

# Understanding the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 on migrants in Kerala, India

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## Summary

**Motivation:** COVID-19 has disrupted the lives of millions of people worldwide. Migrants in developing economies have been among the most affected. This vulnerable population faces a threat to their livelihood and way of life. Hence, there is an urgent need to understand the impact of pandemic on their lives to be able to tackle subsequent waves of the pandemic or similar exogenous shocks in future.

**Purpose:** We delve into the economic and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on employment, sources of income, and lives of different categories of migrant labourers in the Indian state of Kerala.

**Methods and approach:** Using the livelihood portfolio theory, we dissect this impact in relation to a wide range of issues. This was corroborated by the in-depth semi-structured interviews with three categories of respondents. The interview data was analysed by using the directed qualitative content analysis method. We created themes from the data and juxtaposed them with the livelihood portfolio theory in addressing the research objectives.

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**Findings:** Results highlight the impact on livelihood, lifestyles, migration prospects and gender aspects. First, the households dependent on international migrants were more severely affected than those with family members who were internal migrants. Second, a considerable lifestyle change (more reliance on a plant-based diet) and borrowing patterns (more reliance on informal money lending) was reported. Third, opinions on future migration prospects were pessimistic, and a trend in favour of reverse migration was noted. We also captured the resilience measures for each of the themes.

**Policy implications:** We find that blanket responses to mitigate migrants' hardships could be counterproductive. Policy-makers ought to implement tailor-made policies keeping in mind the migrants' classification and socio-economic demographics. Further, we recommend specific measures to address challenges that women face, to ease their workload and mitigate the loss of income. Specific measures aimed at initiating attitudinal change such as creating mental health awareness, curbing misinformation and providing counselling services could also add immense value in tackling the pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, internal migration, India, Kerala, left-behind households, return migration

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Migration is a temporary or permanent movement of individuals or groups of people from one geographic location to another, for reasons ranging from better employment to persecution. Migration is one of the income-generating and consumption-smoothing strategies adopted by low-income households in lower-income countries (Haas, 2010; Zachariah et.al, 2001a; 2001b). India occupied the top position among the migrant-sending countries in 2019, followed by Mexico, China, the Russian Federation and Syria, contributing 17.6 million international migrants (IOM, 2020). Consequently, India has consistently been the top recipient of international remittances since 2010, which increased by 4% in the following decade (IOM, 2020). However, owing to the economic crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, remittances to India were expected to drop by 23% in 2020 from US\$83 billion in 2019 to US\$ 64 billion (IOM, 2020). According to the Census of India 2011, the growth rate of internal migrants was 44.9 % between 2001 and 2011, exceeding even the population growth rate of 18% during the same period. The primary reasons for high internal migration in India have been regional disparity, lack of job opportunities or underemployment in the migrants' home regions, chronic poverty, a weak education system and skill mismatch.

Although destinations provide migrants employment opportunities, a disproportionate share of these workers live and work in dismal conditions as informal workers and have very little or no savings. Of all the states in India, Kerala is heavily dependent on international migration, which has played a predominant role in enabling socio-economic development. The importance of migration is depicted by the remittances to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio, which stands at 31% (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). The comparative number for India overall is a mere 4.2%. Further, Kerala gets roughly

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20% of all the foreign remittances in India and is home to various types of migrants, namely internal, international, and return migrants (Prakash & Nauriyal, 2017). Although there are good possibilities for Kerala to reabsorb its stranded labour, migration is deeply embedded in its economy and culture, making it heavily vulnerable to migration shocks. The persistence of the migration is also crucial until the state becomes a self-sustaining economy (Zachariah, Mathew, & Rajan 2001). Therefore, although there might be a few other regions which could be characterized by higher dependence on remittances, Kerala nonetheless does not lag far behind.

The highly contagious severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus, COVID-19, has killed some 6.05 million people worldwide and infected 460.28 million (as of March 17, 2022) (WHO, 2022). In India, 42.99 million confirmed cases and close to 0.51 million deaths were reported as of March 17, 2022 (MoHFW, 2022). The first case of COVID-19 in India was confirmed in Kerala on January 30, 2019. The number of confirmed positive COVID-19 cases in India was approximately 500 by mid-March 2020. With underfunded and overstretched public health facilities and high population density, Indian government called for a nationwide lockdown. Central and state governments undertook various awareness tasks and relief measures to combat COVID-19. The state governments with non-government organizations (NGOs) set up relief camps to house the migrants and stop the exodus. Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials in regional languages were widely disseminated through various communications media. The Government of India has also launched a smart phone application called *Aarogya Setu*<sup>1</sup> to help in “contact tracing and containing the spread” of the COVID-19 pandemic in the nation.

Directed at controlling the pandemic, lockdowns had varying impacts on different occupations. The unemployment rate increased to 19% after a month of lockdown, and overall unemployment reached 26% across India by April 24, 2020 (Sharma & Mahendru, 2020). In this article, we focus on the particular section of society that has borne the major brunt of the lockdown because of its sudden and unplanned nature – migrant workers (Rajan, 2021). The announcement of lockdown adversely affected migrant labourers, especially those who lived on daily wages and had almost no savings. Many of them lost their informal jobs and struggled to return home due to disruption in public transport services and movement restrictions. Internal migrants constitute nearly 20% of India’s workforce (Economic Survey India, 2016). Due to inadequate access to housing, water, sanitation, health facilities and social safety nets migrants were vulnerable to the risk of contagion.

In this study, we examine the impact of the pandemic on livelihood, lifestyle, gender and migration prospects among internal, international and return migrants at household and individual levels. In addition, we look at migrants’ and the left-behind households’ (LBH) perception of awareness campaigns and relief measures. Interviews were conducted by with LBH and return migrants from the Kerala Migration Surveys of 2016 and 2018 (Rajan & Zachariah, 2017; 2019). From the existing literature on migration and remittances, the welfare pentagon was used for analysing the decision to move.

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<sup>1</sup>This application constructs a user database for establishing an awareness network that can alert people and governments about possible COVID-19 victims. With a view to ensuring safety, various authorities are advised to encourage use of the application.

The theoretical framework of the livelihood portfolio theory based on the welfare pentagon explains the household's migration decision as an essential channel of risk mitigation and income maximization strategy (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2009). The welfare pentagon represents the five core institutions of family, market, social network, public authority and membership in institutions influencing household or individual livelihood decisions. The pandemic is one kind of external shock that hampered the households' various livelihood aspects, specifically the migrants and migrant-dependent households. Against this backdrop, the research objectives of this study are to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affects the livelihood of migrants and LBHs in Kerala. We also investigate if the pandemic had differential impacts on the consumption-smoothing and income-generation activities dependent on internal migrants compared to international migrants' households.

The rest of the article is structured in the following manner. Section 2 reviews the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on migrant labour. Section 3 elaborates on the theoretical framework used and its operationalization. Section 4 discusses the data, while section 5 elaborates on the methodology adopted for interviews. Section 6 presents results of the impact of COVID-19 on internal, international, and return migrants. Section 7 discusses additional insights on understanding the overall impact of the pandemic. Section 8 presents policy implications and section 9 concludes.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical understanding of migration and its impact on economic development and household welfare evolved from optimistic to pessimistic and pluralistic approaches (de Hass, 2010). The optimistic analysis of classical macro and micro migration theories viewed migration as a function of expected wage differences and discounted expected return maximization of human capital investment (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Sjaastad, 1962; Todaro, 1969). Thus, migration promotes economic development and household welfare in the home country with the anticipated income gain of migration. On the other hand, pessimistic theoretical explanation of neo-Marxist and structuralists viewed migration as creating more dependency, more inequality and a brain drain for the home country (Frank, 1966, 1969; De Mas, 1978; Penninx, 1982). However, the severe criticism of migration theories' deterministic nature in the empirical works of the 1980s and 1990s acknowledged the heterogeneous impact of migration on development and household welfare. In response to that, two strands of the pluralistic migration approaches emerged: the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) and livelihood approach towards migration. The NELM framework considers the household as a decision-making unit dealing with the remittances from migration which are used for migrants' welfare and LBH in the absence of perfect credit and insurance market in lower-income countries (Lucas & Stark, 1985; Stark & Bloom, 1985; Stark & Levhari, 1982). Hence, the household considers migration and remittances a risk-mitigation strategy to cope with external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic and other income risks of the left-behinds.

The early empirical literature examined the impact of external shocks such as the 1990 Gulf crisis and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis on the migration and international remittances to Kerala, India. Particularly, Saith (1992) points out four crucial focus

points from the migrants' perspective during the Gulf crisis. First, the consideration of financial loss, loss recovery, and compensation. Second, appraisal of re-entry prospects into the markets where jobs are lost. Third, on the ameliorative measures that tackle the short-term impacts; and fourth, long-term measures, including policy interventions, aim to reintegrate migrants into the home economy. In addition, the crisis resulted in a reduction of remittances from Gulf countries to Kerala, which accounted for around 0.6% to 0.8% of the state net domestic product. However, the literature explains that the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 had a different impact on the migration and remittance inflows from the Gulf states to South Asian countries (Sirkeci, Cohen, & Ratha, 2012). Specifically, the quantum of return migration and job loss during the crisis was 9.5 million, which was less than 5% of total emigrants from South Asia. Concerning the remittances, the magnitude had not fallen during the crisis period except for Sri Lanka and showed a mild rise across other South Asian countries (Rajan and Narayana, 2014). Similarly, the impact of the Global Financial Crisis on migration and household remittances was estimated using the Kerala Migration Survey of pre- and post-crisis periods and results showed a modest increase of 7% in household remittances in the post-crisis period (Zachariah & Rajan, 2010).

COVID-19, on other hand, caught the economy unaware and has jolted all the occupations. Literature on understanding the nature, process, and dynamics of migrant labour during the COVID-19 period is quickly emerging and progressing. At the macro level, the literature estimates a large reduction in the Real Remittance Per Capita (RRPC) for Kerala's economy during the pandemic period, that shows a 43.1% reduction of remittance contribution to the State Gross Domestic Product (SGDP) for the year 2020–21. The reduction of international remittances came from two sources: first, the economic slowdown in Gulf countries during pandemic led to cuts in wages and salaries for the immigrants from Kerala, which in turn reduced remittances. Second, the loss of remittances due to return migration from Gulf countries (Rajan et al., 2021; Murugan & Pushpangadan, 2021). The literature describes how, given the paucity of transport infrastructure, the mass migrant exodus translated into one of the greatest mass tragedies of post-independence India. Lockdown caused an induced loss of earnings and irrational fears, which led to a "perfectly rational" response of reverse migration. Consequently, the reverse migration was to be the greatest crisis in India's rural landscape (Hatekar & Belhekar, 2020; Rajan et al., 2020; Dandekar & Ghai, 2020). Another important aspect is that most migrant workers were not enrolled in social protection schemes, which could accelerate the problems of migrant reintegration (Pandey, 2020). This exodus also acted as a mode of disease transmission. Migrant workers returning to their places of origin were acting as the host for urban–rural transmissions (Singh et al., 2020).

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The livelihood approach explains migration as a livelihood strategy and that the household makes deliberate choices for maintaining, secure and improving all household members' livelihood. These heterogeneous choices depend on the household and its structural environment and institutions (Ellis, 2000; McDowell & De Haan, 1997). One of the critical theories of the livelihood portfolio theory explains the

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interplay of five core institutions in household livelihood choices (de Neubourg, 2002): family, market, social network, public authority and membership in institutions. The theoretical framework of livelihood portfolio theory based on the welfare pentagon explains the migration decision as an essential channel of households' risk mitigation and income maximization (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2009).

In the literature on migration and remittances, the welfare pentagon is generally used to analyse the decision to move. However, one strand of literature discusses the social management of risk and social protection, which explains the active role of the core five institutions in the welfare pentagon in mitigating external shocks to households. The pandemic is one kind of external shock that hampered households' various livelihood aspects, specifically among migrants and migrant-dependent households. The pandemic severely affected consumption and income-generation activities. Hence, the theoretical explanation of livelihood portfolio through the welfare pentagon is appropriate for analysing the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and LBHs. Therefore, we examine how the five core institutions in the welfare pentagon collectively influence the consumption smoothing, income generation and livelihood of the migrants/LBHs during the pandemic.

#### 4 DATA

We conducted 72 in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews. The sample comprised 23 return migrants, 21 internal migrant households and 28 international migrant households. Our study consisted of two broad categories of respondents. The first category consisted of return migrants, where the respondents were the migrants themselves. All the respondents in this category were males. The second category consisted of internal and international migrants; where the respondents were household heads of the LBH. An internal or international migrant LBH was one that reported "as any person (at least one or more) who was a usual resident of this household, migrated out of Kerala, and is still living outside Kerala for at least a year". Those living outside India at the time of the survey were identified as "international migrants" and those living in India but outside Kerala were identified as "internal migrants".

Among internal and international LBHs, 70% and 90% of respondents respectively were males. Respondents were explicitly probed to understand who held the role of household head. Of the respondents who reported a women household head, we found two categories. The first are the cases where women managed households in the absence of men, and the second was where the woman was widowed and the children migrated. Women's migration in Kerala is also a prevalent phenomenon. The majority of women's migration is concentrated in the nursing profession: 5% of the total emigrants were nurses, coming second only to semi-skilled and unskilled labour. Some of the other professions where women and men worked in almost equal numbers were engineering jobs, and office assistants and managers (Rajan et al., 2019). Our survey consisted of 10 women in total (six internal and four international migrants). They worked mostly as nurses while a few others were employed in white-collar jobs such as health workers and IT professionals.

We obtained contacts from the Kerala Migration Surveys of 2016 and 2018. These surveys are conducted as a joint venture between the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum, with financial support from the Department of Non-Resident Keralite Affairs (NORKA), Government of Kerala. Among 200 respondents each (internal and international migrants) from the database of Kerala Migration Surveys (KMS) 2016, 2018, we shortlisted 30 in each category using random sampling. For creating a respondent sampling profile based on income for the internal and international migrants LBHs, we used information on household consumption expenditure KMS 2016 and 2018. We also interviewed return migrants<sup>2</sup> who came back to India from abroad during the pandemic period either through India's special flight or other chartered flights. These points of contact were provided by the CDS through their ongoing research on return international migrants. Of 200 return migrants, a sample of 30 was randomly chosen. Our sample covered respondents from 13 out of the 14 districts in Kerala.

All the interviews were conducted in Malayalam between August 28 and September 25, 2020. Interviews spanned from 10 to 15 minutes, and on average, an interview lasted for around 12 minutes. Physical interviews were out of the question due to the imposed lockdown. Telephone interviews were considered over interviews through video-calling software due to three reasons. First, not all participating households had access to smartphones. Second, among those who did have access to smartphones, connectivity issue was a major challenge. Many respondents were located in remote pockets and hence video calling was not accessible. Third, even if smartphone and connectivity were addressed, many respondents were simply not used to operating and using the video-calling software. Hence, in order to maintain uniformity of procedure and quality in data collection, we chose to conduct telephone interviews.

## 5 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was used to analyse the data and address the research objectives. QCA is a widely used qualitative research technique wherein large amounts of interview data collected is analysed (Demuth & Mey 2015). QCA enables subjective interpretation of text data through systematic process of coding and identifying themes (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). In our study, the directed approach of content analysis was used as opposed to the conventional or summative approach. In directed content analysis, researchers use an existing theory about a phenomenon which could benefit from further description. The objective of directed approach to QCA is to validate or conceptually extend a theoretical framework or theory (Armat et al., 2018). In line with Hsieh and Shannon (2005), we elicited responses in two stages – first we used open-ended questions, followed by targeted questions on pre-determined themes.

Interviews were conducted based on separate questionnaires each for internal, international, and return migrants. The questionnaires sought data on the migrants' characteristics (gender, age, duration of stay, education, and employment) and his/her

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<sup>2</sup> The term "return emigrants" is used here to mean Kerala-born persons who have lived outside India for a minimum of 12 months or worked/studied outside for shorter periods. Here the respondents are the migrants themselves.

left-behind household. The respondents (head of the household) were also probed about the migrants' whereabouts when COVID-19 struck India. If the location was in India/abroad, details were asked for about the time taken to come back to Kerala. There were open-ended questions on the impact of lockdown on internal, international, and return migrants' livelihood and lifestyle along the lines of welfare pentagon mentioned above. Questions also aimed at collecting the remittance information, changes in income sources for the household, and lifestyle change. We also probed about online education. The participants were also asked their opinion on the government's role during the lockdown to fight the pandemic. Finally, we explored their perception of their future migration and occupation plans. All the interviews were translated into English and then transcribed. After finalizing the interview data, we read all the transcripts to identify the statements that related to the employed theoretical framework. Once we coded statements based on their relevance, the uncategorized ones were given separate codes based on our understanding. Texts of the interviews were evaluated and independently coded by two coders, achieving an intercoder reliability of 88%. The remaining codes were thoroughly discussed until a consensual agreement was reached among the authors.

We restricted the sample size in our study to 72 respondents upon reaching theoretical saturation and thematic exhaustion. Theoretical saturation is a point when no new insights are identified, no new themes emerge and no issues arise regarding data categorization (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Respondents were brought into the study until we accomplished two important objectives. First, when interview data achieved redundancy and themes were adequately explained. In accordance with Bowen (2008) saturation was considered to be achieved when diminishing returns to research objectives were observed. Second, when additional data and further analysis failed to provide any new insights or uncover any significant findings in relation to the emergent theory. This technique was applied for each category of respondents and for respondents as a whole.

## 6 RESULTS

The results throw light on the differential impact of the pandemic on internal, international, and return migrants. Of the sample interviewed, most migrants in all three categories were men and the age varied between 33 and 40 years. The duration of stay in destination countries ranged from 7.5 to 10 years. The job destination for internal migrants was mostly southern India. In case of international and return migrants it was to and from the Gulf States (see Table 1). Based on KMS 2016 and 2018, we calculated the household income profile. In the case of internal migrant LBHs, 57% belonged the first two quartiles of the income distribution, and the remaining 23% and 20% were in third and fourth quartiles respectively. In the case of international migrants' LBHs, 61% belonged to the third and fourth quartiles of the income distribution and the remaining 18% and 21% of the households belong to the first two quartiles. This depicts a clear distinction in income profiles among internal and international migrant households in the pre-pandemic period.

Internal migrants were highly educated in comparison to international and return migrants. The migrants' occupation varied depending on their educational



qualifications and skills. These migrants were mostly employed in the private sector; 90% and 95% of internal and international migrants in our sample did not return to Kerala when COVID-19 struck India. The reasons for not returning to Kerala varied from the worldwide public transport strike (of buses, trains and flights) to the inherent fear in the migrants about their insecurity of jobs and uncertainty of their return to the destination (see Table 1). The international migrants returned home for various reasons including loss of employment, expiring visas and concern about their families among others. Some of them returned during June/July 2020 by chartered flights (70%) and the rest by the *Vande Bharat mission* (30%). In the remaining part of this section, we present the results of emergent themes and codes specified in Figures 1, 2 and 3. The themes were identified using an open-coding exercise from interview transcripts. Themes mentioned in white boxes report the impact of pandemic while the grey ones indicate the resilience strategies.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

| Particulars            | Internal        | International  | Return         |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Respondents            | 21              | 28             | 23             |
| % of men               | 70%             | 90%            | 100%           |
| Average Age            | 33 years        | 40 years       | 37 years       |
| Average migration stay | 7.5 years       | 10 years       | 10 years       |
| Migration destination  | Southern Indian | Gulf countries | Gulf countries |
| Completed graduation   | 75%             | 45%            | 55%            |
| Up to 12th class       | 25%             | 55%            | 45%            |
| Private/public sector  | 65/35           | 90/10          | 100/0          |
| Median household size  | 5 members       | 6 members      | 5 members      |

Source: The authors

## 6.1 Impact of COVID-19 on internal migrant LBHs and resilience measures

### 6.1.1 Sources of livelihood

Among the majority of households, one of the primary sources of income was remittances. Half of the LBHs received internal remittances during the lockdown period and reported that these migrants worked in organized sectors. However, one of these LBHs received less remittances than the previous period because the migrant faced a salary cut due to COVID-19. The remaining households were unable to receive remittances. They managed expenses through the earnings of other family members in the household or through past savings and government pensions.

*We did not receive remittances; my sister was not able to work during lockdown period and her company paid the salary only for her subsistence.*

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*Respondent B9, LBH (Internal), Alappuzha, Kerala*

A few households faced difficulties in self-employment and agricultural activities such as labour shortages, transport and market closure. Most of the respondents reportedly faced financial problems during the lockdown, including household members who worked in the informal economy who faced loss of employment and wages. In addition, the non-functioning of informal saving clubs such as chit funds further worsened the credit facility and emergency funds requirement of the households. The resilience mechanism followed by the households included extensive use of family labour in agriculture and self-employment; borrowing from an informal social network that included relatives and friends. A few households took the gold loan, and a handful borrowed money from Self Help Groups (SHGs).

*I am working as a daily wage worker in the construction field. I could not work last two months because of the lockdown restriction as contractors my faced financial crunch. We used to have weekly chit fundraising to support the financial needs of village people, but now it is stopped as most of the villagers do not have employment and money in hand.*

*Respondent B12, LBH (Internal), Kannur, Kerala*

#### 6.1.2 Lifestyle

About 55% of internal LBHs reported no drastic changes in their lifestyle. The families tried to limit spending on food and other household expenses, considering the slump in household economic activities. They undertook minimal spending with no conspicuous consumption and purchased groceries only once or twice a week. Along with the limited budget, the households effectively used the food subsidies from the public distribution system (PDS), which was less before. Some of the households also took the initiative to cultivate vegetables.

*There was no specific change in our lifestyle. There was no significant change in food consumption. We used the food subsidies from PDS. However, we restricted the purchase of groceries once a week compared to three/four times earlier.*

*Respondent B8, LBH (Internal), Kottayam, Kerala*

Among the remaining households, a variation was observed in their lifestyle arising from a change in food and eating habits. There was a considerable reduction in meat and fish consumption and expenditure on shopping, travelling and clothes. A few households reported that social interaction was limited to the family, with no physical exercise and social gatherings. Specifically, the reduced social interaction worsened the mental health of elderly people in the home. Social cohesion and volunteering acted as resilience mechanisms in villages which enabled delivery of essential services such as food, grocery, and medicines to vulnerable people.

*I was not able to do my routine sports games and physical exercise because of social gathering restriction, and it was leading to mental stress.*

*Respondent B21, LBH (Internal), Palakkad, Kerala*

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### 6.1.3 Gender aspects

About 30% of the internal migrant households with school-age children had the additional burden of helping in the children's online education. Since the students were attending the recorded class content broadcasted through television, mothers usually had to find time to listen to the same class to clear up their children's doubts and supervise learning activities. Especially in the case of primary school pupils, they reported that their parents find difficulties in managing their household work and helping them in the online education.

*The absence of classroom teaching harmed the student learning process. We had to spend more time on the children's education in the online mode compared to offline education.*

*Respondent B4, LBH (Internal), Palakkad, Kerala*

Further, the restriction of MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act)<sup>3</sup> employment had a negative impact on women's earning opportunities, which added more agony in her life. The employment loss created financial difficulties and mental frustration among women, which led to greater time spent in the kitchen and household work. Another significant impact of the pandemic on women, especially elderly people, was the difficulties in accessing health facilities and routine check-ups for lifestyle-related diseases. For the emergency medical needs, there was support from the community health services including the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and volunteers at the village level.

*Pandemic affected the economic activities of my family. I used to work in MGNREGA, and I could not continue because of the restriction in participation for people above the age of 60. The restriction in the movement created mental frustrations and added to difficulties in going to the hospital for the routine check-ups.*

*Respondent B7, LBH (Internal), Kollam, Kerala*

### 6.1.4 Migration prospects

Most of the respondents believed that would be no immediate change in the migration outlook. Still, it was predicted that there would be a slack in the job market because of the economic slowdown. Some of the heads of the LBHs felt that the prospect of working outside the state would reduce because of the drop in job opportunities and also the reduction in salaries in the existing jobs. Further, the pandemic-induced travel restrictions created an unwillingness to travel to far-off places for employment. Some prospective migrants could not find a suitable job opportunity outside the state because of the economic slowdown.

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<sup>3</sup> MGNREGA is an Indian labour law and social security measure. Its primary objective is enhancing livelihood security by providing at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to at least one member of every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. In case of sample respondents, women's employment opportunities were usurped by men.

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*I think that there will be reduction in job opportunities outside Kerala because of the current travel restrictions due to pandemic spread. Since the employment opportunity within the state is very less, we cannot avoid going out for the employment.*

*Respondent B20, LBH (Internal), Ernakulam, Kerala.*

The general notion among the respondents was there would be no attitudinal difference towards the migration of people from Kerala to other states. On the contrary, one respondent reported:

*I believe that general attitude on migration will change because of reduction in white-collar job opportunity in outside Kerala. This would open up opportunities inside the state and for that, there is a need for perception change towards domestic employment opportunity.*

*Respondent B13, LBH (Internal), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala*

To tackle the current lack of employment, the respondents reported the need to upskill the younger generation to tap into opportunities within and outside the state. In addition, it was essential to change people's perception of domestic employment opportunities in various sectors and improve the support system to materialize opportunities for youth and return migrants.

## **6.2 Impact of COVID-19 on international migrant LBHs and resilience measures**

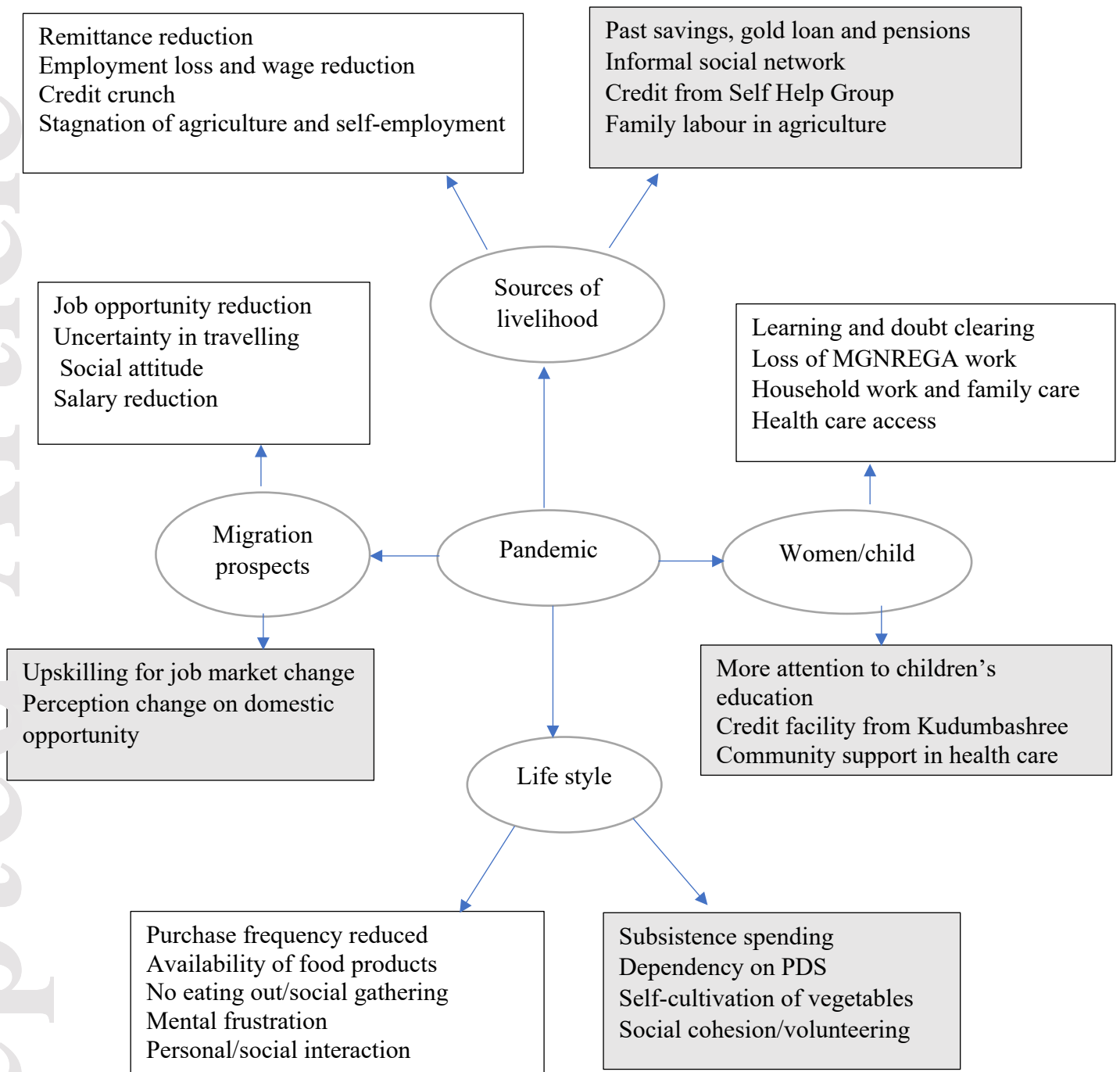
### **6.2.1 Source of livelihood**

The source of income was remittances in the majority of households. The families with a migrant member working as unskilled and semi-skilled worker suffered more than those who were engaged in small business or skilled jobs; 35% of the LBHs received international remittances for all months, i.e. April, May, and June 2020 no delay caused by COVID-19. Among the families who received remittances, most reported receiving less than before. Notably, the migrants had experienced layoffs and salary cuts during the lockdown period, which caused a reduction in remittances.

*We received the remittance all months, but the amount was less compared to the previous period, and my husband was not able to work all working days due to the lockdown restrictions.*

*Respondent A18, LBH (International), Thrissur, Kerala*

**Figure 1: Impact and resilience measures by internal migrant LBHs**



Source: the authors

The remaining households were unable to receive any remittances. They managed their outgoings through the earnings of other family members at home or through past savings or government pensions. A few self-employed dependants who could not work added to the loss of income and increased the burden on family expenditure.

A few households borrowed money from Self-Help Groups (SHGs), while some depended on government subsidies disbursed through the PDS. However, a few families reportedly were not able to receive food subsidies because they had achieved

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“above poverty” status owing to their past remittances. The majority of LBHs reported increased financial difficulties with respect to their outstanding loans. One LBH, for instance obtained loan to construct a house. However, COVID-19 affected the repayments, which in turn negatively affected their credit score and ability to get subsequent credit.

*We had to survive with pension and agriculture income. We borrowed from our relatives to tackle the shortage of funds.*

*Respondent A5, LBH (International), Kasaragod, Kerala*

### 6.2.2 Lifestyle

Eighty per cent of international LBH reported no specific change in their lifestyle. Families explicitly maintained a budget and lived on it. They undertook minimal spending with no conspicuous consumption. All the households were purchasing essential items but only in limited quantities. In the case of the remaining households, a variation was observed in their lifestyle, food, and eating habits. There was a considerable reduction in the consumption of meat and fish, expenditure on shopping, travel and clothing. Some of the households took the initiative to grow their own vegetables. Their consumption was restricted to eating at home as restaurants and hotels were closed.

*Our lifestyle changes were mainly not going out because of the lockdown and restriction. Food consumption increased because of staying at home. Purchase of groceries was in more bulk quantity. Purchases reduced to once a week compared to every alternative day earlier.*

*Respondent A23, LBH (International), Kozhikode, Kerala*

A few of the respondents were older people living alone or with their partners in the home. They faced difficulties in going for their routine medical check-up for lifestyle-related diseases. A household member explained:

*We two people staying in this house having diabetics and Arthritis and both son and daughter are working abroad. We find it very difficult to go for regular check-ups on diabetes and buy medicines. We got assistance from neighbours and ASHA workers getting medicine and other essentials.*

*Respondent A25, LBH (International), Kasaragod, Kerala*

In addition, the respondents were reported that the closure of public libraries and places of worship negatively affected the social interactions and mental health of the left-behind households. A few of the other respondents explained that the yearly visit of the migrant member had been postponed due to the travelling and financial difficulties abroad due to the pandemic. This situation further exacerbated the mental stress and emotional distress of the LBHs, especially the older people. In response to the difficulties in health care access and purchase of essentials of these households, the community services, including ASHA workers and volunteers, actively helped.

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### 6.2.3 Gender aspects

The women respondents largely reported three issues due to the pandemic-induced lockdown. First, they were given the responsibility for their children's online education. More efforts were put into assisting and educating children in completing their educational requirements. Among households with no smartphones, children continued their education through educational television channels created by Government of Kerala. It added to the additional burden of existing household chores. Second was the increase in household chores. All the women reported spending more time than usual on domestic duties. Third, all the women reported a reduction in remittances by direct and indirect means. Direct means were from the reduced earnings of their spouse, while indirect means included cases where they could not access MGNREGA work due to either spending more time on the chores mentioned above or that the men had usurped their everyday MGNREGA work. A woman-headed household reported:

*My husband is working as a construction worker (painting) in Saudi Arabia, and he lost his job and could not come because of the uncertainty of a new job. We did not receive any remittance and managed the household expenses by taking a gold loan. Our children's online education is badly affected because we don't have a smartphone.*

*Respondent A8, LBH (International), Wayanad, Kerala*

### 6.2.4 Migration prospects

A majority of the international migrants' LBHs did not report any change in migration outlook. They attributed the slack in the job market to the economic slowdown. Some of the heads of the LBH felt that the prospect of working outside the country would decline because of the drop in job opportunities and the reduction in salaries in the existing jobs. Furthermore, it was observed that due to the travel restrictions, there was less willingness to travel to far-off places for employment.

*The employment opportunity reduction and salary reductions due to pandemic would create less incentive for new job seekers abroad. Especially the normal labour work will have more difficulty, while educated may not face many difficulties.*

*Respondent A24, LBH (International), Kasaragod, Kerala*

As a resilience to the pandemic-driven sluggishness in new job opportunities abroad, the respondents reported the need to enhance the skills of prospective migrants. Some respondents explained that the requirement of using the domestic opportunities rather than seeking a job abroad owing to the reduced job opportunities and travel difficulties.

## 6.3 Impact of COVID-19 on return migrants and resilience measures

### 6.3.1 Source of Livelihood

Among the return migrants 60% did not receive their salary after the pandemic struck. They were compensated with food and accommodation for a month. Subsequently, they lost their jobs and were looking for new opportunities abroad. These migrants

managed their family's expenses through savings and borrowing from friends and relatives. Migrants also reported acute difficulty in obtaining a job during the pandemic period. The employers of migrants did provide return tickets to most of them, while few others managed expenses through their savings. Migrants who worked in service sectors (such as restaurants, hotels, and tourism) suffered as most of them reported losing their job and moving back to Kerala in July 2020. Migrants who had been looking for work in Kerala remained unemployed. Of those who received a salary, 20% of migrants faced delayed payment. As the usual sources of income dried up, migrants started tapping alternative sources. They also relied on past savings and informal loans.

*I was working as a driver in Saudi Arabia and I was able to work for a few days because of the lockdown. The company paid me salary only for the worked days. Because of the reduction in the number of working days, I did not have enough money to send back home, and it caused difficulty in my family members' life.*

*Respondent C6, Return migrant, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala*

A few of the return migrants reported that they had previously taken on a loan and now the repayment is pending because of the lack of employment and earnings. Although the government had given a moratorium for a few months, the uncertainty about the new work added more financial hardships.

### 6.3.2 Lifestyle

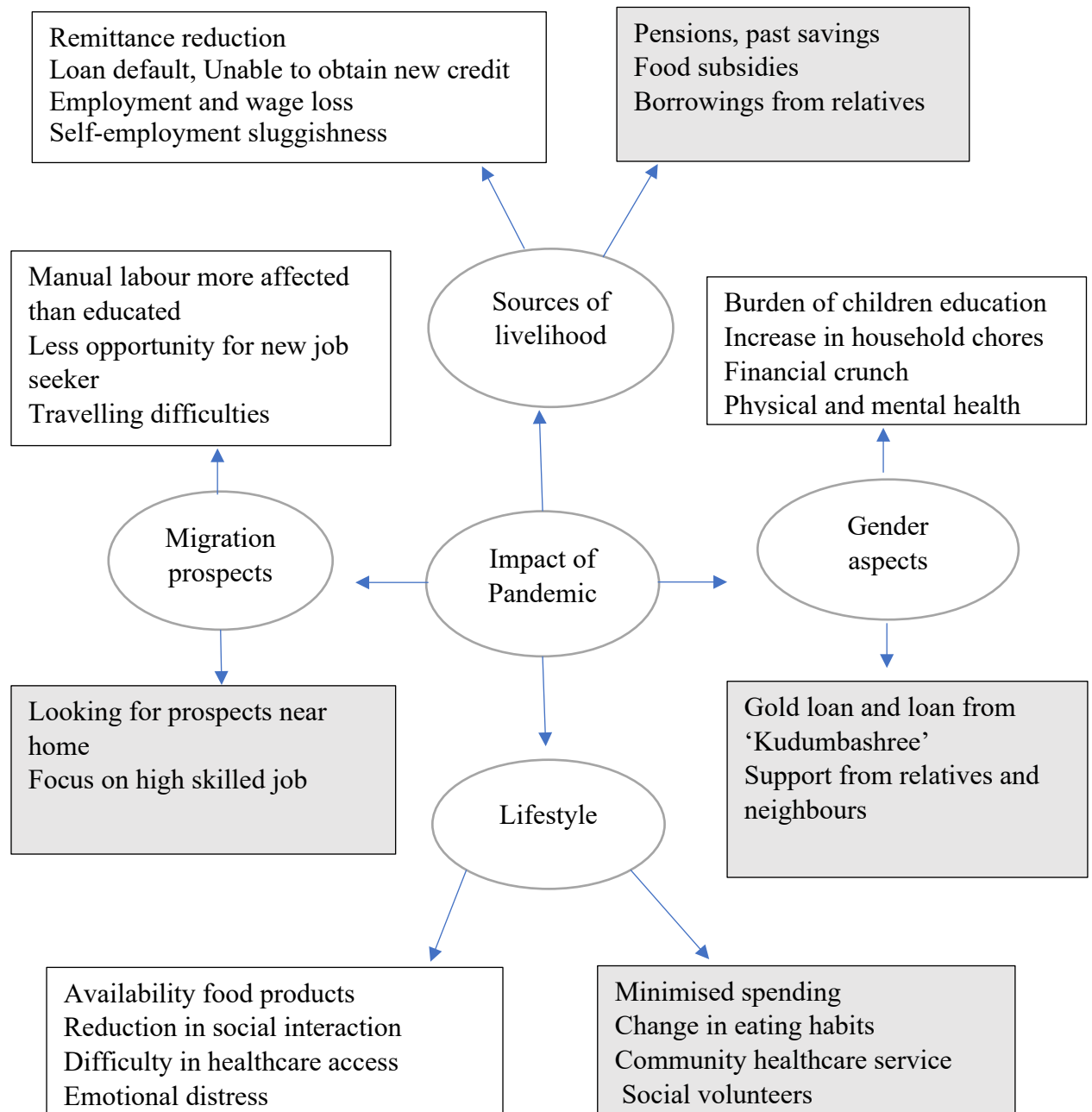
Of the return migrants 45% did not report any specific changes in their diet, although their movement was restricted due to lockdown. Others observed a slight change in their lifestyle. Due to the financial crunch and restrictions on going out for food, food consumption was also limited. Some migrants managed the expenses through past savings and borrowed money from relatives and friends. The purchase of groceries was limited to once a week compared to going more often in the pre-lockdown period. Some of the households also made use of food subsidies from PDS. Most of the return migrants faced credit crunches, especially from their informal network in Kerala. A respondent narrated:

*I was working in Dubai last 11 years and because of the pandemic, I lost my job. I was supposed to receive a gratuity for the ten years but I did not get it. Now after returning, people in my locality are less willing to lend money for my financial needs citing the repayment uncertainty.*

*Respondent C18, Return migrant, Kannur, Kerala*

Some respondents mentioned that there was greater awareness of hygiene among family members and they were able to spend time on household chores. Apart from the financial difficulties, travel restrictions and quarantine created mental stress during and after the lockdown period.



**Figure 2: Impact and resilience measures by international migrant LBHs**

Source: the authors

### 6.3.3 Migration prospects

More than half of the return migrants believed that there was no attitudinal difference in migration outlook because of the pandemic. However, they reported difficulty in finding new job opportunities abroad. Only those who had long-term visas can get a job; now, people with short-term visas have lost jobs, and there is little hope that once the situation becomes more normal, there will be new openings.

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*Currently, the new employment opportunity in Dubai is less; only once the situations become normal there will be openings.*

*Respondent C15, Return Migrant, Ernakulam, Kerala.*

Apart from the fewer new job opportunities abroad, the return migrants reported that the demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labour would further reduce because of the large-scale automation happening in the workplace. Return migrants expected incentives from government authorities in the form of subsidized or interest-free credit facilities for new ventures and self-employment opportunities. Migrants believe there will be more new opportunities for skilled work once the business activities restart, keeping the future migration prospects alive. On the contrary, one return migrant explained:

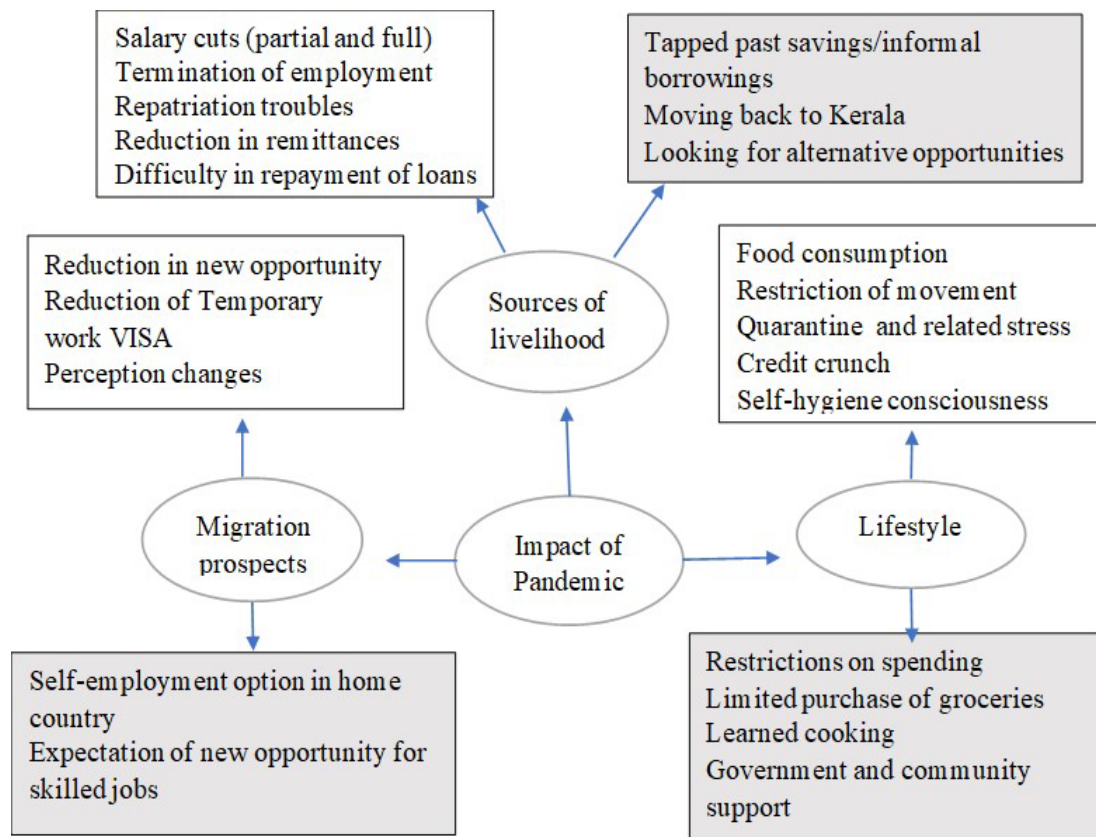
*I am not willing to go back Gulf because I already worked there for 12 years and am trying to settle in Kerala. But if nothing works here and I do not find any job, I have to go back once things get normal.*

*Respondent C22, Return Migrant, Malappuram, Kerala.*

## **7 DISCUSSION**

Results from the study suggest that respondents across the categories of migrants and LBHs have had varying impact from COVID-19 and lockdown. In this section we discuss additional insights that throw more light on understand the overall impact. In line with this, we discuss two key aspects. First, the similarities and differential impact of the pandemic on internal, international and return migrants. Second, the opinions on the government measures. The demographics of the migrants who were internal and international differed substantially. In the case of internal migrants, most were educated and worked in organized sectors such as IT professionals and established industries. However, in case of international migrants, the majority worked as manual labourers. There was a clear difference in the job demographics across the two categories. Although both internal and international migrants were affected by the drop in remittances, the latter were more vulnerable to shocks and hence more affected. Further, in case of internal migrants, those who could potentially work from home (WFH) were even less affected.

**Figure 3: Impact and resilience measures by return migrant LBHs**



Source: the authors

Another aspect that warranted attention was the suffering of older people in the LBHs. We find that older people in international LBHs were more affected than the internal migrants due to greater difficulties in migrants' repatriation. This led to a higher emotional distress among elderly people. Another cause of emotional distress, especially among women, was the rise in domestic violence. Women suffered in several respects such as reduced remittances, increase in women's domestic work, rise in food insecurity and additional burden on household resources (Agarwal, 2021). Although, we did not explicitly explore the occurrence of this phenomenon, few studies explored its prevalence in the Kerala context. Saji et al. (2020) found an increase in domestic violence up to 13.7% in addition to an increase in feelings of anxiety and fear among respondent households. Lk et al. (2020) found a pandemic-induced rise in domestic violence upon men's return. However, none of the respondents was willing to obtain help in spite of several formal and informal support channels available to them. Indu et al. (2021) in the context of northern Kerala reported that severe domestic violence was reported to rise by 6.2% but at least one form of domestic violence was experienced by 25.8% of respondents. They also found a significant positive relation between the occurrence of domestic violence with feelings of depression and anxiety. About 75% and 90% of the internal and international LBHs believed that government played an active role in fighting COVID-19 by creating awareness through messages

and caller tunes on mobile phones, advertisements on television and safety kit distribution. They were satisfied with the relief measures such as health workers' involvement in the quarantine process, transport of migrant workers to their hometown, food subsidies from PDS, and loan facilities from the Kudumbashree (an SHG). The initiation of the Vande Bharat Mission, an effort to transport the stranded migrants abroad, helped the migrants. A few households recommended that the government needed to have some relief measures for the daily wage earners and senior citizens living alone. This segment of society has been severely affected by the pandemic and neglected by the government. Some LBHs were not satisfied with the government's initiatives during the lockdown due to its delay in execution and management, although 85% of the return migrants were satisfied with the role played by the government. They found all the awareness and relief measures to be quite helpful. The migrants also stated that the precautionary measures for air travel were monitored well through various checks and balances. Some migrants also suggested that the government take some initiative to rehabilitate return migrants due to job loss and provide some financial help or subsidy to start-up ventures in Kerala.

## 8 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although results were built on the findings of data collected from Kerala migrants, our study has vital implications for policy-makers in dealing with two types of probable future occurrences. First, in dealing with prospective "black swan" events i.e. an unpredictable event beyond what is normally expected, characterized by severe consequences (Taleb, 2007). The complex geopolitical and climate change events across the globe only add to the fears of future "black swan" events. Second, in dealing with further waves of COVID. Despite scaled-up vaccination campaigns throughout the world, all countries have seen third waves of COVID-19 as of 2021 (Deol & Pandey 2022). Several countries, such as China and South Korea, have even seen a fourth wave (DNA, 2022). In these situations, study findings aid policy-makers across the world need to build resilient systems to protect migrants' welfare. Further, we find that a blanket response to the hardships faced by migrants could be short-sighted and that the policy-makers ought to implement tailor-made policies with respect to the classification and socio-economic demographics of the migrants. In terms of livelihood prospects, our study offers two critical inputs. First, policy-makers need to consider the attitudes regarding employment of international migrants who repatriate. Given the increased interest in and compulsion to find jobs with the state, the governments need to provide opportunities for reintegration of international migrants' workforce into the local economy. This can be efficiently achieved by understanding the workforce composition and tweaking industry-specific policies/incentives. Second, in order to accommodate the internal migrants holding professional jobs, the governments need to consider taking appropriate measure to facilitate WFH opportunities. This is especially relevant as numerous companies are still operating on online or hybrid mode in spite of improvement in the pandemic situation (Bismah, 2022).

Lifestyle is another important aspect of policy relevance that benefits from the findings of our study. In line with the findings, we recommend that policy-makers encourage

cultivation for self-consumption among migrant households. Our data suggest that this could reduce the LBHs' vulnerability to market shocks and also reduce consumption expenditure. A few recommended measures in this direction could be to encourage home gardening and terrace gardening in rural and urban areas respectively. Further, governments should extend financial support to migrants and LBHs to avoid them slipping into vicious credit cycle and informal money lending. This recommendation emerges from the finding of our study that migrants frequently resort to informal loans, default on existing loans and struggle to obtain new loans.

Another important aspect that was neglected in the migration literature is the mental health of migrants and the members of LBHs. Our study offers novel evidence to drive policy implications in this area. Findings from the gender-related aspects throw light on the plight of women in LBHs. Accordingly, we recommend specific policy measures to address challenges faced by women to ease their workload and mitigate loss of income. Further we find that several respondents frequently experienced anxiety and depression. Specific measures aimed at initiating attitudinal change such as creating mental health awareness, curbing misinformation, and providing counselling services could be considered by policy-makers.

## 9 CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected migrants' and LBHs' livelihoods in various respects, ranging from employment and sources of income to the lifestyle and future prospects of migration. From the theoretical understanding of livelihood portfolio theory, in this article we tried to answer how the pandemic affected the various livelihood aspects of internal and international migrant households and how the pandemic affected the future prospects of migrants. The pandemic-induced lockdown restrictions created both financial difficulties and mental agonies for the migrants and left-behind households. The study's findings suggest that primarily the pandemic has had more effect on the livelihood of international migrants than internal migrants' households due to more formal-sector employment by the internal migrants in our sample. Second, the migration's future prospects have been adversely affected due to the economic downturn induced by the pandemic. This fear has unfolded due to the perceived changes in mobility restrictions and labour markets.

Finally, the pandemic had an impact on the livelihoods and lifestyles of migrants and LBHs in the form of subsistence level of food consumption, curbing of conspicuous consumption and higher resort to government transfers and past savings to meet their financial needs. The results suggest that although the impact on migrants has been severe, they have not given up hope. It is at this juncture that the public institutions, social partners, and individuals must act effectively. This could reduce the multiple repercussions of the pandemic ranging from physical and financial to mental issues. Future studies could include the differential impact of COVID-19 and the differences compared to other pandemics. Studies could also explore the varied impact of the duration of migration on different forms of migrants.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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The authors hereby confirm that the study has not received funding from any sources.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

**S. Irudaya Rajan:** Conceived and designed the analysis, contributed data or analysis tools, wrote the paper and provided access to Kerala Migration Survey data.

**Pooja Batra:** Conceived and designed the analysis, contributed data or analysis tools, performed the analysis and wrote the paper.

**R. Sai Shiva Jayanth:** Conceived and designed the analysis, literature review, contributed data or analysis tools, performed the analysis and wrote the paper.

**T. M. Sivadasan:** Conducted the interviews, translated and transcribed interviews, conceived theoretical framework, contributed data or analysis tools and wrote the paper.

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