



Queen Mary
University of London

Remitting Through Crisis:

Experiences Of Migrant And Diaspora
Communities In The UK



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Contents

Introduction	4
Continuities, Changes And Emphasis On Responding To Need	5
Factors Underpinning Capacity To Remit During The Pandemic	7
Remittances And Well-Being: From Meaning And Connection To Pressure And Anxiety	8
Lessons Learned & Policy Implications	9

Introduction

Given the importance of migrants' remittances in many parts of the world, recent global challenges raise the question: what happens when people are squeezed at both ends? As the world confronts on-going climate, conflict and cost-of-living problems, what can we learn from the pandemic period about people's remittance practices through times of crisis? A lot of emphasis is placed on analysis of official remittance data and the importance of migrants' remittances in countries of origin. Less attention has been given to the experiences and practices of the migrant communities sending these funds.¹

This briefing summarises relevant findings from the UKRI-ESRC funded project *Connecting During Covid: Practices of care, remittance sending and digitisation among UK communities*. The research focused on the Brazilian, Indian and Somali diasporas, to explore pandemic experiences and remittance practices among groups with diverse characteristics and distinct histories of migration to the UK. An online survey, publicised through community organisations and social media platforms, collected 356 responses about livelihoods and remittance practices in 2019 and 2020. This was supplemented by a smaller follow-up survey with 55 responses at the end of 2021. While not representative, the survey data allows us to explore how a cross-section of key characteristics (age, gender, economic situation) connect with remittance practices. In addition, 76 qualitative interviews were conducted with people from relevant backgrounds and some remittance intermediaries in London, Glasgow and Cardiff. This was complemented by focus group discussions with Somali community members in Cardiff and five workshops with community, policy and industry representatives. This briefing sets out findings regarding remittance dynamics, capacities and migrants' well-being.²

¹ Ratha, Dilip, Eung Ju Kim, Sonia Plaza, and Ganesh Seshan (2021). 'Migration and Development Brief 34. Resilience: Covid-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens.' Washington DC: KNOMAD - World Bank. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO.

² As shorthand in this briefing we use Brazilian, Indian and Somali to refer to all participants including small numbers who have family heritage but were born in the UK. People's personal identifications is a more complex question.

Continuities, Changes And Emphasis On Responding To Need

Remittances were defined, for the purpose of the survey, as money sent to family and friends abroad for their use. While many remittance surveys focus on people who are sending remittances, this was not a requirement for our study. In fact, Table 1 shows that a (slim) majority of the survey sample did not send money. They did not have family or friends abroad whom they felt they should be supporting, or they did not have the capacity to do so.³ This points to the importance of understanding limits on the motivations and capacities of UK residents as regards remittances.

The proportion of survey respondents who sent remittances was nevertheless significant, although varying by community, with Somalis considerably more likely to be sending remittances, as shown in Table 1. In line with evidence that women are generally over-represented in part-time, low-paid and precarious jobs, women survey respondents were somewhat less likely than men to remit and on average sent around 60% of the amount men were remitting.⁴ Alongside other research, this flags that the quite common perception that women are somehow ‘better’ remitters, needs careful unpacking.⁵

The likelihood of survey respondents sending remittances increased in 2020, particularly for Brazilian and Somali respondents. However, average (mean) remittance amounts decreased, by nearly a quarter for Brazilian and Indian remitters, and somewhat less for

Somali remitters. As a result, aggregated volumes that the UK residents surveyed across these communities reported remitting did not change dramatically between 2019 and 2020. Focusing specifically on the small sample of 61 respondents who completed the follow up survey, the same pattern holds into 2021, i.e. increases in likelihood of remitting and reductions in average transfers. This points to a certain amount of continuity, but at community level, more than at individual level.



Photo: Gabriela Loureiro

Table 1. Remittance practices

Family background	2019 % remitting	Average remittance	2020 % remitting	Average remittance
All groups	39%	£2549	47%	£1994
Brazilian	27%	£1918	39%	£1470
Indian	29%	£3843	30%	£2772
Somali	59%	£2347	70%	£2025

³ See also Omar Khan and Alita Nandi (2012), ‘Understanding Remittances in Understanding Society: Quantifying Ties Overseas and Ties to Britain’ in Stephanie McFall (ed) Understanding Society: Findings 2012. Colchester: Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex.

⁴ All our participants identified themselves as either male or female.

⁵ See UN Women (2020) Migrant women and remittances. New York: UN Women; Russell King and Julie Vullnetari (2010) Gender and Remittances in Albania: Why ‘Are Women Better Remitters than Men is not the Right Question. Sussex Centre for Migration Research Working Paper No 58. Falmer: University of Sussex.

Beyond money remitted to family and friends for their use, transfers for savings, investment and loan repayments, although often large, were much less common. By contrast, many people donated money for charitable/community initiatives, albeit much smaller average amounts. In the Indian community numbers of people engaged in charitable/community initiatives exceeded numbers of people remitting to family/friends. The salience of remittances underlines the family-based and needs-driven nature of transfer activity by UK residents. As news of the severity of the pandemic reached UK residents through a surge of transnational digital communications, around half the survey respondents concluded that the needs of family/friends abroad increased in 2020. People who were already remitting money on a regular basis felt more acutely people's reliance on their support, particularly elderly parents. Economic upheavals abroad also meant that people were being contacted by new people in need, and were supporting more basic needs than previously.



**‘We always paid the bills at my mother’s house because she is retired and she can barely survive with her pension. If we don’t help there’s no way.’
(Brazilian woman, 30s)**

**‘This thing [remittances] is really a livelihood... it is a lifeline for so many people, for their education... some of them, their rent if they rent a place, for their health – medical things and all this and it’s really something, you know, they live on it.’
(Somali man, 60s)**

**‘People who had never asked for help before. They wouldn’t ask if they didn’t have to, all these years they’ve never really asked. You feel that if you can, then yes, it’s your duty to help.’
(Indian woman, 60s)**

Factors Underpinning Capacity To Remit During The Pandemic

Large-scale returns of migrant workers (for example, from the Middle East to India) have had an impact on remittance flows in various parts of the world.⁶ But in the UK, many migrants managed to maintain access to work or other forms of emergency support and preferred to stay put rather than return to countries also under pressure.⁷ Moreover, many people we surveyed who were remitting were settled many years in the UK, and still active remitters – indeed length of residence did not correlate with significant patterns in terms of likelihood of sending remittances or amounts sent.

Sustaining employment was key to economic capacities to remit. Around a quarter of respondents were key workers, and there were some others who had relatively secure jobs and continued to work throughout the pandemic. Some people were able to send more as their expenditure reduced during lockdowns, or when their holiday plans abroad were thwarted. 15% received some help in 2020 via government-financed furlough and 6% through self-employment support, which they contrasted with the limited government support for people affected by the pandemic in Brazil and India and lack of a public safety net in Somalia.

At the same time, around half the survey respondents experienced reductions in both individual work earnings and overall household income.⁸ A third of survey participants struggled to cover essential costs such as food, energy and housing during 2020 (24% of Brazilians, 35% of Indians, and 43% of Somalis). Some of these had no government support due to their precarious immigration status or work situation. Many people were obliged to be creative and adaptive in terms of work: second jobs and side hustles were particularly prominent



Photo: Gabriela Loureiro

in Brazilian accounts of how they coped. Despite this, it was not just the better-off remitting. Similar levels of income reduction and struggles with essentials cost were reported among senders and non-senders in 2020, although of the senders, people who were struggling sent less on average.

Non-work strategies to maintain remitting included being very thrifty, keeping a close eye on exchange rates and transfer fees, drawing on savings, borrowing, or mobilizing the rest of the family network to assist. The latter was particularly common among Somali participants who were often members of large and widely dispersed extended families.

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**‘I started to discover other talents I had but didn’t know I had! I discovered that I could wash the dishes very well [laughs], I knew how to paint walls... I worked in constructions, restaurants, and then I found the motorbike... could pay my bills.’
(Brazilian man, 30s)**

**‘I stopped [remitting] because my financial situation changed, there was no money. I was using all my money on gas and electricity bills.’
(Somali man, 50s)**

⁶ Jones, Katharine, Sanushka Mudaliar, and Nicola Piper. 2021. ‘Locked down and in Limbo: The Global Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Worker Rights’. Geneva: International Labour Office.

⁷ As also noted in the US, see Manuel Orozco and Kathryn Klaas (2021) ‘A Commitment to Family: Remittances and the Covid-19 Pandemic’. Washington DC: Inter-American Dialogue.

⁸ See also Fernández-Reino, Mariña and Cinzia Rienzo (2022) ‘Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview’ Migration Observatory Briefing, Oxford: University of Oxford.

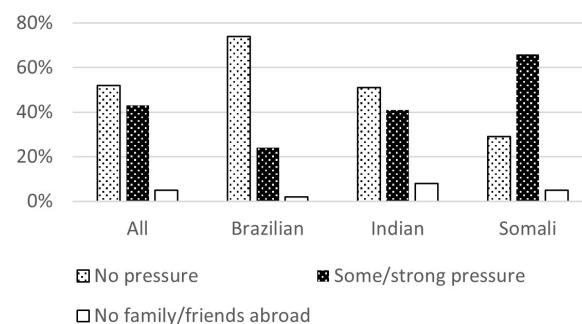
Remittances And Well-Being: From Meaning And Connection To Pressure And Anxiety

When well-being is discussed in relation to remittances, the focus tends to be on improvements in the well-being of recipients, rather than senders. But it is clear that many people derived a real sense of meaning and connection from being able to send money: a sense of paying back, or paying forwards, and a strengthening of family feeling. This was accentuated by the limitations on the possibility of physical visits and concerning reports of the unfolding situation in countries of origin.

Experience of pressure to send varied by community, as shown in Figure 1, being most salient among Somali survey respondents, reinforcing the idea that disparities in income and security between countries are an important driver of remittances. Some people also experienced significant stress around remitting – whether because they were struggling to send, or feeling shame that they could not. A Somali community organization noted that the interruption of people’s ability to send money to Somalia was ‘a very big feature in the anxiety landscape’, amongst all the other challenges Somalis in the UK were facing during the first UK lockdown.⁹

Communication around these issues was complex. There was often intensive contact between people in the UK and abroad, and mutual emotional support and understanding. But some UK residents hid their difficulties to avoid troubling family members. Often participants felt that people abroad had a romanticised image of life in the UK. All this points to the importance of factoring migrants’ well-being into discussions of remittance flows.

Figure 1 Pressure to support family/friends abroad



‘All this time... I never had a chance to pay back... For years I studied, I ate, I stayed, I lived with their money... when I got chance to send back home money, I was quite happy.’ (Indian man, 20s)

‘It modifies the type of relationship. It creates dependency, you feel guilty and responsible... to realise that someone who I always relied on [now has] to be dependent of me was a big emotional shock.’ (Brazilian man, 40s)

‘There is a lot of pressure because the money cannot reach all your family members...’ (Somali survey participant)



‘I just buried it all in my mind and didn’t share this with my family.... my wife [is] a fragile character and she will panic. It was easier to send money by borrowing rather than telling them about the tough living conditions in the UK for undocumented people.’ (Indian man, 30s)

‘Trying to explain to people, you know, nothing’s working here... the rate of everybody dying of Covid is getting high... People were losing their jobs, there’s less hours... trying to explain to our families who we were helping out, it was quite hard, very hard, they were not understanding.’ (Somali woman, 40s)

⁹Anti-Tribalism Movement (2020) ‘Covid-19: Impact on Remittances from the UK to Somalia’ Briefing for UK Government. London: Anti-Tribalism Movement.

Lessons Learned & Policy Implications

Given the array of political, environmental and economic challenges confronting the world today, and the on-going prominence of global migration, what lessons can be learned from remittance practices during the pandemic?

Remittances kept moving through the crisis: it is clear that UK residents responded to escalating needs in countries of origin or heritage, and there was evidence of community-level stability in terms of remitting to family and friends for their use. Capacities to remit were underpinned by various factors, including migrant embeddedness and determination to adapt, stability in some jobs, and government supports for some. But there is also precarity: as the pandemic and lockdowns reduced incomes, many people experienced serious stress, struggling to send money, or being unable to send money. As families, communities and countries around the world grapple with the cost-of-living, on-going conflict, and climate change, these points are pertinent to any policy interventions targeting remittances.

1. It is clear that while migrant creativity and adaptation abounds, supporting UK residents' livelihoods and rights is vital to maintaining remittances. As with the pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis is hitting both the capacities of migrants in the UK to remit, and increasing prices and needs in their countries of origin, squeezing people at both ends.¹⁰ While the emphasis has been on keeping remittances flowing, more attention needs to be paid to what underpins remittances, particularly migrants' access to work and economic supports through times of crisis. The predominantly domestic, inward-looking nature of the conversation about cost-of-living in the UK would benefit from being broadened to consider how it connects, through migration, to wider transnational dynamics.
2. Efforts to leverage diaspora contributions for development in origin communities need to take account of diaspora concerns and issues. It is clear that remittances, alongside diaspora charity and investments, can contribute to livelihoods and well-being in significant ways. Most recently, the Somali diaspora is once again mobilizing support for communities affected by recurrent droughts.¹¹ But there are a range of challenges in major countries of emigration that act as key drivers of migration, and cannot be 'fixed' by diaspora money. These transfers are embedded in close human relationships and wider global structural inequalities that limit their susceptibility to policy influence. Successful initiatives will pay close attention not only to the need for and deployment of cash, but also to the motivation, capacities and welfare of those providing it.

For more information on the study, see:

<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/geog/research/researchprojects/connecting-during-covid/cdc-project/>

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¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-63237965>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-64037860>

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