

INTRODUCTION TO THEMED ISSUE: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN ASIA PACIFIC

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ABSTRACT

This introductory article contextualises the ongoing pandemic and the significance of this themed issue by highlighting the relevance of the seven articles in this issue. All the articles have identified different intersections between Asia Pacific's migrant population and the global pandemic and demonstrated from various perspectives how the COVID-19 pandemic have had an impact on the migrant population in Asia Pacific. The common thread that binds the articles throughout the entire issue is that the pandemic has disproportionately affected the migrant population.

Keywords: COVID-19, economy, health, migrants, Asia Pacific

INTRODUCTION

Migrants in Asia Pacific have been particularly hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. This can be seen in myriad ways by which the pandemic has taken a toll on health, economy, jobs, social relations, social life, and much more. About 40% of the total international migrants originate from the region of Asia Pacific. The COVID-19 pandemic has rendered a huge percentage of them immobile as they are unable to continue their journeys in transit or return to their countries of origin since the beginning of the pandemic.

The migrant workers have historically been living and working in precarious conditions. Owing to the current havoc on public health systems, their professions have become significantly more treacherous because they play vital roles in agriculture, hospitality, healthcare, construction, and critical retail sectors; they are more likely to be infected with the virus. During the pandemic, the healthcare industry has been rendered more vulnerable. Migrant workers account for a sizable portion of the health sector in Asia Pacific, from doctors and surgeons to hospital cleaners, attendants, drug dispensers, diagnostic technicians, sample collectors, and workers producing and marketing masks and sanitisers, as well as other advanced-degreed professional jobs. Many health professionals have also lost their lives far from their homes and loved ones.

Social distancing has been a crucial measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, it has proven immaterial to the migrant workers, the majority of whom have been unable to practise social distancing during the pandemic due to overcrowding in their accommodations and workplaces. Low-wage workers have endured added stress due to job instability, which has placed them under greater pressure to go to work even if they or their co-workers are unwell. Some migrants have had to run the risk of being infected at work against the possibility of losing their jobs. This has been the case for tens of thousands of migrants because they are typically among the first to be laid off and are routinely excluded from protection systems.

To make matters worse, travel restrictions related to the pandemic have made it difficult for migrants to return home or go back to work. Many have been caught in limbo. Due to the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became more difficult to meet the immediate needs (food, shelter, and so on) and other demands of many stranded migrants. Migrant workers died at a higher rate than non-migrants as a result. Families of those who died abroad bore the brunt of disastrous consequences. Language barriers, hefty repatriation costs, and the difficulties in determining how a loved one died all intensified the grieving process.

The financial ramifications have also been disastrous for many migrant workers. Many migrant workers' occupations have been abruptly terminated or the workers are laid off as the virus spreads, leaving them without a source of income. Some have been fired without pay, while others have had their hours or salaries slashed, or they are forced to take time off. Remittances—sent home by migrants and provide a lifeline to about one billion million people worldwide—are also affected. Due to the financial difficulties faced by

migrants, their families back home have also been impacted. For example, the schooling of millions of children has been in jeopardy as their families have not been able to sign up for various schooling programmes due to the lack of digital literacy or difficulty with the language of online teaching. Moreover, millions of families are at the risk of food insecurity.

Nonetheless, many migrants have also been able to turn around and have proven to be resilient throughout this trying time. The migrants have moreover retained a strong network of peers. The strength of those networks and social capital have contributed to their resilience in various ways, including the ability to endure, recover from, and adjust to unanticipated external shocks.

Against this backdrop, I have developed this themed issue with focus on the impact of COVID-19 on migrant communities in Asia Pacific to emphasise its critical nature in light of the ongoing crises. The structure and content of this themed issue have been heavily influenced by how the world has treated minorities and vulnerable groups during the pandemic. The articles in this themed issue therefore provide critical insights into the influence of COVID-19 on a range of issues, including employment and income, education, life at home, and migrants who have been trapped in transit and overseas.

While each of the seven papers are self-contained, I have attempted to impose a loose subject structure and logical flow on their arrangement to demonstrate some of the methodological and thematic parallels and differences. The common threads that I have attempted to weave across this themed issue are migration, COVID-19, and Asia Pacific. The following demonstrates how the seven articles hang together in relation to the primary focus of the issue.

The themed issue begins with the article titled “‘We are all migrant workers’: Commonality of Bangladeshi migrants’ experiences in Singapore amidst COVID-19” by Diotima Chatteraj, which examines the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted the lives of migrant workers in Singapore and illustrates their experiences of the pandemic. Chatteraj focuses on low-skilled Bangladeshi workers who are vulnerable to COVID-19 and finds that they have been subject to significantly more stringent restrictions that largely limit their ability to commute between their workplaces and homes. In contrast, the vaccinated populations have been allowed to go shopping and eat at restaurants in Singapore, even in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic has also highlighted the differences between migrants and locals in terms of access to medical care and living conditions in dorms. Discrimination is thus an issue, as the migrant workers are considered “virus carriers”. Chatteraj utilises the concept of commonality to explain the disparate experiences of low-

skilled Bangladeshi workers in Singapore. This research greatly contributes to the themed issue by exposing the varied experiences and aspirations of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore.

The following article, “‘I want to go home, but I can’t leave’: Narratives of the South Asian diaspora in Brunei Darussalam during COVID-19” by Asiyah Kumpoh, examines the lived experiences of South Asian migrant workers in Brunei during the pandemic through the conceptual lens of diaspora and moral economy, specifically moral remittance, to reveal their connection to their homeland and the ways in which they demonstrate their responsibility and obligation to their families. The findings of Kumpoh’s study indicate how the COVID-19 pandemic affects migration and migrant behaviour. This study offers participants the opportunity to speak for themselves, allowing us to better understand the experiences of the South Asian community in Brunei. Her research moreover throws light on the lives of Brunei’s migrant labourers, whose plight has mostly gone unnoticed. Kumpoh has identified three themes that encapsulated their experience during the pandemic: (1) employment security, (2) concern for themselves and their family, and (3) the obligation to provide care and protection. Due to a strong feeling of responsibility and moral obligation to their families, the participants in this study have chosen to stay in Brunei rather than flee the country. As a result of the devastation the pandemic has caused, many South Asians in Brunei have developed a strong sense of civic responsibility and kinship with the country. According to the findings, remittances and virtual engagement during the pandemic represent the sense of belonging of South Asians, as well as their sense of responsibility and moral obligation to provide care and safety for their families.

The third article by Mozharul Islam, titled “Virtual education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Southeast Asian students in Turkey”, examines the experiences and difficulties in distance education, learning experiences, social life, and so on, that Southeast Asian students have had to endure while studying in Turkish universities. When the coronavirus spread across the world, internet education as a supplement to traditional schooling was not widely employed in Turkey. Students from Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Myanmar seem to have been negatively affected by distance education, despite the fact that the concept is not new. They face a variety of difficulties such as communication difficulties, cultural mismatch, and so on. Some students live in dormitories or flats with little to no interaction or assistance. Other students are not used to shopping online for food, which add troubles to their daily life. While some students are compelled to return home by their families or governments, their

decisions have been hindered by uncertainties related to airport closures and border-crossing challenges. The Southeast Asian students also experience feelings of isolation and anxiety during the pandemic, which have an effect on their academic performance. Islam's analysis thus adds a new perspective to the debate about distance learning by examining the consequences of Turkey's mandatory online education system on students from Southeast Asia. An important finding is that Turkey's massive implementation of remote education has failed to create a participatory environment for overseas students from Southeast Asia, many of whom believe that virtual education is not as effective as physical education.

The fourth article by Hannah Ming Yit Ho, "Mental health challenges of migrant domestic workers in the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of Brunei Darussalam", delves into the mental health issues faced by migrant domestic workers in Brunei Darussalam during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ho discovers early signs of anxiety and other mental health problems that a segment of the migrant community has encountered as a result of employment conditions, structural constraints, and a lack of mental health support. Domestic helpers are susceptible to numerous stressors in the pandemic (e.g., increased labour, insufficient protective equipment, and pandemic-related anxieties). To deal with difficulties associated with the pandemic, they also tend to call on coping strategies. Migrant domestic workers' narratives are thus shaped by their fears and anxieties, as well as their jobs, even if the employers they work for are benign. Uncontested assignments of extended work hours or new jobs and any additional expectations placed on migrant workers during the COVID-19 outbreak result from power imbalances between employers and migrants. Ho's article includes testimonies from migrant domestic workers on their increased workloads. During the course of the conversation, migrant workers open up about the difficulties they have faced working away from their families and the difficulties they have experienced in assimilating into Bruneian society. Their internal conflict is further exacerbated by quarantine and travel restrictions. The migrant workers have been open about the hardships faced and the additional labour they have had to endure during the pandemic, all for the sake of their families.

Md Mizanur Rahman and Mehedi Hasan's "Gulf migrants amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons for the global South" is the fifth article in this themed issue. It examines the patterns of COVID-19 infections, and identifies the challenges faced by major receiving countries, with a particular emphasis on Southeast and South Asian migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC) countries. Rahman and Hasan's article identifies several best practices in the Gulf that may be replicated in other migrant-receiving countries in Southeast and East Asia. A phenomenon referred to as "management of mismanaged responses" has aided in amplifying the impact of COVID-19's rapid spread on world civilisation. While no country had time to develop a long-term plan, decisions were made in haste or by simple replication of easily available but ineffective conventional procedures. While not all developed countries took the COVID-19 pandemic seriously at the onset, the GCC states nevertheless deserve credit for developing a variety of policy measures to battle the virus and adapting to changing circumstances as the pandemic progressed. All coronavirus-related illnesses in the GCC member states have been disclosed to the public using a science-based methodology. The authors also suggest that the Gulf's healthcare policy for Asian low-skilled migrants should be made more inclusive.

The sixth article, titled "COVID-19 and the migrant population: The resilience of South Asians" by Jannatul Ferdous and AKM Ahsan Ullah, dives into how migrants achieve stability and resilience in the face of the terrible pandemic by evaluating the magnitude of the impact on migrants and the process of creating resilience. This article focuses particularly on the migrant community's resiliency in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. When a person is confronted with hardship, their resilience functions as a buffer. The regular government support and participation are critical components of the multipronged strategy to safeguard migrant workers from exposure to the COVID-19 outbreak and to mitigate its detrimental impact on their health and well-being. There has been a social and economic breakdown as a result of the health crisis. Migrants and refugees, in particular, are at risk of facing even more difficult and perilous circumstances. Migrants, their jobs, and the flow of remittances have all been affected by the pandemic's pervasiveness. As a result of declining remittances, foreign exchange reserves have decreased, budgetary stress has increased, and poverty levels have grown. The authors have shown the many ways the migrant population has adapted to survival in the pandemic by showcasing their resilience in the face of social and economic adversities. Social trust and support, self-help, traditional culture, and volunteerism are some of the strategies used by migrant workers during COVID-19 to withstand the trying time. By working hard, persevering in the face of adversity, and having optimism for the future, respondents are able to sustain their resilience.

Finally, Kumar, Pinky, Pulock, Kamal, and Aziz, in their article, “COVID-19 and the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh: Socioeconomic and health impacts on women and adolescents”, have contextualised the pandemic’s socioeconomic and physiological effects on the Rohingya people. They examine the effects of COVID-19 on the livelihoods and health of Rohingya women and adolescents, and include insights into gender-based violence, child marriage, and human trafficking in the process. As Kumar and colleagues observe, there are severe emotional and social impacts and effects on the health and well-being of Rohingya women and adolescents. They find that over 63% of Rohingya adolescent females have been deprived of food as a result of the imposed restrictions. The vast majority of the study participants have moreover expressed concern about protein deficiency (87%). Since their arrival in Bangladesh, they have had limited medical and educational resources access and the COVID-19 outbreak has exacerbated the problem. Girls are more likely to experience sexual and gender-based abuse, as well as early marriage, school dropout, and pregnancy. To safeguard the disadvantaged populations against abuse or discrimination, their study suggests that the government and humanitarian organisations should ensure that basic necessities such as food security and other material requirements should be distributed fairly. When it comes to eradicating gender-based violence, one of the most effective strategies is to empower women via education and training. Providing all women and young adolescents with a wide choice of high-quality education or vocational training would improve their work prospects and quality of life. COVID-19’s complex emotional and societal consequences therefore need a comprehensive response, as it may be the only option to protect these vulnerable people.

FINAL REMARKS

COVID-19, migration, and the Asia Pacific region are the prominent themes in this issue. These three pillars form the core of the papers’ argument. The COVID-19 pandemic has put people and governments all around the world to the test. It has had major health, economic, and security consequences for many. However, migrants have been disproportionately affected by the consequences of these events, which resulted in increased risks of living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, as well as undertaking dangerous routes as a method of migrating illegally. The COVID-19 pandemic has also

contributed to the degradation of a wide range of migrants' human rights, which were already in peril; one example is increased xenophobic attacks on migrants across the world.

Migration is unquestionably a fact of life in Asia Pacific. As far as COVID-19 is concerned, it appears that the region is experiencing the confluence of three distinct dimensions: health risk, unemployment, and economic decline. As a result, it is critical to examine migration as a solution to many of the problems from a broader perspective. The pandemic, border closures, and travel restrictions have reduced migration significantly. There will still be reverberations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on people's livelihoods; these impacts and other circumstances will influence their migration decisions in the future.

I hope that researchers, academics, policymakers, and stakeholders will find this themed issue on the impact of COVID-19 on migrant communities in Asia Pacific informative and useful.

NOTE

- * AKM Ahsan Ullah is Associate Professor in Geography, Environment and Development at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD). Ullah's research portfolio includes stints at the Southeast Asian Research Centre (SEARC), Hong Kong, IPH, University of Ottawa, McMaster University, Saint Mary's University, and Dalhousie University, Canada, the American University in Cairo (AUC), City University of Hong Kong, Osnabruck University, Germany, and Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Thailand. His research areas include population migration, human rights, development, environment and health policy. Ullah has contributed 60 scientific articles to refereed journals and at least 40 chapters in a number of books and published 15 books.