**IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS**

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**DEEPALI ASWAL**

**5TH Yr. BA.LL.B.**

**LLOYD LAW COLLEGE, GREATER NOIDA.**

**E-mail: deepaliaswal1@gmail.com**



www.probono-india.in

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**Abstract**

With a global health crisis glaring at us in the form of Covid-19, it becomes indispensable to talk about how the migrants and refugees are under a major risk.[[1]](#footnote-2) It has created a huge impact on the work and the workers. The current pandemic has put forth a set of challenges with which the developed nations like USA and UK etc. are also struggling. Nations’ healthcare regimes and system and government policies plays a crucial role in crippling the wide and rapid spread of such crisis. Refugees are the most vulnerable section of the society for the eruptions of such pandemic in the country. The migrant workers are not only affected economically but the prominent concern for refugees and them lies in the government policies for health care system in immigrant concentrated areas.[[2]](#footnote-3) According to the World Bank, out of the total population, the majority is of the migrant workers who have been adversely affected from the pandemic. The industry, construction and textile sectors etc. are the largely affected areas as these functions largely on the migrant labour. Also affected is their mobility as various countries have partially or completely have out restriction on their national and international borders. This paper highlights the problems faced by the refugee community and migrants due to Covid-19, statements given by the refugees during recent interviews on their conditions during this pandemic, difference between refugees and migrants and conditions of the refugees and migrants in and outside India based on the analysis from various resources.

**Introduction**

The outbreak of Covid-19 or Corona Virus pandemic is now a global health crisis. It is considered as the greatest challenge faced by the world after World War – II. After its emergence in Asia, the virus has spread all around the world and is increasing day by day. The number of cases worldwide has now exceeded twenty-five million, out of which India itself has more than five million cases and despite taking several measures there seems no stoppage on the same. Initially there was a full lockdown in many countries, however since few months many have already lifted the same which has resulted in the increase in the number of cases but which was also necessary as covid-19 has not only resulted in health crisis but also has developed various socio-economic problem. It has created an enormous disruption on work and the workers and more critically to those who have now become jobless. The economic consequences due to the pandemic is expected to worsen. The majority of business, regardless of size, are facing declines in revenue, insolvencies and job losses.[[3]](#footnote-4)The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that nearly half of the global workforce is now at risk of losing their livelihoods.[[4]](#footnote-5)

These impacts are compounded for the millions of refugees living in low and middle income countries.[[5]](#footnote-6) Refugees and migrants, prior to Covid-19, were already facing a wide range of barriers and challenges in terms of socio, economic and a decent livelihood. Now, Covid-19 has led to widespread loss of livelihoods and an increase in poverty among the population.[[6]](#footnote-7) For refugees and migrants, this pandemic is a combination of health, protection and a socio-economic crisis. It has affected refugees and migrants around the globe differently due to their different locations. It also has a huge impact on access to sources of income, safety measures and other resources coupled with economic inclusion.

**Refugees**

There are currently 79.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, 26 million refugees, 4.2 million asylum seekers and 45.7 million internally displaced people.[[7]](#footnote-8) Also, there are millions of people globally that do not even fall under these categories and remain stateless. For example, the 3.6 million Venezuelan population who are displaced because of the political crisis resulting in the fear and loss of economic and health resources in the country and also 7,45,000 Rohingya people including more than 400,000 children, who fled into Cox’s Bazar (Bangladesh) after suffering discrimination, statelessness and violence in the Rakhine State of Myanmar.[[8]](#footnote-9) According to the Refugee Convention 1951, a refugee is someone who has fled his/her country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, nationality, religion, political opinion or membership of social group.[[9]](#footnote-10)As a result, the refugees seeks protection in the other countries. Other factors responsible for seeking refugee status in other county are climate change, political issues and forced migration etc. The UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and ICRC (International Committee for Red Cross) are the two voluntary relief organization to offer shelter and food to people who would otherwise be homeless.[[10]](#footnote-11)

India is home to a larger number of refugee population coming from Tibet, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Afghanistan with smaller groups of asylum-seekers and refugees coming from Yemen, Syria, Somalia and others. India is neither a party to the Refugee Convention 1951 and its protocol of 1967 nor has enacted any national framework for Refugees. The refugees coming from Sri Lanka and Tibet in India does enjoy certain rights due to its relations with these countries.[[11]](#footnote-12)Refugee issues in India are primarily governed by the ad hoc policies and orders by the government which has resulted in the lack of clarity in the legal status of the refugees. Thus, resulting in the lack of employment opportunities for them. Refugees are struggling in order to get alternate livelihood measures in these time due to lack of relief packages provided to them by the government. Refugee communities are amongst those vulnerable group whose condition has worsened by the day due to the pandemic.

**Migrants**

Lockdown in many parts of the world as well as India amidst the Covid-19 pandemic has created a disturbance in the lives of the migrant population. Migrants include various categories including migrant workers who migrate for economic opportunities and migrants who are victims of persecution etc.According to IOM, a person who moves away from his/her place of residence, within a country or across an international border whether temporarily or permanently for various reasons is called a migrant.[[12]](#footnote-13) Thus there are various categories of migrants –

1. Migrant worker – According to Article 1, migrant worker is a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national.[[13]](#footnote-14) He/she voluntarily move from one state to another in search of better opportunities and improve economic and family condition.
2. Undocumented Migrant Worker – a person who moves within the state or across the border without any authorization in order to get employment opportunities as well as other is known as an undocumented migrant.
3. Refugees –As mentioned above, a refugee is also a migrant who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion and membership of social group and is unable to return to the country of origin. These migrants are compelled to leave their origin state due to the fear of persecution.
4. Stateless Person – Another important category under migrant worker is of a stateless person. According to Article 1 of the Convention Relating to the status of the Stateless persons, a person who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law is considered as a stateless person.[[14]](#footnote-15)

**Impact of Covid-19 on refugees and migrants**

The pandemic and the measures taken to limit the effect of it has a huge impact on the mobility around the globe. As it keeps on spreading, it is quite stressful to know the amount of effect it has on the lives of the refugee and migrants in and around the world. Personally who are displaced internally or who migrated internally and across borders are comparatively at high risk than others. The majority of the total 25 million refugee population and 41 million internally displaced persons is living in the developing countries and the pandemic has already affected them.[[15]](#footnote-16) The measures taken by the governments to reduce the effect of Covid-19 has already greatly impacted the mobility or movement of the migrant workers. In several countries, travel restrictions have been imposed which has prohibited the entry of migrants from other countries and many have already closed their borders. Labour migration has been suspended temporarily in certain countries while in others migration processing and assistance to asylum seers are being slow down.[[16]](#footnote-17)

The similar restrictions in India saw many migrants returning to their respective homes. The strict lockdown of 21 days in India in the beginning made lakhs of migrant workers to walk towards their homes that were hundreds of kilometers from their working place due to unavailability of the public transport. Mostly these migrants were the daily wage workers or the temporary ones and the absence of their daily wages, insecurity of food and the future prospects made them to migrate back to their homes. There was a chaos, fear and anxiety amongst the migrant workers due to this pandemic. For instance – the uncertainty of earning and food made thousands of migrants in Delhi and Kerala took the street route to return to their homeland according to a report.[[17]](#footnote-18) The manner in which the state has handled the internal migrants in India has been under criticism since the first lockdown.

Life of the refugees registered under UNHCR in India was already full of struggles but the Covid-19 pandemic has made their survival even more dreadful. A 44 year old Rohingya Refugee, Nezamudden Linn, who arrived from Myanmar in India in 2013 along with his family used to work as a translator in a non-profit legal aid organization in New Delhi which was the only source of income for his family. However, the pandemic and the lockdown has made him to work in a lock grocery shops in exchange for food to survive and he can now barely makes his ends meet. Most of the refugees like him, who used to survive on daily wages are now jobless. According to Nezamudden, comparatively he is in a better position than the other members of his community to have little or no saving to back on and are largely dependent upon the aid received from UN agencies like UNHCR, local NGO’s and the government schemes.[[18]](#footnote-19) This pandemic has not only affected the refugees but also the communities like UNHCR who support this vulnerable section with food etc. The funding of these agencies have dried up during the lockdown and they are only able to supply only few food packages. Lockdown has prevented the members of the UNHCR to be physically present for these communities. These communities are hard to reach making it difficult to provide resources, education about the virus and the measures to stop it from spreading. They are taking help of the refugee volunteers of the communities to supply food packages and other things.

***Access to healthcare:***

Refugees in camps live in appalling hygiene and little medical care. This condition has worsened as UNHCR and several NG0’s had to close its services of helping this community due to the fear of their safety due to the pandemic. Rohingya refugees residing in New Delhi are at a higher risk for contracting Coronavirus as they live in confined domicile and have limited access to public healthcare.[[19]](#footnote-20) Restricted access to essential services has further aggravated the problems faced by these communities during this pandemic. Major concern is the lack of access to public healthcare facilities, especially for pregnant women, elderly and those who require frequent medical checkups. Fear of revealing of their immigration status, lack of transport or proximity to healthcare provisions are also some other factors due to which the refugees lack access to healthcare services.[[20]](#footnote-21) Access to medical facilities is not easy which has forced her to borrow money for medicine as her mother and brother are sick – stated by a woman from Afghanistan residing in India.[[21]](#footnote-22)There are several restrictions to eligibility or access to services due to the status of the migrant worker.Health advisories issued by World Health Organization and Ministry of Health are being translated into the languages that the refugees speak, however as many of them live in slums, it is challenging for them to practice social distancing.[[22]](#footnote-23) The lack of health insurance often coupled with insufficient financial resources may have a negative impact on migrant’s ability to take preventive measures and to receive medical care if contaminated with Covid-19.[[23]](#footnote-24)

***Loss of Income:***

Mostly refugees and migrants are dependent on their daily wages and they do not have recourse to social protection in the residing country, which often tied them to work in the informal sector due to their irregular migration status.[[24]](#footnote-25) According to the report of Mixed Migration Centre, the impacts of loss of income includes the inability to afford basic needs, inability to pay remittances and inability to continue their migration journey.[[25]](#footnote-26)The pandemic and the restrictions have made the life of the refugees and migrants more difficult as the source of income has stopped due to the lack of jobs and opportunities. They are not able to sustain this situation easily without having any proper source of income. The International Labour Organization has estimated that around 400 million workers will be pushed into extreme poverty due to loss of job and the numbers that are facing food insecurities are likely to get doubled by the end of 2020.[[26]](#footnote-27) In such scenario, the conditions for the refugees and the migrant workers around the globe is estimated to get worsen. In India, sectors like construction, textiles, industries etc. provide lowest paying jobs and 90% of the workforce in these sectors comprised the unorganized sector of the economy of which the migrant workers are a big part.[[27]](#footnote-28) Amidst the pandemic and lockdown, the 40 million migrant workers are facing the major brunt of the situation as stated by the World Bank.[[28]](#footnote-29)

***Living Conditions and Safety measures:***

Migrant workers and refugees often live in small areas, camps, shelters or detention centers with overcrowded population, with the close proximity to each other. They share sleeping and washing facilities with large number of other people, which tends to spread the virus quickly throughout the community. Migrant communities are hard to reach, making it difficult to provide resources and awareness about the current pandemic. UNHCR and NGO’s are unable to reach out to the refugees and migrants as they are not physically present to educate them about the same due to their own safety concern. Environment full of crowd is also effecting the implementation of preventive measures like social distancing for instance in the case of detention, refugee camps or irregular migrants in highly populated labour camps.[[29]](#footnote-30)For instance, migrant workers in Gulf countries from South Asian regions like Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka often live in overcrowded camps in unsanitary conditions in the absence of enough access to running water raise fears amongst them that the situation could turn pathetic for them due to Covid-19. The guidelines for taking preventive measures from Covid-19 such as self-isolation, personal hygiene and medical examination in case of any symptoms are slightly difficult for the refugees and migrants to include in their lifestyle as they live closely to each other in camps and small areas where clean water, hygiene and healthcare facilities are limited. A refugee in Niger stated that living conditions and hygiene conditions are disastrous in the camps as the migrants share only one water source for drinking and sanitation purpose.[[30]](#footnote-31)

***Racism and Xenophobia:***

Migrant workers and refugees have always suffered racism by the citizens and sometimes authorities of the country where they reside. As the world is hit by an outbreak of Covid-19, racism and xenophobia against migrants in particular are on the rise. Impacts of the pandemic are different across regions but migrant workers and refugees around the globe are facing the brunt of the anti-migrant and refugee sentiments and are also experiencing xenophobia of same kind. Xenophobia against foreign nationals and migrant workers at individual and community level, manifesting through verbal and physical abuse, discriminatory remarks, social media outrage and social exclusion have become more common during the pandemic.[[31]](#footnote-32) Xenophobia can be described as behavior, attitude and prejudices that reject and exclude persons based on the perception that they are foreigners or outsiders and racism connotes discrimination on the basis of physical and cultural attributes such as color, language and skin.[[32]](#footnote-33)Different mobility restrictions and being quarantined in overcrowded, unhygienic conditions are some ways that physically segregate and exclude migrant workers from citizens and the rights and protections afforded to them. Such discrimination between nationals and non-nationals constitute a main source of racism and xenophobia.

As majority of the countries have closed their borders partially or completely internally and externally due to the coronavirus outbreak, there has been an increased in difficulties for the migrants on their mobility. Owing to overall socio-economic impact of the pandemic, migrant workers are returning to their countries. Returns are linked to the loss of jobs or income and deteriorating living conditions.

**Conclusion**

Covid-19, a global health crisis, declared by the World Health Organization, has put the entire world at halt .In India, its impact has reached beyond the socioeconomic issues specifically for the migrant workers and the refugees. After fleeing from their country of origin, refugees remains the most vulnerable groups in the world. The lives of refugees and migrants were already precarious before the outbreak of Covid-19 but due to virus and the measures to prevent its further spreading has increase the risks for them. The government should use the humanitarian approach instead of using bureaucratic approach in releasing schemes and guidelines for both nationals and non-nationals with a view that all human beings should be treated with dignity and respect. However, the news of spraying disinfectant on migrant workers in India made headlines across the media channels which showed the failure mechanism of the government. It is necessary that the government should establish a well-functioning mechanism along with the agency like UNHCR to increase the resources and mode of supplying them to the refugee community. Well-being of refugee and migrants is as important as that of the citizens of that country. There is a need to implement social security insurance and some funds related scheme for the migrant workers and refugees to protect their socio-economic issues during such crisis. Unless such system exists, there will be more exploitation of refugees and migrants in the future as well.

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**About the Author**

Deepali Aswal is a 5th year law student of B.A.LLB at Lloyd Law College, Greater Noida. Her interest in Refugee law encouraged her to apply for the internships that specifically works in socio-legal matters. She is a founding member of Migration and Refugee Law Centre at Lloyd Law College through which she engage the students of the college to learn more about migration and refugee issues by organizing lecture series, workshops and interactive sessions. She has been involved in various Moot Court Competitions, which in particular focused upon International law and Refugee Laws, at national and international level. She is very thankful to Pro Bono India for giving her an opportunity to intern which is pushing her one step towards her aim.

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