

Shall I Be Buried in My Land? Difficulties of Pakistani Labour Diaspora in the Middle East

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Abstract

Background: After the outbreak of COVID-19, the psychosocial issues of employees serving as labor in the Middle East have increased. Corona-related fear, death anxiety, obsessive scary thoughts of having the infection, feelings of helplessness, and financial insecurity is prevailing.

Methods: Review of recently published articles that discuss the challenges and difficulties of Pakistani labour diaspora in the Middle East after the upsurge of COVID-19. Both empirical and non-empirical articles were reviewed that were available at PubMed, PsycINFO, and newspapers.

Results: Emotional health and financial security are intricately linked. Pakistani Labours in the Middle East are not sure whether they will able to see their families. They are apprehended that if they die in the remote land, will they be buried in their motherlands. Besides, job loss, salary abatements, and financial insecurity have elevated their level of distress.

Conclusions: The provision of urgent financial assistance and accessibility to effective and efficient psychological support services would help in alleviating widespread despair and loss. The reassurance of financial security from the government would help in promoting their confidence and wellbeing.

Keywords: Labour Diaspora, Middle East, COVID-19, Death anxiety, Corona-related fear

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Background

And he (Jacob) charged them, and said unto them, I am to be gathered unto my people: bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite (Genesis: 49: 29). After a several of years of the Jacob death, when Prophet Joseph was in His death-bed, He called upon his brothers and said “I die: and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he swore to Abraham, to Issac, and to Jacob...and He (Joseph) took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence (Genesis: 50: 24-25).

These verses are taken from the book of Genesis. These last words of Prophet Jacob and Joseph demonstrated that the wish to bury at the land of the forefathers or the homeland is a natural phenomenon. The urge to remain with the family or closed ones at the time of trouble is not novel. There is a drastic worldwide change after the outbreak of COVID- 19. Almost every individual has been affected during this pandemic; however, this pandemic has adversely stirred the people who are living away from their families. Overseas employees all over the world and specifically the people living in the Middle East, who are staying there for the sake of the job, are one of the most vulnerable groups for developing psychosocial complications. Remoteness from their homes, parents, and children has intensified their suffering.

Almost 9 million Overseas Pakistanis are living around the globe. About 4.7 million Pakistani’s are working in Gulf cooperation countries. For the livelihood, they are employed in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Khan, 2020). Pakistan is one of the major labors exporting country. Remittances from expatriate workers in the Gulf have proved a lifeline for Pakistan’s economy. It has been estimated that Pakistanis in the Gulf countries almost contribute \$20 billion in remittances to their country every year (Siddique & Kakar, 2020). Usually, these people need to remain there for job requirements for the time of one to two years and they get leave for one or two months to visit their families. The sole purpose to stay in the foreign land is to earn the bread for their families. After the outbreak of COVID 19, due to travel constraints, these overseas are not able to return home to be with family. A majority of them is confronting joblessness, severe resource constraints, and are restricted to stay in the camps. Many have no income. COVID 19 has unprecedented effects on their lives and their problems are compounded. Measures like prolonged lockdowns, continuing travel restrictions, and isolation have physically depleted and emotionally shattered them. They are haunted by the death-related thoughts due to the pervasiveness of COVID.

Most have shared congested lodgings where they are vulnerable to the infection. Death anxiety has increased among these individuals. Their psychological stress has increased due to job loss, salary deductions, and financial insecurity (Cao, 2020). Those employees who are not on jobs are in extreme stress and confusion (personal communication, 23, 2020). They are in constant dread of having COVID infection. Several individuals had developed

corona infection and they are either in hospitals or quarantines in their camps. They are not clear on how to deal with the dead (Siddique & Kakar, 2020). Besides, it is a general feeling that if they die due to this pandemic they may not be buried in their land. They feel that they have to be buried in a foreign land in case of death.

A corona phobia is prevalent everywhere. If anybody in their families or from their co-workers dies due to corona, their fear raises. After the death of their co-workers, they are even not able to attend the funeral due to the lockdown conditions. This increases their feelings of helplessness, distress, loneliness, and renders them in a panic situation. Further, Social distancing, confinements in camps, and self-isolation in a distant country intensify the feelings of solitude. Moreover, if any employee feels the symptoms of fever, flu or cough, etc. they avoid exposing due to the fear of hospital or quarantines. Certain myths are prevalent among them regarding treatment and quarantines. The fear associated with quarantine is remarkable.

It would be even more stressful if they have elderly parents and young children and they are unable to visit their homes. On the other hand, the individuals who have families with them, they have the extra duty of caring for them. They lack family support at this tough time. Social support or family support serves as protective factors against stress, anxiety, and depression (Ozamiz-Etxebarria, Dosil-Santamaria, Picaza-Gorrochategui, & Idoiaga-Mondragon, 2020). After residing in constant stress, anxiety, apprehensions, and, fear they became vulnerable to the development of physical problems, like blood pressure, and stomach related issues and complicated psychological issues. Electronic media or social media are the major sources of the information they get. Corona-related news enhances their anxiety. Their anxiety is twofold: The safety of their own life as well as the safety of their family and economic predicaments. Their anxiety increases when they hear that some of their family members got infected or died due to corona. Moreover, to suffer alone in a foreign land exacerbates their anguish and distress (Dennis, 2020).

There is a need for the provision of efficient and accessible psychological services to the overseas labor force. They are hit hard during this pandemic; they may develop long term psychological complications. They have a high probability of developing posttraumatic stress, anxiety, and depressive reactions. Joblessness, salary deductions, and financial insecurities may increase their level of distress. The overseas Pakistanis have always contributed to the country’s economy, it this challenging situation, economic aid, incentives, or specialized urgent financial support services would be beneficial for the integrity, physical, and emotional wellbeing.

The provision of sufficient financial support to these employees from the governments would help in mitigating the psychological and financial issues. For instance, overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF) may initiate programs like “global employee assistance” for those workers who are jobless soon after the onset of COVID-19. Lines of communication must be kept open. During these rapidly changing situations, they are needed to be kept

updated. Authorities should make the proper mechanisms to address their complaints in time. Currently, as the stress, anxiety, and trauma are the major problems they are facing to deal with, so it would be helpful to start specialized psychological support services. It can be a great support to help employees to cope with such a critical situation. Both employers and employees need to keep themselves informed regarding the changing situation and keep themselves up to date with the latest guidance from reputable sources, including the World Health Organization. As one of the major predictors of psychological wellbeing is authentic and valid information (Ko, 2020). Further studies are warranted that specifically explore the psychosocial issues of the overseas employees posed by the current pandemic.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: The authors are well informed and declared no competing interests.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank all students who participated in the current study.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding authors on reasonable request.

Author's contributions

NA: study design, literature search, first draft, manuscript revisions, approval of the final version.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The integrate study was approved by the National Institute of Psychology Review Board. Written consent was obtained from all participants.

Competing interests

The authors declare to have no competing interests.

Publisher's Note

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**Received: 11 November 2019 Accepted: 25 July 2020
Published online: 31 August 2020**

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