

STRANDED BETWEEN THE UAE AND PAKISTAN: MIGRANT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS WALK A TIGHTROPE AMID COVID-19

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BETWEEN EJECTION & ENTRAPMENT

- The majority of Pakistan's 4 million migrant population in the UAE is employed in unskilled and semi-skilled construction jobs
- The UAE has a long history of complaints of mistreatment of workers
- Construction was declared a "vital" sector during the pandemic
- Thousands of workers were fired or suspended and told to leave
- They reported high rates of COVID-19 infections and faced unemployment upon their return to Pakistan

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Workers like Hunzullah Khaliqnoor, an IT manager from Peshawar, Pakistan, who shares a room in Dubai with his two brothers, just wants to escape.

Khaliqnoor said he has been pleading daily with the Pakistani Consulate to fly him and one of his brothers out. "Our job is gone and we need to move."

Zulfiqar, a Pakistani in Dubai for 12 years, sent his family home early in the outbreak but stayed on hoping for work, sharing a room and what cash he has with a dozen other unemployed men.

"Things in Pakistan are also not good," he said.



DREAMING OF TECHNO-
UTOPIA

KEY DRIVERS OF INEQUALITY

- UAE's vision for growth and development vs labor export as development strategy for Pakistan
- Individual memorandums of understanding around employment signed between UAE and labor exporting countries
- Kafala system allows for non-transparency, force majeure, indentured labor, and allocation of risks towards workers
- High degree of informality in recruitment and employment processes

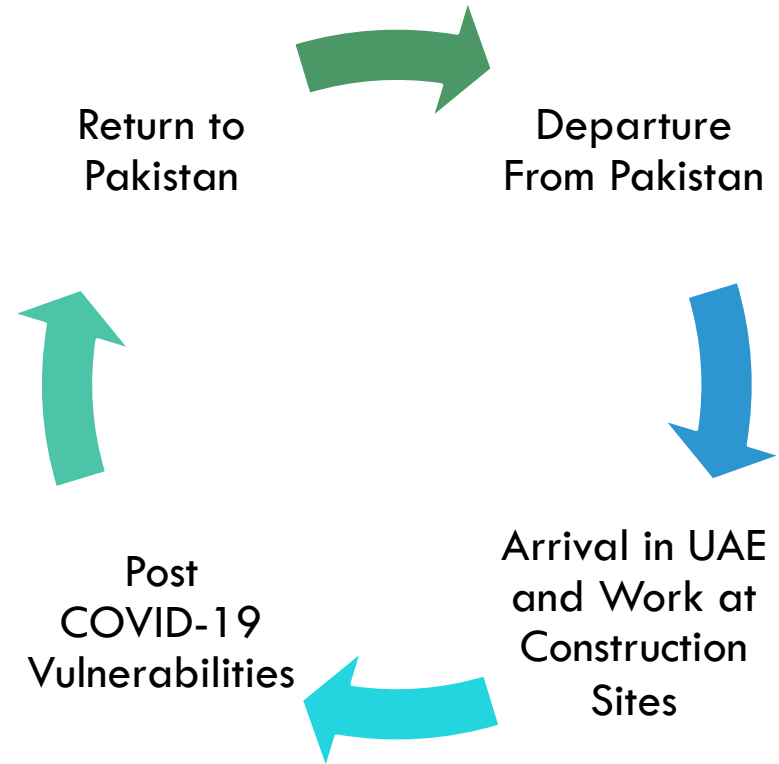
Movement (during lockdown) was restricted completely, and I couldn't leave my room even to get a calling card to tell my family I was alright

Abdur Rehman, mason

When COVID-19 hit, the UAE arm twisted India and Pakistan, the two largest sending countries, to take back their citizens

Vani Saraswathi, MigrantRights.org

CIRCULAR JOURNEY OF MIGRANT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS



DEPARTURE FROM PAKISTAN



ARRIVAL IN UAE AND WORK AT CONSTRUCTION SITES

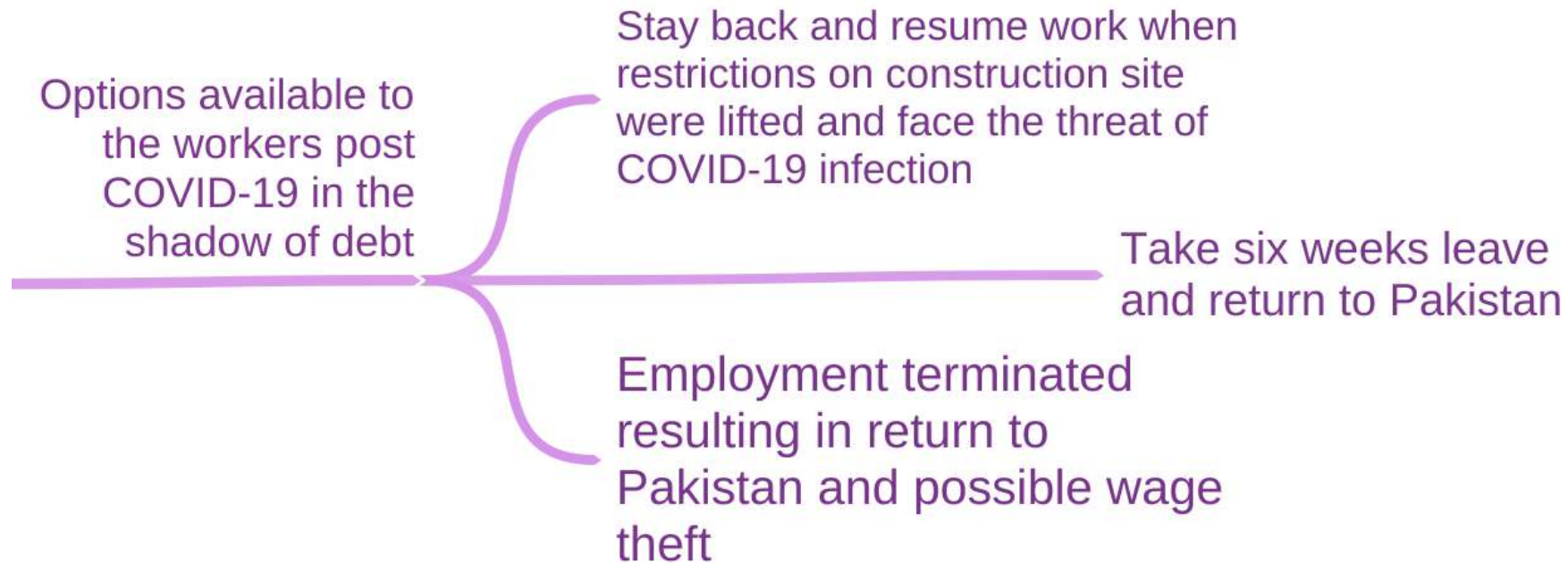
Vulnerabilities Faced Before COVID-19

- Confiscation of Passport (Illegal but endemic)
- Crowded living conditions (racialisation)
- Kafala System (Restricts mobility and expands inequality between employer and employee)
- Threat of criminal law/detention
- Copy of contract may not be given or the inability to understand the terms of the contract.
- Collective bargaining and unions are banned

Onset of COVID-19 and Added Vulnerabilities

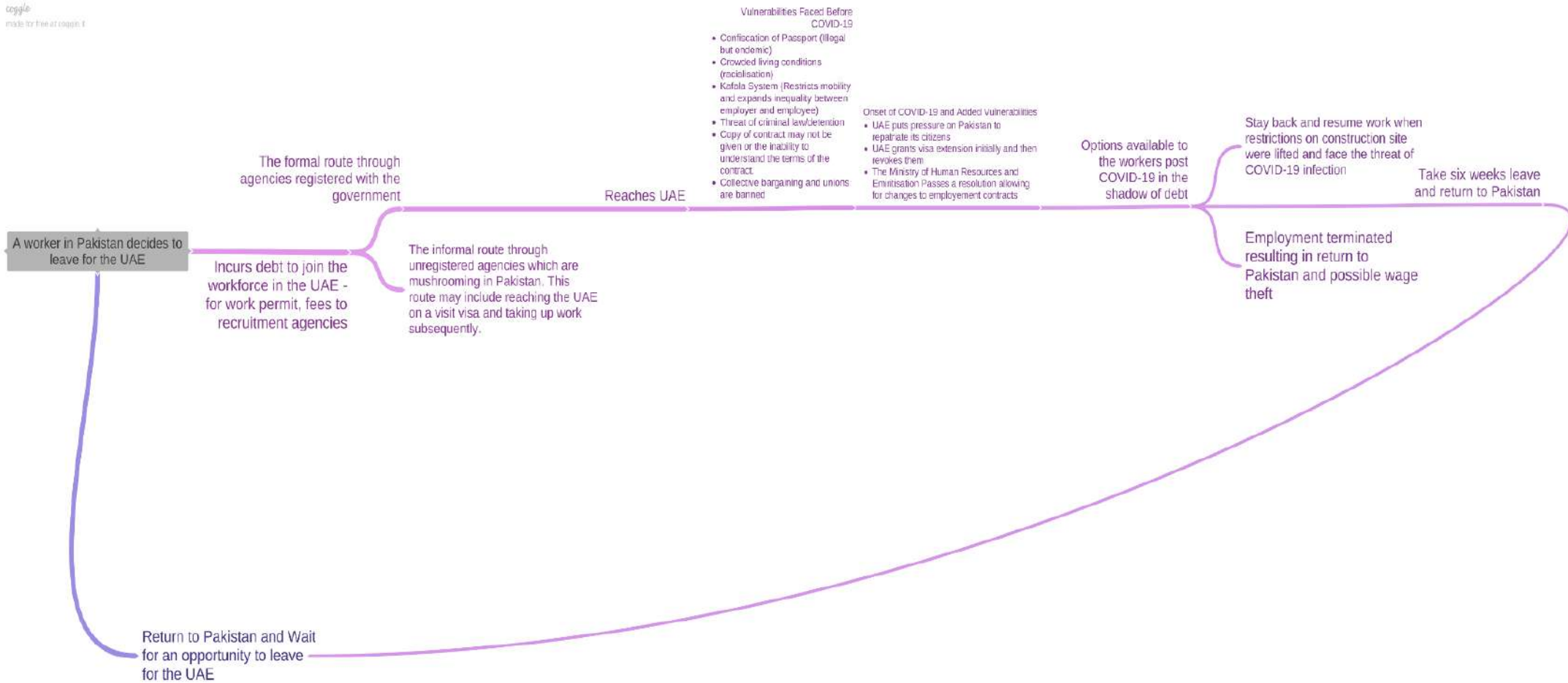
- UAE puts pressure on Pakistan to repatriate its citizens
- UAE grants visa extension initially and then revokes them
- The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiritisation Passes a resolution allowing for changes to employment contracts

POST COVID-19 VULNERABILITIES

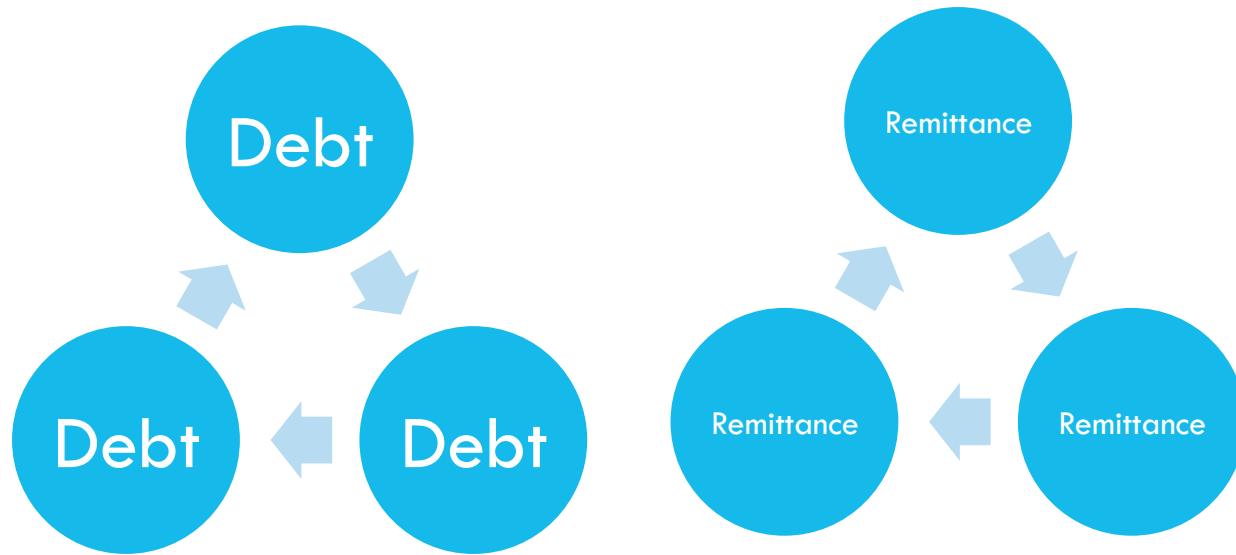


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FURTHER WAYS OF MAPPING – DEBT, REMITTANCE, AND LABOR



ANALYSIS OF KEY LEGAL DRIVERS

- ILO regime
- Bilateral agreements (MOUs)
- Kafala/Immigration Policy
- Labor Policy, especially prohibition on strikes and organizing

THE PREVALENCE OF INFORMALITY

- Pakistani emigrants overwhelmingly choose informal channels
- Informal channels, on average, cost substantially more and result in greater precarity
- More experienced migrant workers tend to use formal channels

KEY SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS - INTERNATIONAL

- Strong economic growth gives the UAE and employers strong bargaining power
- Political disunity among sending countries in South Asia (SAARC) weakens bargaining power

KEY SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS - SOCIAL NETWORKS

- Migrant workers in the UAE self-organize for social support
- Race/Ethnicity functions to divide migrant workers along ethnic and national categories
- Race/Ethnicity often functions through a middle manager migrant

FURTHER QUESTIONS

How does informality shape the nature of migrant work?

Can sending countries bargain on behalf of workers?

How has the absence of unions and workers movements affected their situation during the pandemic?



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