

# COVID-19 and Undocumented Bangladeshi Migrant Laborers in Malaysia: A Study of Livelihood Struggle

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# Introduction

- Malaysia is an attractive labour market since early 1990s
- By 2017, Malaysia was a market of 2- 4.6 million illegal labourers
- Officially 221,000 legal and unofficially 600,000 illegal Bangladesi workers
- Mostly in construction and plantation sectors across the country
- COVID19 crippled the economy and forced the entire works force went without job and earning for one year
- The illegal workers suffered the most in terms of job, earning, insecurity and remittance
- **Research Question:**
  - How has the COVID-19 impacted on the livelihood struggle of the illegal Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia?

# Study Population and Method

- **Population/location**: 659 undocumented Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia (four locations- Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Pahang and Melaka).
- **Tools**: survey and interviews
- **Data** collected on:
  - household demography, gender,
  - citizenship, family size,
  - occupation, migration history,
  - duration of stay, visa status,
  - average income level, average remittance level,
  - tangible and intangible costs, and
  - coping strategies with livelihood sustenance
- **Analysis** : qualitative tools- content analysis, coding, thematic clustering, cross-tabulation and comparison

# Findings

Population	Total	Undocumented	Stay in MY (yrs.)	Employment sector		Average monthly earning (US\$)	Average monthly remittance US\$
Bangladeshi	787	569 (72.3%)	1-12	Construction	255	200-300	80
				Plantation	217	200-230	
				Food & Beverage	71	500-700	
				Fruits/ Grocery	26	1000-1400	
Total	787	569 (72.3%)			569		

# Migrant Life and Livelihood Struggle

- **Social location and dislocation**
  - Unwanted and disgraced, stigmatized
  - Constantly in the state of hiding
- **Exploitation and economic survival**
  - No income or less pay
  - Extortion by police, local thugs and visa agents
  - Low-wage job, and borrowing
- **Remittance economy and sustainability**
  - Pressure of remittance and spiralling indebttness
- **Home economics and sustainability**
  - Self-help, indebttness and uncertain future

# Socio-economic Structural Exploitation

Table 2: Home and Host Country Chain of Major Extortion Agents

Home Country Chain of Exploiters (major)	M i g r a n t  W o r k e r	Host Country Chain of Exploiters (major)
<hr/> <div>Money lenders The Police The thugs Recruiting agents Intermediaries Human traffickers Scrupulous neighbors/relatives</div> <hr/>		<hr/> <div>Local recruiting agents The intermediaries Contract commission agents The police The thugs Passport/visa agents Scrupulous friends, mess/project mates</div> <hr/>
Exuberant Cumulative Migration Cost		Exuberant Cumulative Survival Cost

*Source: developed by the author based on Bangladeshi workers' experience*

# Conclusions

- They are actively employed on contract, or engaged in self-employed income-generating activities
- They remain under constant pressure of 'illegality' and its multi-dimensional threats
- Three common threats to livelihood survival struggle :
  - the constant fear of getting caught, fined and deported;
  - a chain of extortionist exploiters in Malaysia; and
  - a similar chain of extortionist exploiters in home country
- COVID19 has added enormous extra cost to livelihood struggle due to loss of job, no income and remittance, and no government humanitarian support

- Thank you