

## Migration and The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Gulf

### A Study of Foreign Expatriate Worker Communities' Coping Attitudes, Practices, and Future Prospects in Dubai and Jeddah

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#### Executive Summary

Since March 2020, the massive global outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID19) pandemic has disrupted the Gulf industries, severely impacting the living and working conditions of the vast majority of foreign expatriates in the urban Gulf.<sup>1</sup> By closely examining the two key Gulf economic centres - Dubai and Jeddah - during the initial wave of COVID19 pandemic (March-August 2020) via a mixed-method approach (n=117), the study aims to analyze the complex and multilayered effects of COVID19 pandemic on the three largest foreign expatriate communities in these selected Gulf cities, specifically Filipinos, Egyptians, and Pakistanis.<sup>2</sup> The study specifically explores how COVID19 has affected foreign workers' economic and welfare status in both Gulf cities mainly on the following thematic areas: working conditions, living conditions, access to medical services and dispute resolution system, remittance contribution, and current and future employment and security perceptions both in the Gulf and home country labour markets.<sup>3</sup> Key highlights of the study include the following:

- Unemployment among foreign workers across various industries (except healthcare, pharmaceutical, selected food delivery, and digital sectors among others) has become pervasive during the initial wave of COVID19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted both of their income levels and remittance contributions. The survey indicates that during the initial COVID19 wave, 52.5% of foreign workers' income was substantially reduced due to industry closures, of which 83% in Dubai-based expatriates reported a relatively higher loss of income compared to Jeddah-based expatriates at 35%.
- As the Gulf countries have slowly reopened their domestic economies in recent months, unemployment has still remained high across domestic sectors. Our qualitative results further suggest that a culture of 'wage cuts' among foreign expatriates working has become a "norm," particularly in the context of hospitality, education, and other service-related industries. Implemented by their respective employers, the wage cuts, on average, often range between 25% and 50% to offset the Gulf employers' economic loss while aiming to maintain financial flexibility in the long run.
- Despite internal mobility restrictions (i.e., curfews and full/partial lockdowns), part-time employment—both physical and virtual—has continuously acted as an essential coping mechanism for foreign expatriates to offset their loss of income. 17% of survey respondents in the Gulf cities of

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, we comparatively sampled diverse types of expatriate workers, including those in skilled, semi-skilled, and manual workforce without formal educational qualifications or training, to critically gain a multilevel understanding of COVID19 pandemic's effect on diverse categories of expatriate workers in various industries.

<sup>2</sup> The initial wave of COVID19 pandemic is defined by the first six months of COVID19 spread in local society and the labour market. Thus, we focus our initial empirical field observation and analysis from March until August 2020 and intend to further expand the study to see the long-term effects and consequences of COVID19 on these three foreign worker communities across the Gulf region.

<sup>3</sup> In both Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah, we virtually conducted the surveys (i.e. telephone and online surveys) between April – June 2020 to limit COVID19 exposure within these communities. While the survey was executed during lockdown periods (i.e. limited mobility hours and even curfews), it still offers rare insight on how COVID19 has impacted and continues to impact the lives of foreign workers amid COVID19 pandemic in the Gulf.

Dubai and Jeddah participated in some form of part-time employment to survive the pandemic's economic shock. This figure has also likely increased as Gulf economic activities have slowly resumed, specifically in Dubai where our qualitative results indicated foreign expatriates' dependency on part-time employment income.

- Fluctuating wage scales also impact foreign expatriates' decision to stay in the Gulf region. The survey suggests that, if income level drops between 25%-75%, educated foreign workers are likely to exit the Gulf labour market compared to their less-educated counterparts, who have higher propensity to accept wage cuts or unemployment. They also have a strong preference to remain in the Gulf in the long run despite the shifting economic volatility in the region.
- Living conditions have remained a central concern during the initial COVID19 pandemic lockdown and its aftermath for foreign worker communities. Although low housing evictions in both Gulf cities for foreign workers were reported during COVID19 pandemic's initial wave due to state protections, the rising unemployment issue has posed severe challenges for foreign expatriate workers' ability to pay for their accommodations, specifically those unemployed or are currently facing substantial wage cuts.
- Recent rent prices in the Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah have slightly dropped, as the demand for housing has dramatically increased. As more foreign workers lose employment or return to their home countries, along with 'no work, no pay' status and among other critical factors (i.e., wage cuts, increasing food prices) across the two Gulf cities, COVID19 pandemic has and will likely to exacerbate the growing vulnerability of foreign workers, specifically those low-income migrants in impacted industries like construction, retail, and other labour-intensive occupations.
- With ongoing economic disruptions, foreign worker communities' sociopsychological conditions have been severely affected, given the lack of institutional mechanisms to manage various degrees of health-related problems, including mental depression, stress, isolation, and suicidal tendencies.
- Health insurance coverage (90%) among foreign expatriate workers was reportedly high during the COVID19's initial wave (excluding those unemployed, umrahs, or visit visa holders), giving them more health security and confidence. However, with rising domestic unemployment in these Gulf cities, foreign workers highlighted their fear of failing to maintain their insurance coverage (including their children), which will affect not only their decision to stay but also their degree of health vulnerability during COVID19 pandemic. While some Gulf countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia reportedly offered free health coverage for foreign expatriates with COVID19 symptoms (specifically those in an undocumented status) in their public health institutions, further studies are necessary to examine the accessibility and effectiveness of such state-led reforms in their public health institutions.
- While respondents reported low (9%) dispute cases with their Gulf employers during the initial wave of COVID19 pandemic, the perceived lengthy bureaucratic procedures in the Gulf legal system could have shaped their decision not to pursue a legal claim. Reported complaints, including unfair payment settlements, wage reductions, lack of funds for repatriation tickets, and other contractual-related issues (i.e. extended working hours with little pay), have become common, as Gulf-based firms attempt to stabilize their financial conditions. However, Gulf city governments and market reopening have resulted in high dispute cases as some foreign expatriates challenge employers' perceived lack of fairness in the employment settlement process and arrangements (i.e. forced termination, wage cuts).
- The COVID19 pandemic has both largely halted and reduced the demand for more recruitment for foreign workers in origin countries, given the large pool of unemployed population with mixed statuses (i.e., regular/irregular/umrah and tourist visa/freelance visa holders) in the Gulf. Low employment vacancies, including in virtual job sites like Gulf Talent or Bayt.com, were also reported,

while more inter-ethnic job competitions between and among Arabs, Asians, and Africans has become inevitable.

- Remittance flows have also broadly decreased during the initial COVID19 pandemic wave. The survey results suggested that it substantially dropped by 44% among the foreign worker respondents from AED/SR 3,208 (pre-COVID19) to AED/SR 2,712.<sup>4</sup> While some migrants were not able to remit due to work stoppage and existing debt status, others have managed to continuously send by either borrowing from friends or family members, working part-time employment, or receiving some earnings from their existing employers. The Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also ordered local banks to mitigate foreign workers' financial vulnerability by postponing bank repayments in the short term. However, remittance flows have steadily increased as most Gulf markets reopen, although more studies are needed to understand the remittance fluctuations during COVID19 and their varying impacts on Gulf and sending countries.
- Foreign workers still prefer to stay in the Gulf countries—as evidenced in the low (yet potentially increasing) repatriation figures of migrant-sending states—due to perceived financial opportunities. 82% indicated 'better income' prospects as a primary factor for choosing to stay among all survey participants (Filipinos, Pakistanis, and Egyptians). Other key factors, including strong social networks (families and friends), better access to healthcare/COVID19 facilities, and career prospects, were emphasized.
- Even those foreign workers who have expressed intentions to return to their home countries, 63% of survey respondents in both Gulf countries highlighted their plan return to the same Gulf cities, with 10% of them preferring to return to other Gulf countries due mainly for economic reasons. Only 32 or 27% of migrants reported they would not return (due to various reasons, retirement, spending time with family and friends). 11 respondents are undecided. The survey suggests the majority of Pakistanis in Jeddah will return. If we compare the three communities of Jeddah and Dubai, 75% of the Pakistani community in Dubai noted they would come back versus 56% in Jeddah. It is interesting to note that the Egyptian migrants in both cities have the same percentage of 53% to return. The great majority of the Philippines community in Dubai indicated a willingness to return to Dubai city than the Jeddah community with 59%. This could be partly due to the perceived worsening economic conditions and options in their respective home countries, therefore justifying their propensity to stay and of the critical value of the Gulf labour market in the post COVID19 pandemic era.<sup>5</sup>
- Foreign workers' perceived unemployment or weak standard of living prospects in their home countries further reinforces their decision to remain in the Gulf. The survey indicates that 69% believe that their monthly income will decrease. In comparison, 25% of the respondents acknowledge their 'uncertain future' back home, given the rising unemployment both in the formal and informal economies across the Philippines, Egypt, and Pakistan. Some respondents qualitatively highlighted that Gulf informal markets tend to offer better economic returns than their home countries' job markets, specifically in various labour-intensive jobs (i.e., domestic work, cleaning, and other service-based occupations).
- Foreign worker respondents in both Gulf cities emphasize the strong domestic security, health, and market governance in the Gulf countries as crucial factors for their decision to stay. 89.7% of foreign workers in both Gulf cities either strongly agree or agree that the Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah have effectively controlled the COVID19 pandemic. This finding, however, stands in stark contrast to their views towards their home country governments in the Philippines, Pakistan, and Egypt.

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<sup>4</sup> The current exchange rate for UAE dirhams (AED) and Saudi riyals (SR) is USD 1 = 3.75.

<sup>5</sup> Such trend could also be paralleled to the 2008 financial crisis in the Gulf where repatriated migrants eventually returned to the Gulf, reinforcing the circular migration flows in the region.

- While the vast majority of respondents (53%) acknowledge that locals' attitudes towards foreign workers have remained the same, other respondents (17%) emphasize that local attitudes have changed negatively. More interestingly, 29.9% of respondents have highlighted that locals have positively changed their attitudes towards foreign worker communities. While there are no specific indicators that could explain such pattern, there are possible factors that might have shaped such public opinion. These could include those state-led volunteering campaigns—specifically in the health and community sectors (i.e., charitable sectors, Islamic donations and support mechanisms, free covid19 testing/treatment in public hospitals)—that enabled both the local police, health authorities, and foreign worker communities to work closely in addressing foreign worker communities (i.e., food, health safety, etc.) during the COVID19 pandemic. Some expatriates further noted the multilingual translations (Urdu, Tagalog, Nepali, Hindi etc) of public information and services for foreign worker communities that helped effectively convey their campaign messages in both Gulf cities.
- Foreign workers also indicate that sending countries' diplomatic missions (embassies/consulates) offered little or no assistance, except the Philippine state initiatives (i.e., USD\$200 financial assistance to those impacted by COVID and other social aid like food). Migrants from Pakistan and Egypt, however, highlighted their governments' limited support during the COVID19 pandemic.

## Introduction

When COVID19 initially disrupted the Gulf economies in late March 2020, the Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia have broadly imposed various multilevel restrictive measures and initiatives<sup>6</sup> to control and prevent the spread of COVID-19 outbreak. In the Gulf cities of Jeddah and Dubai, local governments have authoritatively enforced domestic state policies and initiatives, including lockdowns, mobility restrictions, social distancing, nationwide sanitation campaigns, mass testing and other hefty sanctions (i.e. fines, deportation, media shaming for violators) to rigorously control the spread of COVID-19 (Gulf Health Council, 2020).<sup>7</sup> As COVID19 cases rose, on average, between 500 and 1,000 per day, the Gulf states were forced to strategically close major Gulf industries - including construction, retail, manufacturing, and other service-based sectors - which inevitably led to the massive unemployment for all foreign workers (World Meter, 2020). While some Gulf cities like Dubai and Jeddah have slowly reopened their markets and government offices since August 2020, unemployment among foreign expatriates has continuously increased, as Gulf-based firms struggle to offset the massive financial loss and low business activity (i.e. tourism) incurred during the initial COVID19 pandemic wave. As a result of the vast unemployment of foreign workers, labour-sending states - specifically Pakistan, the Philippines, India, and Bangladesh - have immediately facilitated the repatriation of their nationals. However, the vast supply of foreign workers has remained in the Gulf, specifically in Dubai and Jeddah, due to perceived weak economic prospects and opportunities in their home countries, as well as "economic hope" that Gulf countries will quickly recover from this looming economic recession.

As COVID19 pandemic continuously threatens the Gulf economies - combined with the persistently low price of hydrocarbon and oil - the Gulf states have also initiated various fiscal and other economic reforms to systematically cope with COVID19's economic impact on their national budgets (PWC, 2020). More specifically, the Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah, for example, are key tourism centres in the Middle East and beyond, often generating critical state revenues. Dubai's global tourism hub status and KSA's hajj and umrah pilgrimage globally attract millions of foreign travellers, which have become a critical state-revenue generating mechanism for both Gulf cities. With COVID19 pandemic's diffusing effect on Gulf markets, the Gulf city governments of

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<sup>6</sup> Key measures include but not limited to mass COVID-19 testing (including mobile tastings), temporary lockdowns and curfews, market closures, sanitation, hefty fines and penalties, public health campaigns in high-risk accommodation spaces (i.e. labour camps) across the Gulf countries.

<sup>7</sup> While domestic lockdowns have been lifted in recent months in the Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah, the local state governments emphasized that they may consider re-imposing such measures if COVID19 cases rise locally.

Jeddah and Dubai faced significant fiscal budget constraints, impacting their existing mega infrastructure projects in the private sector that substantially recruit migrant work. Saudi Arabia had to cut 30% of its fiscal year 2020 budget set for Vision 2030, increased value-added tax (VAT) on July 1, 2020, from 5% to 15% along with an increase in the price of public utilities to stabilize its national budget in the long run (Al Arabiya, 2020). Although the UAE did not cut its annual budget, it instead ensured the financial liquidity of its national central banks by injecting USD 70 billion to stabilize the private sector. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states similarly followed this policy move as COVID19 ensued (PWC, 2020). While these state efforts may (or may not) ease the financial instability in these Gulf cities, the prolonged existence of COVID19 will likely impact the GCC private sector economy, which has been projected to decline by 7% this year (International Monetary Fund, 2020). More importantly, if the UN World Health Organization (2020) estimates that the future public availability of COVID-19 vaccine could only be developed between 12-18 months, the Gulf states' economic uncertainties will likely extend and generate market chaos (i.e., unemployment) in the Gulf. While the current economic reopening in the Gulf may potentially engender economic recovery, it is highly likely that the future hiring for foreign expatriates will remain limited.

This study examines the critical effects of COVID-19 pandemic on foreign expatriate worker communities in the Gulf cities of Jeddah and Dubai. Using a mixed-method approach on three of the largest foreign worker communities - including Filipinos, Pakistanis, and Egyptians - we analyze the governing attitudes, behaviour, coping modalities of different foreign migrant groups in these two of the most dynamic and diverse historical migrant receptions in the Gulf region and the world. By employing a 'virtual' snowball technique (N=117) through phone interviews and focus groups with key field insiders and respondents in these two Gulf cities, the study attempts to explore key themes: employment, living conditions, access to medical services and dispute resolution system, remittance contribution, and current and future employment perceptions and security both in the Gulf and home country labour markets.

As COVID-19 pandemic proliferates in the Gulf countries, an urgent exploratory and comparative study hold compelling justifications for this initial field analysis. First, the report offers a critical thematic snapshot of the current multilevel impacts and consequences of the initial wave of COVID-19 pandemic on foreign expatriate worker communities in the Gulf region. Second, the study provides critical insights into foreign workers' attitudes, perceptions, and coping mechanisms, which are essential to developing or revising current and future state policy responses, specifically for both the Gulf and labour-sending states. These particular field insights could adequately better inform states on how to govern and develop short and long-term policy responses towards different foreign migrant communities. Third, the study further highlights both policy and academic insights on the political dynamics between states (Gulf states and labour-sending states) and foreign migrant communities in times of crisis. Unlike the vast majority of migration literature in the Gulf framed around 'non-crisis context,' the study highlights the critical importance of crisis-based migration governance framework essential both for the policy and academic communities in the long run.

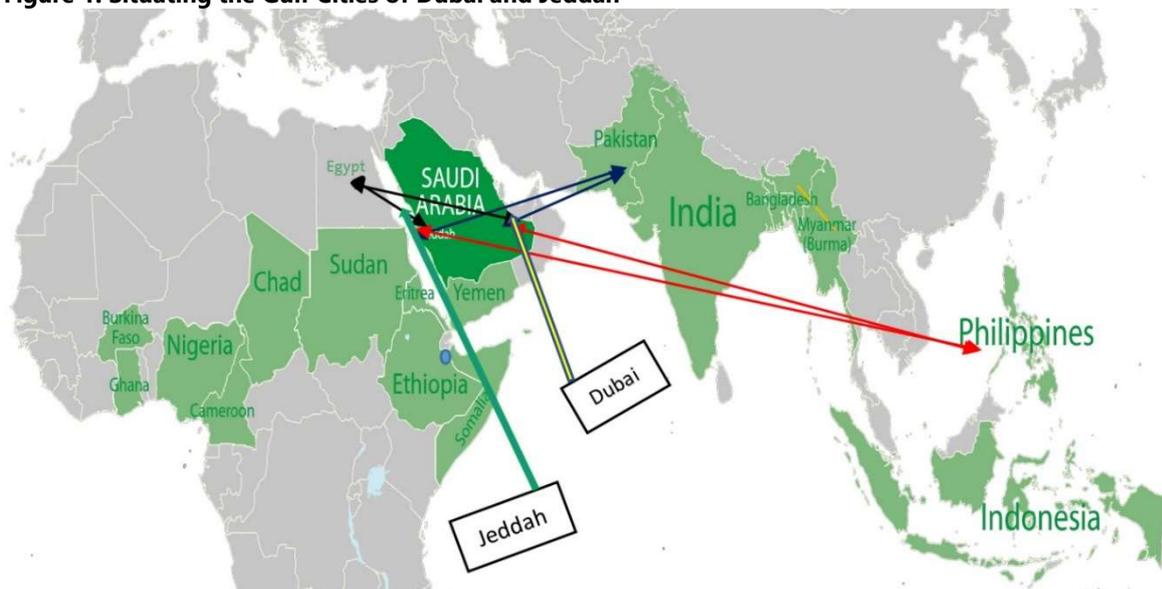
This report is divided into three sections. First, we examine a broader overview of Gulf migration dynamics and labour markets, focusing on the Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah. Second, we summarize the survey demographic data results, highlighting the critical characteristics of foreign worker respondents. Third, we examine the varying effects of COVID19 on migration workers organized around important socioeconomic themes in the Gulf labour markets and beyond, while highlighting critical insights in the post-COVID19 migration governance context in the Gulf region. The concluding section highlights some vital lessons for the Gulf states in managing labour migration amid COVID19 pandemic.

## Setting The Migration Context: Urban Gulf Cities and COVID19

The Gulf region hosts more than 32 million foreign expatriates<sup>8</sup> employed across various diverse Gulf industries, including construction, hospitality, finance, domestic work, and other service-based sectors (GLMM, 2020). The UAE and Saudi Arabia presently have at least 70% of the total Gulf foreign expatriate populations, thus acting as vital global labour destination sites for the Middle East, Asia and beyond. Of the UAE's 9.1 million population, 90% constitutes foreign expatriate workers, mostly employed in key capital centres like Dubai. In contrast, Saudi Arabia has 32.4 million population, of which 37.8% of foreign workers live and work, which makes Saudi Arabia the top migrant labour destination in the Gulf and of the Middle East region. Given the diversity of employment of foreign workers in both Gulf cities, the Gulf states' booming education, health and research sectors have also attracted highly skilled expatriate workers in the recent decade, thus producing a diverse mix of foreign expatriate populations (Khadri, 2017). While the Gulf economies were facing economic slowdown before the spread of COVID19 pandemic, the COVID19 pandemic crisis severely hit the Gulf city economies producing a massive pool of unemployed foreign expatriates (including their children) seeking either to return to their home countries or stay in the Gulf region. The Gulf cities of Jeddah and Dubai are critical urban cities to explore, given their high proportion of foreign workers and economic contributions in the Gulf region. As COVID19 pandemic continues to shape domestic social, economic, and political contexts in these urban Gulf cities, Gulf governments of Dubai and Jeddah have also strategically employed various economic responses to mitigate the rising effect of COVID19 on their critical domestic industries.

Despite the looming economic crisis in these Gulf cities, however, a large share of foreign expatriates have expressed their intention to stay partially due to the worsening unemployment problems in their home countries, as well as perceived inadequate COVID19 governance responses both in their labour markets and overall society.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1: Situating the Gulf Cities of Dubai and Jeddah**



<sup>8</sup> This figure excludes specific foreign worker categories, including those undocumented or overstayed tourist visa holders and their children.

<sup>9</sup> In the Philippines, the unemployment rate in July 2020 was estimated at 10% compared to 5.4% in July 2019, and is expected to decrease over time due to restrictive quarantine and lockdown policies in the country (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). Pakistan has also an estimated total of 12% unemployment rate, while Egypt has reported to have 9.6% unemployment rate compared to 7.5% last year.

### *Dubai*

When COVID19 pandemic crisis initially hit Dubai, the Dubai government immediately ordered all business closures (except critical health and food-related industries like pharmaceutical and food) to prevent the rapid spread of COVID19 virus (Gulf Health Council, 2020). As economic shutdowns persisted between March and August 2020, the Dubai government introduced a series of local policies, initiatives, and efforts, which were aimed not only to control COVID19 virus but also ensured shared responsibility among foreign expatriate populations (Corkery, 2020). From a public health perspective, the Dubai government implemented various initiatives, including but not limited to initial mobility restrictions, local sanitation campaigns (especially in critical areas like labour camp accommodations or other crowded housing units for expatriates), and implemented various humanitarian campaigns via Islamic charitable groups to support foreign workers (specifically those distressed) during the COVID19 pandemic. The Dubai government has even converted several large hotels and public infrastructure (including the World Trade Center) to accommodate COVID19 patients in support for local public and private Dubai hospitals that have limited patient accommodations (The National, 2020). Local police enforcement and security were also tightened to ensure high compliance, and significant hefty fines and sanctions were also enforced to deter non-compliance among foreign worker populations. A series of Dubai-led health volunteering campaigns were also implemented between the local government and respective foreign expatriate communities to enable the Dubai government further effectively access and extend assistance to various foreign worker communities, given the expatriate workers' direct access to their respective communities.

Yet, COVID19's spread has also further intensified, further creating economic constraints for the Dubai government to handle, specifically the rising unemployment in various sectors: hospitality, construction and other service-based industries in the private sector. The Dubai government ordered local banks to postpone financial payments, as well as prohibit real estate owners from evicting foreign expatriates within their respective accommodations during COVID19 pandemic. Key utility prices, however, remained similar and, with the unemployed status of most foreign expatriates, many struggled to survive and remit financial assistance to their families given the prolong market closures and lack of employment. As the Dubai government recently reopened the city economy last July 2020, local Dubai police authorities have continued to enforce - with heavy financial sanctions - public health safety, particularly mandating foreign workers to maintain social distance and use of masks in public spaces. The UAE federal government has also twice extended the amnesty assistance to those with expired residency permits in Dubai, enabling those Dubai-based expatriates to extend their stay while seeking potential employment opportunity (The National, 2020). While key economic stimulus package support has been extended to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to Dubai-based companies, it is essential to see how such local economic reforms will likely shape the labour market and employment status of foreign expatriates across Dubai sectors.

### *Jeddah*

Jeddah is one of the most important port cities on the Red Sea. Due to its strategic location and importance as the gateway to the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah. In order to effectively respond to the rapid spread of COVID19, the Saudi government and its local governments like Jeddah has temporarily suspended the admission of pilgrims for Umrah, Hajj, as well as of tourists and other migrant categories and their families. Starting from March 2nd, 2020, the Saudi government imposed new health measures for Saudi citizens re-entering from Iran, and at the same time, facilitated closer collaboration with local governments like Jeddah to launch a comprehensive national strategy to ordering all business closures to achieve health preservation and guarantee essential services and security. The Saudi Passport authority further extended resident identity automatically via the government portal without fees and sent text messages via phones to all beneficiaries in all needed languages. The validity period for exit and return visas has also been extended (CNN, 2020). The Saudi Ministry of Health, through its portal, offered several applications for Smartphones such as Spacing (Tabaud) Application, Rest Assured (Tataman), among others (Saudi Ministry of Health, 2020). The Saudi Government set up a package of \$61 billion in support of the private sector, of which \$18.6 billion in exemptions

and delay of government's dues, and \$13.3 billion for banking and SME sectors. Tax related-measures include the extension of deadlines for tax returns and payments (Saudi Ministry of Finance, 2020). An alternative recruitment system through the portal "Ajeer" has been set up to protect expatriates' jobs. Measures also include a 25% reduction of expatriates' levy for operational factories until the end of the year. The deferral of loan payments for large and small factories, small projects, and medical projects due in 2020. A 30% discount for two months on utility bills for the commercial, industrial and agricultural sectors (KPMG, 2020). The Saudi Ministry of Health announced free treatment for citizens, legal residents, and undocumented migrants without any legal consequences (Saudi Press Agency, 2020).

Since August, curfew policies in Jeddah have been lifted, thus restoring market business operations in the local economy. Local authorities, however, still enforce strict regulations to control the spread of covid19 in both public and private spaces. The violation of strict norms such as social distancing and wearing a mask are also often punished with economic fines and possible jail sentences. These strict local regulations have significantly impacted various foreign worker communities in Jeddah, as local Jeddah government enforced tighter rule of law in order to stop the spread of covid19 virus. One Egyptian migrant acknowledges:

*We have never had an epidemic that affected our lives at social, economic, and psychological levels. Our regular work stopped because many of the Egyptian community's jobs are manual and can not be done online. Many of us lost their jobs, and as a result, all family members, old and young, were forced to cohabiting in the same house. Curfews could last several hours. The high death toll increased our fear daily, causing tremendous psychological distress. We had to go to a hospital for an eye examination for a family member. We were surprised that all specialties in all hospitals stopped receiving patients except for the emergency department that receives only corona patients. The masks at home ran out. Pharmacists informed me that people bought in large quantities and that there were not enough supplies. The same happened with sanitation products.*

*If caught after the curfew began, we were subject to a fine and possible imprisonment. This caused everybody, including Saudis, confusion and fear. The municipality of Jeddah closed all neighbourhoods' bakeries due to their lack of compliance with the health standards. For this reason, we're unable to taste the sacredness of the holy month of Ramadan. We could not celebrate the Eid al-Fitr holidays that come after the end of Ramadan due to the restriction of movements. Our children's regular education was cancelled, and this caused significant challenges and psychological pressure for both parents and young students. It was not possible to take our children to play. The economic impact of pandemic also caused a lot of stress. Sending remittances became more problematic due to a decrease in our income since a large part of our community did not receive little or no salary. All our income was destined to meet our daily needs. My salary is not enough to survive daily. We do not have enough money to pay the fees. It is possible to send my family back to Egypt as the last resort because they would be exposed to the virus.*

Similar to other migrant workers, Egyptian migrant workers were and have continued to be severely affected by COVID19, particularly their living and working conditions, which have significant implications on their future employment, as well as their family's status in the origin country in the long run. This particular case highlight not only the economic difficulties faced by foreign worker communities in Jeddah, but also the future uncertainties and options in the Saudi and of the Gulf labor market.

## Migration Survey Overview

In the Gulf, COVID19 has significantly impacted not only the Gulf domestic labour markets, but also the broader state institutions and policies, specifically in the areas of public health, urban policy, employment, and security. As economic power centres in the Middle East, major Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah faced economic shocks, which generated massive unemployment (i.e., wage reduction, unemployment) among migrant workers (and their families) regardless of their ethnic, gender, and religious backgrounds. The Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah were mainly chosen because they host the vast majority of the migrant population across the Gulf region. As

top city employers for migrant workers in the Gulf region, these Gulf cities largely contribute to the economies of major labour-sending countries in Asia, Arab, and African states. Many local, regional, and international businesses are also headquartered in these major Gulf cities; thus, when COVID19 pandemic proliferated, migrant workers in these Gulf cities were directly impacted. The collected survey broadly attempts to examine an initial analysis of the effect of COVID19 on migrant workers and explore core issues affecting migrant labour while simultaneously identifying future policy challenges for the Gulf city-states in the region.

#### *Migrant Profile*

Of the 117 migrant surveys in both Gulf cities, 90% of respondents indicated that they work in the private sector while the other 10% indicated their public sector work. The average age of migrants is 39 years ago, ranging from 20 to 70 years old. The average age of migrant respondents in Dubai is 33, while, for Jeddah, it is 42 years old, which directly reinforces the relatively younger migrant composition in Dubai. This is partly due to the high degree of immigration policies of Dubai, which enables migrant workers to convert their 'tourist visas' to 'employment visas', which are often not permitted in Jeddah (also religious visas for umrah and Hajj cannot be changed).<sup>10</sup> In terms of the marital status of migrant respondents, the survey recorded 42 singles, 66 married, eight divorced or separated and only one widow. The average number of children reported in both Gulf cities by migrants is three; however, in Dubai, the average is 2, while in Jeddah is 3.

In terms of education, migrant respondents tended to be somewhat educated. 12% of the migrant's respondents highlighted their post-graduate degrees, while 53% (or 62) acknowledge their college degrees, constituting the majority of the sample. 12% (14) have completed secondary school education, and the other 8% reported some technical vocational programs. Only 10% (or 12) reported little or no formal training or education. When asked about their migration decisions, migrants noted that they migrated to achieve better income and financial opportunity (58%), acquire work experience (31.6%), and family and friends (31.6%) and other issues about the low cost of recruitment. These data suggest that these migrant respondents are not only young and fairly educated but also have already pre-existing migration networks through their families and friends in the Gulf region. Economic opportunity, in particular, was highlighted as a primary factor in their migration decision to the Gulf region.

In entering the Gulf before COVID19, migrant respondents acknowledged they used recruitment agencies (56.4%) and other travel agencies (40%) to facilitate their move to the Gulf city and others through family visa route. Both migrants in the Gulf cities utilized their social networks with family or friends in the Gulf to help them facilitate their tourist visa issuance or introduction to a prospective employer. Others acknowledged that their friends initiated the immigration application in the Gulf or co-facilitated it with a tourist agency to ensure speedy processing. In terms of migration costs, 64.9% reported that they paid AED/SR 200 or less for the placement or recruitment fee to secure their employment in these Gulf cities. The other 25.6%, however, acknowledged that their Gulf employer processed and paid the recruitment to the Gulf, mostly of semi and skilled professionals. Less than 1% of the migrant respondents indicated that they paid AED/SR between 2,000 and 15,000 for placement or recruitment fees.

Also, migrant respondents reported, on average, that they have lived and worked in these Gulf cities for at least 11 years, ranging from one year to 28 years. The average year in Dubai is approximately 12, while, in Jeddah, it is 11 years. These migrant workers have also accumulated debt, averaging AED/SR 4,900 in their home countries or AED/SR 4,551<sup>11</sup> in the Gulf cities. The overall debt range across both Gulf cities is between AED/SR 1,000 and 100,000, which if unpaid, would make it difficult for migrants to return to their home countries. In Jeddah, for example, the overall average expatriate debt is 5,600 SR, while in Dubai, it is approximately 3,565 AED. While

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<sup>10</sup> This option in Saudi Arabia may be available in the future.

<sup>11</sup> In many cases, these debts are related to securing a job in the Gulf. One of the interviewees in Jeddah, Ali from Pakistan noted: "many of us had to sell their home or borrow money by using their home as collateral to buy a visa or secure a job by a Saudi or Pakistani agent."

these debts appear to be low, they are compounded with interests rates from the bank or shark loans in the Gulf cities. With the loss of employment, particularly during the COVID19 pandemic, as explained in the following section, these debts will have a more drastic effect not only on the health but also on the financial security of these migrant workers in times of the pandemic crises.

In both Gulf cities, migrant respondents have also indicated that social media plays a vital role in their lives, often used not only to communicate with their family and social networks in their home or the Gulf countries but also acquire information related to current news and events, specifically during COVID19 pandemic. 57.26% of migrant respondents emphasized that their COVID19 knowledge is gained through Facebook, while 16.2% specified Twitter. Others utilized various social media platforms, including YouTube, television, newspapers and from their other social networks (friends/family members) to keep themselves updated both with COVID19, as well as the changing migration policy regulations both in their home and Gulf countries. These data suggest that migrant workers are not only technologically connected but also socially conscious of the changing policy dynamic changes that are being pursued by the home and Gulf countries.

## Effects of COVID19 on Migrant Labour in Gulf Cities

As COVID19 have continued to increase and impact Gulf cities, migrant employment across industries halted. While the data survey suggests a high degree of migrant precarity before COVID19 - exemplified through their debt levels and financial obligations towards their families - the COVID19 pandemic simply exacerbated such vulnerability. The following section examines how COVID19 pandemic impacted migrant workers in the context of their employment, living conditions, access to medical services, access to justice, and remittance contributions.

### *Employment Status*

During COVID19 pandemic, migrant employment across industries was severely impacted. On average, 52.5% of migrant respondents broadly reported an income decline in both Gulf cities. In Dubai, 83% of respondents in Dubai reported a loss of employment in various fields, including retail, hospitality, construction, and other serviced based industries. The sudden halt of the Dubai tourism sector, in particular, led many to become unemployed but also distressed due to their complex financial obligations to banks, families, and others. In contrast, only 35% of migrant respondents in Jeddah reported loss or partial decrease in income during COVID19 pandemic in various industries, although these migrant respondents' income was either fully or partially deducted<sup>12</sup>, the vast majority fears that, as COVID19 pandemic intensifies, their employment status will soon be cancelled due to the relatively low business activity in both Gulf cities.

In response to economic uncertainties, migrant respondents have increasingly resorted to part-time employment as an alternative financial source to offset their full or partial loss of jobs. While part-time employment (meaning working for multiple employers) is generally not permitted.<sup>13</sup> Part-time employment has also become an essential coping mechanism for migrant workers in the Gulf cities. One Filipino migrant in Dubai, Maria acknowledges: "the hardest part is not the COVID19, but when my family calls me for food and school tuition, and there's nothing I can do about it. I have to sell food even in times of COVID19. It's the only thing I know." The survey suggests that 17%, however, felt that they would "severely suffer" if they fail to secure money for their families back home, most of whom are Filipino migrants in both Dubai and Jeddah. The average monthly income for part-time income ranged between AED/SR 300 and AED/SR 5000, with an average mean income of AED/SR 2080. The average pay for part-time in Dubai was AED 3000, while the average in Jeddah was SR1,500. While the majority appears to not reported part-time employment, it is also possible that

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<sup>12</sup> For example, almost all individuals working in the education sector (except those who teach in higher education) and other domestic service-based industries (hospitality, administration) in the Gulf private sector reported a 50% decrease in their salaries.

<sup>13</sup> The exemption to this rule includes those freelancers or consultants that are being independently hired by local Gulf firms to execute a specific business task for the organization.

respondents may not have reported due to legal issues that could arise for working with multiple employers, which is prohibited under the kafala sponsorship system.

If COVID19 pandemic intensifies in the next few months, some migrants have also indicated their intention to leave depending on the projected wage cuts in their employment. 47.8% of migrant respondents suggested that they plan to leave these Gulf cities if their income drops between 26.5% and 50.5%. Another 32.4% of migrant respondents plan to exit immediately if their income declines between 0-25% respectively. If wages decreased between 51% and 75% respectively, 13.6% have acknowledged their decision to return to their home countries. Only seven migrants (less than 1%) expressed their intention to leave these Gulf cities. In other words, if migrant wages drop, on average by 43.5%, migrant respondents confirmed that they would leave the Gulf cities. The survey also suggests that more educated migrants in both Gulf cities would likely to leave faster than migrants with little education, which could be partly due to their lack of employment opportunities, savings, or prospects exacerbated by their little formal schooling in the job markets.

#### *Living Conditions*

During the COVID19 pandemic, the Gulf cities of Dubai and Jeddah significantly imposed policing control on the internal mobility of expatriate residents to effectively limit the spread of COVID 19 virus, specifically within 'high risk' crowded accommodation spaces (i.e. crowded housing units, labour camps). The survey suggests that with restrictive state control over migrant mobility, 90% of migrant respondents acknowledged that they stayed in their accommodation premises. Our qualitative interviews revealed, however, that the non-payment of monthly rents generated significant tensions between the migrants and landlords since they both are pressured to pay the real estate owner regularly. One Pakistani worker in Dubai, Suhail highlighted: "While my landlord let us stay and delay the rent, others forced them to move to another accommodation or live with their friends to survive during the pandemic." While both Dubai and Jeddah governments publicly prohibited landlords from evicting tenants in times of COVID19, others defied such domestic policy. This particular living arrangement problem has been exacerbated mainly with the 'no work, no pay' condition within their companies, which, to a large extent, has even made it more challenging to afford rental prices. For example, during the pre-COVID19 context, the rent on average in Jeddah was SR 757 room price and slightly decreased to SR 754 during the COVID19 pandemic. On the other hand, the reported average rent in Dubai during pre-COVID was AED 1,348 and slightly increased to AED 1,397. This slight increase could be partly due to landlords' attempt to offset low-revenues during COVID19 pandemic, as expatriate residents have increasingly defaulted on their monthly rental payments (and other financial dues like loans, credit-cards) due to the no work, no pay situation.

#### *Access to Medical Services*

As COVID19 pandemic has continued to intensify in these Gulf cities, the role of public health institutions and medical services has become even more vital. The Gulf states of the UAE and Saudi Arabia declared that public health hospitals would offer free medical treatment to COVID19 patients regardless of their immigration status. During the survey collection period between April and June 2020, the findings suggest that 76.9% of migrant respondents had insurance from their current employers. Other 23.1% reported not having medical insurance due either to their irregular status or recently cancelled work permit. However, as COVID19 dramatically impacted Gulf labour markets, many firms have increasingly lost revenues due to low business activity, therefore potentially producing more unemployed and uninsured migrant populations in these Gulf cities. The high and rising repatriation rates from the Philippines, Pakistan, and Egypt in both Gulf cities suggest the growing domestic market disruptions since April 2020. While both Gulf city governments have liberalized their health system; they allowed migrant workers to access public hospitals (i.e. COVID19 testing) and receive free medical treatment regardless of their immigration status. However, it is likely, more migrants will inevitably face health insecurity due to lack of access to employment and full health insurance coverage, particularly for those irregular migrants (and their children).

### *Access to Dispute Resolutions*

The COVID19 pandemic has also put a temporary halt on governing institutions in these Gulf cities, including labour and interior ministries (specifically immigration) due to the possible rapid spread of COVID19 virus. This domestic state policy has not only prevented many migrants from seeking wage claims but also possibly disincentivized them to pursue legal claims due to perceived lengthy court proceedings. In both Gulf cities, the survey suggests that only 9% of respondents faced some dispute claims with their employer. While the vast majority had no reported claims, one could reasonably argue that this could be partly due to migrants' perceived fear of employer retaliation or government closures and their affiliated offices (i.e. Tasheel) which have made it virtually difficult lodge legal complaints during COVID19 pandemic. Others may have postponed their legal claims due to government closures, and perhaps filed their claims after lifting the internal mobility lockdowns and reopening government offices responsible for the dispute resolution in governing labour courts. Of those who filed or labour disputes in both Gulf cities, common complaints included payment settlements, repatriation tickets and contractual-related issues (i.e. wage reductions). The survey also indicates that 52.99% of migrant respondents across three migrant communities believe that the dispute resolution system is "fair "in both Gulf cities", while only five survey respondents felt that the system is unfair. Other 47% of migrants, however, left no comments, which could probably indicate either their fear of filing or the circumstances that could lead to pursuing a legal dispute case (i.e. immediate termination, costly, lengthy dispute resolution, lack of resources income etc.)

Apart from these Gulf cities' dispute resolution systems, the sending countries' diplomatic missions have also differentially viewed by migrants in the study. As echoed in the previous section, migrants' embassies or consulates in both Gulf states did not offer dispute related assistance due to the internal mobility lockdowns. While certain embassies proactively provided further aid to their migrants (i.e. the Philippine's AED 700 cash assistance and food aid), other migrants' embassies, specifically those from Egypt and Pakistan reported little or no financial or social assistance from their respective consulates or embassies. One Pakistan migrant, Imran acknowledges that "my embassy did not help me because everything was closed and they cannot conduct or advise us in times of COVID19 pandemic." Others complained about the institutional inefficiency of their embassies, whereby one migrant says, "the embassy did not help, and it's not good. The prolonged process in dealing with my problem was difficult to bear. They are very slow to process and send me home." Other migrants, however, blatantly pointed out their rejection of their respective embassies, highlighting that "our embassy doesn't offer anything, even food assistance. The Philippine embassy is more proactive than others (referring to Egyptian and Pakistani consulates or embassies)." To an extent, accessing dispute resolution options in times of COVID19 for migrants has become risky, costly, and not only problematic but also legally and administratively counterproductive to their intention to stay in the Gulf. Some recent studies even pointed out that undocumented foreign expatriates are institutionally hesitant to utilize local government health facilities irrespective of their health conditions due to the fear of identity exposure, arrests, sanctions, or even deportation to their home countries (Alsharif, 2020).

### *Remittance Contributions*

COVID19 pandemic has also disrupted the remittance flows between these Gulf states and respective sending countries like Pakistan, the Philippines, and Egypt. While some migrants, particularly those in unaffected vital sectors (i.e., medical, pharmaceutical, etc.) continue to regularly remit, the vast majority, however, experienced significant drop of remittance transfer due to wage cuts, lack of savings, or high debt levels in the host country. Of the total 117 respondents, the survey indicated that during the -COVID19 pandemic, 56% of migrant respondents reported that their remittances transfers stayed the same. In contrast, the other 44% witnessed a massive decrease in their remittance contribution. This sudden remittance decline could be partly due to partial wage loss or unemployment conditions faced by migrant workers. In Dubai, for example, the average remittance transfer among surveyed respondents changed from AED 1 903 (pre-COVID) to 866 (during COVID), constituting at least a 54% decline. In Jeddah, however, remittance transfer dropped by 19% from SR 3,122

(pre-COVID) to SR 2,535 (during COVID), which both has significant implications for their families back home, as well as sending countries' economies in the long run.

## Post COVID19 Migration Scenarios: Some Policy Insights

As COVID19 pandemic intensifies in the Gulf region, the post-COVID19 migration scenarios will significantly pose serious governance challenges for all stakeholders, including the Gulf states, sending states, and migrants and their families. This section offers some broader insights into the current and future post-COVID19 migration scenarios that could be vital for policymakers and researchers to explore in the long run. If the current COVID19 infection rate relatively remains high (or grows even more), the following scenarios are inevitable. First, Gulf states' fiscal budget and revenues will likely drop, given the slow economic recoveries of Gulf-based firms operating in the Gulf. While slow economic reopening has helped some Gulf-based firms to recover slightly, the vast majority are still struggling to survive. This has severe effects on the quantity and quality of employment opportunities in the Gulf private sector. In particular, Gulf government's limited fiscal budget could also impact their existing mega infrastructure projects, which significantly recruit foreign expatriates. For example, Saudi Arabia has already cut \$8 billion from its Vision 2030 to cope with its fiscal budget constraints. Other Gulf countries like Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman have also restructured their national fiscal budgets to maintain financial liquidity this year.

Second, Gulf employment is and will continue to remain weak in the long run, except in specific critical sectors like health, food, and logistics. To a large extent, the labour-intensive occupational character of most Gulf states - linked to their labour dependence for various vital industries (i.e. hospitality, aviation, construction ) will likely generate unemployment as Gulf-based firms significantly attempt to cut operational costs and maintain liquidity as Gulf economy and businesses try to recover in the short run. Localization policies have also increasingly become intensified, specifically in Oman's and Kuwait's private sector. The UAE and Saudi Arabian governments, however, have not strongly promulgated localization policies but their socioeconomic policies (i.e. Saudi Arabia's VAT policy, UAE's increase of government fees related to work permits, airline tickets) could indirectly trigger the outflow of foreign expatriates living and working in the Gulf. While their localization policies have not been fully mobilized, it is expected that these largest Gulf labour markets will be localized in the long run to accommodate the rising unemployment problems among their local populations.

Third, Gulf states will also continue to impose restrictive and authoritative labour market protectionism and policing to control the spread of COVID19, and its impact on their economy. Apart from localization policies, certain Gulf countries like Kuwait have already imposed migration quotas. In contrast, Bahrain imposed five-month work permit issuance suspension due to COVID19 pandemic; however, the Labor Market Authority has already resumed the work permit issuance process but with a specific focus on those living and working in the country (Lilywhite, 2020). Oman, however, has intensified not only its localization policy but also expanded its administrative crackdowns on undocumented migrant workers working in various Omani sectors, including fishing, construction etc. Among the other Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also intensified not on their labour market reforms (i.e. amnesty, mobility policies) but also their public health strategies to limit the potential spread on the governing labour markets. COVID19 mandatory testing, for example, has been imposed on various sectors in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries as prerequisites for future employment or work permit renewals.

Fourth, the Gulf states' policies will also likely produce an undocumented migrant population. With limited economic prospects in their home countries, and perceived weak governance responses by their home country governments, combined with large financial responsibility as 'family breadwinners' to support their families, foreign expatriates will likely not only struggle to survive the COVID19 pandemic but also will be influenced to stay in the Gulf countries irrespective of their immigration status due to potential opportunities to earn income in the Gulf formal or informal markets. The wage differential dimension of the Gulf-sending country

destinations will likely play a critical role on foreign expatriates' micro-decisions to stay in the Gulf, while simultaneously hoping for the future economic recovery of the Gulf economy.

## Conclusions

As the 'new normal' amidst the COVID19 pandemic exposes the high degree of Gulf states' vulnerability, it also creates new strategic opportunities for the Gulf states and their respective local governments like Jeddah and Dubai to reexamine further the critical linkages of migration as a powerful domestic force in their local economy, public health, and labour markets. While the data results cannot be generalized due to small sampling, the study still offers critical insights into the impacts of COVID19 on migrant workers' welfare and status, as well as validating broader issues shaping their vulnerability and opportunity in the Gulf region. As these Gulf cities authoritatively and consistently enforce public, economic, and financial reforms to protect and maintain labour market stability, rising foreign worker unemployment is not only inevitable but also constitutes the trend across the Gulf sectors. This particular scenario will not only be exacerbated by ongoing localization, repatriation, unemployment, and public health risks, but also produce new multilevel forms of domestic and foreign policy perspectives on local, regional, and global migration governance critical to the long-term longevity of the Gulf economy and states, as well as migrant-sending states and their foreign workers in the long run.

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