

IID Rapid Research

# What do migrants talk about during a pandemic?

Glimpses from social media public posts

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## Introduction:

Migrant workers of Bangladesh have been enriching our economy and improving lives of millions of people with their remittance for decades. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its health and economic implications, has made migrants more vulnerable than ever. Although we get news about the challenges migrants are facing during this crisis in the newspapers and media, these news fail to capture inner feelings and dire needs of the migrants. This study attempts to identify every detail of migrants' challenges that this pandemic has caused, by analysing migrants' posts and engagements in the social media. Social media has been used in this study as source of data because it is an easily available platform for the migrants to express their views openly and to interact with each other. Thus, only in social media we can find what migrants are really talking about and what concern them the most. The study reveals many details about the reality of their lives, for example – being compelled to ask for relief and financial help even going against their self-respect, constantly living in fear of forced deportation during lockdown if they do not have legal documents, living without money and having minimal food for days, uncertainty about returning home, being clueless about process of renewal of their passports and visas.

## Methodologies:

For this study, **34 Facebook pages and groups** of Bangladeshi migrants have been scanned to identify their needs from the posts and comments within the period of April to May, 2020. The study reviewed Facebook pages and groups of Bangladeshi migrants living in **Malaysia, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Kuwait, Italy and Oman**. These pages and groups get **964 posts per day** and represent **1.3 million members**.

Groups and pages in Facebook are easily available platforms for migrants where they feel comfortable to interact, express their feelings and make queries. While these migrant pages and groups got almost 1000 posts a day in average, pages of embassies, government and CSOs got just one tenth of it. Thus this study analysed these groups and pages as the real situation of migrants, in context of COVID-19 situation, is reflected in the parallel virtual world of migrants within social media platform.

Methodology of the study involved first reviewing public posts of migrants in social media, with sorting out posts related to situation migrants are in due to the pandemic. While posts were being selected for further analysis, reactions, shares and comments on those posts were also noted. All reactions, irrespective of positive and or negative and all shares and comments, whether or not those support the posts, were counted. After selecting 309 posts, the posts were sorted into categories based on their subject matters. Within each category, the posts were divided into subcategories. Lastly, total number of reactions, shares comments and engagements (summation of reactions, shares and comments in a post) were counted for all posts in each categories and subcategories.



Figure 1: Flowchart of Methodologies in the study

**309 posts** by the migrants in these groups have been analysed which received 143,273 reactions, 28,277 shares and 27,168 comments by migrants in those groups.

### **Privacy of Migrants:**

Only Non-personal data of users were collected from Facebook forums for further analysis to respect their privacy. Anonymity has been ensured by concealing users' identity as IID understands by disclosing sensitive contents that have been given out in the social media by users in their posts may cause harm to them if the users are discoverable. A recent incident of harassment on a Bangladeshi migrant in Malaysia, followed by broadcasting of his interview in a documentary of Al-Jazeera describing discriminative attitude of Malaysian government towards migrants during epidemic, further validates the necessity of concealing users' identity while publishing their status and opinions on sensitive issues.

In this regard, the study followed the "DFID Practice Note Using Social Media Data in International Development Research, Monitoring & Evaluation" as guideline to maintain privacy of the migrant workers.

### **Findings:**

Topics of discussion by the migrants during the pandemic can be categorized into 4 broader themes, such as **support services**, **returning home**, **lockdown concerns**, and **lack of information**. 33% of posts were related to lack of information, whereas 27% were on lockdown concerns, 22% were on returning home and 18% were on support services.

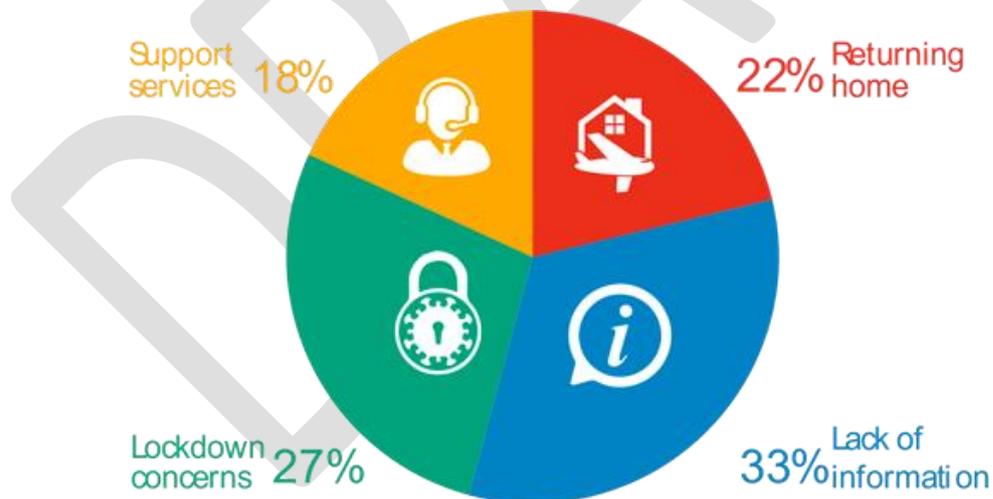


Figure 2: Engagement in four categories

*Note:* Some posts contained statements on issues of two different categories; those posts were added in both categories. For example, the posts inquiring about repatriation and flights were counted under a subcategory in both 'lack of information' and 'returning home'.

### ***Top Issues on Support Service:***

Discussion about support services, while migrants suffer from shortage of food and money, gathered momentum in the Facebook groups and pages. Among all posts on support service, migrants engaged the most on posts related to not getting any relief. Among all 29165 engagements on posts in this category, posts about –



not receiving relief received **25%** engagements



migrants helping each other received **22%** engagements



lack of support from the embassy received **20%** engagements



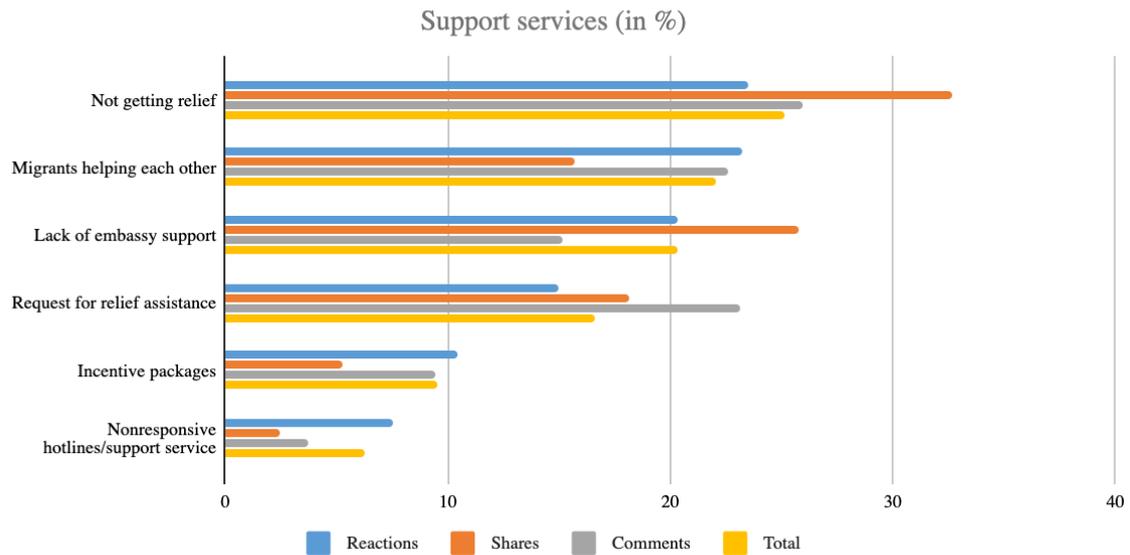
requests for relief assistance received **17%**



incentive packages received **10%** engagements



non-responsive hotlines/support service received **6%** engagements

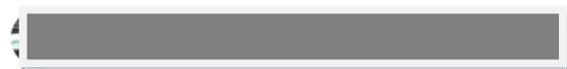


**Figure 3: Engagements in posts related to support services**

This graph shows the percentage of reactions, shares, comments and total engagement on various issues about support services. Posts about not receiving relief got 30% of all shares of this category. Although posts with request for relief assistance received fourth highest engagement, they got second highest numbers of comments.

Lockdowns in many countries left migrants workers in short of money and food. In social media forums migrants begged, often very emotionally, for help and relief. Many migrants gave out their locations in hope that someone might help them after seeing their posts. The pandemic made the migrants so vulnerable that they were compelled to ask financial help from others, even if they hurt their self respect by doing so. A migrant posted:

‘Brother, I am in deep misery in this time of trouble. I have no food at home, no money in my hands. If you kindly help me, then at least I will survive with minimal food. I am asking for help even though I am feeling ashamed for doing so. It would be of great help if you lend your hands.’



ভাই দুঃসময়ে খুব কষ্টে আছি। বাসায় খাবার নেই হাতে টাকাও নেই। আপনারা যদি দয়া করে কিছু সাহায্য করেন তাহলে দুটো ডাল ভাত খেয়ে বেচে থাকতাম। লজ্জা শরম রেখে বললাম কিছু সাহায্য করলে এই সময় খুব উপকার হত। প্লিজ ভাই দেখবেন।

👍🥺 62

31 Comments 5 Shares

Unable to send money to home, migrants were anxious about well being of their families. Many of them are only bread earners in their families. Without the remittance sent by them, their family would not be able to pay for food, rent and education of their children. Thus they asked for relief. One migrant said,

‘This is a request to the respectable Prime Minister. Please do something for the families of the migrants who are now living abroad. As they are jobless for the last 2/3 months, they are not being able to provide for the education of their children. We are in tremendous misery; it is not possible for us to send money to our families.’

মাননীয় প্রধানমন্ত্রীর কাছে আবেদন যারা বিদেশ আছে তাদের পারিবারিক পরিজনদের জন্য কিছু করেন। কারণ বিদেশে ২/৩মাস কাজ নাই ছেলে মেয়েদের লেখা পড়ার খরচ চালাতে পারছে না আমরা আমাদের চলতে অনেক কষ্ট বাড়িতে দিব কি করে

Like · Reply · 3d

Migrants engaged more in discussion about not receiving any help of relief. They often expressed their frustration for not being able to reach any support services using hotline numbers. Migrants complained that no one picked up calls in hotline numbers. Sometimes the calls were received by non-bengali speaking attendants with whom migrants could not communicate due to language gap. Some said even though they had given their name in the hotline number they did not get relief. In some countries, migrants felt vulnerable as reliefs were given to only to the camps with suspected COVID-19 patients.

Discussions about failure of embassies to distribute relief to the workers in need highlighted that embassies were giving out relief only to the people who are known to them. They demanded to know where the funds sent by Bangladesh government go.

Many posts about support services during lockdown focussed on inspiring stories about migrants coming forward with help for their fellow migrants.

## Top issues on returning home

Migrants, unaware of how they can return to Bangladesh took part in discussions related to return. Total number of engagements on issues of return was 66,545 on 78 posts.



Almost half (**45%**) of the engagements was related to **desire to return to home**.



**22%** engagements was on queries on **repatriation and flights** received



**14%** engagements was on **inadequate arrangement of return**



**6%** engagements was on **return of undocumented migrants**



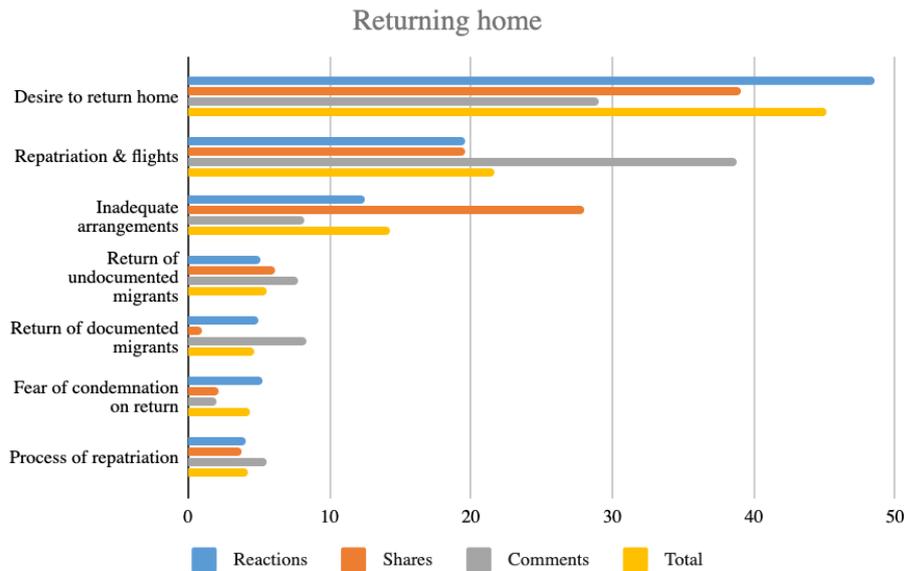
**5%** engagements was on **return of documented migrants**



**4%** engagements was on **fear of condemnation on return,**



**4%** engagements was on discussion on **process of repatriation**

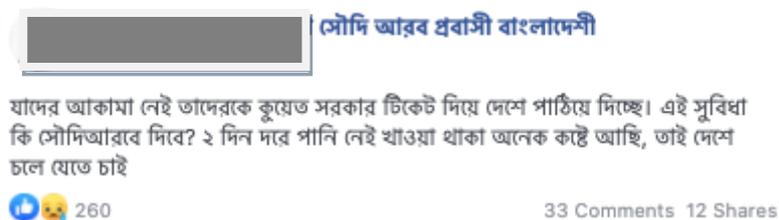


**Figure 4: Percentage of engagements in issues of returning home**

This graph shows the percentage of reactions, shares, comments and total engagement on various issues of returning home. Even though discussions on desire to return home received highest percentage of engagement with almost half of the reactions in this category, migrants chose to be vocal mostly on the posts on queries related to process of repatriation and flight information, by posting highest number of comments. Also, migrants shared posts of insufficient arrangements of return more than the posts about queries on process of repatriation and flights.

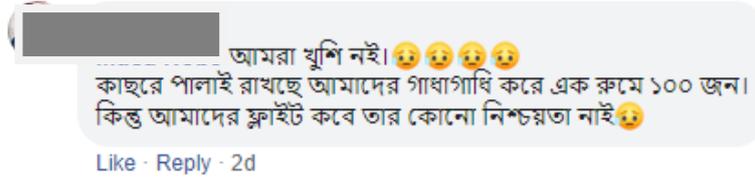
As migrants were living without food and money, they felt that they would be in better condition if they could return to Bangladesh. Some felt so vulnerable that they thought they would die if they could not return. They even feared that their dead bodies would not reach Bangladesh if they die abroad. Demands for taking back migrants who had been living in overcrowded camps were made by the migrants. They requested the government to follow the examples of India and Pakistan in taking back their migrants. A migrant posted in a group:

‘Those migrants who do not have *akama* are being sent home by the government of Kuwait. Will the government of Saudi Arabia give us this opportunity? For 2 days, I do not have water. I am suffering a lot because of the shortage of food and shelter. That is why I want to go back to home.’



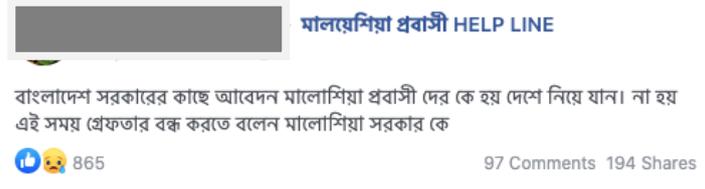
Another post described the living conditions which compelled migrants to think they would be better off if they could return:

‘We are not happy. They have crowded 100 of us in one room, but there is no certainty about when we will be able to catch a flight.’



Migrants' urges to return home were also driven by many other problems, like getting false case by the *kafeels*, being arrested for not having proper documentation. For example, a migrant posted:

'We request the government of Bangladesh either to take the migrants back to their homeland or to ask governments to Malaysia to stop arresting'.



While migrants without document were uncertain about the process of repatriation, legal migrants also did not know how to return. As some migrant became illegal for loosing job during pandemic, they had to live in horrible conditions which could end only by returning. In many posts, government were criticised for making insufficient arrangements for their return. Moreover, some airlines charged very high price for the flights which made returning difficult for migrants.

There was fear of condemnation upon return, which was fuelled by news of returnees being harassed by police and locals. They criticised stigmatisation of returnee migrants by not letting them in to local teastalls, shops, restaurants and hotels.

**Top issues on lockdown concerns:**

Being in lockdown in a foreign land, deprived of the comfort of home and dear ones, migrants were bound to encounter new challenges. They used Facebook as a platform to express their concerns and needs during lockdown. In 99 posts about lockdown concerns there were 61,223 engagements, out of which-



**27%** was on posts about **lack of food, money and jobs** with



another **27%** engagements was on **death of migrants abroad**



**17%** was on **restrictions on movement,**



**9%** was on **uncertainty of re-entry and fear of deportation,**



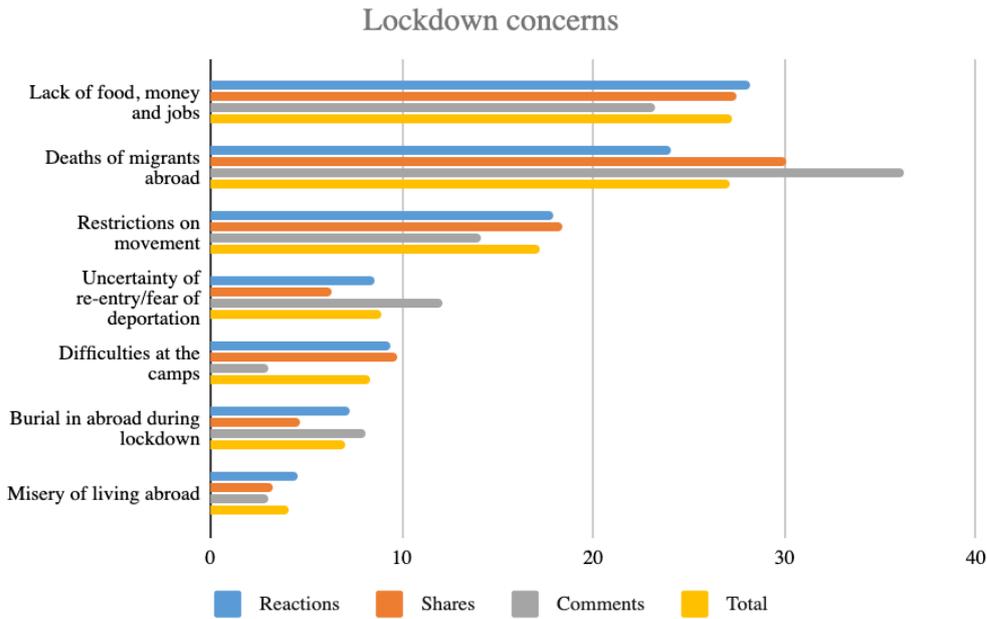
**8%** was on **difficulties at camps,**



**7%** was on **burial in abroad during lockdown and**



**4%** was on **misery of living abroad**

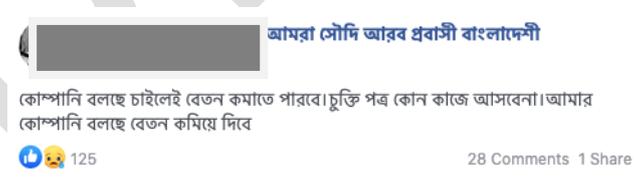


**Figure 5: Percentage of engagements on issues related to Lockdown**

This graph shows the percentage of reactions, shares, comments and total engagements on different issues related to lockdown. Posts about death of Bangladeshi workers in abroad had most comments, although total engagements in these were almost equal to discussion on lack of food money and jobs. These posts were also shared the most within this category.

As economic activities had to reduce to stop the spread of novel coronavirus, many migrant workers lost their jobs. In Qatar, the number was as high as 40, 000. Migrants who were taxi drivers were one of the worst sufferers because of movement restrictions in the destination countries. Some migrants did have jobs, but they were paid less than they were promised in the contract, while employers did not give salary to the workers for a long time. This situation was nicely expressed in the following post:

‘Company claims it can reduce salary if it wishes, contract will not come to any use. My company declared that my salary will be reduced.’



As the workers were left no or very less amount of money, they even could not buy food for themselves and they wrote about their situation in Facebook frequently. Although most migrants wanted to return to Bangladesh to end their, many of them were suspicious whether they could re-migrate in future, if they leave their counties of employment.

During the lockdown, migrants talked about tests of COVID-19 and deaths of migrants who were infected. They were concerned if any migrant without documents can get a test. They exchanged information on test and medical facilities available for migrants. For example, in the following post a migrant inquired about test of COVID-19, which had 52 comments.

‘Can someone who does not have a visa get a test for corona? It would be great if anyone could help by mentioning the place and cost for such a test.’



▶ মালয়েশিয়া প্রবাসী HELP LINE

ভিসা নাই এরকম লোক এর কি করোনা চেক করানো যায়,কোনো জায়গা তে এতে কি টাকা লাগে নাকি ফ্রি তে করা যায় কেউ যদি হেল্প করতেন ভালো হত।



67

52 Comments 1 Share

Restriction of movement during the lockdown raised various concerns among migrants. Many of them were not clear about rules and regulations of lockdown and many received fine while going out even for work. Many undocumented workers expressed their fear of forced deportation in case they were caught while going out to buy food and other essential things.

As the lockdown began, the government of Kuwait offered general amnesty to the migrant workers who did not have legal documents and took those who applied for general amnesty to deportation camps. In the Facebook forums migrants often talked about shortage of food and proper living space, and people getting sick in the camps. Some expressed that registering for general amnesty was a mistake as the government of Kuwait announce a provision for extension of Akama after few days.

### **Top issues on Lack of Information:**

Most post reviewed in the Facebook migrant groups and pages showed evidence of information gap on various concerns among the migrant workers .These posts received 65,851 shares, reactions and comments combined.



Lack of information about **renewing expired visas** had **26%** of total engagements in this category



Post about lack of information on **repatriation & flights** **22%** engagements



queries **opening hour of embassy** had **17%**, engagements



lack of information **expiry of passport** during lockdown had **14%** engagements



queries on process of **sending money** during lockdown had **7%** engagements



lack of information on **return of undocumented migrants** had **6%** engagements



lack of information on **return of documented migrants** had **5%** engagements



on **process of repatriations** had **4%** engagements

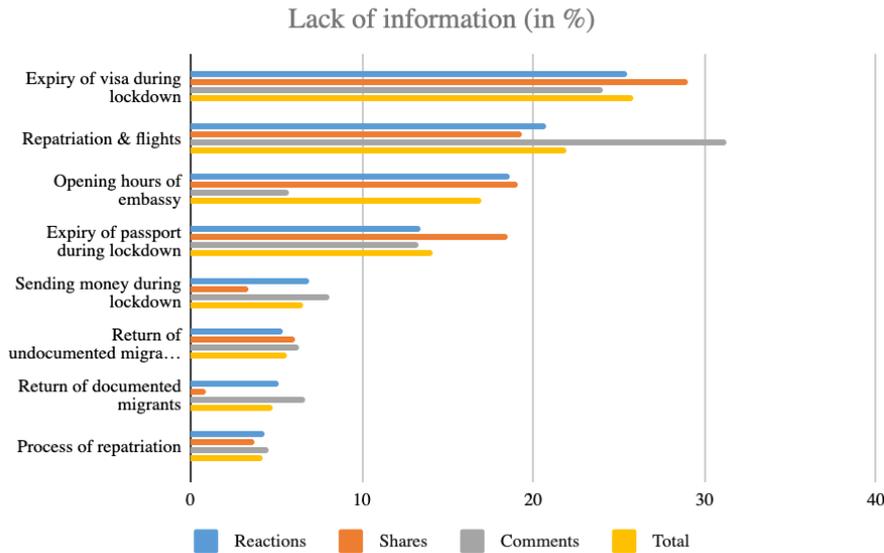
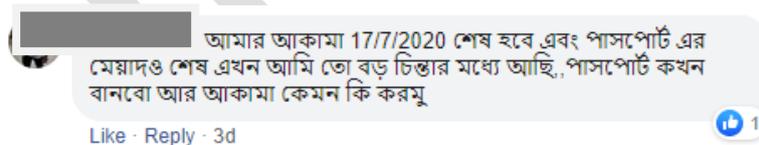


Figure 6: Percentage of engagements on issues related to Lack of information

This graph shows the percentage of reactions, shares, comments and total engagements on different concerns within the category of lack of information. According to this graph, posts on queries on the process of repatriation and flights had the highest comments among the other topics in this category, although migrants engaged the most in discussions about the expiry of visas.

Expiry of visas was a major concern among the migrants. They did not have any idea about how they can renew their expired visas and feared of having illegal status which would start chain reactions of many problems in the foreign lands. The fear of becoming illegal migrants also taunted the migrants whose passports were about to expire as they would not be able to extend their visas if their passport had expired. As embassies were closed and did not receive any calls migrants were clueless about the renewal of passports and visas. The following post described the situation nicely:

‘My *akama* will expire on 17 June 2020, and my passport has already expired. I am very worried. I do not know when I can renew my passport and how I can extend *akama*.’



A huge number of discussions were made around confusion about the process of repatriation and the start of airline operations. Both migrants without and with documents had no information about the chances of return, just like the post of a migrant below.

‘My *akama* has expired. Moreover, *kafel* has lodged a false case against me. Can I go to my country now?’



Queries for many other matters such as-process of sending to and bringing from home, opening hours of embassies, solution for problems faced during online visa renewal, validity of air tickets of flights that had been cancelled for the pandemic- were seen in the Facebook groups/pages.

**The “most talked about’ posts:**

From the following diagram we can see, the most engaged posts were about **desire to return home**. This was followed by engagements of posts related **food, money and jobs**. The third most talked about issue **expiry of visas**, received highest numbers of posts.

### 3 most talked about posts by migrants



Figure 7: Total engagements and posts on each issues