

## Effects Of Covid-19 Pandemia On Returning Uzbek Migrants And Families

S. O. Toshboev<sup>1</sup> , A. Haydarov<sup>2</sup> , G. S. Isamuxamedova<sup>3</sup> , Z. A. Kadirova<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Head of the Tashkent Office of the International Organization for Migration,

<sup>2</sup>Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Doctor of Political Science, Professor,

<sup>3</sup>Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, lecturer

<sup>4</sup>Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Ph.D

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**Abstract** This research article focuses on the experience of the target group of returning Uzbek migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on the livelihoods of migrants, as well as their plans for the future.

**Keywords:** labor migration, Uzbek migrants, returning migrants, pandemic, Covid-19, remittances, migrants' rights.

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### INTRODUCTION

An estimated 2.6-3 million Uzbek citizens, or up to 20 percent of labour force, were believe to be working abroad in 2019<sup>1</sup>. About 2 million of them are in Russia where Uzbekistan is considered to be the largest supplier of foreign labour. Other key destinations include Kazakhstan, South Korea, Turkey, and UAE. Most of migrant workers are engaged in low paid jobs in construction, catering, retail, home care and other services. These fields were among mostly adversely affected industries. According to Erkin Mukhitdinov, the First Deputy Minister of Employment and Labour Relations, about 490 thousand migrants returned to Uzbekistan in 2020 due to pandemic<sup>2</sup>.

The following are types of problems faced by labour migrants faced during pandemic:

- Job losses and or decline in income
- Lack of access to medical care or medicine

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<sup>1</sup> <https://review.uz/post/chislo-trudoviyx-migrantov-iz-uzbekistana-sostavlyaet-26-millionov-chelovek>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/moscow/news/WCMS\\_747272/lang--ru/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/moscow/news/WCMS_747272/lang--ru/index.htm)

- Poverty and indebtedness
- Border passing
- Post-return adaptation and employment
- Mental well being

To understand and assess the impact of COVID-19 on Uzbek labour migrants a survey was initiated which targeted the returned migrants in selected regions. The survey was carried out in home country by NGOs and comprised of a set of standard questions with multiple choice answers. The survey tried to address numerous challenges which migrants had to overcome during the pandemic, including pre and post return home.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Focus group selected for the survey comprised of a total of 508 migrants who returned to Uzbekistan during 2020 and almost evenly represent the following five districts: Andijan, Bukhara, Kashkadarya, Fergana, and Surkhandarya.

56 percent of respondents are men and 44 percent are women. 76 percent of men and 71 percent of females are married. Only 17 percent of all respondents are not married.

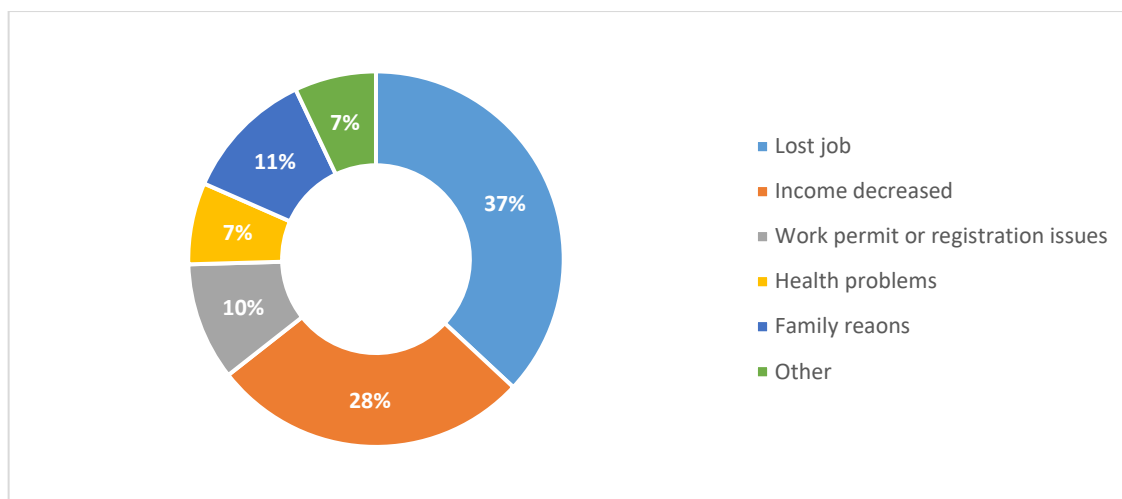
Main destination country of returning migrants is Russia. 82 percent of male and 79 percent of female migrants returned from Russia followed by Kazakhstan where 10 percent and 7 percent of females had worked. For female respondents second popular destination after Russia is Turkey with 8 percent of respondents.

Average number of children in families of returning migrant is 1.83, with respondents from Kashkadarya having 2 and respondents from Fergana having 1.6 children per family on average.

## RESULTS

Major problems affecting labour migrants include job losses or decrease in wages. As per the responses from the focus group, 69 percent male and 59 percent female respondents named loss of job or decline in income as the primary reason for returning home. Additionally, family related issues caused 11 percent and legal issues related to work permit or registration caused 10 percent of returns.

### Graph 1. Reasons for returning home

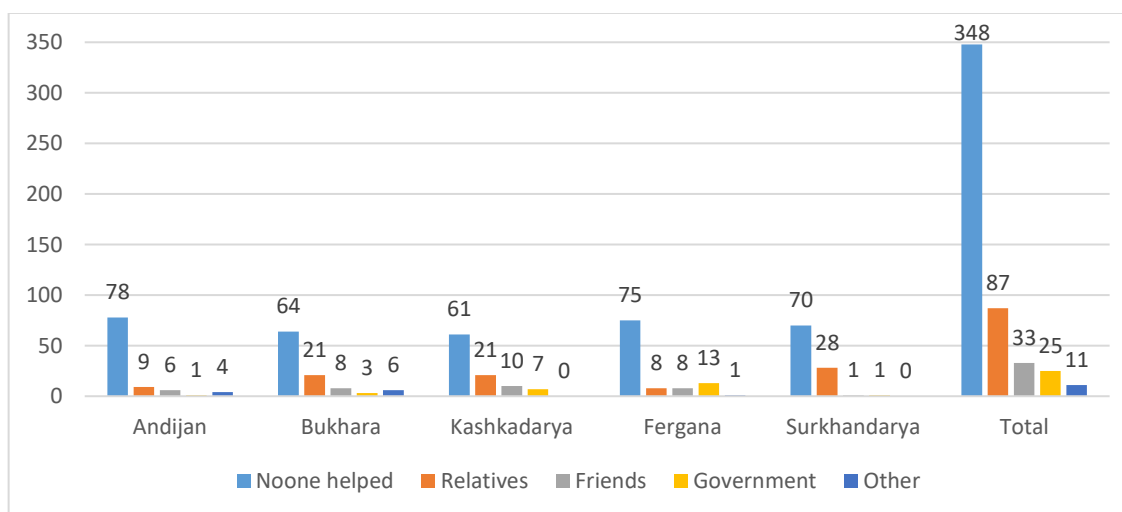


A separate question on how COVID-19 pandemic impacted migrants' employment, 66 percent of male respondents and 64 percent of female respondents named loss of job or decline in income as the main outcome.

Although not prevailing, discrimination based on race, religion, culture and other in recipient country was noted by 15 male and 11 female respondents.

Unlike male, female respondents relied on relatives more to return home. 35 percent of females relied on help, mainly from relatives, to return home compared to 27 percent of male. When the borders were closed, the only way for migrants to return home was using charter flights or trains trip agreed upon between governments. However, migrants had to pay for the cost of travel and often the cost was stated to be higher than prior to pandemic rates.

**Graph 2. Help received to return home**



The number of charter flights initiated by the government were not sufficient to accommodate large number of migrants willing to return home. By late spring when some restrictions were lift off in Russia,

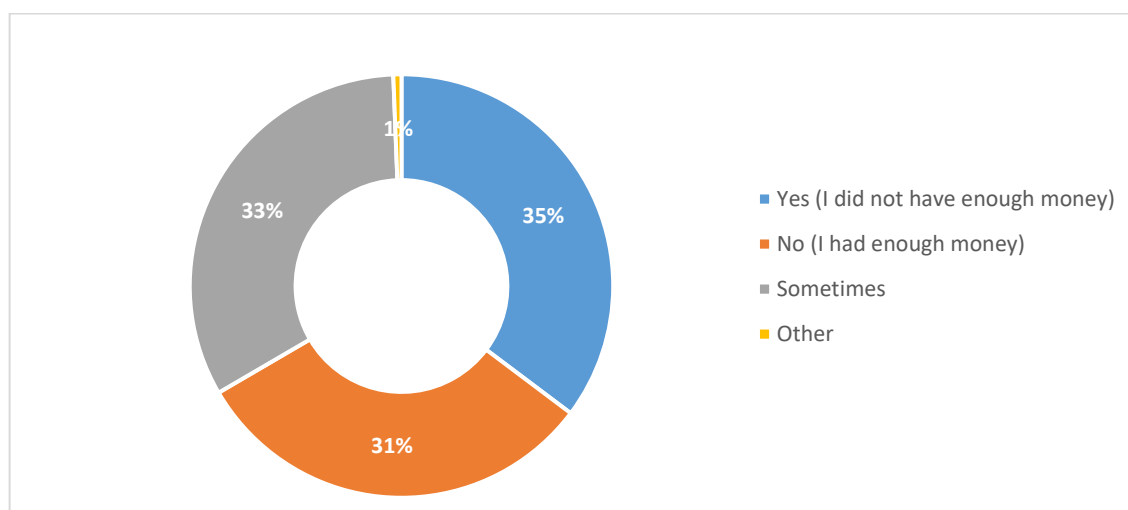
desperate migrants gathered near checkpoints at Russia-Kazakhstan border. Thousands of migrant stayed in camps exposed to cold and heat waiting to be pass through. The government arranged for transportation of Uzbek migrants by bus and train on numerous occasions. However, people had to endure days or weeks until governments could agree on special transit when borders were closed.

Money remittances sent by migrants generate a sizable inflow of foreign exchange into the country and serve as the key source of income for their families back home. In 2019 total amount of official remittances sent to Uzbekistan reached \$6 billionn which accounted for over 10 percent of country's GDP<sup>3</sup>.

28 percent of respondents in the focus group confirmed reduction in remittances sent to their families during pandemic, whereas 55 percent mentioned that remittances did not decline. Around 13 percent of respondents, however, do not transfer money home.

Some migrants who lost their job or faced with other financial distress, faced difficulties in buying even basic necessities which includes groceries or hygiene products. After returning home, among respondents in the focus group, 35 percent did not have enough money and 33 percent faced temporary shortages in buying basic necessities

**Graph 3. Faced with financial difficulties in buying basic necessities after returning home**

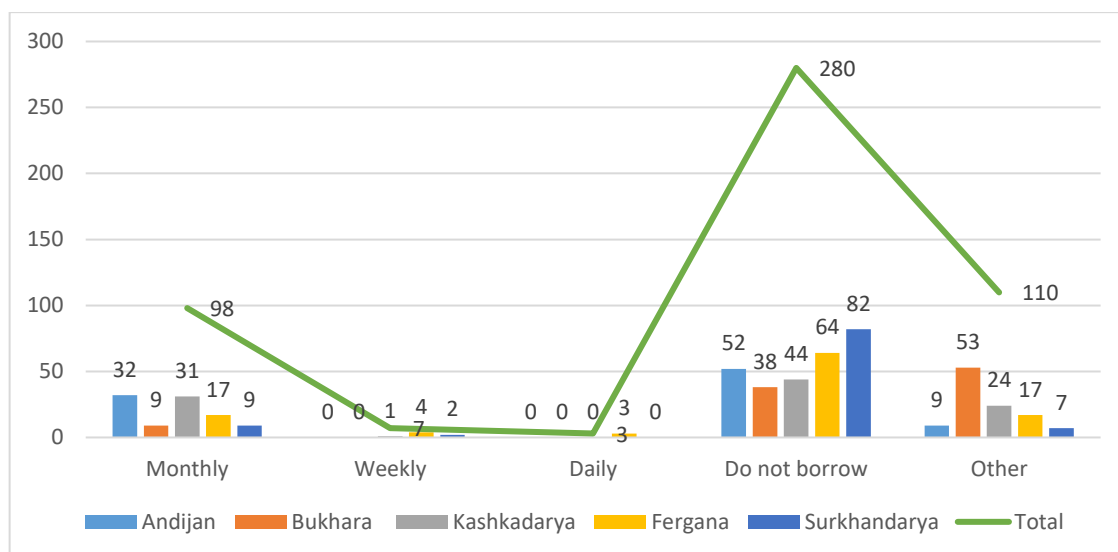


Returning migrants generally avoid borrowing money. 72 percent of responents stated that they do not borrow money, while other 28 percent borrow regularly. Preference to not to borrow is about the same for both female and male respondents. Not availability of sources for borrowing could partly explain the low percentage of migrants who borrow.

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<sup>3</sup> Central Bank of Uzbekistan

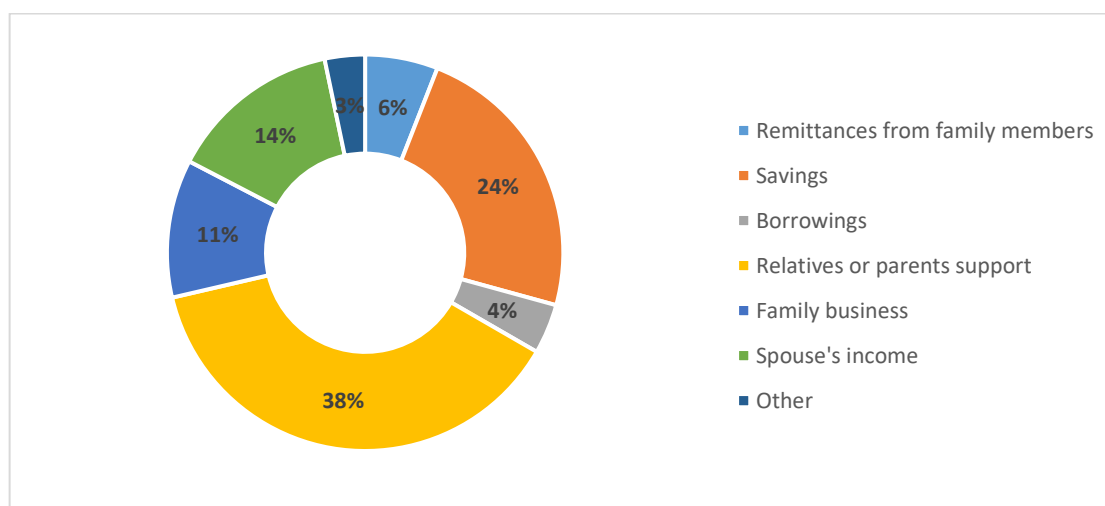
**Graph 4. Frequency of borrowing money**



Among those who regularly borrow, 72% percent borrow less than 500 thousand soums (about \$50) in a month. At the same time, 67 percent of migrants mentioned that their monthly expenses exceed monthly income.

To cover their living expenses returning migrants rely on a number of sources. While mostly unemployed, respondents point at family support and savings as primary means to meet the ends. Savings accounted for 23 percent and borrowings for a mere 4 percent, whereas the rest is linked to family support.

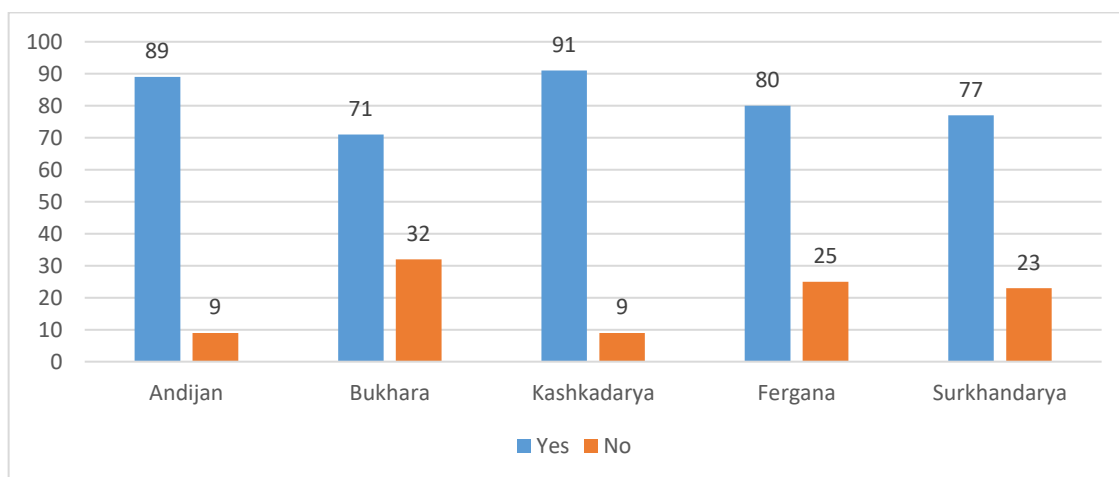
**Graph 5. Source of money to cover expenses after returning home**



Returning migrants have difficulties in adaptation which could include both economic and social issues. 78 percent of respondents stated that they do not have a job at present, while another 11 percent are working unofficially.

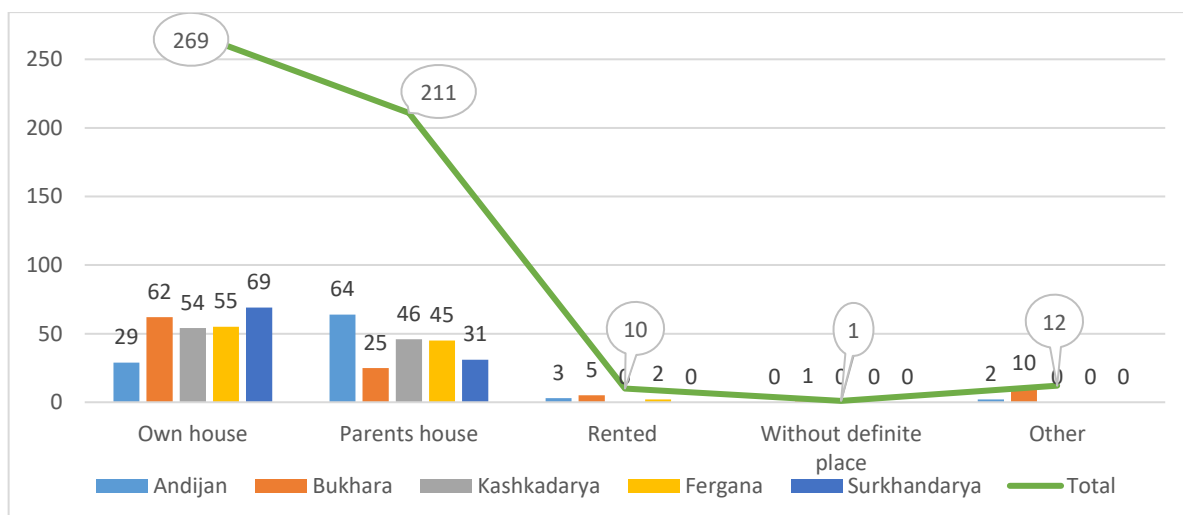
Migrants in Andijan and Kashqadaryya are among the least fortunate in finding jobs with 87 and 85 percent respectively being unemployed. However, 81 percent of respondents are looking for a job, either because they are unemployed or unsatisfied at current place. Difficulty in finding jobs seems more serious in Andijan and Kashkadaryo regions.

**Graph 6. Respondents looking for a job currently**



On the positive side, 95 percent of returning migrants either live in their own home or in parental home whereas only 2 percent rent their current home. Being able to live either in own house or with parents significantly relieves the migrant families from incurring expenses for rental. Additionally, 77 percent of respondents consider their living conditions (including the size of their home, security, cleanliness and neighbourhood) as average and only 10 percent consider as poor or very poor. More positive or optimistic were respondents from Surkhandarya where only 3 percent of respondents consider their living standards as poor or very poor versus the highest of 16 percent unsatisfied recorded among respondents from Fergana region.

**Graph 7. Current place of staying in home country**



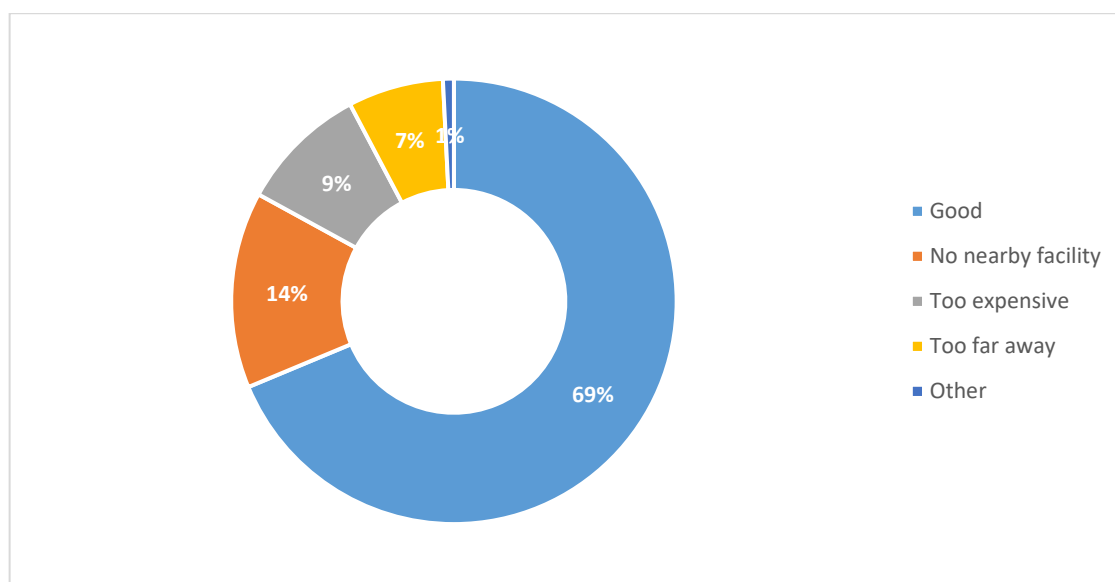
Another important positive aspect is that 99 percent of all returning migrants have at least one piece of identification document. Moreover, perceptions of the current security among returning migrants, that is being free from persecution and violence, is strongly positive. 90 percent of respondents stated that they feel secure and 7 percent feel neutral. Only 2 percent feel insecure most of the time. The picture is stable for both sexes and accross all 5 regions.

Adaptation to a family after returning home is generally stable. 74 percent of respondents did not experience any form of conflicts or stress in their familiy. This is truer for men with 79 percent compared to women with 67 percent being free from conflicts in their families. 11 percent of repondents experienced some form of conflict once or twice a month, with women being exposed more than men – 11 percent of women versus 5 percent of men.

Experiencing job losses and forced return home due to COVID-10 pandemic was not left traceless on the state of migrants' heath. Among the respondents, 23 percent confirmed to having experienced some form of phsycological problems after returning home.

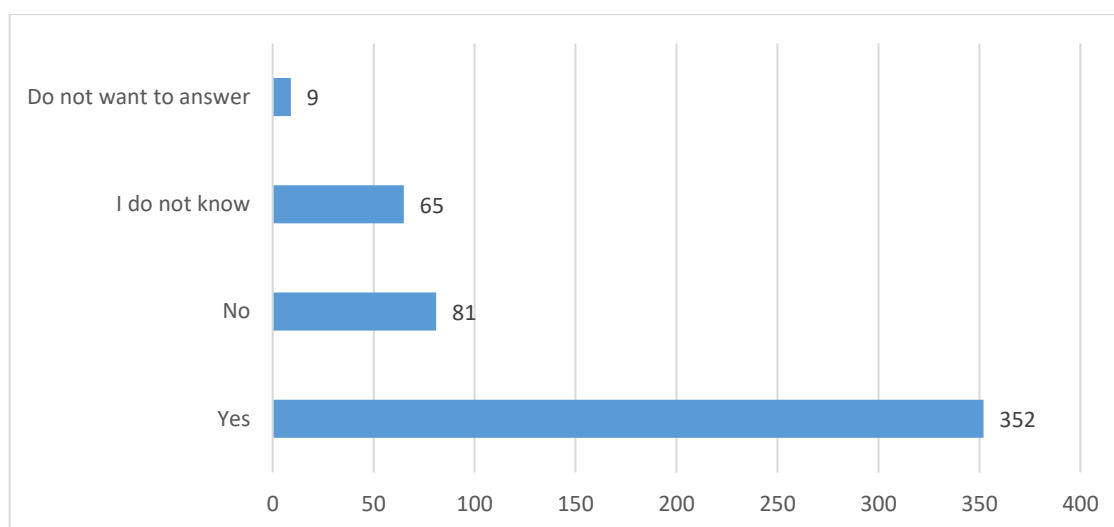
Dificultiy of accessing health care services during pandemic was stated by 31 percent of returning migrants and it was mainly due to proximity issues of clinics. Remaining 69 percent considered health care accessibility as reasonable.

**Graph 8. Accessibility of health care facilities**



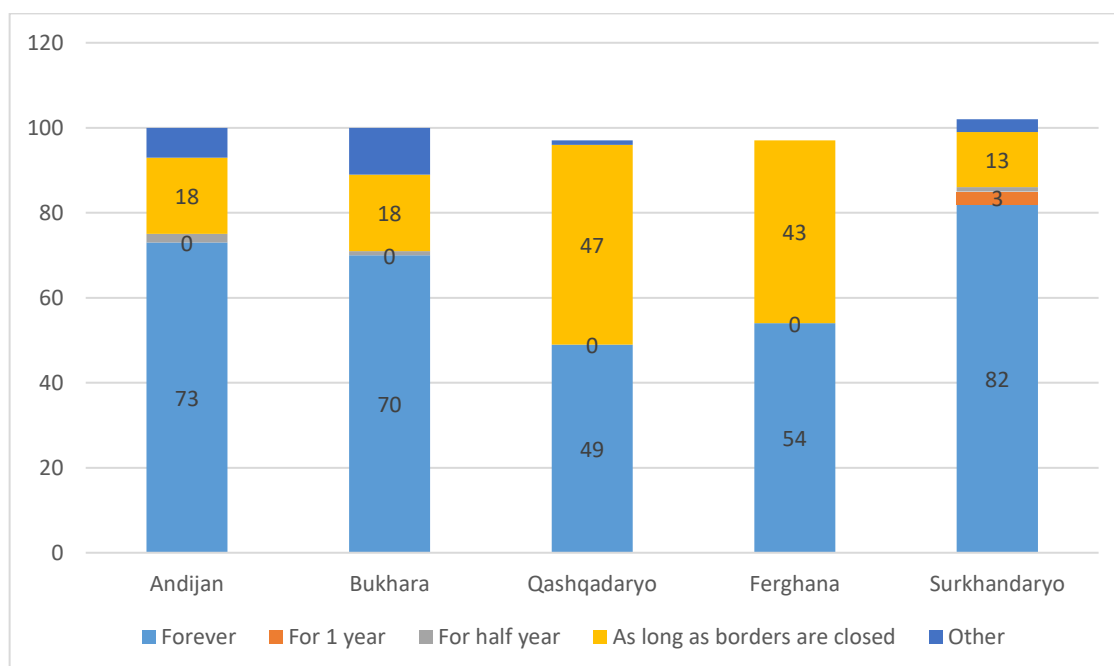
In general, returning migrants are positive about staying home with 69 percent believing they can stay and only 16 not believing they can stay home. Interestingly, only 1 percent of respondents from Kashkadarya do want to stay home, versus 36 percent of respondents from Fergana.

**Graph 9. Plans to stay or leave home country**



Among migrants who preferred to stay home, 66 percent of both females and male respondents stated that they would not leave home anymore. At the same time 28 percent of male and 29 percent of female migrants would stay home as long as the borders are closed. Remaining respondents have plans to stay for a while or unsure how long to stay. Determination not to leave home anymore was stronger among respondents from Surkhondaryo with 82 percent of migrants and lowest for Kashkadarya with 49 percent respondents planning not to leave home anymore.

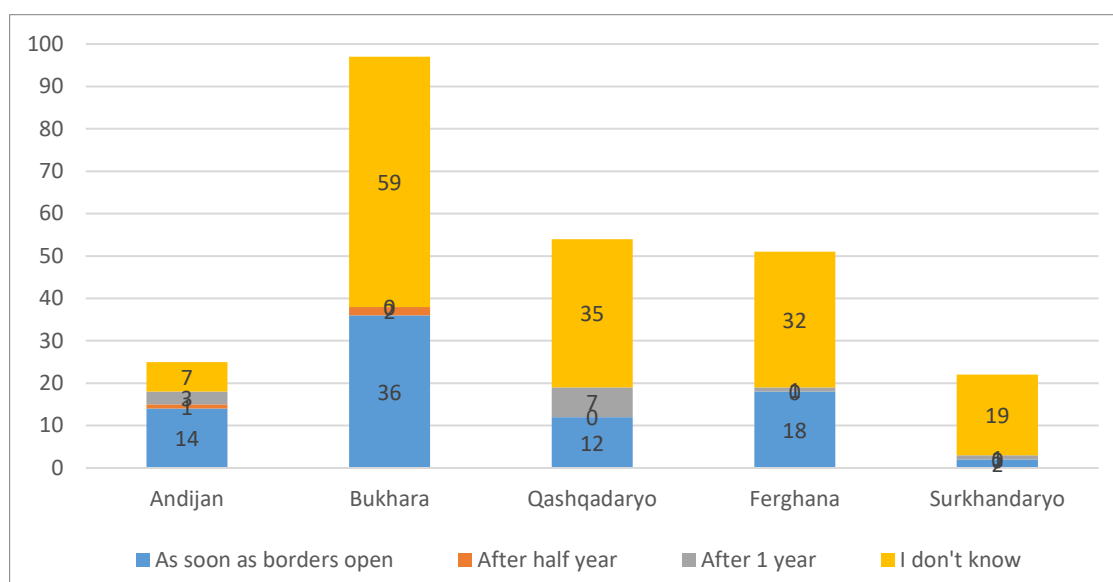
**Graph 10. Length of estimated stay at home**





Among the migrants who are planning to leave home, 61 percent are unsure about timing, and 33 percent are going to leave after borders open. Determination to leave home right after the borders are open is stronger among male respondents, i.e. 38 percent versus 28 percent for female.

**Graph 11. Timing of the next labour migration**



## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 pandemic underlined the vulnerability of migrants whose rights are not well protected and often abused. Additional challenges emerged due to sudden loss of jobs and travel bans. Current situation reiterates the need for more support to migrants when they are abroad and for reintegration when they are back home.

Responses from migrants indicate that usually abuse of their rights stem from not being a custodian of own passports, working illegally, or being unaware and unprepared for challenges. On one hand, greater awareness and information dissemination among especially rural population could help them be more prepared. On the other hand, government and non-government institutions could play a greater role in protecting the rights of migrants when they face a problem.

Based on the results of survey results and in-depth interviews a number of recommendations can be made:

### Protection and support migrants:

- Consulates of Uzbekistan in key recipient countries could make migrant counselling more accessible in different geographical locations by using internet or communication technologies. For example, helplines created throughout Russia could help migrants reach out for necessary assistance or guidance be it medical, legal, or others. NGOs could help by creating a wider geographical reach.

- Intergovernmental agreements, especially with Russia and Kazakhstan, should address the issues of modern day slavery and abuses of migrants' rights.
- Consulates of Uzbekistan across the world should make the process of reissuance of identification documents easier and quicker to help migrants who lost possession of their passports.
- Applying other forms of protection of migrants' safety and health including emergency health insurance and return tickets. While migrants do not always have cash to spend, some services can be provided on credit terms.

#### **Entrepreneurship, jobs and investments:**

- Incentives such as free training, tax breaks, and loan subsidies can encourage more migrants and their families to invest remittances received towards family owned businesses.
- Seasonal migrants are potential traders as they travel back and forth frequently. Incentivising small trade without customs duties to and from destination country will create extra income to the migrants and help them become entrepreneurs.
- Removing restrictions on working or residing within Uzbekistan for its citizens could increase mobility of workers within the country and provide an alternative of going abroad.
- Uzbek diaspora money could also be attracted into the capital markets and specifically to privatisation of state entities in Uzbekistan. By being allowed to participate in the investment activity of strategic entities in Uzbekistan, migrants will maintain the bond with their home country and build investment capital.

#### **Education of migrants:**

- Obtaining higher education for many in rural areas remain a key challenge due to its high tuition and opportunity cost. Government may consider providing more scholarships to study at public universities for students from the least fortunate districts.
- Free courses on learning basic Russian, understanding the legal aspects of working in Russia, and other important types of training tailored for migrants can be offered online or offline with the help of local NGOs.