saudi Arabia for ten months due to the pandemic, he was informed that he could not benefit from the programme as only migrant returnees with proof of contracting COVID-19 while in the host country could benefit from the programme. Even though Sivaraja believes that he contracted COVID-19 while in the host country, he did not get a PCR test done as his visa had expired at the time and his legal status in the country was precarious. These revelations by the interviewees indicate a lack of support for pandemic-affected returnee migrants.

5.5 *Conclusion*

This study examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf region. It looked into various types of pandemic-led challenges encountered by Sri Lankan migrant workers

in the GCC, the coping mechanisms employed by these migrant workers to overcome these challenges, the support extended by the SLBFE and Sri Lankan missions in the Gulf region to address these challenges, and the impact of COVID-19 containment policies implemented by the GoSL on the level of severity of these challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrant workers.

The study classifies pandemic-induced challenges faced by Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf into two categories: health-related difficulties and financial difficulties. The health-related challenges faced by migrant workers were mainly psychological due to the immense stress they faced, especially during the first few months of the pandemic. In addition, some migrant workers who contracted COVID-19 had to encounter the ensuing health risk of the illness.

The most common financial challenge Sri Lankan migrant workers across the skill spectrum reported was pay cuts, followed by delays in salary payments, cuts and delays in payment of allowances and gratuity, and job losses. In addition, migrants who faced extreme financial hardships reported difficulties covering the costs of food, accommodation and other daily basic needs. While all migrant workers, irrespective of their skill level, faced health-related challenges, as can be expected, the financial repercussions of the pandemic were borne mainly by semi-skilled and low-skilled workers.

The study found that overall, the Sri Lankan migrant workers who had to undergo the harshest challenges were semi-skilled and low-skilled workers whose contracts were terminated after the closure of Sri Lankan borders on 19th March, 2020. Some of these migrants had submitted their resignation letters in February and early March 2020, hoping to

return to Sri Lanka at the end of March or early April 2020. The rest were either laid-off or resigned in the early months of the pandemic due to deteriorating working conditions or their desire to be with their families in Sri Lanka during the unprecedented global health crisis. However, even though the contracts of these migrants were terminated, resulting in the expiration of their visas, they could not immediately return to Sri Lanka due to the COVID-19 containment measures implemented by the GoSL, which considerably exacerbated their financial and mental health woes.

Unlike laid-off high-skilled and skilled migrants who, in general, have some financial savings to survive several months without a source of income, semi-skilled and low-skilled workers who earn meagre salaries in the Gulf in general, do not have sufficient financial resources to survive in the Gulf for several months without an occupation. Therefore, as the GoSL continued to keep the country's borders closed and prioritised repatriation of other categories of migrants, such as students and stranded pilgrims, migrant workers in the Gulf seeking to return home had to face harsh conditions during the first year of the pandemic.

Even though, as the months passed, the GoSL allowed more Sri Lankans abroad to return to Sri Lanka, priority was given to migrants who could afford to pay for their quarantine. As these paid quarantine centres were luxury and semi-luxury hotels that charged above LKR 100,000 for a fortnight's stay, semi-skilled and low-skilled workers, especially those who had been without jobs for months, opted to wait for vacancies at government-run facilities where quarantine was free of charge. However, as the capacity of these government quarantine places was limited, low-income earning migrant workers in the Gulf, especially those who had been out of a job for months, had to wait for extended periods. In contrast,

those with financial means got the opportunity to return even if they did not have any immediate need to get back to Sri Lanka.

The study found that migrant workers faced with financial challenges utilised various coping mechanisms to offset or reduce their income losses. These included borrowing, moving to accommodation with lower rentals and sharing accommodation. In addition, those faced with severe financial setbacks resorted to extreme measures such as a drastic reduction in food expenses and asking family members in Sri Lanka to remit money.

The in-depth interviews indicated that even though Sri Lankan migrant workers faced extreme financial difficulties during the pandemic, the support extended by Sri Lankan missions in the Gulf countries was abysmal. Migrant workers complained of having to stay in long queues just to gather information about the availability of repatriation flights. The in-depth interviews also indicated minimal support for these migrant workers when they eventually returned to Sri Lanka.

5.6 Recommendations

As a country with many migrant workers in the volatile Middle Eastern region, Sri Lanka should have had better plans for repatriation in emergencies. While the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique situation, there have been instances in the past, such as the Gulf war of 1990 and the Lebanon war of 2006, which required the repatriation of thousands of Sri Lankans during a short period. However, the GoSL's inefficient repatriation efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that Sri Lanka had failed to learn from these prior experiences. Therefore, we recommend the following courses of action to improve the conditions of migrant workers for any emergencies they face in the future, whether

they are large-scale emergencies affecting hundreds of migrant workers or personal emergencies arising due to job losses and poor working conditions:

- Establishment of a toll-free, dedicated helpline in all Sri Lankan missions in key foreign employment destinations that migrant workers can dial up during emergencies. This line should be separate from the primary contact number of the Sri Lankan mission in the country and should be managed by a trained officer who can provide migrant workers with the information they need during any emergency.
- Implementation of a centralised digital database with details of all current migrant workers maintained by the SLBFE in coordination with the Sri Lankan missions in key migration destinations. This database should be updated regularly to ensure that the most current details of migrant workers are available.
- Establishment of accommodation centres (safe houses) managed by Sri Lankan missions in key foreign employment destinations that can be used to house Sri Lankan migrant workers facing issues such as harassment by employers. These accommodation centres can be used to house migrant workers in large-scale emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Establishment of mechanisms by the SLBFE to provide financial support to the migrant workers' kith and kin in Sri Lanka during crises migrant workers face in the host countries. This financial aid could be drawn from an insurance scheme using the registration fee that the SLBFE collects from migrant workers before their departure.

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Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sri Lankan Migrant Workers in the Gulf Region

Anoji Ekanayake

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At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the crowded labour camps, where most Sri Lankan low-wage migrant workers in the Gulf resided, became breeding grounds for COVID-19 and had to be placed in isolation with entry and exit barred. As the year 2020 progressed, lockdowns and other COVID-19 containment measures imposed, coupled with the contraction of Gulf economies caused by the pandemic-led drastic decline in oil prices in the world market, resulted in lay-offs, pay-cuts, delays in payments and other financial issues for migrants belonging to all skill levels. Furthermore, while certain Gulf countries implemented policies to provide financial support to help their populations affected by the pandemic, most of these were geared towards benefiting only citizens and local businesses, and migrant workers were given limited financial assistance. As a result, the pandemic severely affected Sri Lankan migrant workers and their families that depend on the remittances they send home.

While the Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf region were negatively affected by the pandemic-related policies implemented by their host governments, their adverse situation was further exacerbated by some of the measures taken by the Government of Sri Lanka that were geared toward controlling the spread of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. For instance, Sri Lanka's border closure from 19 March 2020, expensive private quarantine packages, and the long waiting list for free government quarantine facilities that were in place until April 2021 left thousands of migrant workers, predominantly low-income earning semi-skilled and low-skilled workers, stranded in the Gulf for approximately a year.

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