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Sri Lankan Migrant Women's Uncertain COVID-19 Conditions in the Middle East

Mohamed Idrees Mohamed Aslam

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The discrimination and exploitation encountered by Sri Lankan migrant women in the Middle East labour market have aggravated, which engenders significant challenges for numerous families, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study aims to explore Sri Lankan women's uncertain living conditions with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative research method was employed to collect data through a semi-structured interview guide and produce a descriptive analysis using the thematic analysis technique. Purposive sampling was performed to recruit Sri Lankan migrant women who stayed with their respective families in Bahrain. A total of 13 online in-depth interviews were conducted. Resultantly, Sri Lankan migrant women experienced significant challenges during the pandemic due to frequent humiliation and termination by employers, which significantly increased the pressure of living. The crisis negatively impacted Sri Lankan migrant women's lives owing to increased family responsibilities, which led to high challenges in achieving a balance between work and family. Working in the Middle East and resettling in Sri Lanka were not as favourable as expected at their stage of work, which required them to adopt coping mechanisms to achieve their economic goal. However, the amount of relevant materials and social support for the migrant women was minimal. The present study advocates that women's right to work should be protected and that welfare organisations should be expanded to reach more vulnerable families. The current findings enriched the existing knowledge corpus by providing empirical evidence in the broader sociological field, which could assist policymakers and researchers in future migration studies.

Keywords: COVID-19, low-skilled workers, migrant women, Sri Lanka, the Middle East

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E-mail address:
aslamriza@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus (COVID-19) disease outbreak in 2019 (Paterson-Young, 2021) significantly impacted over 769 million

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individuals and caused approximately 6.9 million deaths worldwide as of August 2023 (World Health Organisation, 2023). The crisis has also significantly impacted billions of individuals' lives since the beginning of 2020, especially migrant workers with highly aggravated living conditions that received global attention. Most companies and house owners prevented minor workers from entering premises owing to the high concern of physically spreading the virus, which caused low-paid and foreign domestic workers to experience a significant loss of employment and income sources (Garfield et al., 2020; Jamil & Dutta, 2021). The ineffective management of the crisis by sending and receiving countries (Equidem, 2020) also engendered migrant workers, including Sri Lankans, to assemble in front of respective embassies to express personal discontent despite the severe COVID-19 consequences, which received great attention on social media.

Only a small body of literature exists on the experiences of Sri Lankan migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2021) explored the financial issues experienced by professionals and skilled and semi-skilled Sri Lankan migrant workers in Qatar. Weeraratne (2020) examined skilled labourers' employment and wage issues in various destinations, including the Middle East. Nevertheless, past studies did not focus on the COVID-19 experiences of housemaids and low-skilled migrant women with family or undocumented migrants (Aslam et al., 2023) physically working at outdoor workplaces. It is pertinent to note that Sri Lankan housemaids in the Middle East stay with employers and outside of the employers' homes (Frantz, 2008). The pandemic significantly impacted migrant women workers' daily lives and the economy, as their primary income source was labour force participation. Gender has become a crucial intersecting factor of several studies amid COVID-19, exploring the experiences of migrant women in various destinations. Direct and uneven financial effects during the pandemic pushed migrant women into extreme poverty (J. Smith et al., 2021). For example, unemployed female workers in Hong Kong relied on financial support from families back home and funding agencies (Milhaud, 2023). Women who experienced the career break caused by the pandemic faced long-term consequences. For instance, when Canada eased the pandemic restrictions in the Middle of 2020, re-employment rates increased twice as fast among men than women (Statistics Canada, 2020). Nevertheless, the lack of data impeded gender-based analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gunatilaka (2013) corroborated that Sri Lankan economic growth highly depends on increasing women's participation in the paid labour force. Particularly, socially constructed gender roles in Sri Lanka rapidly change due to globalisation and macroeconomic developments, which allow more women to participate in income-generating activities and community roles (Jayaweera & Dias, 2009). Additionally, female households become the primary

economic providers, which challenges the symbolic female role in household duties, such as childrearing, cooking, and caring for the elderly (Gamburd, 2000). The role reversal is more apparent among female migrant workers when migration could assist in reducing poverty while enhancing the family economy (Jayaweera & Dias, 2009). A report published by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE; 2023) depicts that, from 1993 to 1997, over 70% of females migrated. The proportion gradually decreased over the years, reaching 34.31% in 2017. Subsequently, a significant transition was observed in 2022, with 40% of females migrating from the total departure of 311,161 migrants, involving nearly 91% of females in the Middle East (SLBFE, 2023). Nonetheless, discrimination and exploitation of women persist in the labour market, which was exacerbated by the pandemic and became a common occurrence in daily life.

Unequal treatment based on gender mostly exists among female migrants in the emigrated countries. Prior scholars identified that women's vulnerabilities, such as lack of effective means against discrimination and low aspiration wages, were highly exploited by different industries to generate higher profits (Gunatilaka, 2013). Women were also perceived as a more manageable workforce segment. Most Sri Lankan female migrants also belonged to disadvantaged families or lived in vulnerable conditions and low-skilled categories in the emigrated destination (Ukwatta, 2010), which contributed to higher exploitation by recruiters and employers (Amnesty International, 2014). Choudhury et al. (2024) confirmed that Bangladeshi women who migrated to Saudi Arabia with prosperous dreams returned to the country heartbroken due to the physical and verbal violence. Parrenas (2021) explored Filipino women whom their UAE employers deported for minor infractions, such as working slowly. Similar exploitative practices, including beating, scolding, and dehumanising treatment from respective employers, were experienced by the Sri Lankan migrants (Weeraratne, 2014). Moreover, being a temporary migrant or undocumented status was another cause for unequal treatment. Undocumented migrants were recruited by companies due to low wages (Khoso & Noor, 2021), which frequently occurred in Middle Eastern countries during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alsharif, 2022). The inhuman treatment encountered by female workers with the increasing demand for female domestic workers reflects the gender-based discriminatory practice among the transitory labour workforce. Yet, the implication of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of migrant women with families has not received due attention from the existing knowledge and policymakers (Mueller et al., 2023).

Documenting relevant experiences of Sri Lankan migrant women during the COVID-19 pandemic could contribute to the existing literature on migration. Nevertheless, quantitative data on female workers staying with families and the exact

numbers of migrant workers were scarce in Sri Lanka (Ramanayake & Wijetunga, 2018). Studying Sri Lankan migrant women with families qualitatively among individual workers with high family expenses and family responsibilities in the emigrated nation could enrich the current knowledge corpus. Accordingly, 13 migrant women who stayed with families in Bahrain were interviewed. The main objective of this study is to complement previous findings by providing more empirical evidence on Sri Lankan migrant women's uncertain COVID-19 conditions in the Middle East.

Specific objectives of this study sought to:

1. Explore the intersection between the push migration factors and the economic and social precarity of migrant women with families in the Middle East during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Investigate the gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Examine the migrant women's solutions to the COVID-19 Challenges in the Middle East.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sri Lankan Migrant Women in the Middle East

This paper first draws on the literature on migrant women, reviewing push migration factors to evaluate the gender effects of the pandemic that hinder achieving the migration goal. The experiences of female migrants, who constitute approximately half of all international migrants, are the researchers' main focus (International Labour Organization, 2016). The findings of the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) reveal that 4.2 million women workers were recorded in Arab states in 2019. A total of three Asian Pacific countries supply domestic workers, namely the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia (Piper, 2008). Sri Lanka provides multiple labourers, which is indicated by the increasing migration since 1976, when the Sri Lankan government lifted the restrictions on foreign employment. Subsequently, the government introduced a liberal economic policy in 1977, which allowed labourers to search for economic opportunities across national borders (Lakshman, 1993). Oil discovery in the Middle East and the persistent demand for Sri Lankan labourers to fill in developmental projects also promoted migration to the Middle East, which was regarded as an alternative economic avenue to resolve immediate economic challenges (Gamburd, 2000; Ukwatta, 2010). Furthermore, the pre-departure cost for female migrants is thrice cheaper than the cost for males, which is compensated by agents through migrants' advance payments received from the employers (Shaw, 2010). Hence, more Sri Lankan females have migrated to Middle Eastern countries.

Sriskandarajah (2002) demonstrated that the lack of domestic economic opportunities and development was the primary reason for labour emigration from Sri Lanka. Gunatilleke (1995) also observed that sluggish Sri Lankan economic growth and urbanisation engendered job seekers to wait

for a longer period to secure permanent employment, which resulted in rural-to-urban migration and, subsequently, urban-to-international migration. Withers and Piper (2018) discovered a similar pattern, in which women migrated from rural villages to urban Colombo due to the uneven development between rural and urban areas. The migrant women worked in the garment industry and as domestic workers before emigrating to other nations, owing to the lack of payment. Nonetheless, the migration rationales remained ambiguous despite poverty and unemployment as primary issues in the Sri Lankan urban, rural, and estate sectors (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2016). Hewage et al. (2011) demonstrated that migration motivations resulted from the desire to earn more money for family necessities and future investments, such as building a house, commencing business ventures, and educating children.

Previous Sri Lankan migration studies conducted among female workers consistently observed that the primary reason for migration was economic factors. Dharmadasa et al. (2018) revealed that low wages in the tea plantation sector compelled young females to alter personal income portfolios by incorporating non-farming income sources, primarily migrating to the Middle East. Abeyasekera (2010) also observed that young Muslim women sought employment in the Middle East to earn money for dowries, which is a common Sri Lankan cultural practice that requires females to pay a lump sum of money or property to the male partner during the marriage (Gamburd, 2000). Regmi et al. (2020) agreed that less educated young females from low-income families in Nepal preferred working in the unskilled category in Middle Eastern countries to support their families and repay debts. Similarly, Parrenas (2021) disclosed that family economic vulnerabilities are the primary push factor for migrating Filipino domestic workers to the UAE. The above studies mostly have focused on the experiences of individuals, and migrant women with families in the emigrated destinations have largely been ignored by the literature.

Migrants would utilise available migration resources to temporarily reunite with families in Middle Eastern countries (Gardner, 2011). Previous researchers denoted marriages as a means to form families among migrant workers in the transitional phase (Hart, 2007). Particularly, Sri Lankan female migrants acquired romantic relationships that led to marriage in the Middle East (Frantz, 2008; M. Smith, 2010). M. Smith (2010) observed that certain Sri Lankan women worked from outside arrangements in Lebanon due to the advantage of earning more money than in employers' homes and obtaining more freedom. Nevertheless, migrant women's families tend to be impoverished, which constitutes a significant segment of the migrant workers. The COVID-19 pandemic has substantial gendered repercussions and may deteriorate their career progression. However, the studies on migrant families were less informative.

Migrant Workers' Solutions to COVID-19 Challenges in the Middle East

The COVID-19 outbreak in the Middle East occurred when a Chinese family arriving in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) tested positive for COVID-19 at the end of January 2020 (Bashir et al., 2021). Curbing the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging in the Middle East as neighbouring countries are culturally and religiously sensitive, allowing inter-state travel and massive religious gatherings, such as the Hajj pilgrimage (Baloch et al., 2020). Every Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country has reported several COVID-19 cases since March 2020, which resulted in strict preventive measures to protect citizens (Al-Tammemi, 2020). For instance, Bahrain restricted public gatherings and issued workplace guidelines limiting worker density in the workspace (Alabdulkarim et al., 2021). The implemented preventive measures impacted the economy of migrant workers more extensively than the native community (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified multiple issues among Middle Eastern migrants, including work termination, unemployment, reduced salaries, depletion of savings, and insufficient health facilities (Tazyeen et al., 2022). Work resumption was expected to be delayed for several months or years as employers were concerned with the virus spreading among migrant workers. Jamil and Dutta (2021) highlighted that Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East remained unemployed and struggled to secure their current job, which was necessary for survivability. Consistent with the above study, Ansar (2023) confirms that unemployed Bangladeshi women in the Middle East returned empty-handed because they could not claim their unpaid salaries for several months. Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2021) recorded that Sri Lankan migrants primarily depended on self-perpetuated coping mechanisms when the COVID-19 situation exacerbated, such as borrowing money from friends, selecting lower rental accommodation, and decreasing food expenses instead of seeking assistance from governmental and non-governmental agencies. Migrants were compelled to remain at their emigrated destinations and were subjected to living under the high pressure of personal expenses and transferring remittances to their home country.

Undocumented migrant workers were significantly impacted by unemployment and work termination during the COVID-19 pandemic. Alsharif (2022) discovered that undocumented migrants in Saudi Arabia were exploited by being recruited for low wages or without wages in a short period (Khoso & Noor, 2021). Similarly, female migrants without employment contracts and work permits worked in informal settings (Foley & Piper, 2021). Migrant women in an irregular migration status and employment without contracts were in constant apprehension of immigration detention due to the lack of legal documents to freely move across different workplaces

(Aslam et al., 2023). Consequently, migrant women could not access health facilities and maternity protection, which was further aggravated during the COVID-19 outbreak (Foley & Piper, 2021). Undocumented migrant workers, particularly women, had received less attention among welfare and anti-epidemic governance during the peak of COVID-19 (Milhaud, 2023; Zhang, 2024). The nature of undocumented migrants' work and lack of legal documents hampered them from employing support-seeking mechanisms. Being an employee in the informal sector would prevent one from accessing some 'social protection schemes,' such as wage subsidies (Mueller et al., 2023).

Additionally, migrant workers with families experienced more financial burdens, such as losing income and expenses in the migrated destination, as house rents, school fees, and other expenses remained unchanged during the pandemic (Khalaf, 2020). Substantial wage cuts or unemployment posed high challenges to migrants in paying house rentals punctually (Alsharif & Malit, 2020). Hashmi (2020) narrated the story of a pregnant woman in the UAE who was not recommended to travel after 33 weeks of pregnancy. The woman continued travelling as the woman's family lacked the necessary assistance, was homeless, and struggled with the expenditures of regular hospital visits and delivery due to the woman's husband's work termination. Migrant parents also struggled with their children's school fees, which compelled the parents to request fee waivers or discounts from school authorities. Khalaf (2020) reported in the Financial Times that 13,900 parents of children in UAE private schools signed a petition demanding school fee discounts of 30% due to the high living costs while receiving significant pay cuts. In summary, the pandemic exacerbated the financial burdens of the migrant workers' and the daily lives of their families. However, studies have rarely considered the responses of women to the gendered effects of the pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, two factors are collectively studied: migration goals not achieved in the migrated destination and positive reconstruction of the surrounding world to achieve their migration target, where the coping mechanisms are employed. In order to guide the study on migrant women's uncertain COVID-19 conditions in the Middle East, the present study employs three theories, which are the push and pull migration theory (Lee, 1966), migration network theory (Massey et al., 1993), and social capital theory (Putnam, 1993).

Female members in the family migrate overseas, leaving their traditional gender roles, to attain the family's collective well-being and improve personal wealth (Gamlath, 2019). However, these women's future dreams are demolished by gender-based discrimination, which was further aggravated during the pandemic. Accordingly, the present study employed the push-and-pull migration theory to frame the initiation of the migration and discern

migration goals (Lee, 1966). According to this model, every act of migration involves an origin, a destination, and an intervening set of obstacles. This theory was compared with the migrant women's uncertain COVID-19 conditions.

Since labour force participation was the primary income source for many migrant women, returning to the country at their stage of work during the pandemic was considered a double burden as the country of origin had also been affected (Ekanayake & Amirthalingam, 2021). Undocumented migrant women remained silent and were unwilling to return to their country of origin (Aslam et al., 2023). Thus, coping with the gendered effects of the pandemic was a potential solution for many women. This research studies the coping mechanisms by incorporating migration network and social capital theories (Massey et al., 1993; Putnam, 1993). Migration network and social capital theories support one another. In the migration context, social capital is a key resource within the migration network. Putnam (1993) defined social capital in terms of economic development as the "features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". Migrants potentially create new social networks with various migrant communities and strengthen the existing ones (Massey et al., 1993), all of which are considered social capital. This social capital aids in lowering the risks and achieving the migration goals.

METHODS

Study Approach

The present qualitative study on Sri Lankan Migrant women (MW) was conducted via the case study method. Given that this study aimed to investigate factors related to the gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic among MW, the qualitative inquiry that yielded various implications was considered a more appropriate approach. A qualitative study is generally conducted in a natural setting to understand and interpret individuals' personal experiences with respective connotations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Accordingly, the present study appraised migrant women's experiences in terms of uncertain living conditions of families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The informants were migrant women (MW) who had resided with families in Bahrain for over six months. The total departure of 2922 migrant workers emigrated to Bahrain in 2018, with 33% of the migrants as housemaids (SLBFE, 2019). The MW with families in Bahrain were identified with assistance from Darul Iman Bahrain, a welfare organisation for Sri Lankans. The MW were recruited through purposive sampling and the snowball technique, which enabled the selection of unique informants who were informative and would assist in recruiting other MW. The first few informants were selected from the evidence provided by this organisation on how MW was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 depicts the informant characteristics.

Table 1
Informant characteristics

Document Name	Children In Bahrain	Husband's Nationality	Husband in Bahrain	Residence Type	Employment Type
MW1-Sara	Yes	Sri Lankan	No (Separated)	Rented Home	Office In-Charge
MW2-Jazeera	Yes	Indian	No (Separated)	Sharing Home	Babysitting
MW3-Nisa	Yes	Indian	Yes	Rented Home	Caretaker
MW4-Sama	Yes	Indian	Yes	Sharing Home	Housemaid
MW5-Zameela	Yes	Bahraini	Yes	Husband's Home	Taxi Rider
MW6-Simaya	Yes	Pakistani	Yes	Rented Home	Housemaid
MW7-Mary	No	Indian	Yes	Rented Home	Part-Time Works
MW8-Amaliya	No	Sri Lankan	Yes	Rented Room	Home Nurse
MW9-Rubini	Yes	Sri Lankan	No (Separated)	Rented Room	Housemaid
MW10-Naja	Yes	Sri Lankan	Yes	Rented Home	Part-Time Works
MW11-Arsana	No	Sri Lankan	Yes	Sharing Home	Housemaid
MW12-Sheema	Yes	Pakistani	Divorced	Sharing Home	Part-Time Cleaning
MW13-Dilini	Yes	Indian	Yes (Separated)	Rented Home	Part-Time Cleaning

MW interviewed for this study were sole economic providers for their families. Most MW's families resided in shared and self-rented houses in commercial and residential areas to search for employment within a shorter distance. The MW primarily worked in precarious jobs, such as maids, babysitting, childcare, taxi riders, and daily paid work. The MW were unemployed during the interview except for two respondents. The MW's families stayed in Bahrain, and most had more than two years of working experience. An MW did not engage in contract work after arriving in Bahrain due to the pandemic outbreak, and job recruiters did not provide a secure workplace. Three MW couples left children behind, whereas the remaining nine MW lived with children in Bahrain. Six MW formed a family either with Pakistani or Indian workers, while one MW with a Bahraini. Four MW were without male companionship due to separation or divorce. The researcher received repeated information, reflecting the achievement of data saturation after interviewing the 13 informants.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews, which lasted an average of one hour, were conducted with MW from December 2020 to August 2021 via a semi-structured interview guide consisting of questions on the experiences of MW during the pandemic. The researcher was accompanied by the spouse in the discussion as certain Muslim women were restricted from meeting male strangers without husbands or close male guardians (*Mahram* in the Arabic language). Conducting interviews with MW was effortless as the MW were not monitored by employers. When the information sheet and consent form were submitted requesting permission

to meet for an interview, many expressed fears about face-to-face interaction during the pandemic. Therefore, all interviews were conducted on two online platforms, namely Zoom and WhatsApp, with the informants' consent due to pandemic restrictions. To avoid audio interruptions, a supporting mobile data package for online conversation was activated for those who cannot afford it. Participants were informed of the potential risks, nature of the research, benefits, and the right to withdraw from the interview. The researcher assured the confidentiality and protection of the participant's anonymity. Recording was also performed after obtaining approval from the participants. The ethical processes assisted in establishing sufficient trust between the researcher and the participants.

Data Analysis

A thematic approach on the ATLAS.ti software was conducted to present the findings. In particular, recorded interviews were transcribed and perused to determine the actual meaning of the responses. The transcribed interviews were fed to the software to highlight codes found in the data. The digital coding procedure eliminated redundancies and allowed the individual codes in the documents to be grouped into code groups based on some fundamental categories, such as income, legal status, gender, and family structure. For example, the theme of work instability and exploitation was created using four codes: extra work, wage delay, physical torture, and no legal status. The data were analysed by organising categories and building networks between codes based on relevant themes for corresponding narratives and detailed interpretations. Due to the methodological constraints that the qualitative study demands, such as face-to-face interaction and participant observation, which the pandemic restricted, the data obtained was triangulated with previous findings in this context.

FINDINGS

Migrant Women During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Migrants arriving in a foreign country anticipated a stable job with a regular income through labour force participation in the productive work environment to support families, which was the primary migration goal. Migrants believed that jobs in the Middle Eastern sectors would be abundant and would assist in resolving domestic economic challenges. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly and negatively impacted migrant workers' economies. Figure 1 depicts theme categories on migrant women's uncertain COVID-19 conditions. As illustrated in Figure 1, the current findings delineated the circumstance based on three main themes, namely 'want to work!' that described the living pressures, 'but we cannot work' that elucidated work challenges, and 'migrant women's solutions to the COVID-19 challenges' that explicated the barriers in seeking assistance and recognition from the community.

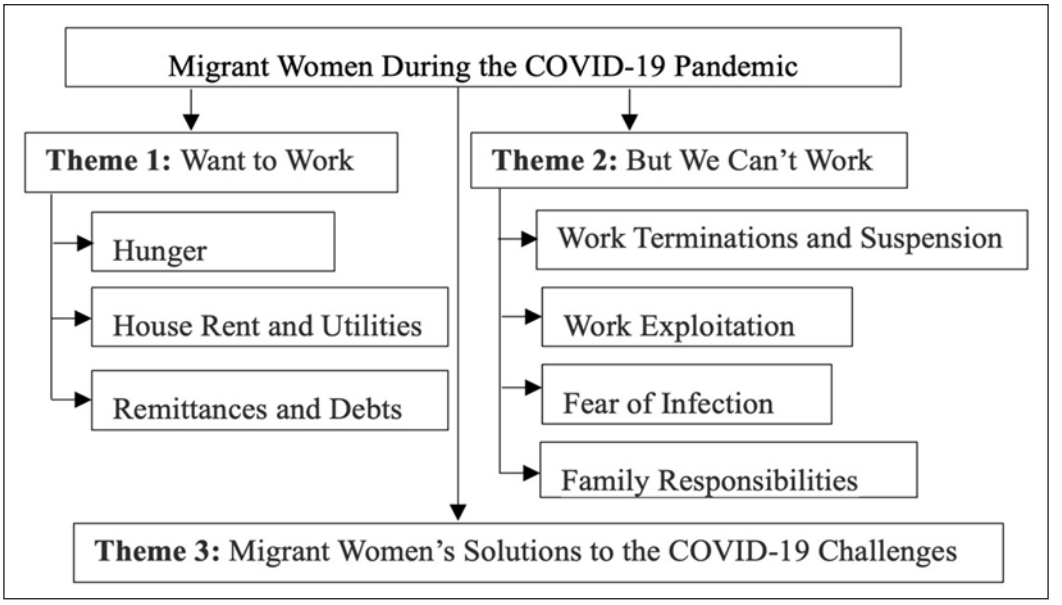

Figure 1. Theme categories on migrant women's uncertain COVID-19 conditions

Main Theme 1: Want to Work!

The MW were deprived of employment essential to supporting their families, thus leading to significantly reduced wages. Furthermore, daily requirements, payments, and debts remained unchanged. The average income of MW's families ranged between 280BD ($743) and 300BD ($796) in a regular work period. However, only the spouses working or single-parent families earned below the average income amount. Work termination and suspensions, which were highly implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly impacted family savings and expenses. Terminated MW lost all earnings, whereas suspended MW continued receiving salary for food expenses despite the amount being insufficient for all payments and expenses. Both terminated and suspended MWs were highly pressured to work due to hunger, rent, and remittances.

Hunger

Hunger was a recurring issue in most lower-class families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The migrants lost daily income due to the work turbulence, which significantly impacted the immediate need for sustenance. Sama described that:

> *I had only coffee for my breakfast. I only have rice to cook for lunch* (MW4).

Food was the primary expenditure in daily life. Nevertheless, most lower-income families could not afford sufficient food. The mothers were highly concerned with the starving children owing to negatively

impacted income sources. Most MWs relied on daily work, and the COVID-19 pandemic decreased the regular earnings of the MW and corresponding family members. Rubini shared her story on the encountered economic stress:

> *I struggled with my daily expenses for five months without a job due to Corona. Sometimes, we eat two times a day, skipping dinner or breakfast* (MW9).

During the pandemic, every MW experienced hunger regardless of income level. Staying with families led to higher living costs than the MW's income. Consistent with the above findings, Azeez et al. (2021) found that many migrant mothers in India were at risk of being unable to feed their children. During the pandemic, families spent less on their daily needs due to the loss of income sources (Abdullah et al., 2022).

House Rent and Utilities

The second pressure on MW was the cost of accommodation and utilities. The MW spent an average of 100BD ($265) for a room, 160BD ($424) for a shared home, and 220BD ($584) for a self-rented house without compensation during the pandemic. Naja explained that:

> *We spend two-thirds of our earnings or more on rent and utilities* (MW10).

Sara was required to pay rent of 250BD ($663) and approximately 90BD ($239) for monthly utilities. She covered 180BD ($478) from renting two rooms in her home. Nonetheless, the tenants vacated the rooms during the pandemic. Sara possessed a higher burden of paying rent as searching for new tenants was challenging during the pandemic. Furthermore, tenants must pay electricity and water bills on time. Electricity is a necessity in the Middle Eastern environment with summer and winter. The present study discovered that the MW's families failed to secure personal salaries and encountered disrupted utilities by the Electricity and Water Authority (EWA). Nisa expressed her fear:

> *The fact is that without electricity and water, we cannot survive. Last month we experienced a cut off in the electricity service* (MW3).

Remittances and Debts

The migrants' primary goal was to secure a productive job to save and remit money to their home country. The MW were the sole economic providers for the natal families and families in Bahrain. The MW was required to allocate money for both families when receiving the monthly salary. The pressure on remitting money significantly increased when the families in Sri Lanka required financial support. Nevertheless, remittances did not happen as expected during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Sama lived with her children in Bahrain, married an Indian, and performed remittances occasionally:

> *Sometimes, I send money to my parents, but it was not possible during this pandemic* (MW4).

Amaliya was compelled to remit monthly to her parents, wherein the amount was significantly reduced after experiencing the pay cut:

> *I need to send money to my parents. I only sent half of them during this pandemic* (MW8).

Repaying debts was another pressure for MW during the pandemic. Numerous Sri Lankan women selected Middle Eastern employment to repay debts (Gamburd, 2016). Furthermore, certain MWs were required to repay debts created by the emigration to Bahrain, which caused multiple families to incur additional burdens. However, repaying the loans was delayed due to the pay cuts and unemployment. The MW required work due to high expenses and being pressured to remit money. Nevertheless, the working sectors were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic while the expenses remained the same.

Main Theme 2: But We Cannot Work!

Certain factors hindered MW from working despite significant financial pressures.

Work Terminations and Suspensions

The MW experienced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including work terminations and suspensions. Certain MW were under formal employment contracts while other counterparts worked from outside arrangements without legal employment visas. Employers neglected the MW working under employment contracts during the pandemic. For example, Arsana was a housemaid under an employment visa to work part-time while staying with her husband. Arsana's employer terminated her employment due to the fear of the COVID-19 outbreak. Arsana was not under the responsibility of the visa provider or the previous employer during the interview. Arsana expressed that:

> *Arbab (Boss) stopped me due to the fear of spreading the disease (COVID-19). I have a visa bought from a sponsor, but it expires soon. I should find work to survive here* (MW11).

The MW encountered significant economic challenges when employers suspended the MW from entering homes or workplaces due to personal hygiene factors and fear of infection. Jazeera, a mother of three children, worked as a part-time housemaid on contract for two families. Both families prevented Jazeera from working due to the fear of infection, which generated no income. Another participant described that the employer halted employment until the situation resumed at the pre-pandemic level, which reduced half of the MW's salary. The informant delineated that:

> *Since the beginning of spreading the disease, I have been at home. I cannot survive with half my salary* (MW13).

The MW was motivated to emigrate due to economic factors in the country of origin, such as low income, unemployment, and scarcity of jobs. Thus, acquiring employment was vital upon arriving at emigrated destinations or terminating previous contract

work. The MW's experiences demonstrated the significant challenge of fulfilling family expenses during the pandemic when most MWs were deprived of regular income. The undocumented MW were also afraid of their undocumented status. As Pandey et al. (2021) found that in the USA, domestic workers were hesitant to report inhuman treatment due to fear of losing their jobs. Losing a job during the pandemic means losing one's work permit, accommodation facilities, and regular income, as the work permit is tied to one's sponsors (Foley & Piper, 2021). The findings revealed that both documented and undocumented MW were terminated or suspended by employers without providing proper employment rights, such as salary or employment benefits. Consistent with the above findings, a study in Thailand discovered that Myanmar female workers were stigmatised and refused by employers (Chuemchit et al., 2024). The impact of work stress on the well-being of working women should be investigated more to retain employees (Zulkifli & Hamzah, 2024).

Work Exploitation

The work environment was not conducive due to being unstable and exploitative. MWs' work was highly demanded, but many were not fairly remunerated (Pandey et al., 2021). Numerous MWs feared the work environment during the pandemic, as employers would assign additional work, which resulted in resignation. Employers required workers to perform cleaning and washing daily within a limited period:

> *We should do extra cleaning during the pandemic, sometimes more than needed. People want us to be machines* (MW7).

Certain MWs did not possess valid visas and performed all available jobs without concerns about health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, although the jobs were compensated with low wages. Specifically, the MW performed cleaning in shops owned by Pakistanis and Indians. Employers would occasionally exploit MW by assigning additional tasks without paying corresponding wages, as the MW possessed no legal status to complain to authorities, including the police, due to visa issues. The MW encountered high difficulties in avoiding the exploitative work environment. Overwork, wage issues, and physical torture were common and became more evident during the pandemic. Simaya explicated about the employment conditions of an Indian shop owner:

> *I have been at home for more than ten months. I worked extra hours but could not get my salary during the pandemic. How can we complain without a visa?* (MW6).

Fear of Infection

Certain MWs terminated their existing jobs due to health concerns, similar to the employers. The MW were cautious about spreading the virus when staying with family members, which posed an additional burden to the family. Certain women also utilised public transportation to reach the

workplace, which was highly risky due to the pandemic. For instance, Naja was concerned about work safety during the surge of COVID cases, which elevated the possibility of virus transmission in public transport. Taxi services were also suspended for similar reasons. Zameela was a taxi rider and a self-employed woman who voluntarily stopped work due to the fear of infection. Zameela and the family were also infected by COVID-19, wherein Zameela was required to depend on the husband's income:

> *No taxi hires due to the high infections. I am avoiding the hires because we have already suffered from the coronavirus* (MW5).

The MW, who worked in Arabian kitchens, was not provided with the necessary equipment to protect from COVID-19 infection. Employers also did not assist the MW in undergoing proper medication after being infected (Ansar, 2023). Utilising formal medical treatment was infeasible due to the MW's undocumented status. The MW would be reported to the police, and legal action would be taken against the MW regarding the illegal stay. Consequently, the MW lost the right to work in a protected environment.

Family Responsibilities

The MW's family responsibilities increased due to living with families. The husbands, who shared house chores before the COVID-19 pandemic, were more engaged in the workforce during the pandemic. The MW, who lived with children, would avoid staying at employers' homes as being responsible for children. Nisa depicted that:

> *My husband works overtime these days to earn more. Always, either one needs to stay with our autistic son. Mostly, I am with him. I cannot work Full-time* (MW3).

Some MWs without children were interviewed in this study. Certain employers were ready to allow the MW without children to stay at employers' homes based on urgent needs but with restrictions. Amaliya was allowed to work as a home nurse to care for an older woman under the condition of not being allowed to meet the husband physically:

> *I agreed to work without meeting my husband, as I was pressured to pay my debts* (MW8).

Certain single mothers struggled to balance work and family responsibilities. Jazeera, who lived with adult children, was the sole economic provider for the family and was required to return home daily to care for the children:

> *I cannot stay anywhere far from my children. Usually, I return home in the evening.* (MW2)

The MWs with families were burdened with dual roles: paid work and household duties. The pandemic increased husbands' working times, which compelled women to spend more time at home taking care of the children. As found in Malaysia, childcare was shouldered mainly by women in the

family during the pandemic (Chelliah et al., 2023). Single mothers also struggled to manage work and household duties. During the outbreak of the pandemic, childcare facilities were closed (Fodor et al., 2021), which overburdened female-headed families. Certain MWs sacrificed family lives to earn sufficient salaries.

Main Theme 3: Migrant Women's Solutions to the COVID-19 Challenges

Emigrating to a foreign country isolated migrants from extended families in Sri Lanka, which engendered high reliance on the social support of the community in the emigrated destination. Nevertheless, the received social support at the emigrated destination was significantly reduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The disruption in regular government and civil organisations' services and restriction of movement worsened the risk of violence against women and prevented them from receiving timely assistance (Ansar, 2023; Chuemchit et al., 2024). Numerous individuals and organisations constantly monitored the situation and assisted vulnerable families negatively impacted by the pandemic. The support was only limited to food, although the MW concurrently encountered other challenges. Sara described:

> *We received food from some individuals and Darul Iman because they knew about our situation* (MW1).

While the funding organisations were willing to assist vulnerable groups, migrants were reluctant to approach the organisations owing to multiple rejections. Simaya expressed that:

> *After reviewing many documents during my third attempt, one organisation accepted my application* (MW6).

Migrants could seek assistance for payments and other necessities from wealthy individuals. Nonetheless, the limited accessibility compelled the MW to seek support via formal channels. Most migrants could only receive support from individuals with whom the migrants were familiar. The MW were less inclined to seek assistance from other individuals multiple times due to the fear of stigmatisation:

> *I am too nervous to ask for help from others. If they understand my situation and help, then I will accept* (MW12).

Certain undocumented migrants were highly vulnerable and feared being reported to the police, especially when seeking assistance from other individuals and organisations. The legal barrier prevented migrants from seeking support during the pandemic. Rubini stated that:

> *I approached one organisation, but they asked for many details. I worried about giving too much information about myself. I came without getting their help* (MW9).

Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant challenge for MW, who continuously waited until certain individuals were identified and assisted with the encountered challenges. Minimal assistance

was obtained owing to the ineffective migration network. Moreover, immediate barriers, such as lacking legal documents and fear of stigmatisation, prevented MW from seeking support from other individuals and organisations.

DISCUSSION

The Middle East has been a temporary work destination for Sri Lankan MW for over four decades, where emigrated families possess a temporary life separated from extended families in Sri Lanka. The MW participating in the current study agreed to emigrate by ignoring personal desires while focusing on the aspects that would benefit children and families in the long term. The MW emigrated after resolving different obstacles, including family commitments, lack of skills, low education, and debts. The primary income source at the emigrated destination was labour activities, which was the major migration goal to be achieved. Neetha (2004) concluded that female migration was a breakthrough, as they worked as the primary breadwinners in the household and shouldered the entire family burden. Women's participation in the labour market demonstrated that women were empowered to be equal to men in achieving economic goals. However, more dialogues are also required on the exploitation causes for low-wage workers at the emigrated destinations (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017), which allows policymakers and migrated-related organisations to ensure that women work in highly protected work environments. Jayaweera and Dias (2009) observed that the bilateral agreements signed by sending and labour-receiving countries did not adequately protect Sri Lankan migrants' employment rights. The challenges encountered by MW should be underscored to increase the effectiveness of the policies formulated by the governments.

Female workers' lives in the Middle East were not as favourable as expected, owing to several challenges, such as exploitation, sexual harassment, and verbal and physical torture (Frantz, 2008; Gamlath, 2019; Hewage et al., 2011). Discrimination and exploitation became regular occurrences in daily life, which was reflected during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study's findings revealed that more than the fear of infection, work instability and exploitation were major hindrances that prevented women from labour force participation. Madgavkar et al. (2020) also demonstrated that women's working sectors were impacted more than men's during the pandemic, which exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. In addition, a study in Hong Kong (Lui et al., 2021), findings on Bangladeshi women in Saudi Arabia (Ansar, 2023), and evidence found among female workers in Thailand (Chuemchit et al., 2024) revealed that employers overworked domestic workers and did not provide sufficient health facilities during the working and quarantine period. Overall, domestic work, which was in high demand in the Middle East, remained a devalued occupation (Choudhury et al., 2024; Pandey et al., 2021). Precarity among Asian migrants is an ongoing phenomenon (Asis et al., 2019).

The MW with families encountered more challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the inability to cover family expenses, balancing work and family, lack of work security, and fear of stigmatisation, apart from the existing difficulties in terms of unstable work conditions that negatively impacted income and well-being.

This study also discovered that a stable income source was pivotal to sustaining a family in a foreign country when the MW stayed with families, as in the theme 'want to work!' discovered. Most families struggled to cover daily expenses, house rent, and utilities, which engendered multiple issues, including mental stress (Lui et al., 2021). Certain MWs in the present study were pressured to work when their husbands, who were also exploited by low-paid employment, could not support the family. Furthermore, the theme 'but we cannot work' elaborated that MW was burdened with more family responsibilities as the husbands were more engaged in the workforce, which significantly altered the role division in the family. Accepting more family responsibilities while coping with work was challenging, particularly for single mothers who could not effectively integrate career and childcare, as observed in the United States of America during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alon et al., 2020). Moreover, MW was not skilled in immediately responding to fluctuating work environments, which caused the MW to earn insufficiently for families from highly feminised jobs in oil-rich countries (Gulati, 1997). The MW were required to stay with families, regardless of the consequences of family migration. Caring for the families was vital, especially after establishing a family with a foreign worker and being undocumented while simultaneously acting as primary breadwinners. The MW's family responsibilities should be recognised by providing adequate labour protection to achieve migration goals of protecting the well-being of families. Policies should be drawn by labour-sending and receiving countries to protect MW who lose their jobs by giving unemployment benefits and wage subsidies to low-paid women.

The remittances to the home country and savings in the local bank were significantly lower during the pandemic when the pressure of debts and remittances remained the same. Remittances from migrant workers would significantly contribute to local development, as Sri Lanka was a labour-sending country. Ekanayake and Amirthalingam (2021) and Weeraratne (2020) demonstrated that the flow of remittances to Sri Lanka from Middle Eastern migrants significantly declined due to pay cuts and work terminations. Thus, numerous MWs are highly dependent on help-seeking strategies to resolve the pandemic challenges. However, the weaker social capital that MW had heightened the gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the social support received from the government and welfare organisations was minimal. While certain welfare organisations were committed to aiding vulnerable migrants, the MW were less exposed to the public and less

frequently approached the organisations due to their illegal status. Working in the informal sector substantially hinders the creation of strong migration networks (Mueller et al., 2023). Burton-Jeangros et al. (2020) discovered that undocumented migrants were silent workers unwilling to expose personal issues to the public due to security reasons, which aggravated subsequent challenges encountered by the migrants. Menjívar and Salcido (2002) revealed that undocumented MW were reluctant to seek support, while Mona et al. (2021) discovered that migrants refrained from seeking healthcare due to the fear of being tracked by the police. This study adds knowledge to the literature in exploring the gendered effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by examining the intersection between MW and undocumented status. However, the present study suggests exploring the undocumented MW by focusing on the long-term consequences they face due to the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This research has identified the uncertain working sectors of women and the economic downturn that these women experienced during COVID-19. Bahrain was selected as the case study to exemplify MW's challenges with sufficient empirical evidence. The present study conducted in-depth interviews with 13 migrant women who lived with families to understand the COVID-19 experiences thoroughly. The present study implies that similar to the studies on migrant workers, migration studies with the inclusion of families are parallelly important, which was stressed by this study. As per the obtained data, it was apparent that their arrival in Bahrain was challenging, and often, all the positive prospects that they were pulled for were non-existent. The discrimination and exploitation that MWs encounter are recurrent issues which were exacerbated during COVID-19. Furthermore, promptly deciding to resettle in the origin country at their stage of work was found would not be practical since being undocumented and primary breadwinners. The MW was required to stay with families, regardless of the consequences of family migration, since pushing factors still prevailed and were aggravated during the pandemic. Thus, coping with the challenges to achieve economic well-being was vital for MW. Nevertheless, MW had a poor network with the public and government agencies to mitigate their challenges. The challenges led to minimal assistance being received by the migrants despite welfare organisations continuously aiding migrants to relieve economic hardship. Hence, these migrant women should be more empowered, and their labour rights should be protected by labour-sending and receiving countries. Future studies could explore the long-term gendered effects of the pandemic and the coping mechanisms adopted by MW based on different demographics.

Study Limitations

The actual number of migrant families or legal methods to approach MW and corresponding families in the Middle East was unavailable. Certain families were less inclined to assist in searching

for other families to participate in in-depth investigations due to the lack of legal documents. This study did not identify MW by participating in migrants' gatherings and workplaces, as the traditional qualitative study performs, due to the pandemic restrictions. The limitations could impede the researcher's engagement with more participants. The limited number of participants might also be a limitation, although the current study employed the case study method to explore MW's living experiences. Due to these methodological constraints, this study does not claim the universality of the problem faced by MW during the pandemic. Future studies could include more participants from different geographical locations to ensure outcome validity.

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