



## The return of extreme poverty 'Back empty-handed': Bangladeshis cut off from jobs abroad face rising poverty

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**Kaamil Ahmed and Rafiqul Montu in Noakhali**

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**W**hen the pandemic forced Firoza Begum back to [Bangladesh](#) after six months trapped in her employer's house without pay, her husband was so angry she had returned empty-handed that he would not let her move back in to the family home.

All her savings after 14 years working in the Middle East had been spent escaping her abusive employer.

Begum, 40, had to go to her parents' home, where she took on responsibility for her mother and two disabled sisters.

For years, Bangladeshi migrant workers have supported their families back home and their remittances have been vital to keeping entire communities out of extreme poverty, as the government has tried to meet the UN's 2030 sustainable development goals.

But after hundreds of thousands of migrant workers lost their jobs because of Covid-19's economic impact, government [research](#) suggests that they and their families are returning to the poverty they tried to escape.

A year ago, Begum was earning 22,000 Bangladeshi taka (£190) each month working for a Saudi doctor, sending almost all of it to her husband or her parents, to repair houses, buy land and pay medical bills.

“Now there is no income. I am [having a hard time](#) meeting our family's monthly expenses,” she says. “We're surviving by taking loans from my relatives. I owe them about 150,000 taka. I don't know how this money will be repaid.”



▲ Firoza Begum returned to her village in the Patuakhali district of Bangladesh after escaping an abusive employer in the Middle East. Photograph: Rafiqul Islam Montu

The government has encouraged work abroad. [Remittances](#) were worth \$15bn (£11bn) a year and helped reduce poverty in rural areas, supporting families and financing small business.

By last April however, remittances were at their lowest for a decade, according to the central bank, and the protracted crisis is pushing back Bangladesh's progress on

poverty. The World Food Programme has estimated that, globally, the drop in migrant workers' remittances could put an additional **33 million people at risk of hunger**.

When the **government reported to the UN** on its progress against the sustainable development goals in June, it said that the poverty rate had halved from 40% in 2005 to 20.5% in 2019, but that the pandemic risked halting the main strategies of promoting work abroad and increasing employment opportunities for the poorest. By June 2020, the poverty rate **had risen back to 29.5%**.

A **survey by Bangladeshi research company** Innovision said on average low-income families had enough to support themselves for eight days without extra income, while most households had grain stores that would last 11 days.

**“ People are coming back empty-handed who have lost their jobs. They don't know what will happen in future  
Shariful Islam, Brac**

Brac, Bangladesh's largest NGO, created a database of 35,000 returnees to support them with cash grants and counselling. Shariful Islam, head of Brac's migration programme, says there have been more than 400,000 returnees since early 2020 and **most had no support**.

“People are coming back empty-handed who have lost their jobs. These people don't know what will happen in the future.”

Given how many people are supported by each migrant worker, he says, up to a third of the population could be affected by the job losses, and there are still many unemployed people stranded abroad.

A **survey in June** by the UN's migration agency (IOM) revealed that most of the returnees were now unemployed and half had no income at all.



▲ Reaz Mahmud lost his job in the Middle East. Now, he says, he worries about having to sell his home to survive.  
Photograph: Rafiqul Islam Montu

In Paschim Charbata, a village in the coastal Noakhali district, almost every home had sent a man abroad over the past decade but most are now back. They sit at home worrying about jobs, mounting debt and feeding their families.

“The coronavirus pandemic has stopped my life. My life trajectory was at its peak but now it’s rapidly descending. The family was doing quite well. I could spend the money on what my family needed. Now it is very difficult to meet the daily expenses,” says Reaz Mahmud, 39.

He has accumulated a debt of 600,000 taka (£5,200) - double the amount he borrowed when he first left Bangladesh in 2010 to work as an electrician in Qatar.

His job as a private driver in Oman ended when the pandemic led to travel restrictions, trapping him in Bangladesh, where he had been taking a holiday for the first time in two years.

Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, head of Bangladeshi NGO Coast, says the organisation will make migrant workers a priority by supporting them to reintegrate into society, or providing training so they can return to work abroad with better skills.

“There are hardships because they are running out of savings, they are not in good condition and sometimes they are suffering trauma. If it continues it will create social unrest, so we are ready to support them,” says Chowdhury.

Mahmud had to send his wife to her father's house with their three children and sell most of his land. With so many people searching for jobs, finding work has proved impossible and he now faces selling the plot his family live on unless he can return to Oman.

“Before the pandemic I was able to send money home every month and, from abroad, alleviated many of the crises at home. I thought I could make a living through this job, that I could improve my life,” says Mahmud. “Coronavirus shattered all dreams.”

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