

KERALA

'Wage theft,' a bane of Gulf returnees

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A survey among 3,345 Keralite migrant workers concludes that 11% of them have been forced to return without severance package and wages for several years, with the amount translating to ₹62.58 crore



As many as 11% of migrant workers from Kerala who were forced to return from Gulf countries during the COVID-19 pandemic have not got their wages, according to a study on wage theft conducted by the Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS). The report points at remittance loss to Kerala owing to this, which is a cause for worry as remittances make up more than a quarter of the State Gross Domestic Product.

The survey was conducted among 3,345 migrant workers who either returned home or are stranded abroad after being abandoned by their employers. A total of 397 workers out of them, making up more than 11% of the surveyed, were found to be victims of 'wage theft,' signifying termination without notice and withholding or deduction of wages and other benefits. Out of them, 90% belong to the construction sector, 2% manufacturing, 2% transportation and 2.5% comprising other sectors such as domestic work, retail, and medical.

According to figures maintained by NoRKA Roots, the field agency of Department of Non-Resident Keralites, a total of 15.36 lakh migrant workers returned until July 15 this year since the outbreak of the pandemic, out of whom 10.98 lakh indicated job loss as reason for return.

1.3 lakh victims?

Extrapolating the survey findings to these numbers, the CIMS estimates that around 1.3 lakh of those who returned due to job loss are likely to be victims of wage theft, which could lead to huge remittance losses to Kerala.

“Immediate attention should be paid to timely access of justice mechanisms as certain GCC countries allow labour complaints only for a period of one year,” says Parvathy Devi K., migrant rights activist at CIMS and a research scholar at Mahatma Gandhi University, who authored the report.

Highest at ₹19.26 lakh

As per the analysis of data collected from the victims, a total of ₹62.58 crore has been denied to the 397 returnees who reported wage theft. The highest amount of wage theft reported by a returnee is ₹19.26 lakh, as severance pay and other benefits for several years of service rendered.

It was revealed that only nine respondents among the 397 were aware of the legal measures they could take to claim unpaid dues and wages after return to their country of origin. Along with the survey, CIMS, an organisation which has been handling issues of Indian migrant workers for over two decades, has also been filing cases of grievance since August 2020 in the MADAD portal, run by the Union Ministry of External Affairs. Unfortunately, none of the cases were resolved in a way that the worker receives justice for wage theft. None of the returnees were able to file a case through the MEA or generate a power of attorney for the same purpose due to delay on the part of Indian missions abroad.

Firms run by Indians

The survey acknowledges the difficulty in accessing women migrant workers to document their experience with wage theft. The survey results include only five women workers. Ironically, some of the perpetrators of wage theft, who run the companies abroad, happen to be Indian citizens. In October 2020, *The Hindu* had reported the case of 286 repatriated workers of the Nasser S. Al-Hajri Corporation (NSH) in Saudi Arabia, who were being denied their severance pay. Seven of these workers have filed police complaints in Kerala against the management staff of Kerala origin, but no action has been taken.

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