

Exploring the challenges faced by Kurdish migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Background

With the outbreak of Covid-19, migrant workers have faced new and intensified problems. The present qualitative study aims to explore the challenges faced by Kurdish migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methods

Applying a qualitative approach, we conducted 29 semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with Kurdish migrant workers who had temporarily migrated to Iraqi Kurdistan to find work. Inductive qualitative content analysis was employed to converge and compare themes in participant data.

Results

The following five main themes emerged from the analysis: sociocultural challenges, economic challenges, psychological challenges, job challenges, and individual challenges. The findings revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on the physical, financial, psychological, and social well-being of migrant workers.

Conclusions

This study emphasizes the importance of support measures for migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, including insurance coverage and the provision of health services, such as access to vaccinations and border health screening, as well as the development of socio-economic support, the legislation of labor laws, and the obligation of employers to create a safe workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

It has been documented that 3.3% of the world's population lives outside their home country, and half of these people are estimated to be migrant workers [1]. A significant proportion of these people are low- or semi-skilled workers who live under conditions of social overcrowding and substandard hygiene [2]. Covid-19 has highlighted the vulnerability of migrant workers as an occupational group, because they often work in unsafe conditions, have less income, work longer hours, experience cultural and language barriers, and are not included in public protection programs [3, 4]. Millions of low-skilled migrant workers live in unhygienic housing conditions where social distancing is difficult to practice [2]. During a pandemic, these housing sites could contribute to spreading infection among workers. In light of the current Covid-19 pandemic, migrant workers are now exposed to the virus and its complications. There

have been numerous reports of person-to-person transmission of Covid-19 among residents of a house [5]. Alahmed et al. have shown that environmental factors such as small rooms, group living, and poor or no ventilation increase Covid-19 outbreaks among migrant workers [6]. Also, people living in areas with high outdoor air pollution levels were shown to be at a higher risk of dying from Covid-19 [7]. In addition, migrant workers encounter more barriers in accessing health services and receiving social support in host regions [8, 9]. The psychological vulnerability of migrant workers during the Covid-19 epidemic has also been reported [10, 11].

Kurdistan is a province located in the west of Iran with a population of 1,493,645. The unemployment rate in Kurdistan is 12.2%. During the Covid-19 pandemic, most Kurdish workers lost their jobs. High rates of unemployment have caused Kurdistan's people to migrate to other cities or to Iraqi Kurdistan to find a job and meet living expenses. According to the latest statistics, about 35,000 Iranian migrant workers work in Iraq. Most of them migrate to Iraq from the western provinces, specifically from the city of Marivan [12]. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has the lowest poverty rate in the country, and its strong economy has attracted around 20,000 workers from other parts of Iraq [13].

It seems that with the outbreak of Covid-19, the problems of these workers have increased. To the best of our knowledge, no study has focused on the challenges faced by Kurdish migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. To fill this gap in the existing literature, the present qualitative study aims to explore these challenges.

Methods

Study design

This study used an explorative qualitative approach that seeks to provide information as a narrative of previous procedures and experiences. From September to October 2021, we conducted 29 in-depth qualitative interviews with Kurdish migrant workers who were temporarily migrating to Iraqi Kurdistan to find work. The participants were selected from among the workers referred to the health center of Marivan to get a PCR test. One of the most important routes for Kurdish workers leaving the country is the Bashmaq border. This route is located in the city of Marivan. Workers must also have a negative PCR test to enter Iraq. This test is performed in the central laboratory of the Marivan Health Center, where workers were invited to participate in the study. The objectives of the study were explained, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To gain rich and varied data, we applied a purposive sampling technique so that participants with varying socioeconomic backgrounds, age groups, and job statuses would be represented in the study. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached. An institutional review board of the Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences approved this study [IR.MUK.REC.1400.001].

Data collection

Data were collected using in-depth interviews. The principal investigator supervised all interviews. To accumulate more detailed information, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with

participants. The interviewer followed a guide that aimed to encourage participants to explore and discuss their views and experiences regarding the challenges of Kurdish migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview guide was developed based on the literature and piloted with two interviews. The interview guide included (1) the demographic characteristics of the participant and (2) the socio-economic, cultural, individual, environmental, and psychological challenges of Kurdish migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. We prepared a compensatory package, including a small gift and a health package containing a disinfectant solution and a mask, which was given to the workers after the interview to thank them. We focused on each of the expressed experiences of work in Iraq during the Covid-19 pandemic in the responses to the following open-ended and non-directive questions: "What problems did you experience in finding a job during the pandemic? What problems did you experience during the Covid-19 pandemic in Iraq? What problems did you experience in the workplace when following health protocols? What is your employer's opinion regarding adherence to Covid-19 health protocols in the workplace? Would you please explain further?" After each question, participants were encouraged to elaborate on what they had said. Participants were told that they could end the interview at any time. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 min. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and then transcribed by the researchers.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed with MAXQDA software using Graneheim and Lundman's method. A qualitative content analysis with a conventional approach was applied to the information gained from the semi-structured interviews in order to detect the semantic units. Immediately after the interviews, the recorded interviews were typewritten. Transcriptions were analyzed and coded so that the next interviews were directed by information obtained from the previous interviews. The following steps were applied for qualitative data analysis. First, the transcripts were read and reread by the researchers, and then important quotes were highlighted. Next, meaning units were produced from the statements. In order to elicit primary codes, a comparative analysis was applied. Finally, themes and subthemes were constructed based on the codes with similar meaning.

Results

In total, 29 Kurdish migrant workers took part in the study. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, with an average of 52.64 minutes. Data analysis was performed based on the content analysis method using MAXQDA software. Participants' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. Overall, five major themes emerged from the analysis: sociocultural challenges, economic challenges, psychological challenges, job challenges, and individual challenges. More information on themes and categories can be found in Table 2. In the following sections, we describe participants' experiences.

Table 1
 Socio demographic characteristics of
 participants (n = 29)

	Number (n = 29)	Percentage
Age group		
≤30	13	44.8
31–40	13	44.8
≥41	3	0.1
Education		
No diploma	11	37.9
Diploma	15	51.7
Post-diploma	3	0.1
Marital status		
Single	14	48.2
Married	15	51.7
Total	29	100

Table 2
Main themes and categories

Themes	Categories
Sociocultural challenges	<i>Disbelief in the Covid-19 pandemic</i> <i>Strict bureaucracy for issuing work permits</i> <i>Closure of the border</i> <i>Ignoring the Covid-19 pandemic</i> <i>Discrimination</i>
Economic challenges	<i>Closure of jobs</i>
Psychological challenges	<i>Cost of protection equipment</i>
Job challenges	<i>Low wages</i>
Individual challenges	<i>Lack of economic support</i> <i>Fear of closing the border</i> <i>Fear of losing job</i> <i>Depression</i> <i>Closing of work project</i> <i>Not following health protocols in workplace</i> <i>Losing job</i> <i>Working under duress</i>

Sociocultural Challenges

According to interviewees, cultural and social issues during the pandemic have had an adverse effect on migrant workers. Disbelief in the Covid-19 pandemic, tighter restrictions on issuing work permits, closure of the border, ignoring the pandemic, and discrimination were all challenges brought on or intensified by the pandemic.

Disbelief in the Covid-19 pandemic

Most workers stated that their employers did not believe in the Covid-19 pandemic, so they did not take special care in the workplace to prevent it. One worker said, "The employer did not believe in corona at all ... he swears several times every day that the corona is a lie and is man-made" (Participant 1; 30 years old, married).

Another worker said, “My boss says that if it’s time for us to die, we will die. He knew there was an epidemic ... but he was careless and denied it. And they said that only God can destroy man” (Participant 9, 32 years old, single).

In addition to denying the nature of Covid-19, employers did not trust the Covid-19 morbidity and mortality statistics. As one worker expressed, “My boss said that if the corona death rate was as high as the government announced, the population of the Kurdistan Region would have to be significantly reduced” (Participant 5, 35 years old, married).

Tighter restrictions on issuing work permits

From the perspective of the participants in this study, the process of acquiring work permits during the pandemic has become difficult and complicated. Some workers expressed dissatisfaction in this regard: “In the past, we used to go to Iraq easily with passports. But now a governor’s letter is needed ... to be issued [a work permit], we have to have a negative corona test and we have to have been injected with the vaccine” (Participant 5, 35 years old, married).

Ignoring the Covid-19 pandemic

Another problem for workers during the pandemic has been the failure of the populace to follow health protocols in the Kurdistan Region. This has raised concerns among workers about the possibility of others transmitting the disease to them. One worker said, “They had no adherence to hygienic principles. Very few wore masks. They always denied the corona ... They believed that life and death are in the hands of God. They did not believe in hygiene)Participant 8, 35 years old, married).

Another worker said, “When we wore a mask, our employer told us not to wear a mask, because customers would think you had corona and would no longer eat here” (Participant 6, 34 years old, married).

Stigma and discrimination

It seems that ignoring Covid-19 is so common among the people of the Kurdistan Region that most people did not follow health protocols.

“In the Kurdistan Region, those who wear masks are immediately identified, by the mask, as Iranian” (Participant 10, 39 years old, married).

Employers’ discriminatory behavior towards Iranian workers was another issue raised by the participants in this study “The employers were looking for an excuse to fire us, because many of the natives were unemployed because of the corona. It was a really difficult situation” (Participant 1, 30 years old, married).

Another worker said, “We went to do projects in people’s house,since covid was very common in iran, I heard people say ‘Iranians do not come to work on our house” (Participant 14/0, 31 years old, married).

Economic challenges

One of the elicited themes in the current study was the economic challenges, including four different categories, namely, closure of jobs, low wages, lack of economic support, and cost of protective equipment.

Closure of jobs

During the closure of jobs coinciding with the quarantine, migrant workers became practically unemployed, and a lot of economic pressure was imposed on them. One of the participants mentioned, "In Iran, I lost my job because of the corona. We ran out of money and got stuck. We could not even pay the rent. The landlord was pressuring me" (Participant 8, 35 years old, married).

Another worker stated, "Corona caused us to lose our work. We were in quarantine for about six months in the Kurdistan Region. There was no work or business (Participant 11, 37 years old, married).

Another offered, "On the day the quarantine was announced in the Kurdistan Region, the shops were closed altogether, and after a week, it was extended for another week. The same process continued for about 45 days") Participant 4, 31 years old, married).

Cost of protective equipment

The high cost of disinfectants and masks is another problem for migrant workers, who work for low wages. Employers do not take any responsibility for the provision of this equipment, and workers are forced to provide it at their own expense. However, according to labor law, employers are required to provide a healthy work environment, especially during the corona pandemic. One worker said, "In Iraq, the price of a bottle of disinfectant is 7,000 dinars that is so expensive for me"

Another worker expressed, "The employer bought us masks and disinfectants, but he reduced my salaries" (Participant 17, 33 years old, married).

Low wages

Another challenge for workers during the pandemic is their low wages. The workers believed that because the employers were aware of their dire need for work, they offered lower wages, which they would be forced to accept.

"They abused us. They said they were Iranians and because they knew their money was valuable, they paid us little. Because our work in Iran was closed, we had to accept") Participant 4, 31 years old, single).

Lack of economic support

During the pandemic, a lot of economic pressure was imposed on migrant workers, but labor organizations did not provide much support. Based on the experiences of the participants in this study, employers did not take special measures to protect their workers, either. Workers who became unemployed as a result of Covid-19 have no rights.

Another participant stated, “We were unemployed for a while because of the border, which was closed for eight months in the first year and for six months in the second year. Every time we cross the Bashmak border, we pay just for the corona test, which is very expensive.”

Psychological challenges

Many of the workers interviewed believed that Covid-19 had had significantly influenced their psychological condition. This theme includes four categories, namely, depression, danger due to border closures, fear of losing a job, and fear of corona. One of the interviewees commented:

Depression

Quarantine conditions can cause psychological effects, such as depression and anxiety. This is exacerbated by the distance of migrant workers from their families and loneliness. One worker said, “It has depressed us. You cannot go anywhere. It is really very difficult. All these people have to go to a psychiatrist; they are all depressed” (Participant 9, 31 years old, single).

Danger due to border closures

If a worker is forced to work in another country, closing the border could lead to unemployment. According to the study participants, when the border was closed, the workers sometimes tried to cross the border illegally, which poses many dangers for them. One worker said, “Because we are right next to the border checkpoint, sometimes they see us, and there is a danger of shooting. Sometimes we hidden for two hours because the police towers were watching us with their cameras” (Participant 3, 21 years old, single).

Fear of corona

Corona came, the quarantine began, the borders were closed. It was really scary, because you could not see anyone in any way, even if you were in your own city; parties were forbidden. They were all mentally involved.

Fear of losing job

The fear of losing a job is ever-present for migrant workers, but it has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This is partly due to quarantine conditions. One worker said, “One of my colleagues only coughed a little, he did not have a cold at all, and the employer fired him” (Participant10, 39 years old, married).

Job challenges

One of the most important problems facing migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic relates to work and the workplace. The following are the concepts extracted for the theme of job challenges: closing work projects and not following health protocols in the workplace.

Closing work projects

One interviewee commented, "One of the problems was the closure of the guilds, and we had a supermarket and goods with an expiration date, so we worked secretly. We were afraid of being arrested by the security forces" (Participant 2, 29 years old, single).

Another worker said, "Many contracts were canceled; many places were closed down altogether. It really affected our work."

Not following health protocols in the workplace

"It bothers me when I wear a mask over my mouth. My co-workers did not understand what I was talking about, so I had to shout so that they would understand what I was saying"

Individual challenges

From the interviewees' point of view, another theme of the challenges of Kurdish migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic is that of individual challenges. Concepts extracted from the interviews were divided into the conceptual categories of forced labor in Iraq and job loss.

Forced labor in Iraq

One of the interviewees commented, "Later, I was forced to go to Iraq and start working. This was compulsion. We do not stay and work by choice or at our pleasure." (Participant 21, 28 years old, single).

Job loss

"I was working as a restaurant worker in Marivan. When the epidemic started, I lost my job and came to Iraq because of the cost of living" (Participant 17, 37 years old, married).

Discussions

In this study, it was found that workers often migrate to the Kurdistan Region due to unemployment and difficult economic conditions, as well as the higher value of the Iraqi dinar compared with the Iranian currency. These people often have difficult jobs. These findings are consistent with other evidence that migrant workers are employed in jobs with unsafe and temporary working conditions and at lower wages than most citizens of their host societies [14]. Covid-19 has exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities by affecting people living and working in poor conditions and poverty. These effects are influenced by a wide range of factors, such as living and working conditions, disregard for cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and access to labor rights [15]. Therefore, migrant workers of any type, whether legal or illegal, are at a greater risk of being negatively affected by Covid-19 [16]. In addition, the use of sick-leave benefits as one of the natural rights of these workers is ignored [17]. Those working in the informal economy may lack legal protection and adequate information about their rights, which makes them vulnerable to abuse by employers and authorities [18]. Participants in the study also stated that if they had Covid-19 and needed to rest, they would have to take unpaid sick leave, and the employer would not be responsible for them due to the lack of protection laws for migrant workers.

Migrant workers are also vulnerable to the consequences of measures against Covid-19, such as travel restrictions, border regulations, and quarantines [14]. In this study, workers were forced to renew their work permits at the end of each month in Iraq. Sometimes it was not possible for them to travel due to quarantines and border closures; thus, there was a risk of losing their jobs or encountering legal problems [16].

Other challenges that migrant workers described in this study were the inability to comply with health protocols and social distancing due to working in environments lacking health protection, as well as living in crowded housing provided by the employer in which accessing health facilities, such as water, soap, disinfectant, or personal protective equipment, is difficult. These findings are similar to those of other studies in this field [19, 20]. Legal status is a determining factor in access to affordable and adequate health services for immigrants [21].

Another problem for migrant workers is the prevalence of psychological disorders. Migrant workers are more likely to suffer from mental disorders, such as depression and stress. These conditions have worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic due to fear of illness, quarantine, and lack of income. The stress of losing one's job or being deported from one's host country has other negative consequences for the mental health of workers. Psychological disorders are also exacerbated by financial problems, especially for workers who are unemployed due to quarantines or are unable to send money to their families. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a series of negative cognitive reactions and chronic psychological manifestations, such as depression, anxiety, and panic disorder (Qiu et al., 2020; Tandon, 2020).

The participants reported experiencing depression and fear of illness during the pandemic. Immigrant workers are vulnerable to various physical and psychological conditions due to social-cultural, administrative, and linguistic barriers [22]. They have faced even greater social isolation and mental health challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic [11]. Because most male migrant workers do not live with their family members, their loneliness predisposes them to psychological problems, such as depression (Zhou et al., 2020).

Quarantines have been a problem for these workers, because in quarantine conditions, in addition to closing the workplace (creating a risk of dismissal and unemployment), the borders are closed, which makes travel difficult. Most of these workers do not have a legal employment contract, and their employment rights will be violated if they are fired.

All participants in this study pointed to economic problems caused by job loss or wage cuts. This was probably due to the lack of skill of these workers and their employment in service jobs. In the pandemic, workers who have temporary contracts and whose work is not of a teleworking nature are at a greater risk of losing their jobs [23]. Workers working in key sectors are less likely to lose their jobs. Migrant workers are vulnerable due to their poor socio-economic conditions and because they often work without an employment contract or under non-standard contracts.

Participants in the study reported that they did not have health insurance and that they would have to bear the heavy medical costs themselves if they contracted Covid-19 in Iraq. The International Labor Organization reports that 81 percent of the world's workforce is affected by quarantine measures; 61% of these workers are from the informal sector, and social protection measures are often inadequate; they frequently lack access to health and economic support [24].

The workers sometimes expressed that they feared they would be fired if they get Covid-19, and this made them feel stigmatized; thus, they hid their disease. Stigma can increase the isolation of these groups and prevent them from reporting symptoms, receiving testing, and seeking medical care [14]. Fear of the Covid-19 pandemic should not be used as a tool to impose repressive policies against migrant workers [14].

The workers also reported that there was no sensitivity to the outbreak in the Kurdistan Region. It is essential that the information required be made available in a simple and accessible manner to all, especially migrant workers living and working in social isolation.

One of the limitations of this study is its generalizability. This study was conducted with workers who migrated from the Bashmak border to Iraqi Kurdistan and may not reflect the experiences of all Kurdish migrant workers. The closure of the border due to quarantine temporarily restricted access to migrant workers.

Conclusion

This study showed that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on the physical, financial, psychological, and social well-being of migrant workers. Migrant workers face a wide range of challenges, such as the risks of Covid-19, job insecurity, psychological distress, and discrimination. This study emphasizes the importance of support measures for migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, including insurance coverage and the provision of health services, such as access to vaccinations and border health screening, as well as the development of socio-economic support, the legislation of labor laws, and the obligation of employers to create a safe workplace during the pandemic.

Declarations

Availability of data and materials

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

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest for this study.

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Contributions

TP and MKH contributed to the framework and design of this study. AB provided assistance in data collection, analysis and drafted the manuscript. KP and PT helped to complete the modification of the manuscript. All authors contributed significant intellectual content in this study and approved the final submission.

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Ethics declarations

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Competing interests

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