

MERGE

BIM Berliner Institut für empirische
Integrations- und Migrationsforschung



MERGE Snapshot Analyses

Migrant Workers in the Middle East Facing the Pandemic

(July 2020)

Zahra Babar
Isabelle Kronisch
Akhil Changayil

Team:

- **Dr. Serhat Karakayali**, BIM, Humboldt University of Berlin (Project Leader),
serhat.karakayali@hu-berlin.de
- **Dr. Nader Talebi**, BIM, Humboldt University of Berlin,
talebina@hu-berlin.de
- **Y. Emre Küçükkaya**, PhD Researcher, Middle East Technical University, Ankara,
kuecueya@hu-berlin.de

CONTENT

Preface.....	2
Zahra Babar	3
Locked Down But Essential: Gulf Migrant Workers and the COVID-19 Pandemic	3
Isabelle Kronisch.....	5
Syrian Workers in Turkey and the Impact of COVID-19	5
C S Akhil	6
Situation of Migrant Workers in Gulf Countries during COVID-19 Pandemic.....	6
About Merge	8
Contact	8

PREFACE

The socio-economic consequences of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic have heavily ravaged lives and livelihoods across the globe, with [more than 12 million confirmed cases worldwide](#). The pandemic has particularly unmasked the vulnerabilities of disadvantaged communities. Among them are millions of migrant workers in the Middle East who are reeling from the economic slowdown.

With three different opinion pieces on this compilation, the **MERGE network** puts a spotlight on how migrant workers in the region have been impacted by both the pandemic itself and the measures that came with it. The premise of the compilation is, in addition to providing academic insights, to engage with experts and activists possessing substantive knowledge about the issue.

Zahra Babar, the associate director for research at the Center for International Regional Studies (CIRS) at Georgetown University in Qatar, stresses the devastating ramifications of the lack of holistic health-care policies developed by Gulf governments to address millions of low-income migrants who continue to perform essential duties amid the pandemic.

Isabelle Kronisch, the technical officer for refugees at International Labour Organization (ILO) Office for Turkey, highlights the sharply rising unemployment rates among Syrian refugees in Turkey and touches upon the potential risks of social tensions between refugee and host communities in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Akhil Changayil, the research lead of the Centre for Indian Migrant Studies, an activist NGO in India, points out the alarming situation of millions of South Asian migrant workers whose health and rights are put at stake by irresponsible politicians and opportunistic employers in the Middle East.

In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 rapidly spread across the **six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies** and accentuated the particular susceptibilities of lower income migrant workers to a contagious disease. Migrants make up a large proportion of the workforce in **Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates**; and overall, there are close to **30 million** of them in the region. Blue-collar and lower income migrants, during the best of times, are considered a segment of the population with generally poorer health status and outcomes.

Background

Migrant workers' health vulnerability is a result of a [combination of different factors](#) - substandard living conditions, inadequate food and nutrition, dangerous work, inequalities in health care access, and general social marginalization. Migrants contend with underlying challenges, such as language barriers, literacy constraints, and cultural sensitivities when it comes to having their health needs met. Furthermore, they experience significant obstacles to access to information on their rights regarding the health-care system of host countries. Migrant workers in the region are also frequently known to conceal their health problems in order not to lose their jobs or visa status despite the fact that they are at high risk for many physical and mental health issues such as depression.

Essential and Undervalued

Lower skill migrants in the Gulf share similarities with those in other parts of the world: They tend to do the dirty, dangerous, and physically demanding work that no one else wants to do. They are far more likely than citizens to be engaged in jobs requiring manual labor, frequently carried out outdoors and in harsh weather conditions. Lower skill migrants tend to work in sectors requiring close physical contact with other people. And as the pandemic has highlighted, many of these workers fall into job categories and sectors that are considered "essential", which means that someone needs to keep doing them even during emergencies and as other large parts of the economy may be put on hold.

Strict Pandemic Measures

Shortly after the virus appeared in the region, Gulf states rapidly adopted various mitigation strategies, many of which turn out to be some of the broadest, strictest, and longest lockdowns seen anywhere in the world: Border closures and travel bans, business shutdowns and mandatory work from home policies, suspension of schools and a transition to online learning, as well as various restrictions on mobility were rolled out across the region and stayed in place for more than four months. By the end of March, many of the Gulf's gleaming metropolises – Riyadh, Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi- became "ghost cities" as white collar workers, both expatriates and citizens, stayed at home for all except the most essential of tasks. Despite these strict lockdowns, however, the number of virus cases continued to escalate over the months, with increasing cases identified amongst migrant worker communities. In response, several GCC states adopted targeted containment measures to restrict transmission from

migrant worker communities to the broader population, including entire lockdowns of certain parts of cities where workers were housed. For example, **Qatari authorities** imposed a **complete lockdown** on a large portion of the Industrial Area in March, where many hundreds of thousands of migrant workers live in group accommodations provided by employers. Entry in and out of the zone was heavily restricted for well over a month.

No 'Work from Home' for Migrants

Despite having their mobility curtailed, many migrants continued to work during the height of the pandemic. Additionally, working in the lower tiers of the labor market, **migrants contend with grim conditions** that make following basic health guidelines around virus prevention close to impossible. Many of them live together in dormitory-style accommodations of **specially designed labor camps** provided by employers. Communal living on a mass scale is the norm for lower income workers across the region, where social distancing and maintaining high standards of **personal hygiene** in these circumstances are almost an **exercise in futility**. Despite the lockdowns and perimeter controls preventing migrants from easily leaving their residential areas, maintaining COVID-19 health protocols within their accommodation has been a challenge.

In addition to their squalid living conditions, the low-income migrant workers within the GCC region are faced with equally **immense health challenges in workplaces** amid COVID-19. As the Gulf construction industry has largely continued to operate during lockdowns, tens of thousands of laborers, many of whom are migrants, have been unable to maintain proper social distancing on building sites and construction projects as well as by using public transport. Grocery stores, transport and delivery services, and many other parts of the labor market deemed as “essential” dominated by migrants have also remained active throughout the pandemic. Security guards, street cleaners, garbage collectors, plumbers, electricians, and other maintenance workers have been unable to avoid going about in public and carrying out their work tasks from home. While masks, sanitization, and symptom checks have increasingly been adopted by many employers and made compulsory on many worksites, these **measures were clearly not effective enough** to entirely stop disease transmission in its tracks during the first wave of the disease.

Jobs at Stake

Other migrants faced different challenges as they were unable to work at all – especially those in the hospitality and retail sectors, and the ones working in beauty parlors, suddenly failed to go to work and went through **financial and emotional strains**. Across the region, hundreds of thousands of migrants have experienced **job losses and income decline** since the start of the pandemic. Some migrant-sending governments consequently arranged **special repatriation flights** to evacuate their migrant citizens **from the Gulf**.

Migrant-Sending Governments

Although migrant-inclusive health policies are quite essential, particularly for countries hosting large migrant populations as in the GCC; historically, there has not been a great deal of efforts on the part of GCC host states to integrate mainstream labor migrants' health needs

into national health policy frameworks. In comparison, migrant-sending countries have taken **more proactive steps** to formulate practices and policies around the health of migrants - including pre-departure and orientation training programs, as well as providing compulsory insurance schemes to address disability and death probabilities. Some countries have also taken various measures to help return migrants access adequate health care.

The Bitter Lesson

Had there been a more coherent strategy to integrate migrants into health frameworks in the GCC states, there might have been better preparedness to cope with the coronavirus when it hit the region. One can only hope that a painful lesson is being learned in the region, and that one possible positive outcome could be that in the future of the Gulf there will be a holistic health strategy that is more attuned to the needs and vulnerabilities of migrant communities.

**Zahra Babar, Center for International and Regional Studies (CIRS), Georgetown University in Qatar.*

ISABELLE KRONISCH*

Syrian Workers in Turkey and the Impact of COVID-19

With 4 million refugees, as of 2020, Turkey is the country hosting the largest number of refugees in the world for the seventh year in a row. The vast majority, close to 3.6 million, come from Syria. Syrian refugees in Turkey can benefit from the Temporary Protection Status – a protection framework that grants access to education, the health system, social services, and the labour market. Further, as of the end of 2019, more than 130,000 Syrian workers¹ in Turkey have received work permits, as the 3RP (Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan) 2020-2021 Turkey Chapter [notes](#).

Having said that, most Syrian refugees in Turkey work informally in manufacturing, especially in textile industry and service jobs, as well as in agriculture and construction with long hour shifts and earn below the minimum wage. These sectors have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, which in addition to being a health crisis, has turned out to be a social and economic crisis. **Unemployment** levels have increased, making it even harder for Syrian refugees to access income. Assessments on the impacts of COVID-19 on **Syrian refugees** have shown that a dramatic number – **69 per cent** according to [one study](#) – has **lost their jobs**, while [another survey indicates](#) that the **unemployment rate among Syrian refugees has risen to 88 per cent**.

With limited access to social protection and support mechanisms implemented by the Turkish government in response to COVID-19, Syrian refugees along vulnerable host community members are facing increasing difficulties to meet their basic needs. Hence, the likelihood of resorting to negative coping mechanisms raises serious concerns.

The sharp slowdown of economies and the closing of businesses also threaten to worsen existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, especially among Syrian refugees. In addition, there is

¹ This number includes those under temporary protection and Syrians who have a residence permit, see: 3RP 2020-2021 Turkey chapter, available [here](#).

a **risk of rising social tensions between refugee and host communities**, fueled by misinformation and misperceptions.

In responding to these challenges, the **ILO in Turkey** has **implemented measures** to protect workers and help enterprises cope with changing economic conditions and retain employment. Supporting workers to maintain income security in decent work conditions has also been another objective for the Organization, while engaging in social dialogue and paying special attention to the arising needs of refugees.

More specifically, the ILO in Turkey builds a knowledge base to better support people affected by COVID-19 in the socio-economic sphere. The Organization's rapid [assessment report on seasonal agricultural workers](#) explores the vulnerabilities that this group of workers is facing, such as being on the move and living in tent camps. In addition, an assessment on young people known as NEETs (neither in employment, education, or training), including refugees is planned.

To support business continuity and job retention, the ILO office will soon launch a support programme with the Turkish Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services. Nine hundred small businesses employing up to 5 employees – 40 per cent owned by refugees - will receive micro grants. Further, through the extension of the Transition to Formality Programme (KIGEP), which is targeting 50 per cent refugees, employers are supported to retain formal employment and uphold access to social protection for their workers through the reimbursement of social security premiums and work permit fees.

To continue promoting skills transfer, the ILO in Turkey is digitizing its skills and language training so that refugees and host community members are better equipped to deal with new labour market challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Finally, to address the vulnerabilities of both refugees and host community members, the ILO and the Turkish Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services have made occupational safety and health guidelines accessible to refugees.

**Isabelle Kronisch. Technical Officer for Refugees, ILO (International Labour Organization) Office for Turkey.*

C S AKHIL*

Situation of Migrant Workers in Gulf Countries during COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 situation in the Gulf countries has recently attracted global attention for two major reasons: The massive presence of migrant workers from the Global South who work and live in precarious conditions in the region is the first and foremost concern. This is followed by unprecedented economic shocks that hit the Gulf economies from the spread of the COVID-19, coupled with the collapse of oil prices. Apart from the oil industry, all other ventures, especially in the service sector, tourism, aviation, and retail, where most migrants are employed, face severe shocks.

While the health crisis is morphing into an economic one, reducing labour cost has turned out to be the safest and easiest option for companies, as businesses either dismiss their migrant employees or oblige them to take unpaid holidays.

As half of the population among all six GCC countries, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates are foreign nationals, they represent the [largest workforce](#) of these nations. The number of migrants among the COVID-19 patients in the region, however, remains even higher compared to the number of citizens who contracted the virus.

Most of the migrants live and work in unsanitary and dangerous conditions, with lack of access to proper precautionary measures as they live in tightly packed single room accommodations with very limited access to primary health-care. Among these migrants, unskilled and unprotected workers who are often employed in 3D (Dirty, Dangerous, and Demeaning) jobs are disproportionately hit by the virus as they do have quite limited access to basic health services and often lack adequate government support. Furthermore, undocumented workers in the Gulf region, both migrant and domestic workers, are even in a more vulnerable situation since they receive no social security and access to health-care.

Various stakeholders have responded to the crisis in their own capacities. The Gulf governments made attempts to provide food, shelter, and health-care access to migrant workers along with constant monitoring of their employment situations in the initial phase of virus spread. The countries of origin have also provided direct assistance through their diplomatic missions to these workers.

In addition to government initiatives, non-government stakeholders such as Civil Society Organisations actively addressed these matters at the grassroots level and advocated the rights of the most vulnerable migrants. However, there was a noticeable delay and hesitation in response from the governments, at least in the initial phases of the virus spread. This is largely due to the decades-long absence of a pro-migrant labour welfare system coupled with the lack of welfare mechanisms at various country missions in the Gulf. Such a delay in response led to an alarming increase in infections among migrants, many of which resulted in deaths.

With the support of various repatriation programs initiated by either their home governments or civil societies, a large number of workers have started going back to their home-lands. In this context, some employers in host countries might take advantage of mass repatriation programs to terminate the contracts of returnees without making any payments.

The situation demands short term interventions to protect the rights of the migrant workers by ensuring the payment of their dues. Furthermore, a long-term approach in the forms of comprehensive national, bilateral and regional migration management frameworks are also highly needed in the region. The academia and civil society predict that the post-COVID-19 period may witness more economic anxieties that could lead to increased vulnerabilities and irregular movement of people across the borders.

**C S Akhil, Researcher Lead, Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS), Kerala, India.*

ABOUT MERGE

The cross-border movements of migrants, particularly across the Middle East, have recently been a signifier of the urgency for a transnational approach in social sciences. Indeed, several countries in the region have undergone multidirectional migration patterns across different geographies. Therefore, a nascent scholarship has emerged to espouse a transnational perspective to analyze social, economic, and cultural facets of major developments beyond the state-centric logic of territoriality.

However, a great deal of scholarship still appears to portray the Middle East region merely as a “migration sending” heartland, mostly in the direction of Europe and thus overlooks the broader picture. We rather adopt a multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach, seeing societies as dynamic and fluid communities.

As a research network based in the Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research (BIM), the MERGE aspires to harness the power of collective thinking to expand the scope of conventional approaches and explore the burgeoning dynamics of migration and mobility within the Middle East.

CONTACT

Humboldt University of Berlin
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research (BIM)

Office:

Tel.: +49 (0)30 2093-46255
E-Mail: bimmerge@hu-berlin.de

Postal address:

Unter den Linden 6
10099 Berlin

Visitors address:

Hannoversche Straße 25
Haus 25, 1. Etage
10115 Berlin
10117 Berlin

Website:

<https://www.projekte.hu-berlin.de/en/merge>

MERGE