



**REGIONAL OVERVIEW:  
SURVEY ON THE SOCIOECONOMIC  
EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON RETURNEES  
AND STRANDED MIGRANTS IN CENTRAL  
ASIA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION**

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)  
MARCH 2021

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This report is part of the outputs under the project "Mitigating the effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on migrants and their families from Central Asia" produced with the financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. The report was written by Vittorio Bruni. Further editorial support was provided by IOM's Global DTM Support Team.

Publisher: International Organization for Migration – IOM  
Regional Office for South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia  
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This publication has been published without formal editing by IOM.

Cover photo: archive of the IOM, © IOM 2021

Suggested citation: Bruni V., 2021. Regional Overview: Survey on the Socioeconomic Effects of COVID-19 on Returnees and Stranded Migrants in Central Asia and the Russian Federation. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Kazakhstan.

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## REGIONAL OVERVIEW: SURVEY ON THE SOCIOECONOMIC EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON RETURNEES AND STRANDED MIGRANTS IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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# PART ONE

# GENERAL OVERVIEW



# 1.1 Introduction

The Central Asian region and the Russian Federation are characterized by large regional, circular labour migration flows. With Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation acting as migration catalysts and attracting migrants from neighbouring States such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, international migration has always been crucial for many families in the region. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues across the world, the governments of Central Asia and the Russian Federation have adopted early measures, seeking to curb the spread of, and improve preparedness for COVID-19. To reduce the impact of the pandemic, the governments imposed travel restrictions as soon as the first COVID-19 cases were confirmed. The result of these policies on international migrants have been two-fold. On the one hand, hundreds of thousands of migrants have been stranded abroad and were uncertain about their future, while on the other hand, a number of migrants managed to return to their home countries, but are now unable to migrate again. Many of those who returned and those who were unable to return continue facing significant challenges and, in most cases, they are not covered by State social protection systems. Given the importance of remittances as a share of GDP in many countries of origin, it is perhaps unsurprising that not only migrants but also their communities of origin have been affected by negative spillover effects of the COVID-19 crisis, and by interrupted international labour migration flows. The COVID-19 emergency is exacerbating all pre-existing migrants' vulnerabilities, which can intersect with other factors such as gender, age and disability, and is also limiting options for international migration.

Due to the absence of data relative to this unprecedented situation, IOM decided to improve understanding of the migration dynamics and COVID-19 impacts on migrants and communities in Central Asia and the Russian Federation by collecting evidence and data through the IOM Displacement/Mobility Tracking (DTM) Mechanism. A regional survey exercise was launched to gather more information on sociodemographic profile, migration trajectory (reasons for migration and reasons for return), remittances behaviour, employment situation, and COVID-19 impacts and needs of stranded migrants and returnees. Specifically, this research project targeted stranded migrants in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, and returnees in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Its aim is to provide evidence to improve protection of vulnerable migrants and ensure their access to basic services, and increase financial inclusion and digital remittance transfer by Central Asian migrants to build resilience and enhance the development value of remaining remittance flows in the countries of origin.

In December 2020, under this project, a total of 3,390 respondents further divided into stranded migrants (1,648) or returnees (1,742),\* were surveyed in Kazakhstan (748), Kyrgyzstan (885), Tajikistan (857), and the Russian Federation (900). These population groups were interviewed with two different survey tools, adapted to the country context and tailored to the target population to capture the most accurate information possible for both target groups. As a result, this regional overview was published to compare trends and findings between different countries.

The findings of this study can be used as a basis to identify new migration patterns, common challenges and vulnerabilities, and better inform policymakers working on international migration challenges. Cross-country comparisons can help in identifying regional trends and needs and provide regional answers to safe and orderly management of international migration. In addition, this study, which was done shortly after the COVID-19 outbreak, can be used as a baseline for the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 on migrants and their families in Central Asia and the Russian Federation, and, at a later stage, to measure how the situation has evolved, and whether or not migration policies will have provided the desired outcomes.

\* The operational definitions of stranded migrants and returnees can be found in page 5.

# 1.2 Executive Summary

This executive summary will follow the structure of the survey tools used to execute this study. Under each thematic area there are two paragraphs, the first refers to the returnee population, and the second one to the stranded migrant population. The only exception is the section on remittances, which was asked only to stranded migrants.

## Sociodemographic profile

The returnee population was mostly composed of young, married males aged between 25 and 29 years old. Around 3 in 4 returnees reported having children who, in most cases, were living with them in the country of return. The majority of the sample population completed secondary education or higher, while the share of respondents with no education was close to 0 per cent. Around 1 in 3 respondents had previous migration experience, and the most common country of destination was the Russian Federation.

The stranded migrant population was mostly composed of young, married males aged between 26 and 34 years old in the Russian Federation, and between 35 and 44 years old in Kazakhstan. The majority of the sample population completed secondary education or higher, while the share of respondents with no education was less than 1 per cent. Most stranded migrants came from Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

## Migration trajectory

When looking at the reasons for migration of the returnee population, the data analysis indicated that economic related factors were the most common ones. Low wages, lack of work, and finding employment were the most commonly cited reasons for migration. Considering the reasons for selecting a specific destination country, the data illustrates that availability of jobs, higher salaries, and the ways in which migrants are treated, as the most important factors that influenced this decision. The main reasons for return were job loss, family pressure to return, and COVID-19 related reasons, either linked to document status or to economic factors. Roughly 1 in 2 participants reported facing return related challenges, which were primarily linked to the difficulty of finding a job or migrating again.

The analysis of stranded migrants data highlighted that the main reasons for migration were of an economic nature, with the desire to make money, low wages, lack of work, and finding employment being the most common reasons for migration. Considering the reasons for selecting a specific destination country, the data on stranded migrants in Kazakhstan illustrates that previous work experience there, geographical proximity, and higher salaries were the most important factors that influenced this decision. When asked about their migration journey, the data shows that over half of the sample population used savings to finance their migration journey, and below 4 in 10 participants had to borrow money in order to pay for their migration journey.

## Employment situation

The data analysis indicates that the unemployment rate amongst returnees was considerably higher when they were in their home countries as compared to when they were abroad. The unemployment rate during migration and before the COVID-19 pandemic was 2 per cent. However, the unemployment rate of the returnee population in their home countries tripled between pre- and post- COVID-19 outbreak, from 17 per cent to 62 per cent, respectively. Even when currently employed, around one in two returnees reported earning less as compared to the period before the COVID-19 outbreak. One out of three returnees who were unemployed at the time of the assessment reported being in employment before the outbreak of COVID-19. The majority of them, when asked why they were currently unemployed, mentioned COVID-19 related reasons.



High competition between graduates, low education level and lack of opportunities due to COVID-19 were mentioned as the main barriers to employment. Regardless of the migration stage, around one in two respondents was working in the informal sector, and this share was generally higher for male respondents as compared to females. When looking at the sectors of employment, the data indicates a strong gender dimension to the labour market, with male and female respondents generally working in very different sectors. Male respondents were more likely than females to be employed in construction, transportation and storage, and agriculture. Females were more commonly employed in hotels and accommodation, and wholesale and retail trade.

COVID-19 had significant impacts on the employment situation of stranded migrants as well. At the time of the assessment, 1 in 3 individuals interviewed in Kazakhstan were unemployed, and this represents a two-fold increase as compared to the situation before migration. Even when employed, more than 1 in 2 stranded migrants were earning less now as compared to the period prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. When looking at the share of respondents working in the informal sector, it was found that this share was around 50 per cent. Sectors of employment before and during migration were similar, and most respondents were employed in construction, wholesale and retail trade, hotels and accommodation, and other services and activities. Similar to the returnee respondents, a nuanced gender dimension to the labour market was found, with very different employment sectors for female and male respondents.

### Remittances

More than 6 in 10 stranded migrants were sending remittances to their home country, and in most cases, remittances were sent on a monthly basis. The share of individuals sending remittances was much higher amongst stranded migrants living in the Russian Federation as compared to those living in Kazakhstan. In addition, while no differences between sexes were noticed between male and female respondents in the Russian Federation, females were less likely than males in Kazakhstan to be sending remittances. By far, the main reason for sending remittances was to support family and friends. The most common remittance sending mechanisms used were bank or money transfer operator offices, or banks and money transfer operators' apps or websites, and this was true for both female and male respondents. The data analysis indicated that COVID-19 severely impacted the sum of remittances sent by survey participants. During the lockdown in the Russian Federation, 2 in 5 respondents had to stop sending remittances, and this disproportionately impacted female respondents, who were more likely than males to be working in sectors strongly impacted by the current pandemic such as hotels and accommodation, or wholesale and retail trade. In Kazakhstan, 3 in 5 individuals had to reduce or completely stop remittance sending due to COVID-19.

### COVID-19 impacts and vulnerabilities

More than half of the interviewed returnees reported that over past three months their income was insufficient to provide for their family's basic needs, which are here defined as housing, food, health care and education. A similar share of respondents over the past three months had to borrow money to cover monthly expenses. The data analysis also indicates that, to different extents, and over the past three months, around 9 in 10 respondents had to reduce the quality and quantity of food they consume. When looking at the changes in the financial situation of returnees since the COVID-19 outbreak, the data indicates that 8 in 10 respondents sustained either a partial income loss, a total income loss or indebtedness. Respondents with debts, less income or no income were asked why the lack of jobs followed by low wages and not receiving remittances were reported as the main reasons for the deterioration of the financial situation since the outbreak of the pandemic. Looking at COVID-19 vulnerabilities, access to face masks and hand sanitizers were reported as problematic. The data indicates a need for COVID-19 information materials to be distributed by official sources.

In total, around 7 in 10 stranded migrants reported that their financial situation deteriorated due to COVID-19, and COVID-19 overall impacts appeared to be more significant in Kazakhstan as compared to the Russian Federation. In Kazakhstan, the deterioration of the financial situation was reflected by a total or partial income loss, debts, and by 24 per cent of the sample being without income or with an income insufficient to cover basic needs. This share was 3 per cent amongst stranded migrants in the Russian Federation. Almost 7 in 10 respondents reported facing COVID-19 related challenges at the time of the assessment. The most reported problems were insufficient income, salary reduction, unemployment, debts, mental stress, and the desire to leave but being unable to do so. In Kazakhstan, 70 per cent of the respondents reported that they started to face problems only after the outbreak of COVID-19. In terms of COVID-19 prevention, it was found that most stranded migrants find COVID-19 related information in the internet, social media, or messaging apps, and this should be considered when developing information campaigns. When looking at COVID-19 needs, the data indicates that access to hand sanitizers and information should be prioritized.

# 1.3 Methodology

This research study is based upon a quantitative survey methodology and analyses data collected during December 2020 in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and the Russian Federation. The methodology used for this study builds upon the survey tool of the DTM toolbox, and was developed at the regional level to enable comparisons between focus countries.

Two tools with a variety of close-ended questions divided in thematic areas were developed for this study. These tools, targeting stranded migrants in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, and returnees in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, were then adapted by national researchers to adequately fit the local context.

**Table 1 – DTM Survey Tools**

Focus countries	Target population	Definitions
Kazakhstan, Russian Federation	Stranded migrants	Any person who 1) was identified as migrant (has a different citizenship from the one of the countries of analysis), 2) is currently located in any of 12 regions of Kazakhstan, or in Moscow, St. Petersburg, or Yekaterinburg, in the Russian Federation, 3) has been in the country of analysis for over 1 month at the time of assessment, 4) has the intention to return to his/her country of origin, but is unable to do so.
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Returnees	Any person who 1) is a citizen of the country of analysis, 2) returned to the country of analysis after living for at least 3 consecutive months in a third country, 3) returned to the country of analysis during or after March 2020.

The total sample of this study consists of 3,390 respondents that were further divided into stranded migrants (1,648)\* and returnees (1,742). Out of the total sample, 748 respondents were surveyed in Kazakhstan, 885 in Kyrgyzstan, 857 in Tajikistan, and 900 in the Russian Federation. After data cleaning, a total of 157 interviews were removed, and the sample size used for this analysis totaled 3,233. Most removed observations were due to an interviewee not being part of the target population. The number of surveys used for this study by country was 659 for Kazakhstan, 772 for Kyrgyzstan, 842 for Tajikistan, and 900 for the Russian Federation. As aforementioned, respondents were interviewed by using two different survey tools divided in various thematic areas. An overview of the survey tools can be found below.

**Table 2 – Thematic Areas**

Focus countries				
Sociodemographic profile	Migration trajectory	Remittances	Employment situation	COVID-19 impacts and vulnerabilities
Focus countries				
Sociodemographic profile	Reasons for migration	Reasons for return	Employment situation	COVID-19 impacts and vulnerabilities

\* Note that due to the sample design, all stranded migrants interviewed in the Russian Federation were employed at the time of the assessment, while this was not a criterion for the sample drawn in Kazakhstan.

## Displacement Tracking Matrix

The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) is a set of tools and methodologies, which enable systematic and regular primary data collection, analysis of population movements, human mobility and forced migration (both internal and cross-border). DTM was first conceptualized in 2004, and it has since been adapted for implementation in over 70 countries, including many countries in Europe and Asia, such as Ukraine, Turkey, the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Mongolia. In 2017 alone, DTM tracked over 30 million individuals (internally displaced persons, returnees and migrants) across a broad range of contexts. DTM operations are collaborative exercises. IOM engages with national authorities and humanitarian partners to ensure wide coverage and access, as well as the usefulness and relevance of data and trust in the results. Although originally designed to serve the humanitarian community during crises, DTM has been increasingly implemented in non-crisis situations. Similar to the labour migration context in Central Asia and the Russian Federation, DTM has in some cases been used not only as a tool to track the movements of a displaced population, but also to receive better and more detailed information on mobile populations. The activity that was implemented under this study is called a “survey”, which is a component of the DTM Toolbox designed to adequately track the profiles, needs and vulnerabilities of mobile populations.

## Geographical location coverage

This assessment covers the situation of stranded migrants in Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, and of returnees in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. For feasibility reasons related to limited time, human and financial resources, this assessment adopted another geographical focus depending on the country of analysis.

In Kazakhstan, all 14 regions of the country were included in this study, and the sample was stratified across the whole country to provide a more holistic overview.

In the Russian Federation, the study focused on three key cities of interest, which were selected due to particular relevance in terms of regional migration trends. Interviews were carried in the cities of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg.

In Kyrgyzstan, the geographical scope of this assessment was limited to some settlements in the cities of Bishkek and Osh, which are the two largest cities and economic centers of the country. Both cities are surrounded by a number of informal settlements characterized by a difficult economic situation and critical livelihood conditions. Since there was no data on the population living in these settlements, 16 settlements in Bishkek city, and 13 settlements in Osh city were randomly selected for this assessment.

In Tajikistan, the sample population was stratified across all four regions of the country. The geographical scope is therefore country-wide and can provide a general overview of the situation of returnees throughout Tajikistan.

The different geographical scopes of these studies should be considered with particular care when reading the data analysis of this report. The information provided for the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan, in fact only reflects the situation of some cities or settlements of these countries, rather than a country-level overview.

## Data collection implementation

All data was collected by a total of 66 enumerators directly trained by the IOM lead researcher in two separate 16 hours workshop events each. In addition, all enumerators received on the job training and detailed one-on-one feedback by IOM national researchers for the entire duration of data collection. In the Russian Federation data was collected by using paper forms. Instead, in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the survey data was collected using the KoboCollect application installed on tablets. The KoboCollect application automatically uploads completed surveys online. This makes it easier to monitor daily data entries and target compliances. Data was closely monitored by the national researchers and the international researcher both during and after data collection to ensure the highest possible data quality.



## Sample size

As outlined in the previous section, the study focuses on two target populations: stranded migrants, who at the time of the assessment were stuck in Kazakhstan or the Russian Federation, and returnees, who came back to Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan after March 2020. In Tajikistan, the sample size was calculated by using the 2019 government data on returnees, and the sample was stratified by sex and location, accordingly. Instead, to calculate the sample size for Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan, a proxy of 100,000 individuals was used due to the absence of data on the populations of interest. This approach is commonly adopted when dealing with unknown populations, and it was selected for this study as well. The formula to calculate the sample size is not directly proportional to the size of the real population, and when the real population is above 100,000 individuals, differences in the sample size are almost negligible. For instance, by holding the confidence level and the margin of error constant at 95 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively, the difference in sample sizes between a real population of 1 million and 100,000 individuals is just 1 person. For each country of analysis, the overall sample population of this study is representative of the real population with a 99 per cent confidence level and 5 per cent margin of error.

## Data limitations

The data presented in this study should not be considered as representative of all stranded migrants living in Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, nor of all returnees living in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The limited geographical scope of the assessments run in the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan constrains any generalization beyond the geographical boundaries of the cities or settlements that were assessed. In addition, since the number and location of the target population was unknown in all contexts, a non-probabilistic sampling method was selected. As such, internal and external validity of this study are limited, and generalization of findings should be avoided.

Another limitation of this study, which is often found in quantitative research, is the difficulty of complex trends' in-depth analysis. By using close-ended questions, it is difficult to draw conclusions on the reasons why complex or unusual trends emerging from the data analysis were observed. As such, additional analysis or literature review can support to unpack some of the results of this assessment.



PART TWO

RETURNEES



# 2.1 Data Analysis

During December 2020, IOM DTM teams in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan collected a total of 1,709 surveys (852 in Kyrgyzstan, 857 in Tajikistan), using a survey tool developed at the regional level to interview returnees. After data cleaning, a total of 80 interviews for Kyrgyzstan and 15 interviews for Tajikistan were deleted, due to the observations not being part of the target population. This resulted in a new sample size of 1,614 returnees, of whom 772 were interviewed in Kyrgyzstan and 842 in Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, respondents were stratified by sex and location by using 2019 government data on returnees. Geographically, the assessment in Tajikistan is countrywide, and covers all regions of the country. In Kyrgyzstan, due to the absence of data and other limitations, the geographical coverage of the assessment was limited to Bishkek and Osh city.

Map 1 – Locations of Data Collection

Kyrgyzstan – Bishkek and Osh city



Tajikistan – Countrywide



These maps are for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on these maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

## Thematic Area 1 – Sociodemographic profile

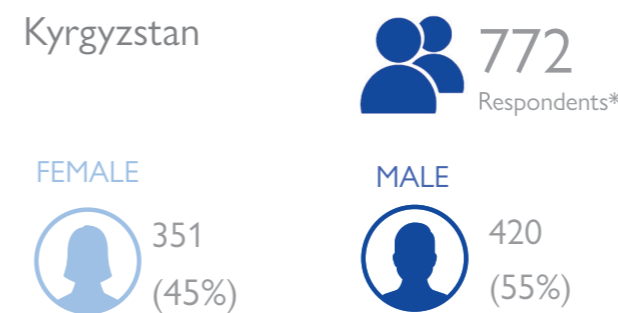
The returnee population was mostly composed of young, married males between 25 and 29 years old. Around 3 in 4 returnees reported having children whom, in most cases, were living with them in the country of return. Females were more likely than males to have children. In terms of education level, the majority of the sample population have completed secondary education or higher, while the share of respondents with no education was close to 0 per cent. In around 90 per cent of the cases, the length of migration was between 1 and 3 years, with negligible differences between countries of analysis. Around 1 in 3 respondents had previous migration experience, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the most common migration country was the Russian Federation. Having previous migration experience was more common amongst male than female respondents.

### Sociodemographic profiles

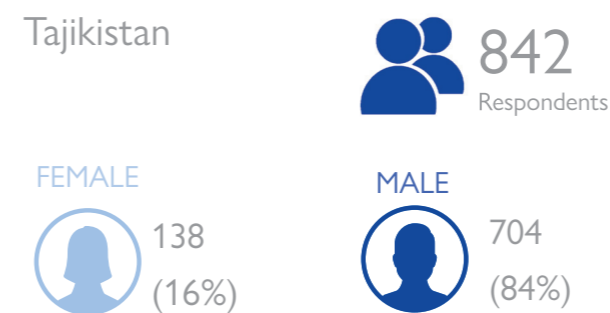
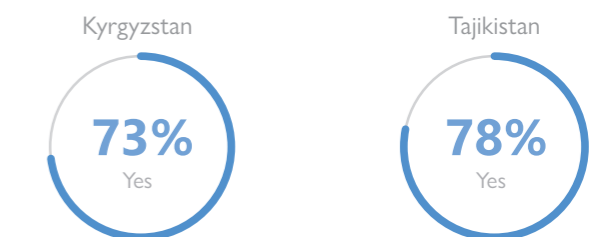
Looking at the sex composition of the sample population (n=1,614), the data indicates that 16 per cent of the interviewed returnees from Tajikistan were females, while this share was 45 per cent for Kyrgyzstan. This situation reflects the sampling strategy adopted in both countries. Respondents were stratified by sex of the 2019 returnee population in Tajikistan, and, by sex of the resident population of Osh and Bishkek city in Kyrgyzstan. The age breakdown shows that the largest cohorts of participants were between 25 and 29 years old for both Kyrgyzstan (24%) and Tajikistan (23%). In Tajikistan, some 9 in 10 respondents (94%) were between 18 and 54 years old. In Kyrgyzstan, 19 per cent of the respondents were over 54 years old.

The data analysis indicates that most returnees were married, and that this share was higher amongst Tajik returnees (77%) than Kyrgyz returnees (64%), and amongst males (75%) than females (62%). The share of respondents who were single at the time of the assessment was higher in Kyrgyzstan (20%) and lower in Tajikistan (14%). The majority of respondents reported having children, and this share was similar between respondents from Tajikistan (78%) and Kyrgyzstan (73%), but it was different between females (81%) and males (73%). Respondents with children were also asked where their children were living at the time of the assessment. In Tajikistan, children were living in the same location as their parents in 97 per cent of the cases. In Kyrgyzstan, this share was 88 per cent.

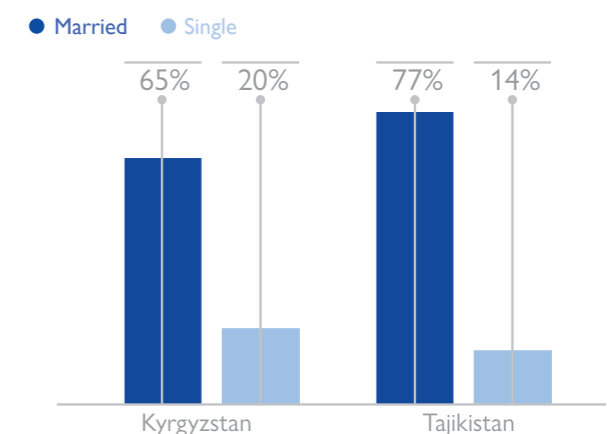
Figure 1 – Sample Distribution by sex



Graph 1 – Share of Respondents with children



Graph 2 – Share of Respondents by marital status



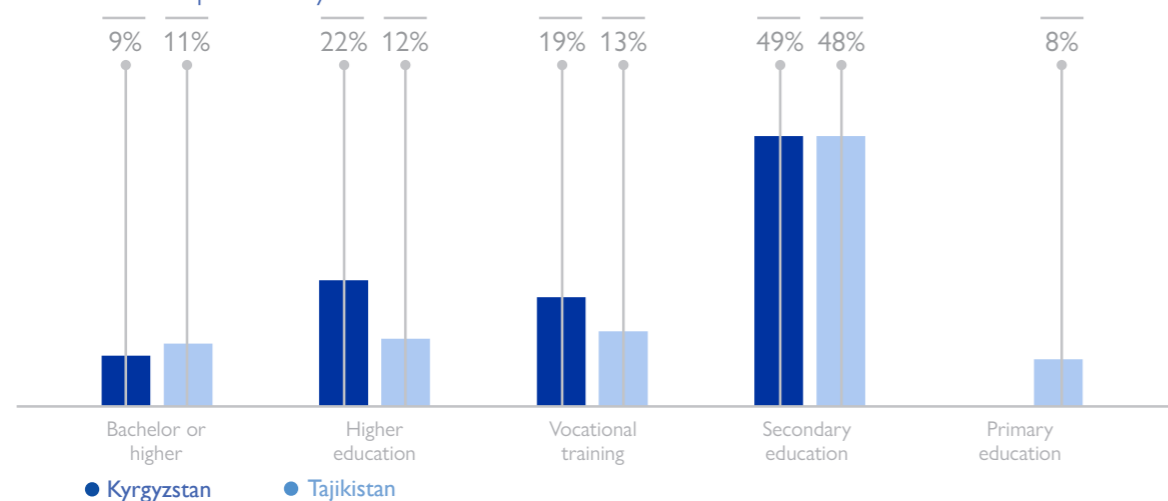
\*Note: 1 respondent reported "other" when asked about their gender.



On average, according to this assessment, returnees from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have completed secondary education (48%) or vocational training (16%). Around 1 in 10 respondents (10%) has a bachelor degree or higher, and the share of respondents without any education is close to 0 per cent. Kyrgyz returnees had, on average, a higher education level as compared to their counterparts from Tajikistan. Specifically, 98 per cent of the returnees from Kyrgyzstan had completed secondary education or higher, while this share was 84 per cent amongst Tajik returnees.

When looking solely at the education level of Tajik respondents, no major difference between sexes was noticed. However, respondents located in different parts of the country had different education levels. Around 17 per cent of the respondents from Khatlon Region completed a bachelor degree or higher, as compared to 2 per cent of the respondents from the districts of republican subordination. Similar geographical disparities in terms of education level were also found in Kyrgyzstan. The share of respondents with a bachelor degree or higher was 15 per cent in Bishkek city and 4 per cent in Osh city.

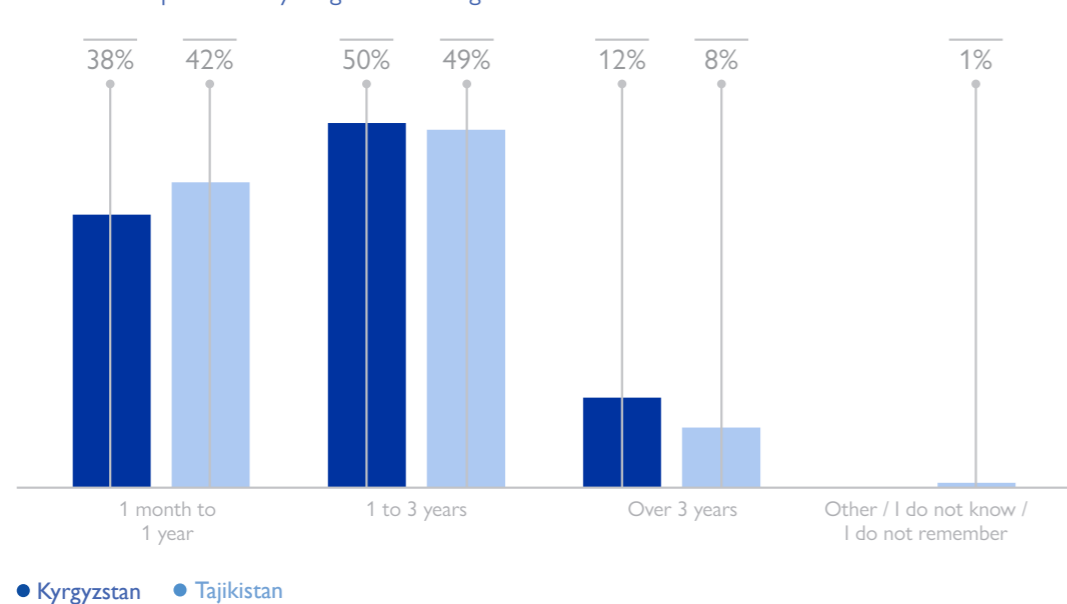
Graph 3 – Share of Respondents by education level



### Previous Migration Experience

Returnees were also asked about their last migration experience, the duration of their stay abroad, and their last country of residence. As outlined in the graph below, similar patterns between Kyrgyz and Tajik returnees arise when looking at the length of their last migration. The majority of returnees lived abroad for between 1 month and 3 years, irrespective of whether they came from Kyrgyzstan (88%) or Tajikistan (91%). The share of respondents who lived abroad for more than three consecutive years was around 10 per cent.

Graph 4 – Share of Respondents by length of last migration



Returnees were asked whether they had migrated before in their life, with the exception of this last migration journey. In Tajikistan, 35 per cent of respondents had previous migration experience, while in Kyrgyzstan this share was 30 per cent. When looking at previous migration experience by sex, it is observed that female respondents were less likely than males to have migrated previously (24% versus 38% for Tajikistan, and 26% versus 33% for Kyrgyzstan). Other differences were observed when disaggregating the sample population by location of return. In Tajikistan, 63 per cent of the respondents from Khatlon Region had previous migration experience, which is almost twice the country average. In Kyrgyzstan, respondents from Bishkek (33%) were slightly more likely to have previous migration experience as compared to respondents from Osh (27%).

When looking at the most common destination countries, it is observed that the Russian Federation was the most common option for returnees from both Kyrgyzstan (84%) and Tajikistan (97%). Respondents from Kyrgyzstan also reported Turkey (8%) and Kazakhstan (4%) as common destination countries.



## Thematic Area 2 – Reasons for migration

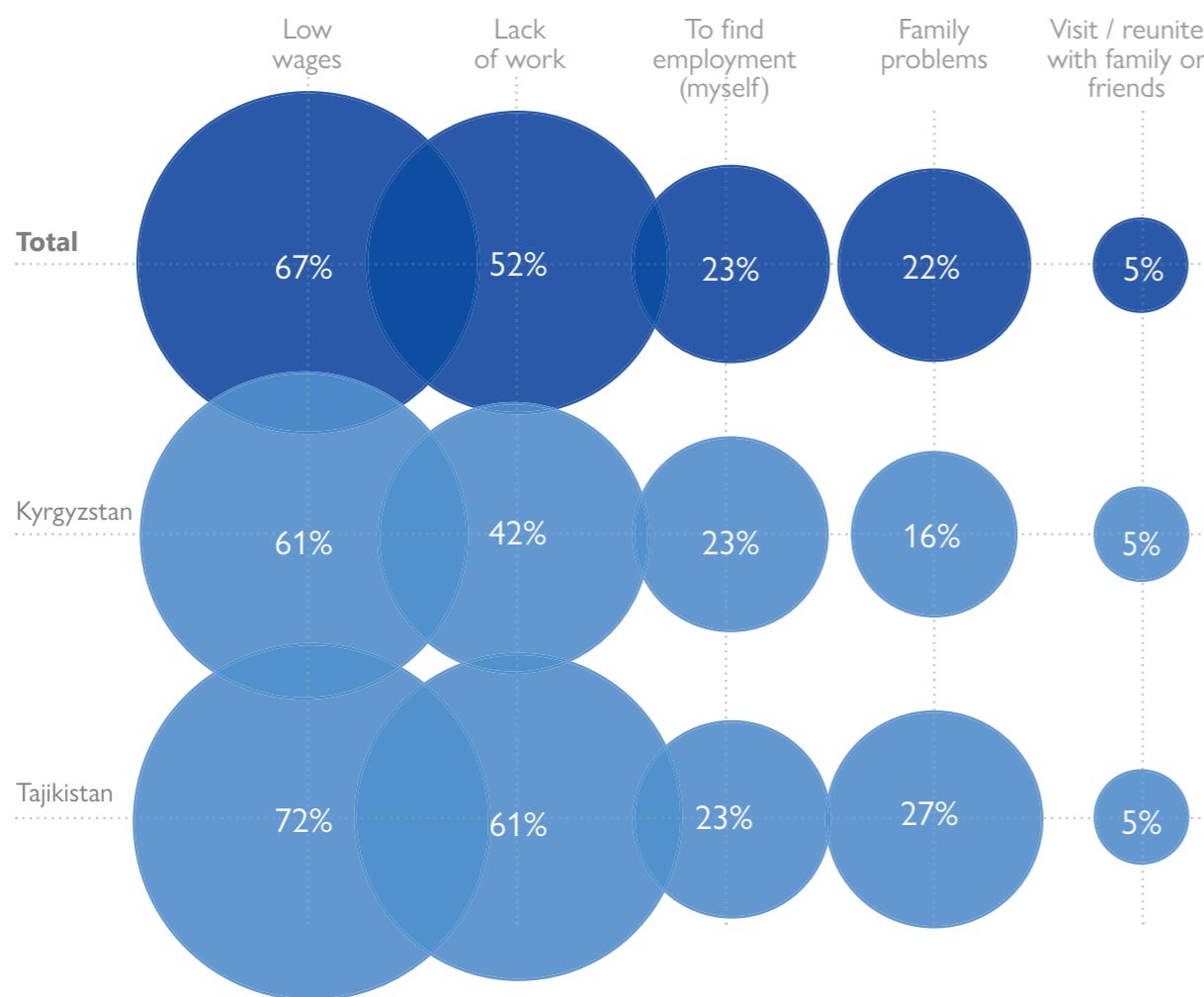
When looking at the reasons for migration, the data analysis indicated that economic related factors were the most common ones both for male and female respondents. Low wages, lack of work, and finding employment were the most commonly cited reasons for migration. Considering the reasons for selecting a specific destination country, the data illustrates that the availability of jobs, higher salaries, and the ways in which migrants are treated are the most important factors influencing this decision. In this context, differences were observed between Kyrgyz and Tajik returnees, with the former being more likely to cite the presence of family and friends, and the latter to mention attitude towards migrants, and ease of obtaining documents. In terms of sex differences in the context of the main factors for selecting a specific destination country, females were more likely to mention the presence of family members, while males mentioned the ways in which migrants are treated as factors influencing this decision. The majority of the sample population reported that the length of their migration changed due to COVID-19. In most cases, they had to return to their home country before the expected date.

### Reasons for migration

This section of the survey explores the variety of factors that might simultaneously drive a person towards migration or attract a migrant to a specific destination country. At the individual level, the decision to migrate is often seen as a combination of different factors ultimately leading to the decision to migrate.

Overall, returnees from both countries mentioned numerous reasons that pushed them towards migration, and most of these reasons were of economic nature. Low wages (67%), lack of work (52%) and finding employment (23%) were the most commonly mentioned reasons for migration, followed by family problems (22%) and visiting or reuniting with family or friends (5%).

Graph 5 – Share of Respondents by main reasons for migration (multiple answer question)



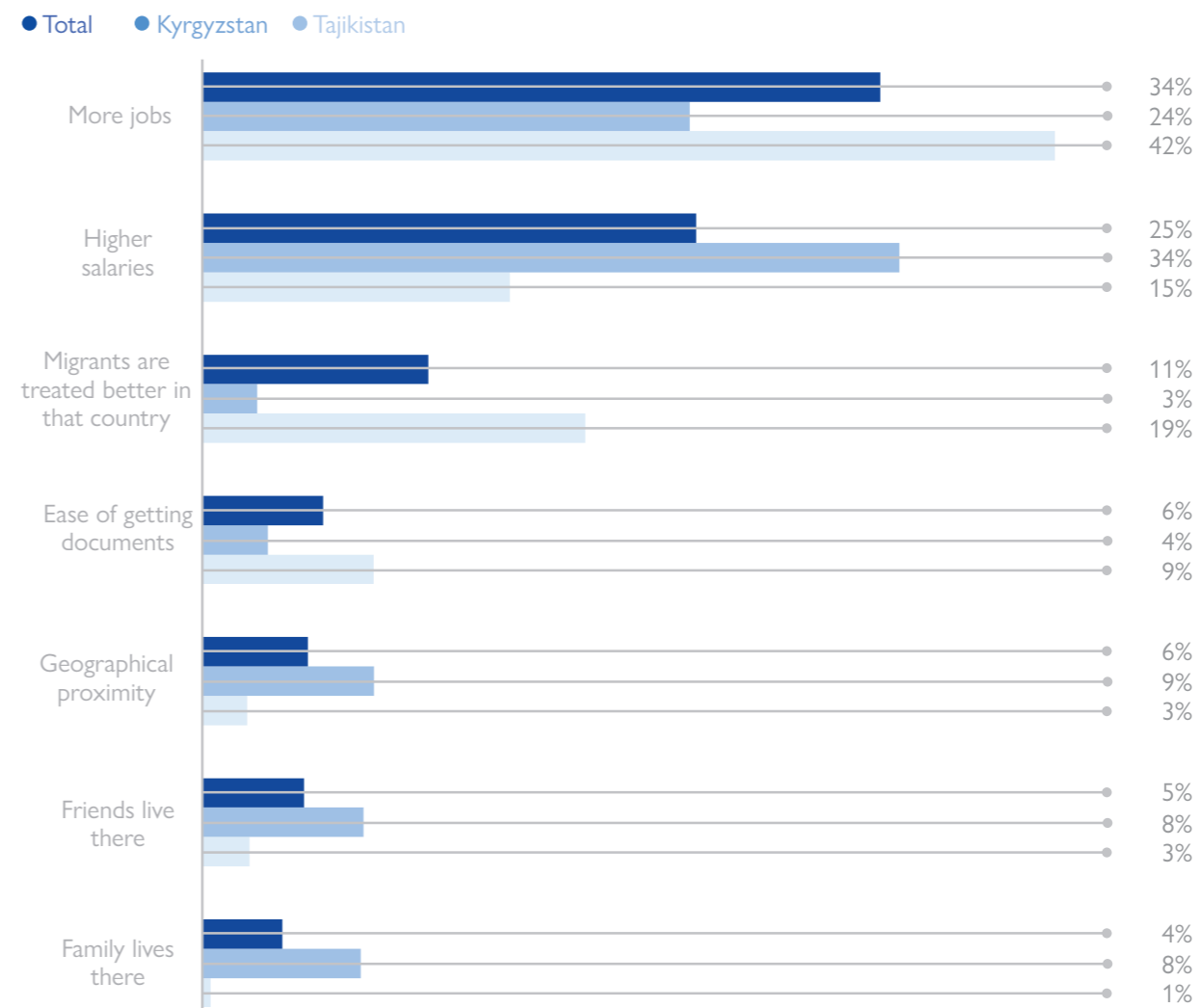
As shown in Graph 13, the main reasons for migration were the same for returnees from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Yet 27 per cent of the respondents from Tajikistan reported family problems as a reason for migration, while this share was 16 per cent for interviewees from Kyrgyzstan. No differences between sexes were observed in terms of reasons for migration.

When looking at the reasons for selecting a specific destination country, the data analysis indicated that a higher number of jobs (34%), higher salaries (25%) and positive attitude towards migrants (11%) were the most commonly mentioned factors. Other common reasons for selecting a destination country were the ease of getting documents (6%), geographical proximity (6%), and the presence of friends (5%) or family (4%). While the main reasons for selecting a specific destination country were the same between male and female respondents, some differences were observed still. Particularly, 10 per cent of female respondents reported selecting a specific destination country because one or more family members were living there, and this share was 2 per cent amongst males. On the other hand, the way migrants are treated in the destination country was mentioned by 14 per cent of male interviewees and by 6 per cent of females.

The data showed significant differences between Kyrgyz and Tajik returnees in terms of reasons for selecting a given destination country. For Tajik respondents the presence of jobs (42%), the way in which migrants are treated in the destination country (19%) and the ease of getting documents (9%) were comparatively more important factors. Instead, the choice of the destination country for Kyrgyz respondents was comparatively more likely to be influenced by higher salaries (34%), geographical proximity (9%), and the presence of friends (8%) or family abroad (8%).

The difference in the factors influencing the decision to migrate of Tajik and Kyrgyz returnees is an area that deserves further comparative research, with a focus on the drivers of migration and the reasons why they differ between these population groups.

Graph 6 – Share of Respondents by reasons for selecting a specific destination country





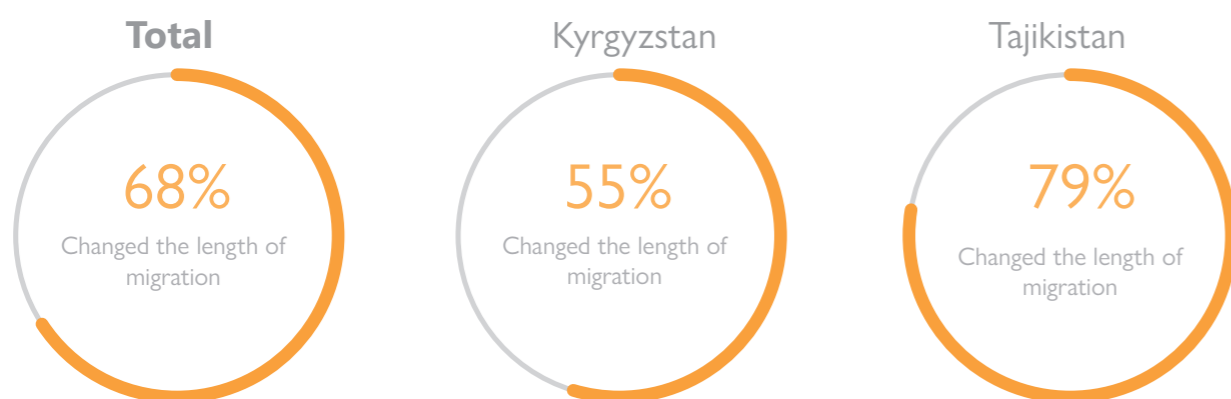
The fact that Tajik returnees value the way they will be treated in the destination country so highly in their decision to migrate could be a potential indicator of experiences of xenophobia and similar ill treatment in previous migration destinations. However, additional research is needed to corroborate this hypothesis. The finding that Tajik respondents consider the ease of getting documents quite highly in their decision to migrate as compared to their Kyrgyz counterparts, could be a reflection of two different systems for obtaining documents to work abroad. In fact, while Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union that gives Kyrgyz citizens easier access to international labour migration to the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, Tajikistan is not. In terms of further research, it would be interesting to further explore the role of Kyrgyz diaspora in the decision to migrate as well as in migration preparation and arrangements in order to understand if and how it can be leveraged towards improved protection, information dissemination, and also sustainable development in the country of origin.

### Impact of COVID-19 on migration length

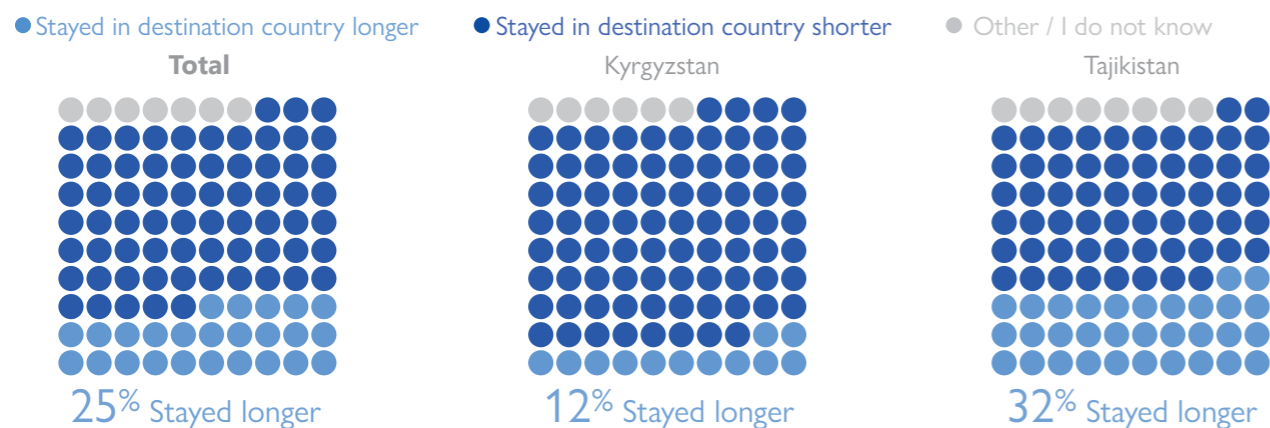
To understand the impact of COVID-19 on migration, participants were asked if the length of their migration changed due to COVID-19, and if it did change, how. In total, 68 per cent of the sample population changed the length of their migration due to the current pandemic. However, this share was much higher amongst Tajik returnees (79%) as compared to Kyrgyz returnees (55%). In terms of differences between sexes, it was observed that 63 per cent of female returnees changed the length of migration due to COVID-19, while this share was 70 per cent amongst males.

When looking at the ways in which the length of migration changed due to COVID-19, the data analysis indicated that in 67 per cent of the cases, returnees stayed in the destination country shorter than expected. Staying in the destination country longer due to COVID-19 was reported by 25 per cent of the respondents. In Kyrgyzstan, the share of participants who stayed in the destination country for less time due to COVID-19 was 72 per cent, while in Tajikistan it was 60 per cent. Tajik respondents were more likely to report that due to COVID-19 they stayed in the destination country longer (32%) as compared to Kyrgyz returnees (12%).

Graph 7 – Share of Respondents who changed the length of their migration due to COVID-19



Graph 8 – Share of Respondents by changes to the length of their migration due to COVID-19



Note: this question was asked only to respondents who changed the length of their migration due to COVID-19.

### Thematic Area 3 – Reasons for return

Overall, the main reasons for return were job loss, family pressure to return, and COVID-19 related reasons, either linked to document status or to economic factors. Reasons for return were similar between sexes. Roughly 1 in 2 participants reported facing return related challenges, with Tajik respondents being more likely to face challenges as compared to Kyrgyz returnees. Male respondents were more likely to face challenges as compared to females. The most reported challenges were linked to the difficulty of finding a job or challenges in migrating again, underlining the importance of circular, seasonal migration for communities living in the focus countries. Interviewees were asked to rank the services in their communities of origin to create a service perception index. According to this scoring system, services in Kyrgyzstan were considered fair, while in Tajikistan between fair and good. The most problematic services in both countries were access to jobs and salary scales as compared to the cost of living.

### Reasons for return

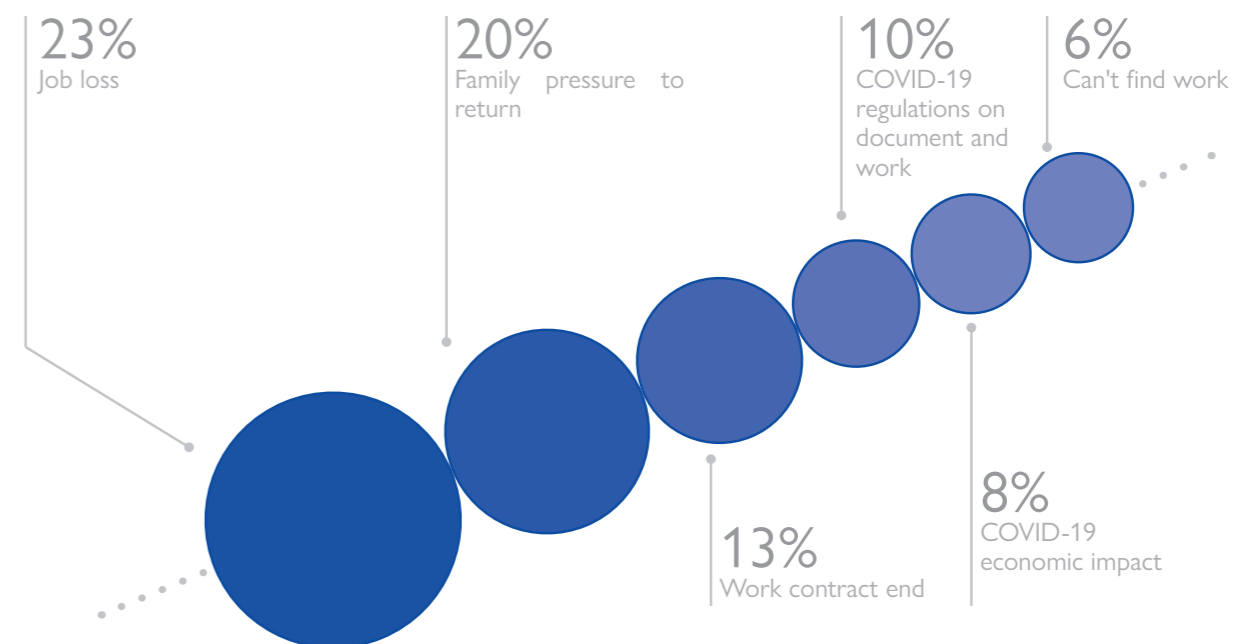
Similar to the decision to migrate, the choice to return to the home country is often influenced by various, often overlapping, factors. This section of the survey explores exactly which were the factors that mostly influenced the sample population to return to their home countries.

In total, 23 per cent of the returnee population returned to their home countries because they lost their job. Other common reasons for return were family pressure to return (20%) or the end of the work contract (13%).\* Roughly 18 per cent of the sample population reported that they returned to the home country due to COVID-19 related reasons linked to changes in document status (10%) or to the COVID-19 economic impact (8%).

The data analysis indicates that the importance of migration networks for Kyrgyz returnees highlighted in the decision to migrate is found once again in the reasons for return. Kyrgyz returnees were more likely than Tajik returnees to return because of the family pressure (27% versus 14%).

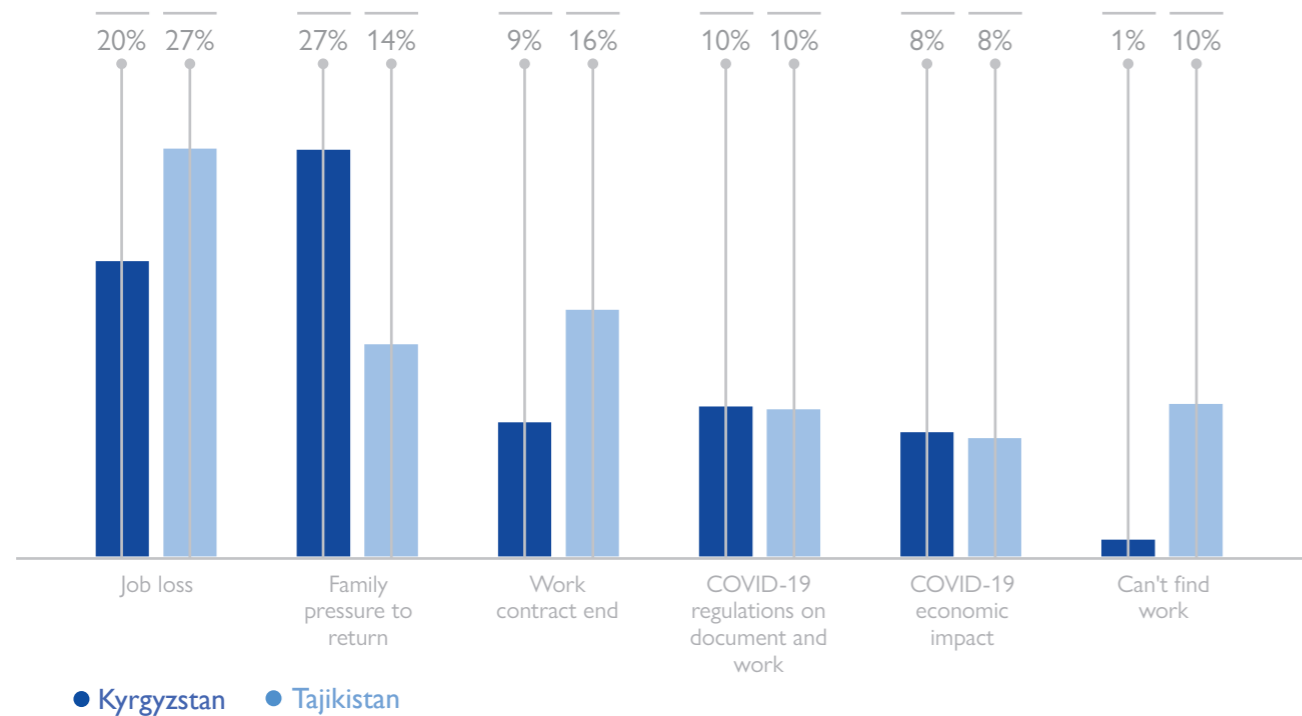
When looking at the reasons for return of Tajik returnees, it was found that there are some indicators of vulnerability risks. As compared to Kyrgyz respondents, Tajik returnees were more likely to return due to job loss (20% versus 27%), end of work contract (9% versus 16%), or inability to find work (1% versus 10%). In addition, 5 per cent of them returned due to deportation, while this share was 1 per cent for Kyrgyz respondents.

Graph 9 – Share of Respondents by main reasons for return



\*Job loss was defined as a sudden and unexpected job loss. Work contract end, was defined as the end of the work contract, which was known and expected. COVID-19 related reasons were selected when the participant directly mentioned COVID-19 in the answer.

Graph 10 – Share of Respondents by main reasons for return and by country

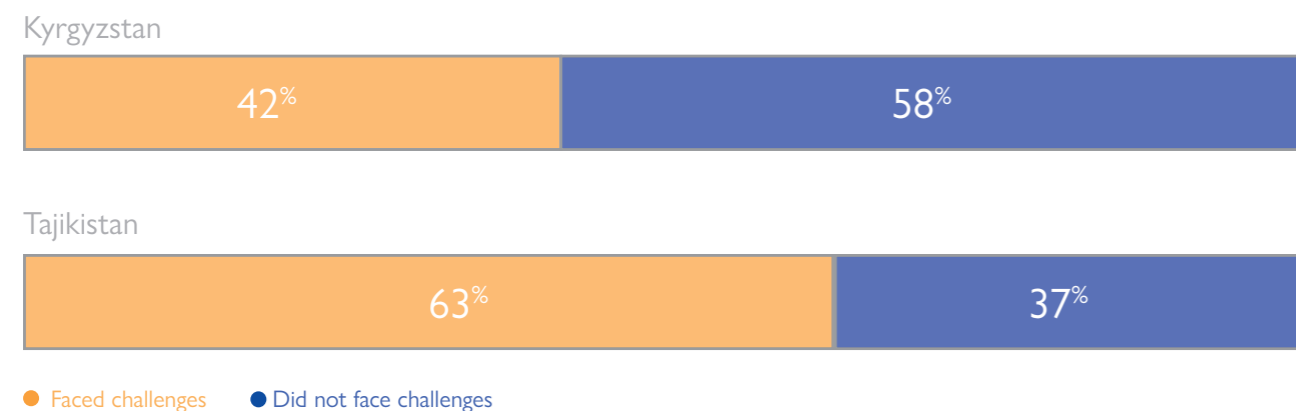


Return related challenges

Previous evidence indicates that after returning to the home country, migrants might have to face a number of challenges ranging from psychological distress, difficulties in finding employment, discrimination by the host community, and other personal or social challenges. This section of the survey was designed to capture these problems, to understand if Tajik and Kyrgyz returnees are facing return related challenges, and if they are, which ones.

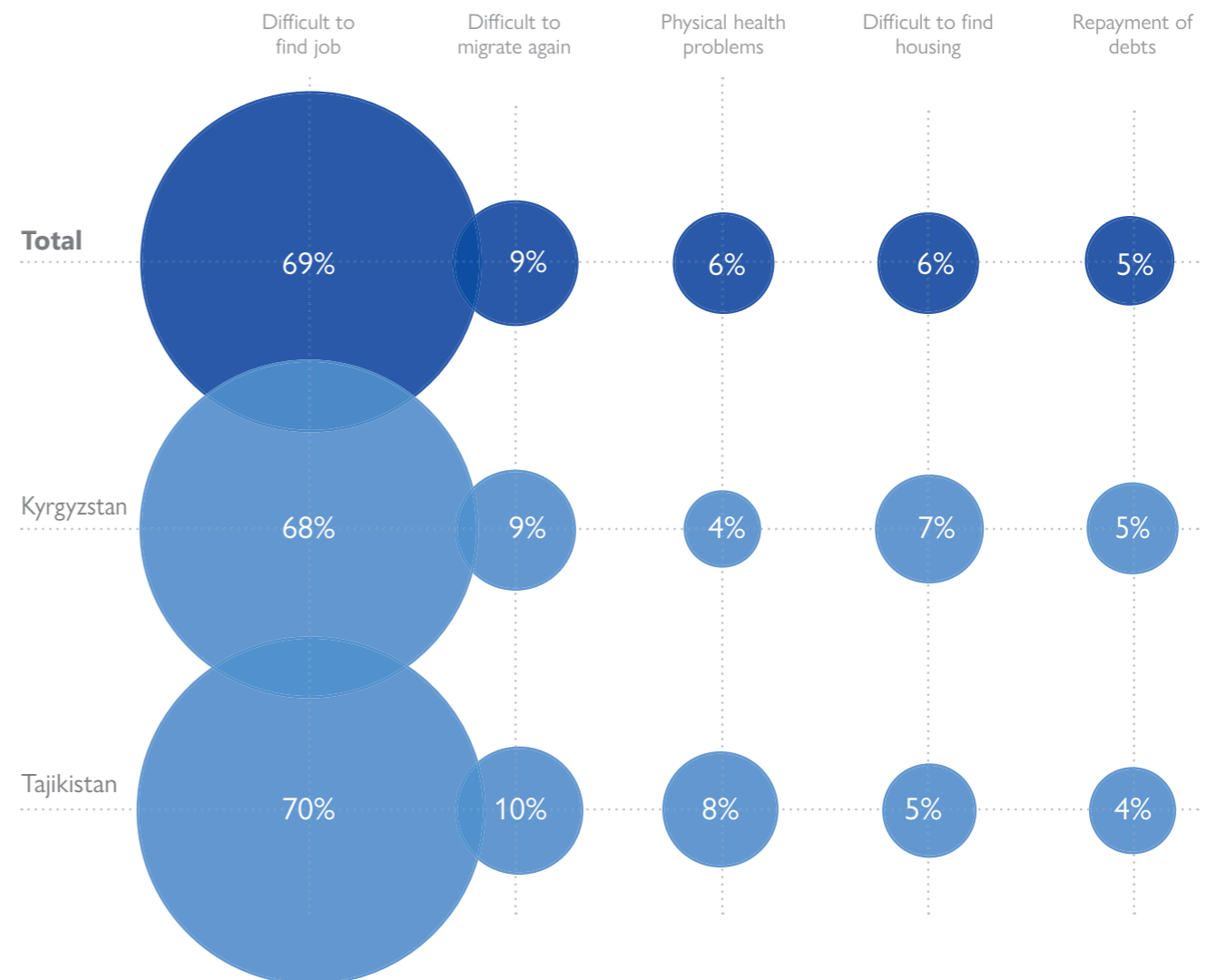
In total, 53 per cent of the sample population reported facing return related challenges. This share was up to 63 per cent for Tajik respondents and as low as 42 per cent for Kyrgyz respondents. It was observed that females were less likely than males to report return related challenges (45% versus 56%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents who were working informally during migration, reported facing challenges upon return more often than people working in the formal sector (59% versus 49%). The data analysis indicated that in terms of return related challenges, there were large disparities even between respondents of the same country. In Kyrgyzstan, 53 per cent of the respondents located in Bishkek city faced return related challenges, while this share for respondents in Osh city was 32 per cent. In Tajikistan, almost 4 in 5 respondents (78%) from the Districts of Republican Subordination reported facing challenges upon return, while this share was lower for respondents from Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (54%) or Sogd Region (54%).

Graph 11 – Share of Respondents who faced challenges upon return



Participants who faced challenges upon return were asked to describe the type of challenge they faced. The data analysis indicates that the challenges affecting the sample population were quite homogenous between Kyrgyz and Tajik respondents. The most common return related challenge was finding employment, reported by 69 per cent of the sample population. In addition, 9 per cent of the respondents mentioned the difficulty to migrate again, 6 per cent reported physical health problems, and 6 per cent faced difficulties in finding housing.

Graph 12 – Share of Respondents by type of challenge faced upon return





### Service quality index

Kyrgyz and Tajik returnees were asked to rate the services present in their communities of origin. By averaging the ratings given to the different services a service quality index was created for both countries and for all services assessed. This index reflects the opinions of returnees about the status of services in their communities of return. For this reason, this is a perception-based index, which does not reflect the objective situation of a given service, but rather how people perceive it.

Figure 2 – Service quality index Kyrgyzstan

0=non-existent 1=very poor 2=poor 3=fair 4=good 5=very good

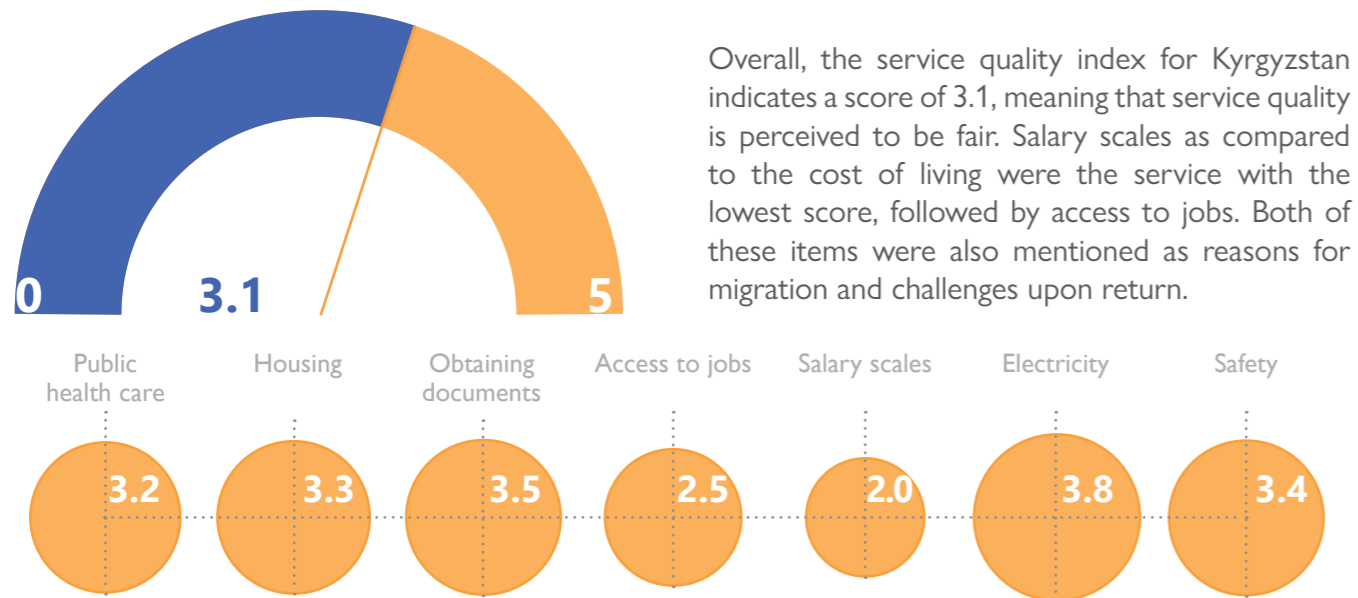
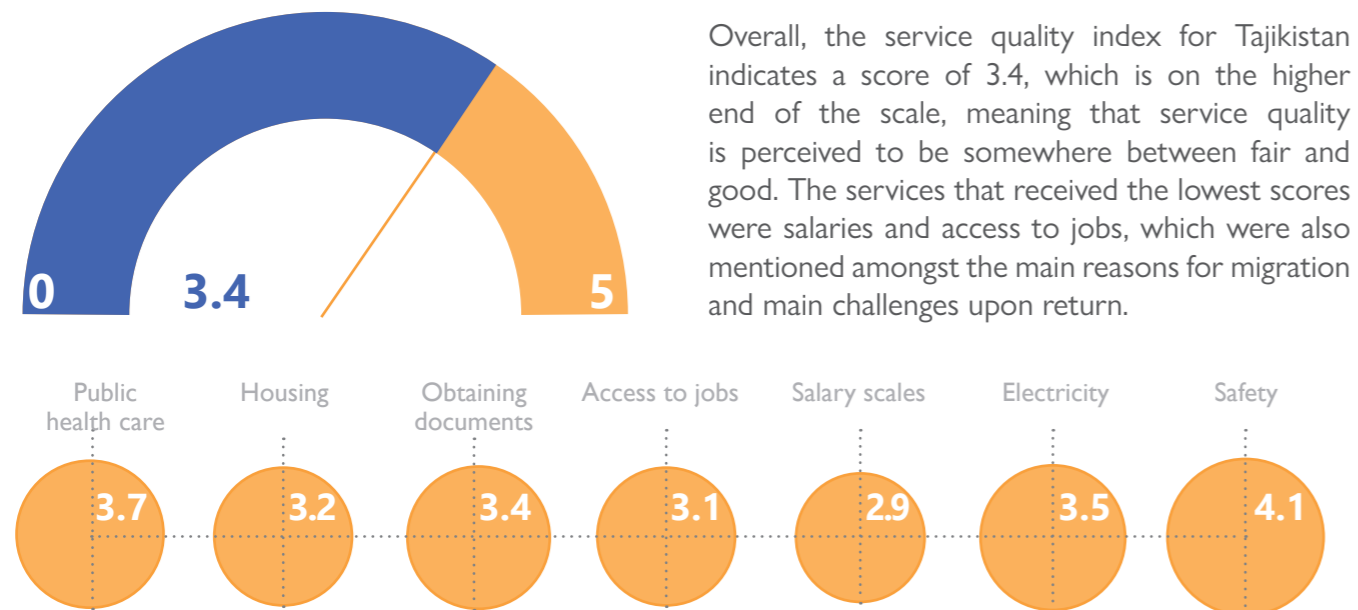


Figure 3 – Service quality index Tajikistan

0=non-existent 1=very poor 2=poor 3=fair 4=good 5=very good



### Thematic Area 4 – Employment situation

Overall, the data analysis indicates that the unemployment rate amongst returnees was considerably higher when they were in their home countries as compared to when they were abroad. In addition, the unemployment rate of the sample population tripled between pre- and post-COVID-19 outbreak, corroborating the finding that COVID-19 had severely impacted the livelihoods of many returnees and their families. The unemployment rate before, during and after migration was always higher amongst female respondents as compared to males. Even when currently employed, around one in two returnees reported earning less as compared to the period before the COVID-19 outbreak. One out of three returnees who were unemployed at the time of assessment reported being in employment before the outbreak of COVID-19. The majority of them, when asked why they were currently unemployed, mentioned COVID-19 related reasons. High competition between graduates, low education level and lack of opportunities due to COVID-19 were mentioned as the main barriers to employment both by male and female respondents. Regardless of the migration stage, around one in two respondents was working in the informal sector, and this share was generally higher for male respondents as compared to females. When looking at the sectors of employment, the data indicates strong gender dimension of the labour market, with male and female respondents generally working in very different sectors. Males were predominantly employed in construction, agriculture and transportation, while females were more likely to be working in hotels and accommodation, and in wholesale and retail trade.

Given the importance of labour migration for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this section of the survey focused on the employment and economic situation of returnees prior to migration, during migration and upon return. By comparing results from different parts of the migration journey, the data analysis provided valuable insights on the differences between unemployment rates, sectors of employment and informal economy in the different phases of the migration journey.

#### Employment status prior to migration

Prior to migration, 67 per cent of the sample population was employed, while 17 per cent was unemployed, and 16 per cent was either retired, studying, or doing unpaid family work, with negligible differences between Kyrgyz and Tajik respondents. The unemployment rate amongst females was 20 per cent while for males it was 16 per cent. If employed prior to migration, participants were asked if they were working in the informal sector. The data analysis indicates that around 56 per cent of the sample population was doing so. According to the data analysis, males were more likely than females to be working in the informal sector in both Kyrgyzstan (60% versus 53%) and Tajikistan (56% versus 48%).

Graph 13 – Share of Respondents by employment status prior to migration

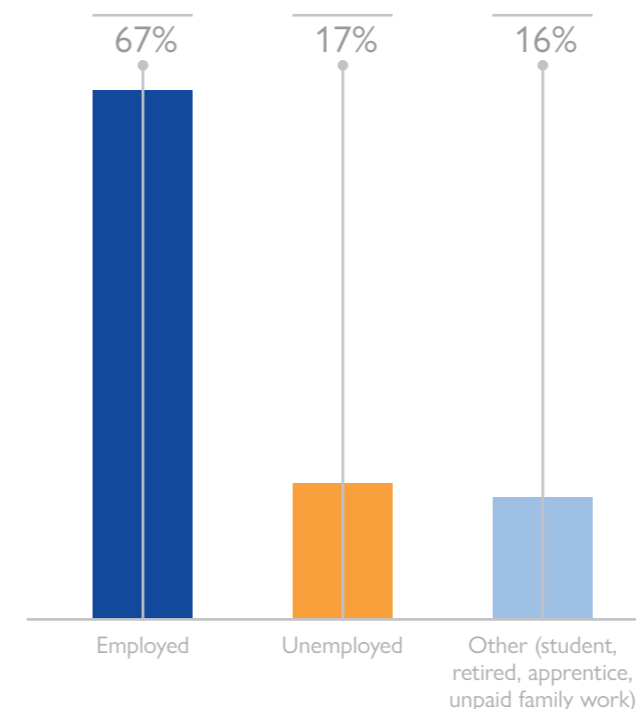
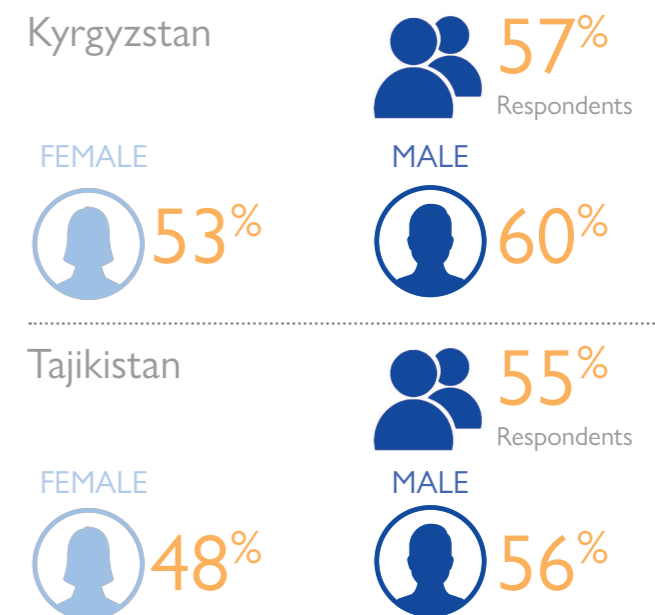
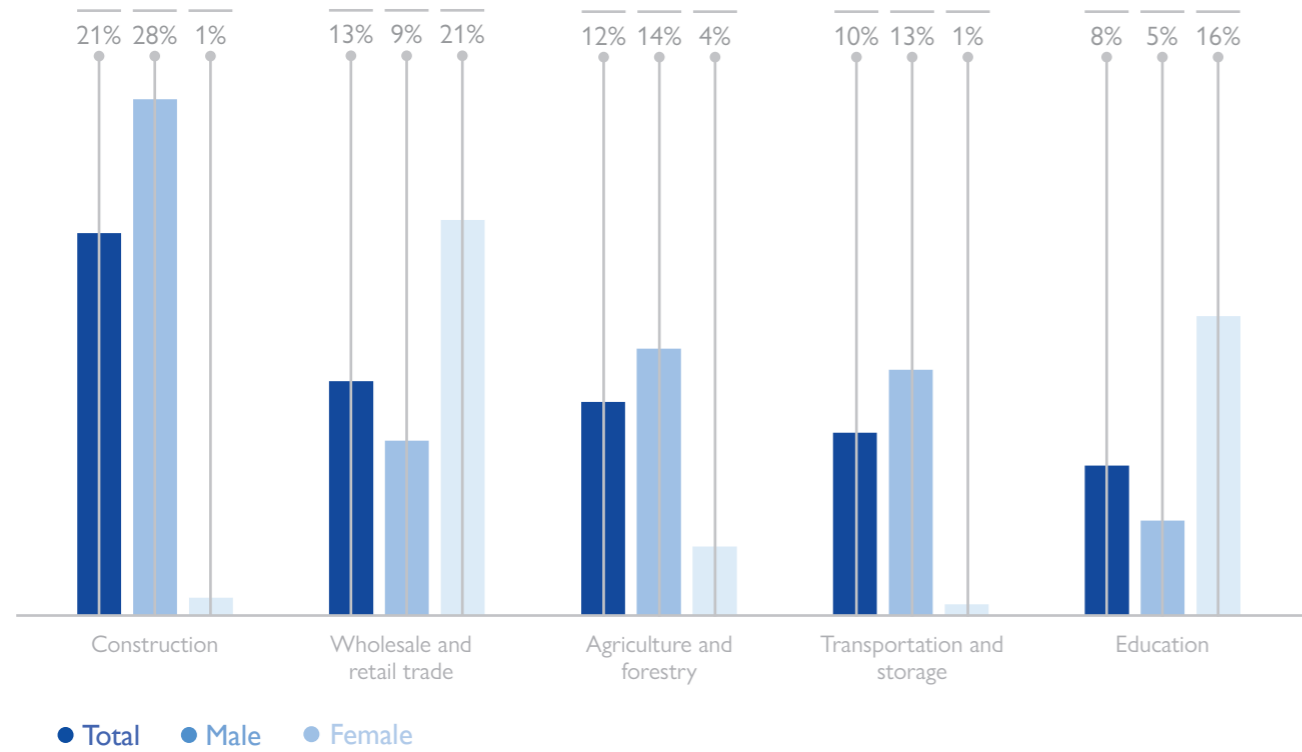


Figure 4 – Share of Respondents by working in the informal sector prior to migration



Note: this question was asked only to respondents who reported being employed prior to migration.

Graph 14 – Share of Respondents by sector of employment prior to migration



Note: this question was asked only to respondents who reported being employed prior to migration.

The data analysis indicates that prior to migration, returnees were mostly employed in construction (21%), wholesale and retail trade (13%), and agriculture and forestry (12%). Sectors of employment were generally similar between Kyrgyz and Tajik returnees, but major differences were observed when analysing sectors of employment by sex of the respondents.

The most common sectors of employment for female respondents were wholesale and retail trade (21%), education (16%), manufacturing and other factory work (11%), and domestic work (11%). As a comparison, the share of male respondents working in wholesale and retail trade was 21 per cent, while the share of males working in education was 5 per cent, and in manufacturing or domestic work was below 5 per cent (4% and 3%, respectively). On the other hand, male returnees were more likely than female respondents to be working in construction (28% versus 1%), agriculture and forestry (14% versus 4%), and transportation and storage (13% versus 1%).

As will be shown in the next pages, the gender segmentation of the labour market in Central Asia is not only a characteristic of the employment situation prior to migration, but also during migration and upon return. This finding indicates that in order to reduce inequalities between male and female returnees in terms of salaries or work in the informal sector, both during migration as well as upon return, there are some key sectors of employment to consider and to focus on.

### Employment status during migration

When looking at the employment situation during migration, the data analysis indicates that 90 per cent of the sample population was employed, 8 per cent was either retired, studying or doing unpaid family work, and 2 per cent were unemployed. However, the unemployment rate amongst female respondents was 4 per cent. This is a stark difference as compared to the situation prior to migration, where the unemployment rate among the sample population was up to 17 per cent, eight times higher than the unemployment rate reported during migration. Perhaps unsurprisingly, prior to migration, the employment rate was 23 percentage points lower as compared to the situation during migration (67% versus 90%).

Graph 15 – Share of Respondents by employment status during migration

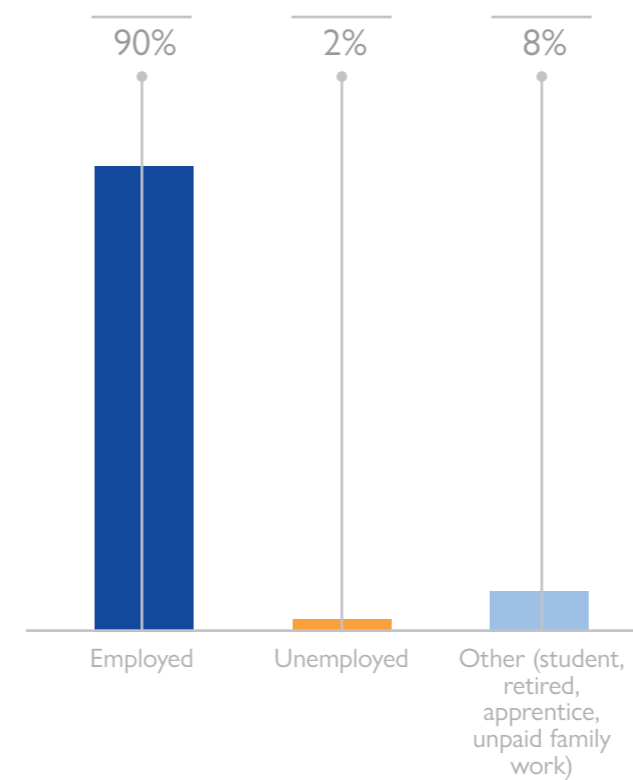
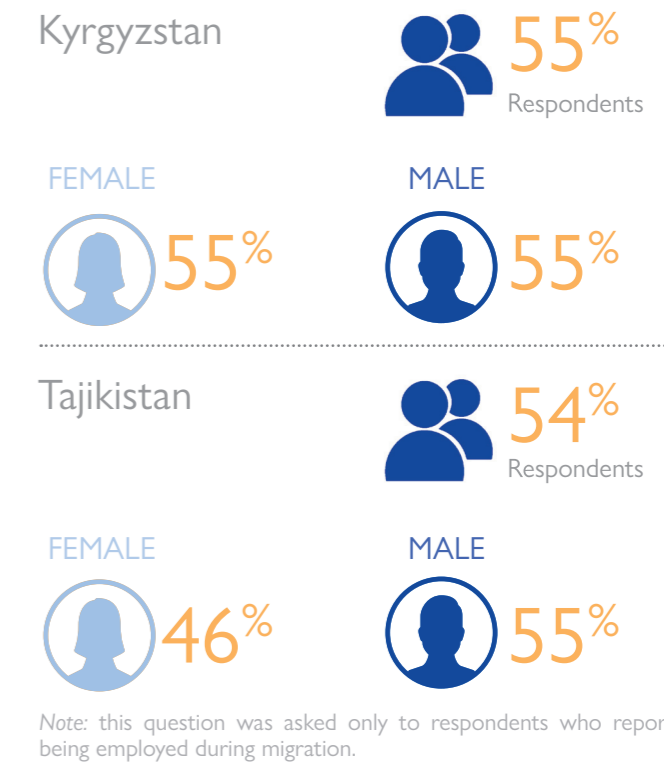


Figure 5 – Share of Respondents by working in the informal sector during migration



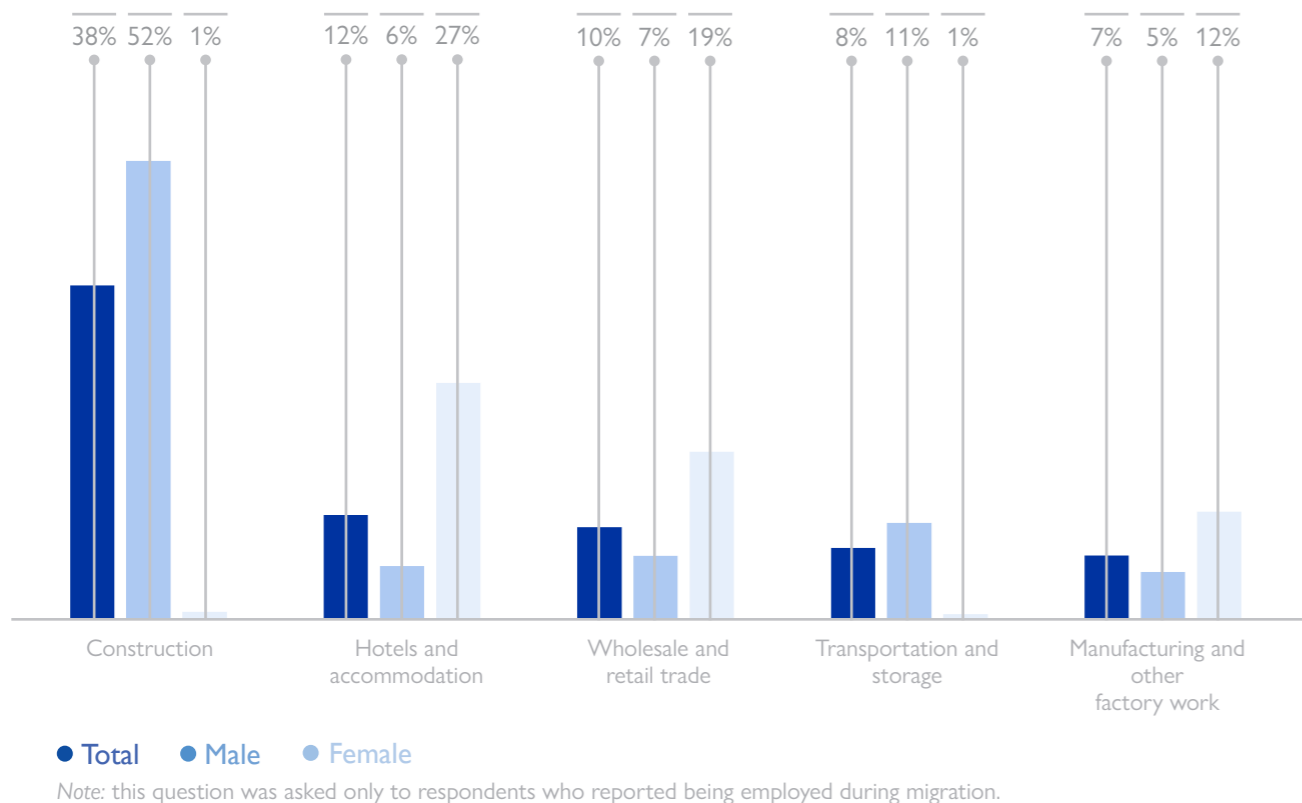
Note: this question was asked only to respondents who reported being employed during migration.

This finding might indicate that migration from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is not causing brain drain, because had these migrants stayed in their home countries instead of migrating, they would have not been able to find employment and, as a result, staying could have led to "brain waste". This term generally indicates the comparative productivity loss in a scenario where migrants stay in their home countries instead of migrating.

When looking at the share of respondents working in the informal sector, the data analysis shows that 55 per cent of the sample was employed in the informal sector during migration, which is roughly the same as the share reported prior to migration. For Tajik returnees, differences between sexes in the share of returnees working in the informal economy remained the same during migration as compared to previous to migration, with males being more likely to work informally (55%) as compared to females (46%). This is not the case for Kyrgyz returnees, where sex related differences in terms of work in the informal sector during migration disappear.



Graph 16 – Share of Respondents by sector of employment during migration



During migration, most returnees were employed in construction (38%), hotels and accommodation (12%), and wholesale and retail trade (10%). The data analysis shows some difference in terms of sectors of employment between Tajik and Kyrgyz returnees. However, these differences are mostly explained by the different sex composition of the two target populations, and by the strong gender segmentation of the labour market.

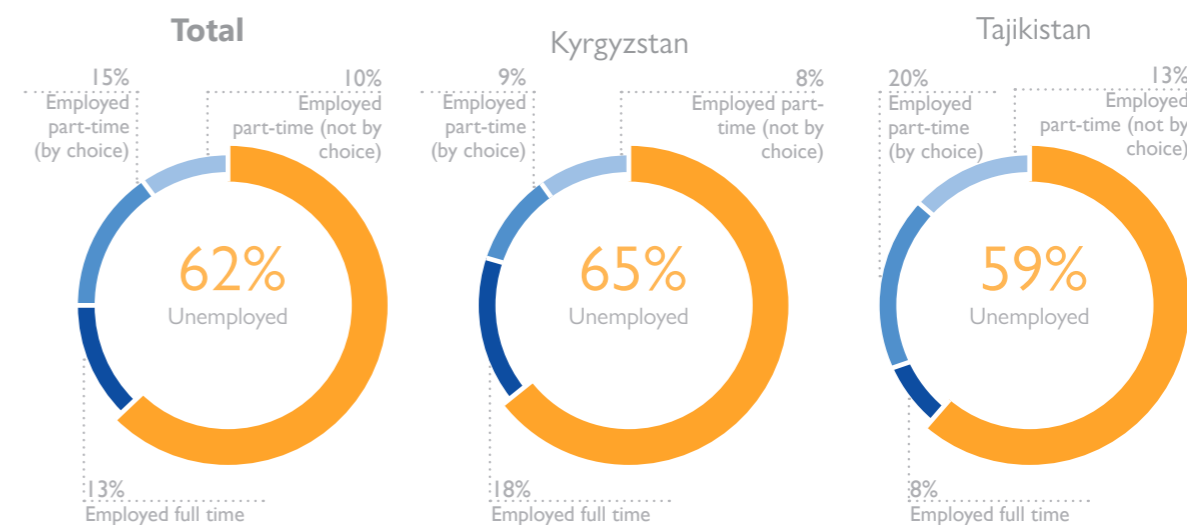
During migration, female respondents tend to work in hotels and accommodation (27%), wholesale and retail trade (19%), domestic work (18%), and manufacturing or another factory work (12%). The share of male respondents working in the sectors mentioned above ranged from 7 per cent for manufacturing and other factory work, to 1 per cent for domestic work. The majority of male returnees worked instead in the construction sector (52%), or in transportation and storage (11%), and as mechanics repairing motorcycles and vehicles (4%). The share of females working in these sectors ranged from 1 per cent for construction and transportation to 0 per cent for repairing vehicles.

This segmentation of the labour market for migrants in their destination country should be considered when developing labour market policies aiming at reducing differences and inequalities linked to labour migration.

### Current employment status

Returnees were asked a set of questions to understand their current employment situation, to compare it with their situation during and prior to migration and draw conclusions on the impacts of COVID-19 on their employment status. Similar to the situation before and during migration, the unemployment rate at the time of the assessment was higher amongst female (69%) as compared to male (59%) returnees. The data analysis indicates that the current unemployment rate amongst returnees was higher for Kyrgyz returnees (65%) as compared to Tajik returnees (59%) and that on average was 62 per cent. By comparing this value to the unemployment rate reported prior to migration (17%) or during migration (2%), it is observed that COVID-19 had severe impacts on the employment status of returnees

Graph 17 – Share of Respondents by current employment status



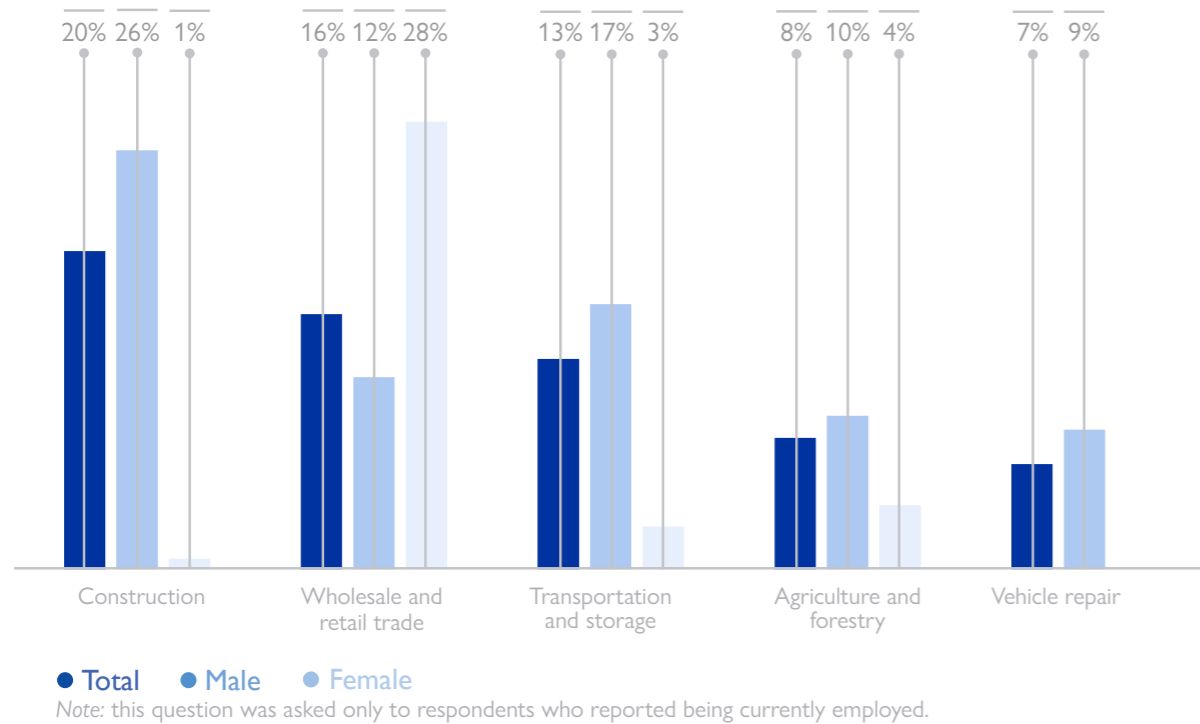
The returnee population of this study is composed of persons who migrated abroad prior to COVID-19 and returned to the home country during the COVID-19 pandemic, and were interviewed in December 2020. By comparing the unemployment rate before and after migration, we can have some indications of how COVID-19 impacted the financial situation of returnees. In a non-COVID-19 scenario, we would expect 1 in 5 returnees (17%) to be unemployed in their home country. Instead, we observed that 3 in 5 returnees were unemployed, indicating how COVID-19 disrupted many income generating opportunities, not only abroad, but also in the communities of return.

When looking at the share of respondents who are currently employed (38%), the data shows that 13 per cent were working full time, 15 per cent part-time by choice, and 10 per cent part-time because they were not able to find full time employment. The share of returnees working full-time was lower in Tajikistan (8%) as compared to Kyrgyzstan (18%), while the share of interviewees with part-time employment was higher in Tajikistan (33%) as opposed to Kyrgyzstan (17%).

The data analysis indicates that when analysing the unemployment rate of Kyrgyz and Tajik respondents separately, and by location of return, there were large differences even within the same country. In Kyrgyzstan, the unemployment rate amongst returnees was higher in Osh (74%) as compared to Bishkek city (55%), and it was also higher amongst female (72%) than male respondents (58%). In Tajikistan, the locations with the highest unemployment rates were Gorno Badakhshon Autonomous Region (77%) and Khatlon Region (67%). Policy-wise, it is recommended to take into consideration these differences in the terms of unemployment and prioritize regions based on observed trends.

Respondents who are currently employed also reported their current sector of employment. Results indicate that 20 per cent of the sample population was working in construction, 16 per cent in wholesale and retail trade, and 13 per cent in transportation and storage. The data analysis, indicated differences between female and male respondents in the current sectors of employment, which are reported in the graph below.

Graph 18 – Share of Respondents by current sector of employment



COVID-19 impacts on employment status

Respondents who reported being currently employed, and who were employed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were asked whether they earn less or work less as compared to the period prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Results indicate that up to 60 per cent of Kyrgyz respondents currently earn less as compared to the period prior to COVID-19, while this share is 53 per cent for Tajik respondents. On average, 47 per cent of the sample population reported working less at the time of the assessment as compared to the period before COVID-19.

Graph 19 – Share of Respondents who earn less as compared to before COVID-19

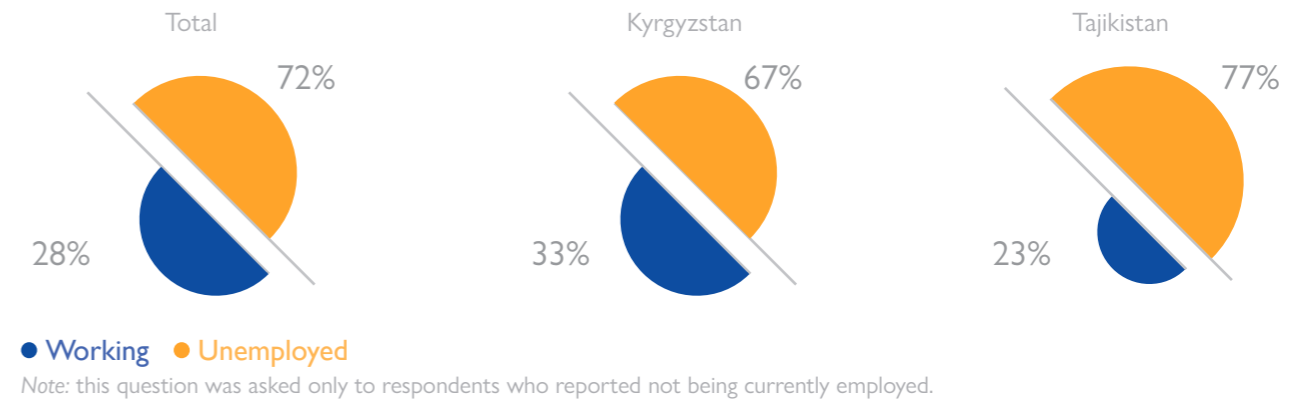


Graph 20 – Share of Respondents who work less as compared to before COVID-19



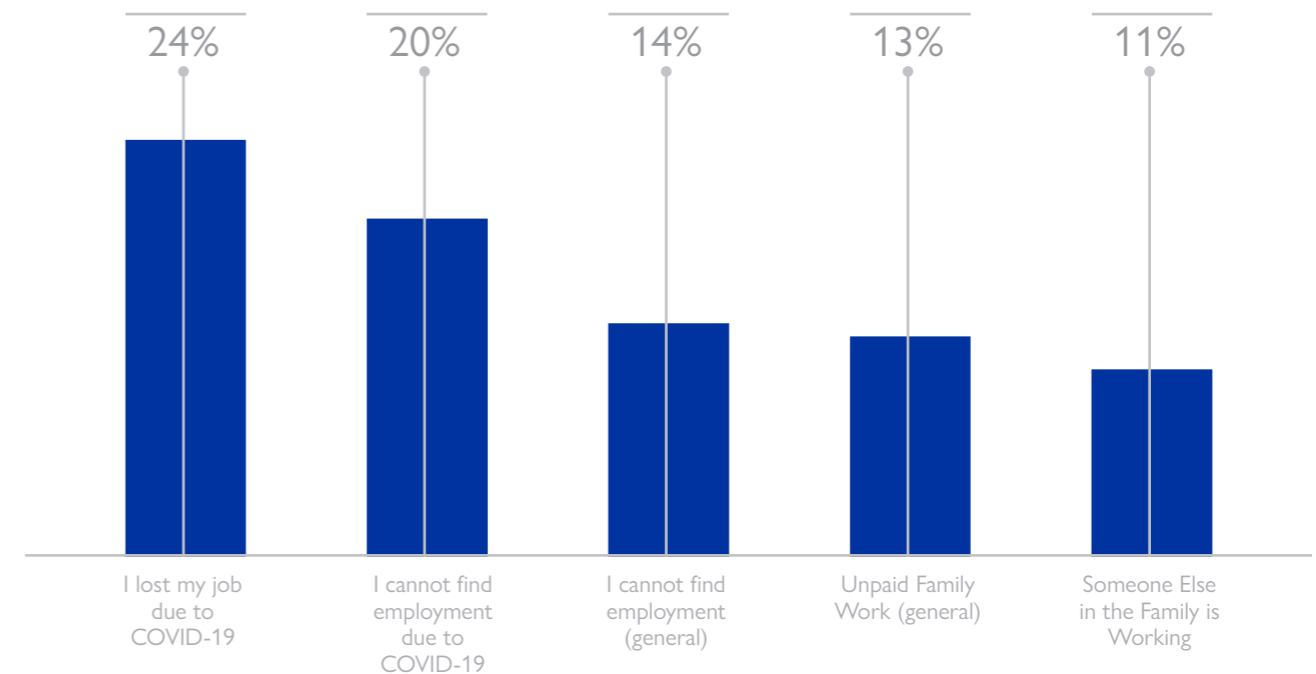
These findings indicate that respondents earn less, but they also work less. Respondents who were not working at the time of the assessment were asked if they were working before the outbreak of COVID-19. Results indicate that roughly 1 in 3 respondents (28%) were working before COVID-19, but are now unemployed. This set of respondents were asked why they are not working anymore, and the data analysis indicates that COVID-19 related reasons were reported by 44 per cent of the respondents.

Graph 21 – Share of Respondents by employment status before COVID-19



By coupling this information with what was reported previously, it is observed that the impacts of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of returnees are severe. On the one hand, when comparing the unemployment rate before and after the pandemic outbreak, we observe that it has tripled, from 17 per cent to 62 per cent. On the other hand, even working respondents now earn less as compared to the period before the pandemic, and, in addition, 1 in 3 currently unemployed people were working before COVID-19 outbreak.

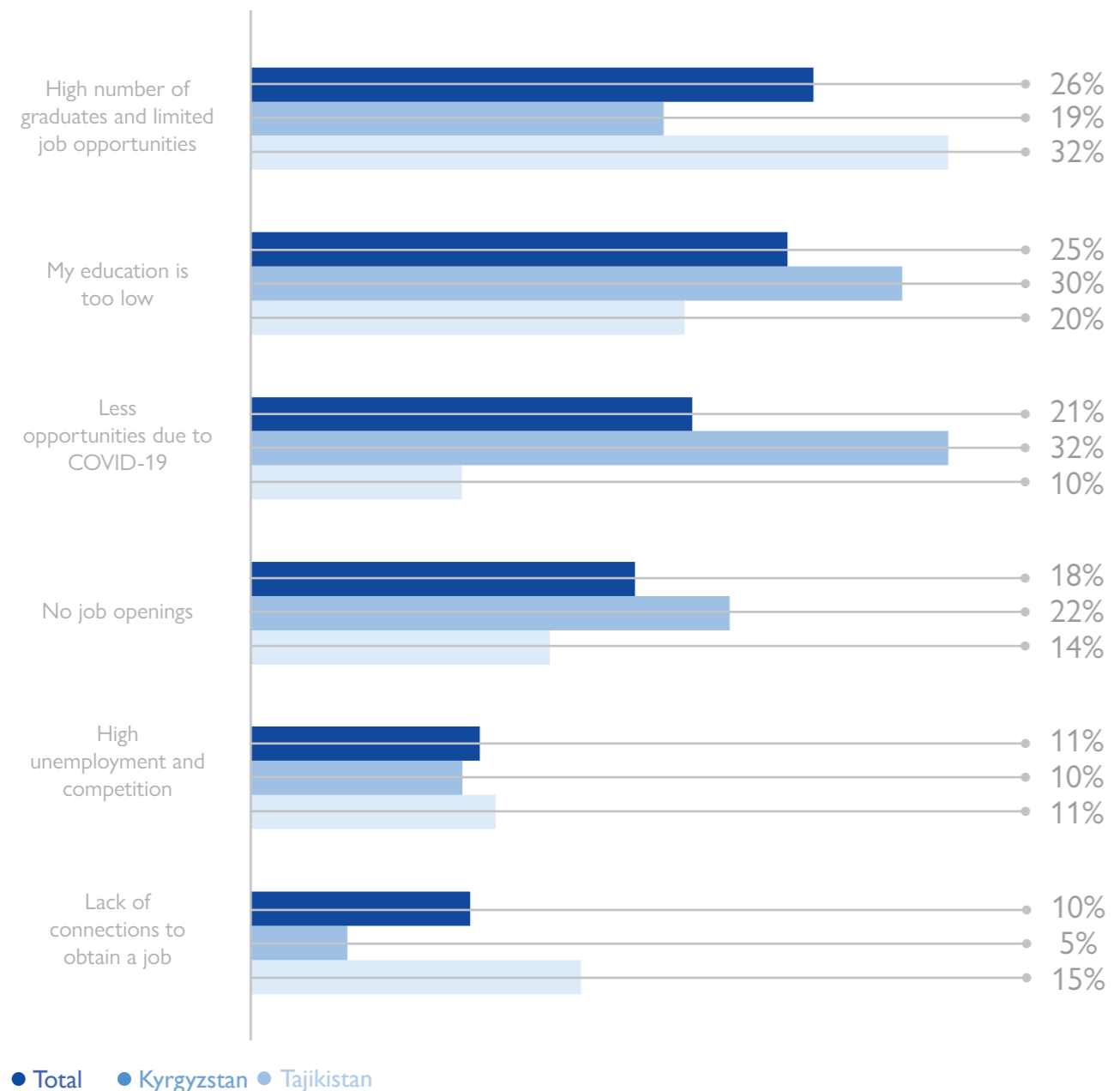
Graph 22 – Share of Respondents by reason for not working anymore



Note: this question was asked only to respondents who were employed previous to COVID-19.



Graph 23 – Share of Respondents by main barriers to employment



All respondents were finally asked about the main barriers to employment in their communities of return. In total, 32 per cent of Kyrgyz respondents reported that now there were less opportunities due to COVID-19, 30 per cent said that their education was too low, and 22 per cent that there were no job openings. For Tajik returnees, the main barrier to employment was the high number of graduates and limited job opportunities (32%), low level of their education (20%), or their lack of connections to get a job (15%).

It was observed that male and female respondents mentioned similar barriers affecting their employment situation. Females mentioned high unemployment rate (27%), no job openings (26%) and less opportunities due to COVID-19 (23%) as main barriers to employment. On the other hand, the most common barriers mentioned by male respondents were lack of connections to get a job (29%), high unemployment rate (24%), and no job openings (18%).

### Thematic Area 5 – COVID-19 impacts and vulnerabilities

More than half of the respondents reported that over the past three months, their income was insufficient to provide for their families' basic needs, which are defined as housing, food, health care, and education. A similar share of respondents over the past three months had to borrow money to cover monthly expenses. No differences between sexes were observed for either of the two aforementioned financial indicators. The data analysis indicates that, to different extents, and over the past three months, around 9 in 10 respondents had to reduce the quality and quantity of food they consume, with similar results between female and male respondents. When looking at the changes in the financial situation of returnees since the COVID-19 outbreak, the data indicates that 8 in 10 respondents suffered from either a partial income loss, a total income loss or had to go in debt. Lack of jobs, followed by low wages and not receiving remittances were reported as the main reasons for the deterioration of the financial situation since the outbreak of the current pandemic. Looking at COVID-19 vulnerabilities, access to face masks and hand sanitizer were reported as problematic. The data indicates a need for COVID-19 information material to be distributed by official sources.

The final part of the questionnaire specifically focused on COVID-19 related indicators. It was designed to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on returnees and their families in terms of employment, financial situation, and access to food. This part of the survey also contained questions related to COVID-19 prevention and protection, such as access to face masks, hand sanitizers and COVID-19 information material. Before starting this section, respondents were asked if they knew what COVID-19 was, and 100 per cent of respondents reported that they have heard of COVID-19 prior to the interview.

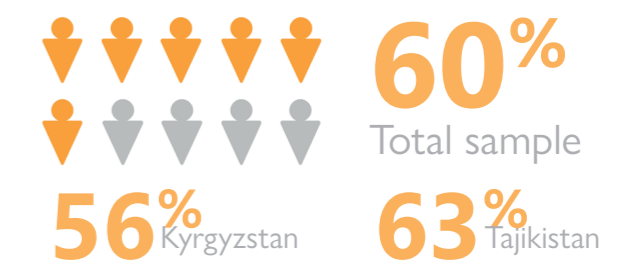
#### COVID-19 impacts on food and income

Overall, 62 per cent of respondents reported that over the past three months their income was insufficient to provide for their families' basic needs, which are defined as housing, food, health care and education. This share was similar between respondents from Kyrgyzstan (63%) and Tajikistan (61%). However, in Kyrgyzstan, respondents from Osh city (68%) were more likely to lack income for basic needs as compared to returnees in Bishkek (58%). The data analysis indicates that over the past three months 60 per cent of the sample population had to borrow money to cover monthly expenses. Borrowing money was more common amongst Tajik returnees (63%) as compared to Kyrgyz respondents (56%).

Figure 6 – Share of Respondents by insufficient income to provide for family basic needs over the past three months\*

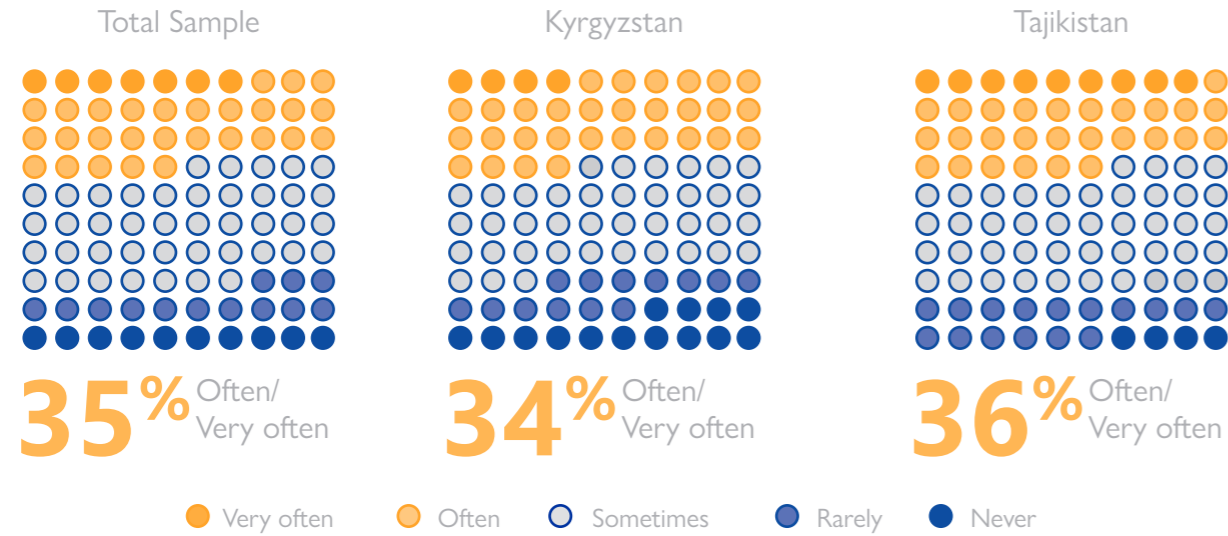


Figure 7 – Share of Respondents who had to borrow money to cover monthly expenses over the past three months



\*Basic needs are defined as housing, food, health care and education.

Graph 24 – Share of Respondents who had to reduce the quantity of food they consume



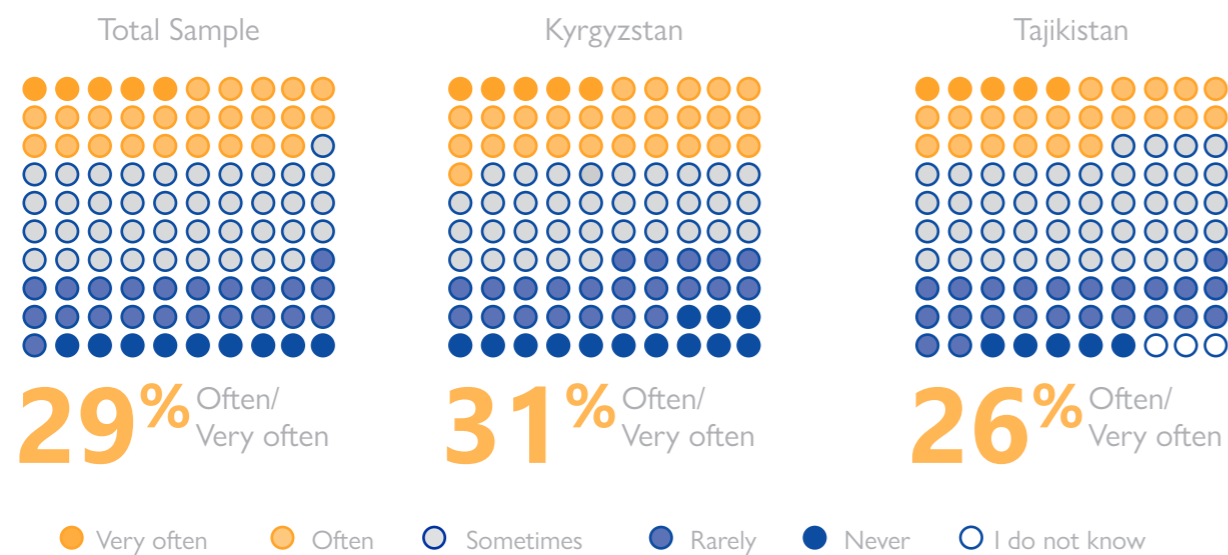
Sometimes during the periods with particularly severe economic losses families might have to reduce the quantity or the quality of the food they consume. For this reason, respondents were asked if over the past three months they had to reduce the quality or quantity of food consumed.

The data analysis indicates that to different extents 90 per cent of the sample population had to reduce the quantity of food consumed over the past three months. In total, the share of respondents who had to reduce the food consumed either often (28%) or very often (7%), was 35 per cent. The share of respondents who never had to reduce the quantity of food consumed over the past three months was 10 per cent.

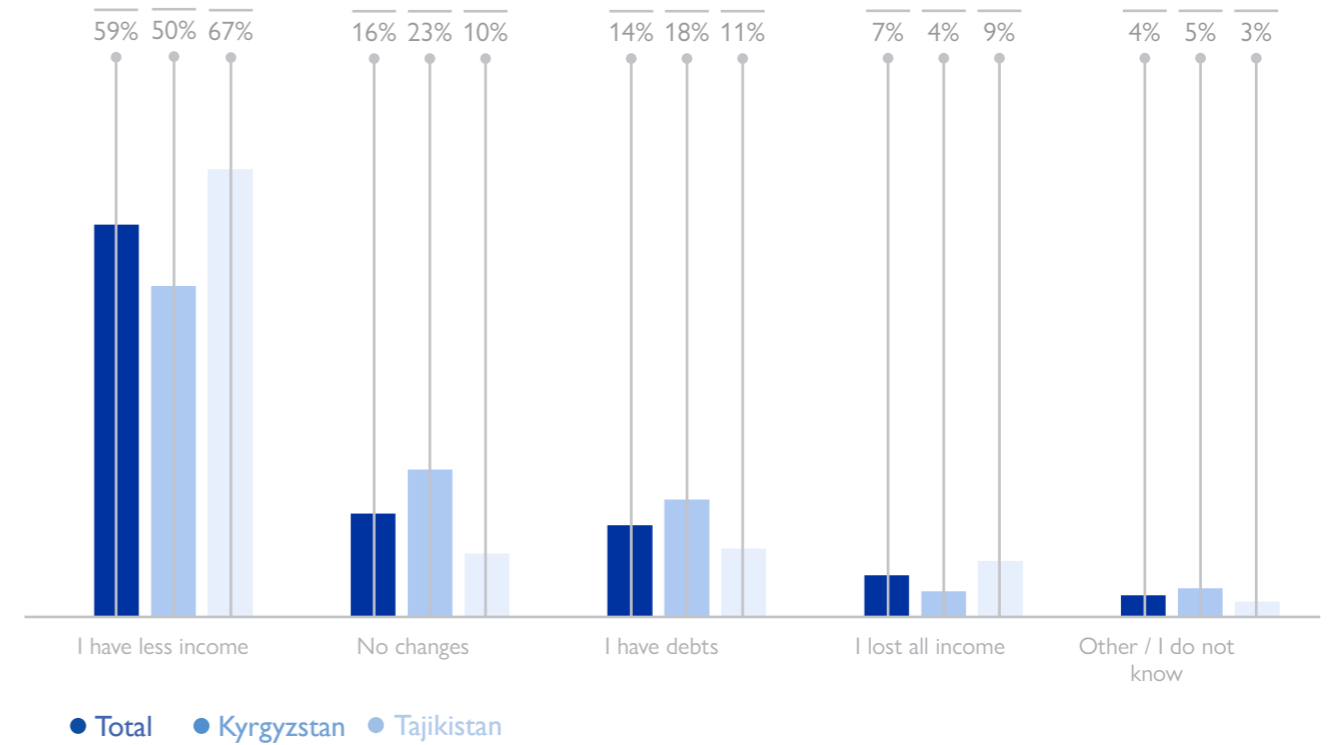
When looking at the quality of food consumed, the data indicates that to different extents 91 per cent of the respondents reduced it over the past three months. Overall, 29 per cent of the sample had to reduce the quality of food consumed either often (24%) or very often (5%). Nine per cent of the returnees never had to reduce food quality over the past three months.

Returnees were also asked to describe how their financial situation changed since the outbreak of COVID-19. This question was asked to a total of 1,550 participants, and while 3 individuals reported an improvement in their financial situation, the rest of the sample reported no changes (16%) or other types of economic losses (80%).

Graph 25 – Share of Respondents who had to reduce the quality of food they consume

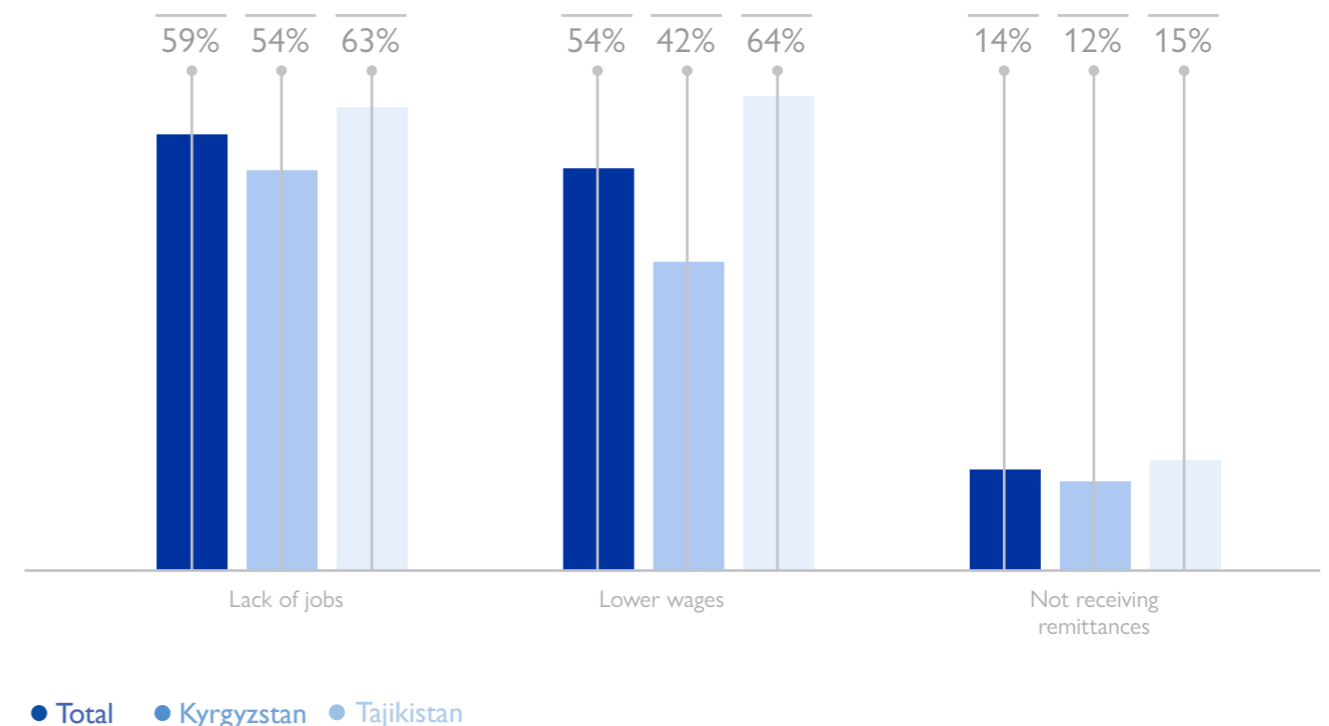


Graph 26 – Share of Respondents by changes in the financial situation due to COVID-19



Specifically, 59 per cent of the sample population sustained an income loss, 14 per cent had debts, and 7 per cent suffered a total income loss. Both partial and total income loss were more common amongst Tajik respondents as compared to Kyrgyz interviewees. Participants who faced income losses or debts were asked to cite the main reasons behind the deterioration of their financial situation since the COVID-19 outbreak. Responses to this multiple answer question indicated that the main issues were lack of jobs (54%), lower wages (54%), and not receiving remittances (14%).

Graph 27 – Share of Respondents by reasons for having debts, or less to no income (multiple answers)



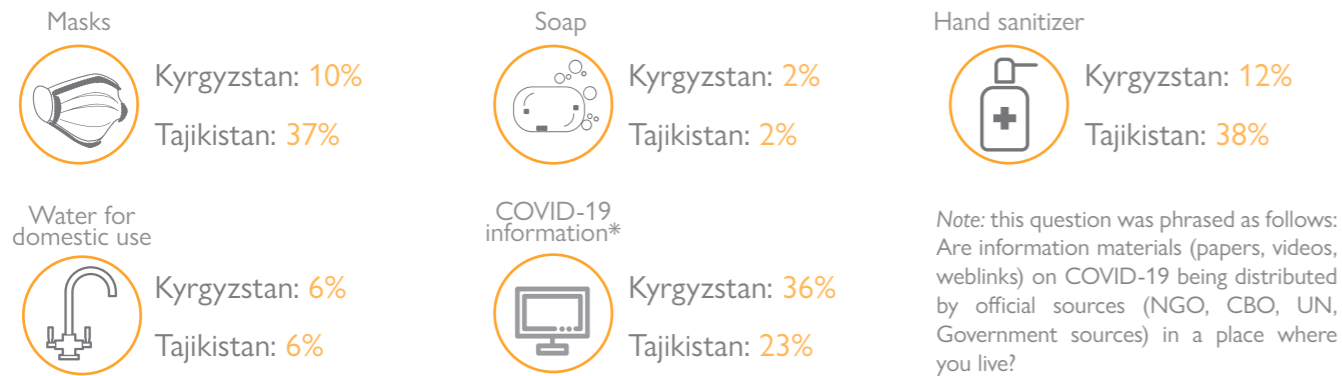
Note: this question was asked only to respondents who reported having debts, less income, or a total income loss.



## COVID-19 infection prevention and control

Returnees were asked if they had daily access to various hygiene items that have been proven useful for the prevention of COVID-19 and other diseases. The data analysis indicates that only few respondents did not have access to soap (2%) and water for domestic use (6%). Overall, access to personal protective equipment was more problematic in Tajikistan as opposed to Kyrgyzstan. Overall, 37 per cent of Tajik respondents reported not having daily access to face masks, while this share was 10 per cent amongst Kyrgyz respondents. In terms of the access to hand sanitizers, it was observed that 12 per cent of Kyrgyz returnees lacked daily access to it, while 38 per cent of Tajik interviewees reported the same.

Figure 8 – Share of Respondents without daily access to the following items



Returnees were asked if COVID-19 information material was being distributed in their communities of return by official sources. In terms of COVID-19 information programmes, around 1 in 3 Kyrgyz respondents reported that no COVID-19 information material was being distributed in their locations. In Tajikistan, 23 per cent of the returnees reported that COVID-19 information material was not being distributed.

# 2.2 Conclusion

## Summary of Key Findings

### Sociodemographic profile

The returnee population was mostly composed of young, married males between 25 and 29 years old. Around 3 in 4 returnees reported having children who in most cases were living with them in the country of return. Females were more likely than males to have children. In terms of education level, the majority of the sample population have completed secondary education or higher, while the share of respondents with no education was close to 0 per cent. In around 90 per cent of the cases the length of migration was between 1 and 3 years, with negligible differences between countries of analysis. Around 1 in 3 respondents had previous migration experience, and in the majority of cases the most common migration country was the Russian Federation. Having previous migration experience was most common amongst male than female respondents.

### Reasons for migration

The data analysis indicated that economic related factors were the most common reasons for migration for both male and female respondents. Low wages, lack of work, and finding employment were the most commonly cited reasons for migration. In terms of choosing specific destinations, the data illustrates that availability of jobs, higher salaries, and the ways in which migrants are treated are the most important factors that influence the decision-making. In this aspect, differences were observed between Kyrgyz and Tajik returnees, with the former being more likely to cite the presence of family and friends, and the latter to mention attitude towards migrants, and the ease of getting documents as more important factors. In terms of the differences between sexes and the choice of destination country, females were more likely to mention the presence of family, while males referred to the ways in which migrants are treated as factors influencing their decision. The majority of the sample population reported that the length of their migration changed due to COVID-19. In most cases, they had to return to their home country before the expected date.

### Reasons for return

Overall, the main reasons for return were job loss, family pressure to return, and COVID-19 related reasons, either linked to document status or to economic factors. Reasons for return were similar between sexes. Roughly 1 in 2 participants, reported facing return related challenges, with Tajik respondents being more likely to face challenges as compared to Kyrgyz returnees. Male respondents were more likely to face challenges as compared to females. The most reported challenges were linked to the difficulty of finding a job or challenges of re-migration, underlying the importance of circular, seasonal migration for communities living in the focus countries. Interviewees were asked to rank the services in their communities of origin to create a service perception index. According to this scoring system, services in Kyrgyzstan were considered fair, while in Tajikistan they were in the range of fair and good. The most problematic services in both countries were access to jobs and salary scales as compared to the cost of living.

## Employment situation

Overall, the data analysis indicates that the unemployment rate amongst returnees was considerably higher when they were in their home countries as compared to when they were abroad. In addition, the unemployment rate of the sample population tripled between pre- and post-COVID-19 outbreak, corroborating the finding that COVID-19 had severely impacted the livelihoods of many returnees and their families. Unemployment rate before, during and after migration was always higher amongst female respondents as compared to males. Even when currently employed, around one in two returnees reported earning less as compared to the period before the COVID-19 outbreak. One out of three returnees who were unemployed at the time of the assessment reported being in employment before the outbreak of COVID-19.

The main reasons for unemployment were COVID-19 related. High competition between graduates, low education level and lack of opportunities due to COVID-19 were mentioned as the main barriers to employment by both male and female respondents. Regardless of the migration stage, around one in two respondents were working in the informal sector, and this proportion was generally higher for male respondents as compared to females. With regard to sectors of employment, the data indicates a strong gender dimension of the labour market, with male and female respondents generally working in very different sectors. Males were predominantly employed in construction, agriculture and transportation, while females were more likely to be working in hotels and accommodation, wholesale and retail trade.

## COVID-19 impacts and vulnerabilities

More than half of the respondents reported that over the past three months their income was insufficient to provide for their families' basic needs, which are defined as housing, food, health care and education. A similar share of respondents over the past three months had to borrow money to cover monthly expenses. No differences between sexes were observed for either of the two aforementioned financial indicators. The data analysis indicates that, to different extents, and over the past three months around 9 in 10 respondents had to reduce the quality and quantity of food they consume, with similar results between female and male respondents. When looking at the changes in the financial situation of returnees since the COVID-19 outbreak, the data indicates that 8 in 10 respondents suffered either from a partial income loss, a total income loss or indebtedness. Lack of jobs followed by low wages and not receiving remittances were reported as the main reasons behind the deteriorated financial situation since the outbreak of the current pandemic. Looking at COVID-19 vulnerabilities, access to face masks and hand sanitizers were reported as problematic. The data indicates the need for COVID-19 information materials to be distributed by official sources.

## Recommendations

*Overall, COVID-19 severely impacted the lives and livelihoods of returnees and their families.* This data analysis indicated that families are unable to meet basic needs, have to borrow money to cover monthly expenses and are reducing the quantity and quality of food consumed. Unemployment rates are three times higher now as compared to the situation prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, and people who are used to be employed are now jobless and unable to find work. In total, 8 out of 10 participants reported having debts, lost part of their income, or all of their income. The inability to migrate again and the lack of remittances from abroad add pressure to this already precarious context.

*It is recommended that the Governments, IOM, and partners working on return migration in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan implement a two-pillar strategy based on policy development and implementation, and primary research to reduce returnees' needs and vulnerabilities.* The operational data collected under this project should be used to implement policies to improve the livelihoods of returnees and their communities of return. The data collection structure created under this project and the data collected should serve as a basis for additional surveys and research activities aiming to monitor how needs and vulnerabilities evolve over time, and measure to what extent support policies and programmes will reach the desired outcomes and target beneficiaries.

## Policy recommendations

*The creation of jobs and livelihood opportunities in the communities of return should be prioritized.* Based on this data analysis, it was observed that most returnees are young, educated individuals who, on average, were working abroad between 1 and 3 years. Despite the high human capital of this group of individuals, 2 out of 3 returnees are currently not in employment. Investing in the creation of jobs for the returnee population will positively contribute to the development of their communities of origin both in the short and long term. According to this data analysis, there is a strong gender dimension of the labour market for Tajik and Kyrgyz returnees, which should be taken into account when creating employment opportunities. Male returnees mostly worked in construction, transportation and storage, and agriculture and forestry. Female returnees were likely to be employed in wholesale and retail trade, hotels and accommodation, manufacturing and other factory work.

*Incentives to work in the formal sector for both employers and employees should be created.* This data analysis indicated that around 1 in 2 respondents was employed in the informal sector, generating dual negative outcomes. For returnees, informal employment results in the lack of access to social protection programmes, and benefits, but it could also lead to abusive situations, being paid below the minimum wage, and other ill-treatment. For central and local government, it results in lower tax revenues, constraining their ability to operate, intervene, and function at the best of their capabilities.

*At the regional level, discussions to create a system for safe migration with adequate precautions to cope with the current pandemic should be created.* This data further corroborated previous evidence on the importance of circular, seasonal migration for Tajik and Kyrgyz nationals. For instance, it was found that their unemployment rate during migration was as low as 2 per cent, while previous to migration was 17 per cent. Not receiving remittances was also reported as a main reason for having a poor financial situation. For this reason, safe corridors for the travel of international labour migrants should be created.

*Distribution of food or cash-based assistance to alleviate the current situation of returnees and their families should be implemented as soon as possible.* This data analysis indicated that most respondents are unemployed and have sustained a total or partial income loss. Returnees are unable to meet their basic needs, reduce the quantity and quality of food they consume, and make debts to cope. This situation can only worsen in the months to come unless development programmes are implemented or COVID-19 regulations on travel are lifted.

*Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be distributed and made available to returnees and communities of return.* This data analysis indicated that access to face masks and hand sanitizers are still problematic, and a distribution of such items could help to curb the spread of the pandemic. Country level reports produced under this project will give a precise overview of the locations within Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that are mostly lacking PPE. These locations should be prioritized by actors working in the area of PPE distribution.

*COVID-19 information materials should be provided by official sources to returnees and their communities of return.* A well-informed public is believed to be essential for curbing the spread of COVID-19 and complying with government policies. This data analysis indicates that all respondents had some level of education and were able to read. Yet, when planning information and training material on COVID-19, the use of the language used should be attended, and simple language should be preferred. Country level reports created under this project can provide a more detailed overview of the areas within Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that should be prioritized.

## Research recommendations

*Research on the needs and impacts of COVID-19 on returnees and their communities of return should be run regularly.* Needs and vulnerabilities evolve and change over time, and the current situation is particularly volatile. At the same time, the data collected under this project can be used in further assessments as a baseline, to compare a situation before and after, or to run longitudinal studies. The data collection structure created under this project should be used in the upcoming months by IOM in coordination with the Governments and other partners for the continuous collection of the operational data and a response to the current pandemic.



*It is recommended to implement research activities on the possible exploitation and trafficking of Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants in the work place. This research has shown that 1 in 2 respondents during migration was working in the informal sector. This situation deserves further attention as exploitation and abuse of migrants working informally are commonplace, and human rights should be preserved. In addition, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is probable that trafficking and migrant vulnerabilities are changing, and the previous research might not necessarily be able to adequately explain and describe the current situation.*

## PART THREE

# STRANDED MIGRANTS





# 3.1 Data Analysis

During December 2020, IOM DTM teams in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan collected a total of 1,648 surveys (900 in the Russian Federation and in 748 Kazakhstan), using the survey tool developed at the regional level to interview stranded migrants. After data cleaning, a total of 89 interviews for Kazakhstan were deleted. This resulted in a new sample size of 1,559 stranded migrants, of whom 900 were interviewed in the Russian Federation and 659 in Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, the geographical scope of this assessment was country-wide, meaning that stranded migrants living in each Kazakhstani region were surveyed. In the Russian Federation, the geographical coverage of the assessment was limited to three key cities of interest: Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg.

Map 2 – Locations of Data Collection

Russian Federation – Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg city



Kazakhstan – Country wide



These maps are for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on these maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

## Thematic Area 1 – Sociodemographic profile

The stranded migrant population was mostly composed of young, married males between 26 and 34 years in the Russian Federation and between 35 and 44 years in Kazakhstan. In both, the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, female respondents were less likely than males to be married. In terms of education level, the majority of the sample population have completed secondary education or higher, while the share of respondents with no education was less than 1 per cent. Education level was considerably higher amongst respondents interviewed in the Russian Federation as compared to these interviewed in Kazakhstan, and amongst females as compared to males. Most stranded migrants came from Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, further indicating that there is a strong regional dimension to international migration to the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan.

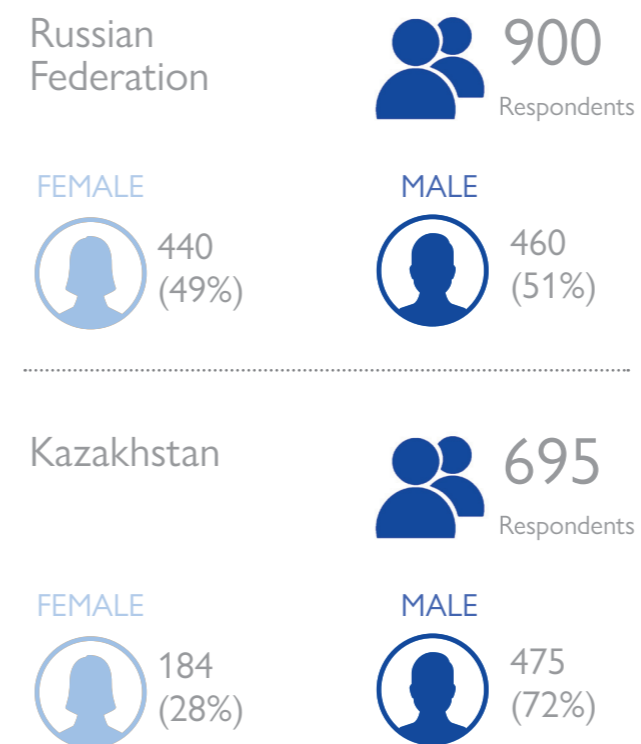
### Sociodemographic profiles

By sex distribution of the sample population (n=1,559), the data indicates that 60 per cent of the stranded migrants were males and 40 per cent were females. In the Russian Federation, the sex ratio was almost equal between males (51%) and females (49%), while in Kazakhstan the share of males was up to 72 per cent. This distribution largely reflects the different sampling strategies adopted in the two countries of analysis.

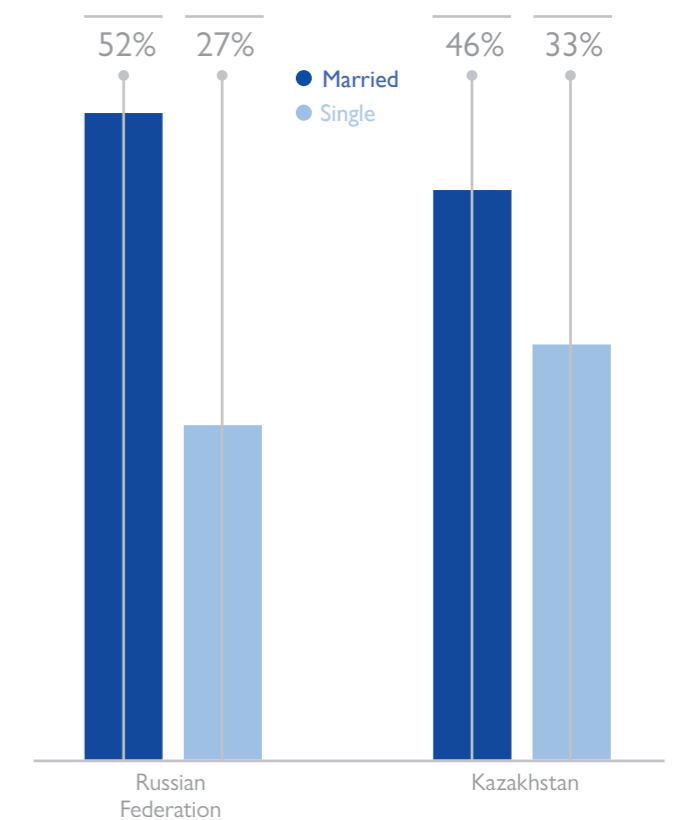
The age breakdown shows that the largest cohorts of participants were between 35 and 44 years old for Kazakhstan (35%), and between 26 and 34 years old for the Russian Federation (35%). The data analysis indicates that most stranded migrants were married, and that this share was higher amongst migrants in the Russian Federation (52%) than amongst migrants in Kazakhstan (46%). The share of respondents who were single at the time of the assessment was higher in Kazakhstan (33%) and lower in the Russian Federation (27%). In both the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, female respondents were less likely to be married in comparison to males.

In Kazakhstan, stranded migrants were asked if they had children and if yes, to specify the location of their children. In total, 60 per cent of respondents in Kazakhstan reported that they had children and that in 65 per cent of the cases their children were living in another country outside of Kazakhstan. In 33 per cent of the cases, however, their children were living with them in Kazakhstan (multiple answers question).

Figure 9 – Sample Distribution by sex



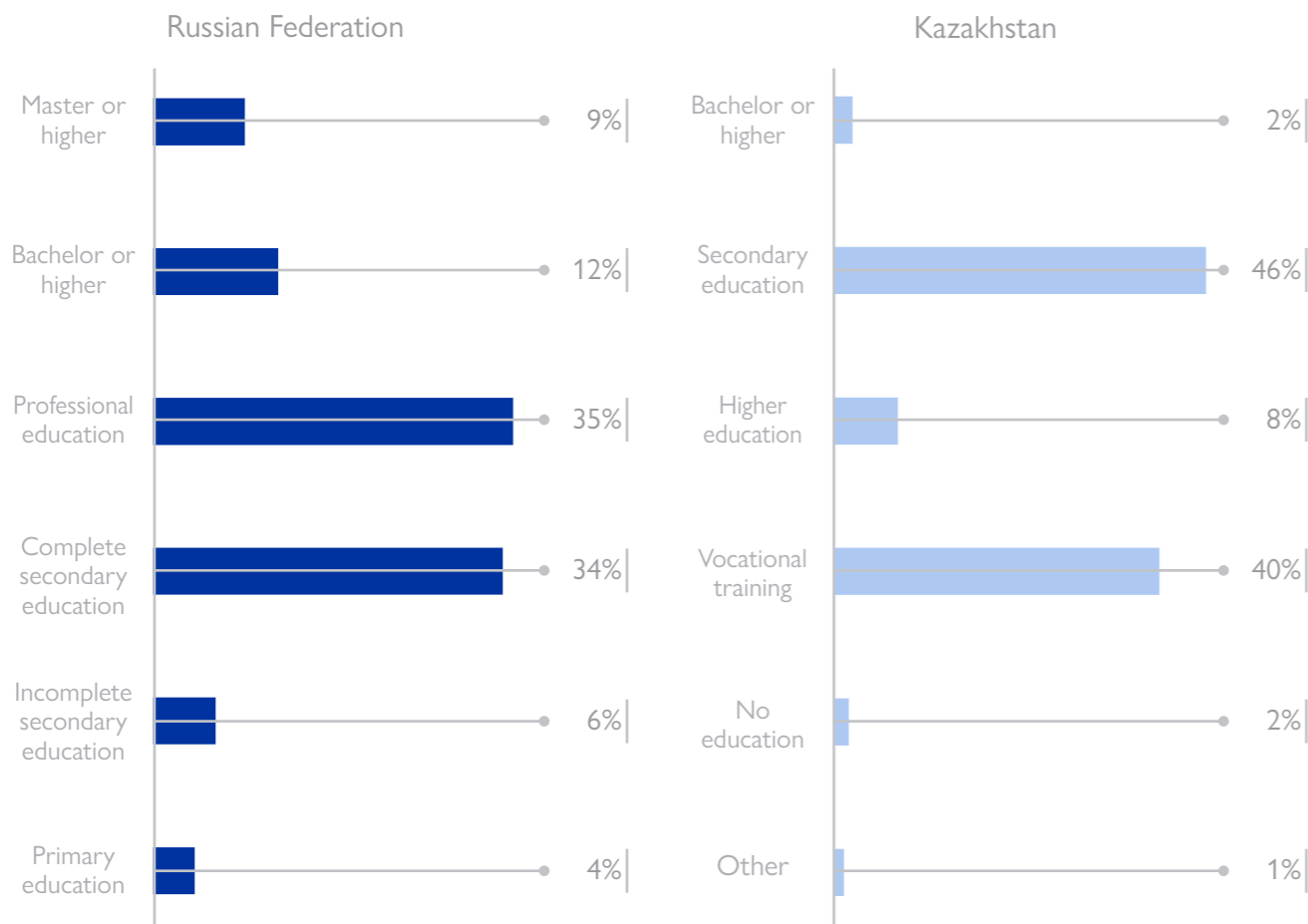
Graph 28 – Share of Respondents by marital status





As this assessment shows almost all stranded migrants had some level of formal education (99%), while less than 1 per cent of the sample population having no education. When comparing the education level of respondents by country of destination, it was observed that stranded migrants in the Russian Federation had higher levels of education as compared to respondents in Kazakhstan. In the Russian Federation stranded migrants were likely to have completed professional education (35%), secondary education (34%), or a bachelor or higher level of education (21%). In Kazakhstan, 46 per cent of the respondents reported that they either completed or started secondary education, and 40 per cent completed vocational training. However, only 2 per cent had a bachelor degree or higher level of education. It was also observed that female migrants were generally more educated than males. In the Russian Federation 23 per cent of female respondents had a bachelor degree or higher, while this share was 19 per cent for males. In Kazakhstan, the share of female stranded migrants with a bachelor degree or higher was 15 per cent, and for males it was 8 per cent.

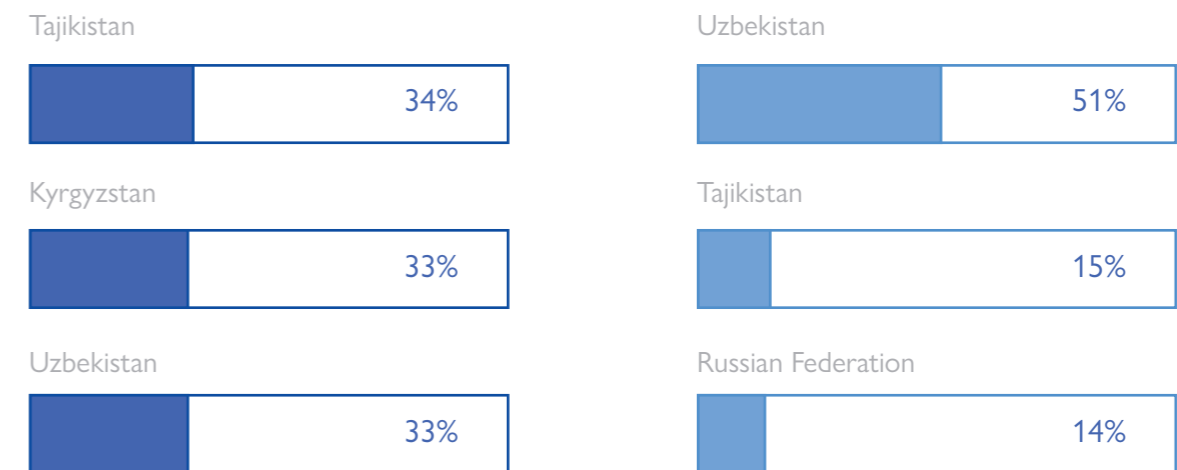
Graph 29 – Share of Respondents by education level



Respondents surveyed in the Russian Federation were asked about the type of settlement which they inhabited in their country of origin. The analysis of this data shows that 32 per cent of the migrants came from a large city (above 100 thousand individuals), 26 per cent from a small, yet urban, town (less than 100 thousand inhabitants), and 21 per cent from the capital. In total, 1 in 5 participants (21%) came from rural areas. The data analysis illustrates that stranded migrants in the Russian Federation were mostly coming from urban-type settlements or cities. This might be unsurprising, as people in rural areas might lack the connections and resources to migrate, but also have limited exposure to an international environment, reducing both their aspiration and their ability to migrate internationally.

Stranded migrants were asked where they were coming from. In terms of nationality, respondents in the Russian Federation were almost equally divided between Tajikistan (34%), Kyrgyzstan (33%), and Uzbekistan (33%), and this reflects the stratification strategy adopted at the country level. When looking at stranded migrants in Kazakhstan, around 1 in 2 respondents (51%) had Uzbek nationality, 15 per cent was from Tajikistan, and 14 per cent was from the Russian Federation. Other reported countries of origin were Kyrgyzstan (8%), Turkmenistan (4%), and the Republic of Moldova (3%).

Graph 30 – Share of Respondents by nationality



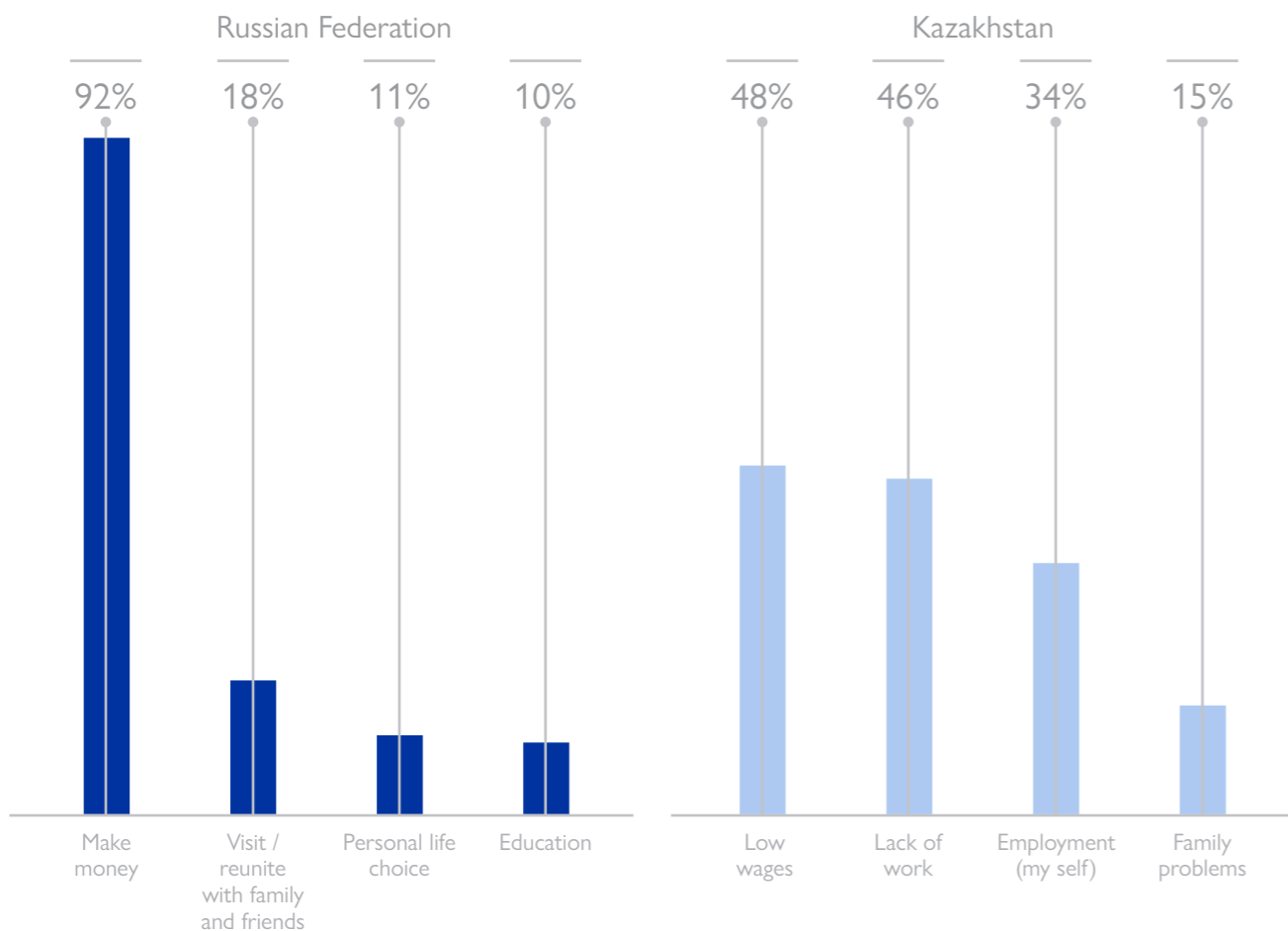
### Thematic Area 2 – Migration trajectories

The data analysis highlights that the main reasons for migration were of economic nature, with the desire to make money, low wages, lack of work and finding employment being the most common reasons for migration. Considering the reasons for selecting a specific destination country, the data on stranded migrants in Kazakhstan illustrates that previous work there, geographical proximity, and higher salaries were the most important factors influencing this decision. When asked about their migration journey, the data shows that over half of the sample population used savings to finance their migration journey, and below 4 in 10 participants had to borrow money in order to pay for their migration. In Kazakhstan, male stranded migrants were more likely than females to borrow money to pay for the migration journey. The length of migration changed between stranded migrants in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, with the former being more likely to stay in migration for over 3 years.

This section of the survey explored the migration trajectory of the target population. This is intended as factors that influenced the decision to leave the home country, reasons for selecting a specific destination, and factors impeding returns. To fill country-specific gaps and information needs, the survey tools utilized for this part of the assessment differed significantly between the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan.

Overall, the main reasons for migration were of economic nature. In total, 92 per cent of the stranded migrants in the Russian Federation migrated to make money, while finding employment (34%), lack of work (46%), and low wages (48%) were cited as the main factors amongst respondents in Kazakhstan.

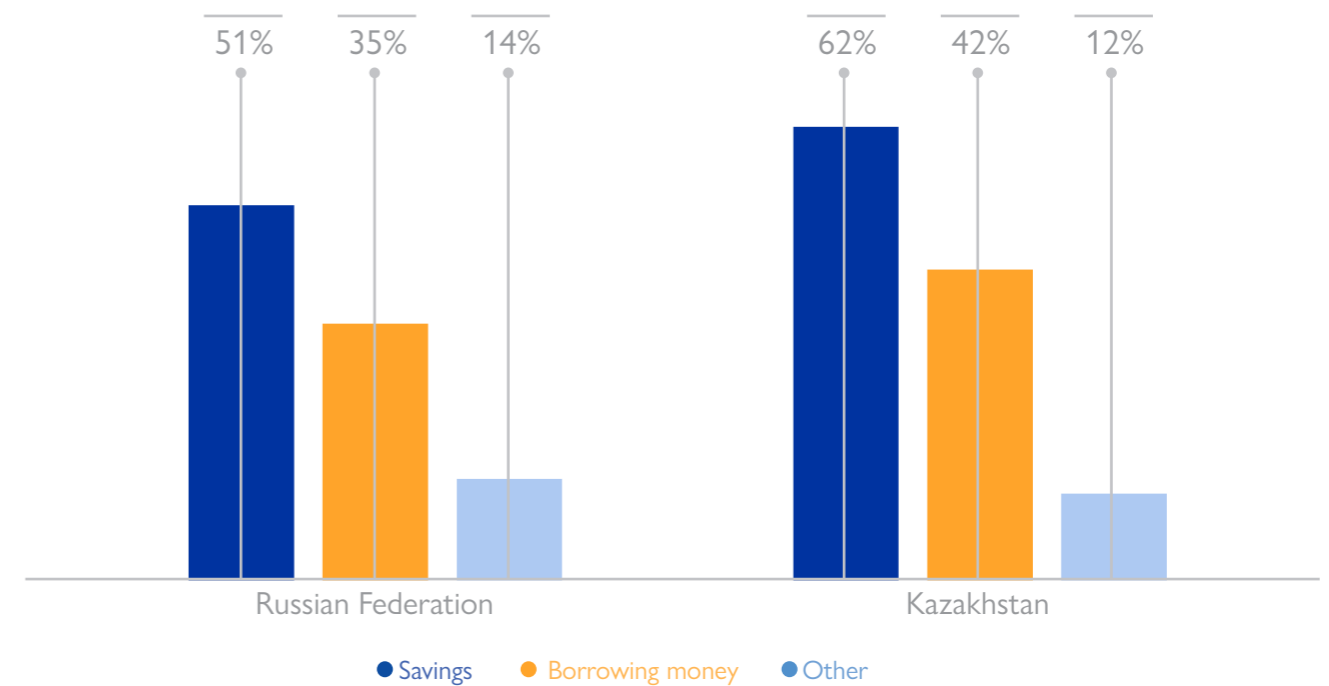
Graph 31 – Share of Respondents by main reasons for migration (multiple answers question)



Respondents in Kazakhstan reported the main reasons for choosing Kazakhstan as their destination. The primary reasons included prior work experience in Kazakhstan (21%), geographical proximity to their home country (14%), and higher incomes (11%). As secondary reasons, respondents mentioned higher incomes (17%), residence of other migrants from their country there (10%), and availability of jobs (10%).

The data analysis indicates that using savings was the most common way to pay for the migration journey for respondents in both the Russian Federation (51%) and Kazakhstan (62%). This is likely due to the fact that most stranded migrants come from Central Asian countries, and migration costs are not high. However, 35 per cent of respondents in the Russian Federation and 42 per cent in Kazakhstan had to borrow money in order to pay for the migration journey. No differences between sexes were observed amongst respondents in the Russian Federation. However, in Kazakhstan male stranded migrants were more likely to borrow money to pay for their migration journey as compared to females (45% versus 36%).

Graph 32 – Share of Respondents by type of payment for the migration journey



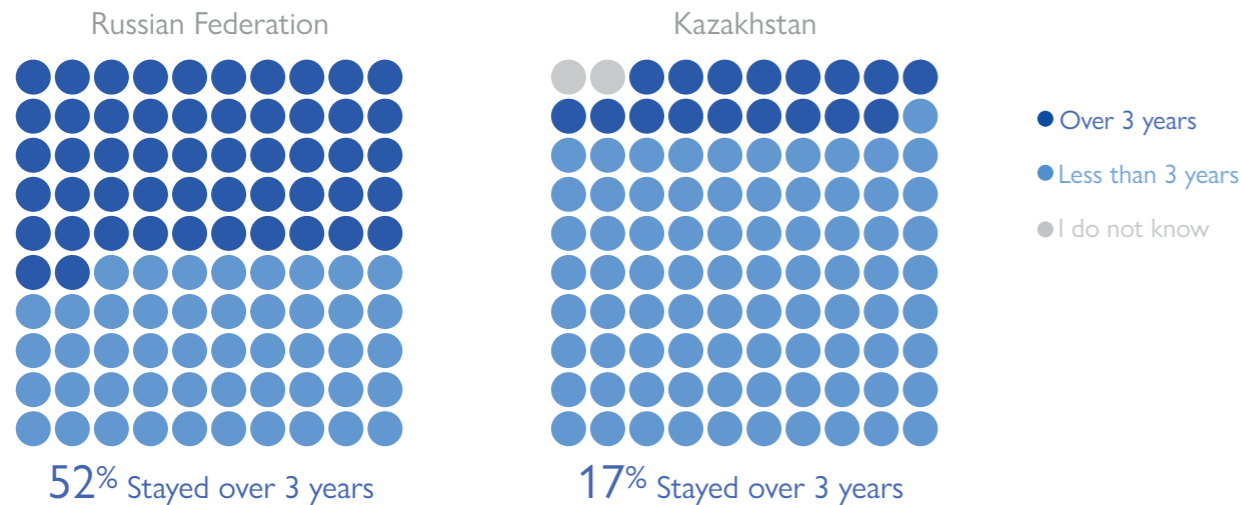
Note: In the survey used in Kazakhstan this question was multiple answer option.

The data analysis indicated that stranded migrants in the Russian Federation tended to spend more time in migration as compared to respondents in Kazakhstan. Overall, 51 per cent of stranded migrants living the Russian Federation stayed there for over 3 years, while this was the case only for 17 per cent of migrants in Kazakhstan.

In Kazakhstan, stranded migrants reported how COVID-19 impacted the length of their migration. In total, 82 per cent of the respondents in Kazakhstan reported that the length of their migration changed due to COVID-19. In most cases (90%) they reported that the main impact of COVID-19 was the inability to go home. Stranded migrants in Kazakhstan mentioned that border closures (43%), insufficient amount of money for the return journey (27%), or lack of documents (13%) were the main factors impeding their return.



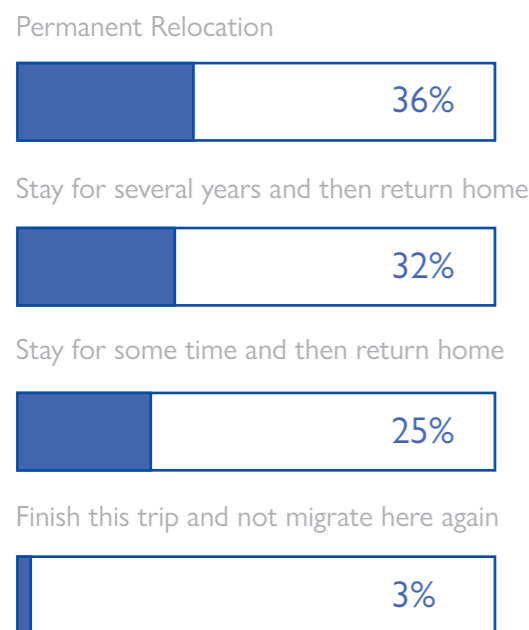
Graph 33 – Share of Respondents by migration length



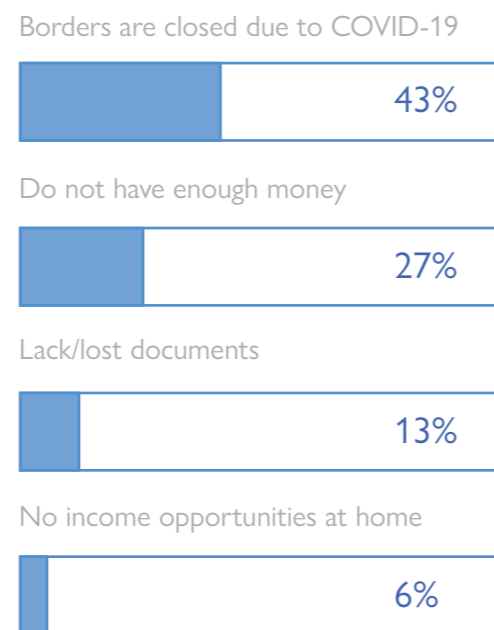
To further explore the migration trajectory, stranded migrants in the Russian Federation were asked about their plans for the future. Overall, 36 per cent of the sample wanted to permanently relocate in the Russian Federation, 32 per cent wanted to stay for few years and then return home, and 25 per cent wanted to spend some time in the Russian Federation and then return home. No major difference between sexes was found.

Respondents in Kazakhstan were asked why they wanted to return, why they were unable to return, and whether or not they expected to face challenges upon return. The data analysis illustrates that most stranded migrants in Kazakhstan, wanted to return to visit friends and family (63%), or because family wanted them back (28%), or because life or work was not as expected (17%). End of visa or work permit and job loss were also the main factors influencing the desire to return, and they were reported by 12 per cent and 11 per cent of the respondents, respectively. In total, 83 per cent of stranded migrants in Kazakhstan, expected to face return related challenges. In most cases, they envisioned that the main return related challenges would be linked to finding a job (55%), to the difficulty to migrate again (33%), and to repayments of debts (15%).

Graph 34 – Share of Russian Respondents by plans for the future



Graph 35 – Share of Kazakh Respondents by reasons for not being able to return



### Thematic Area 3 – Remittances

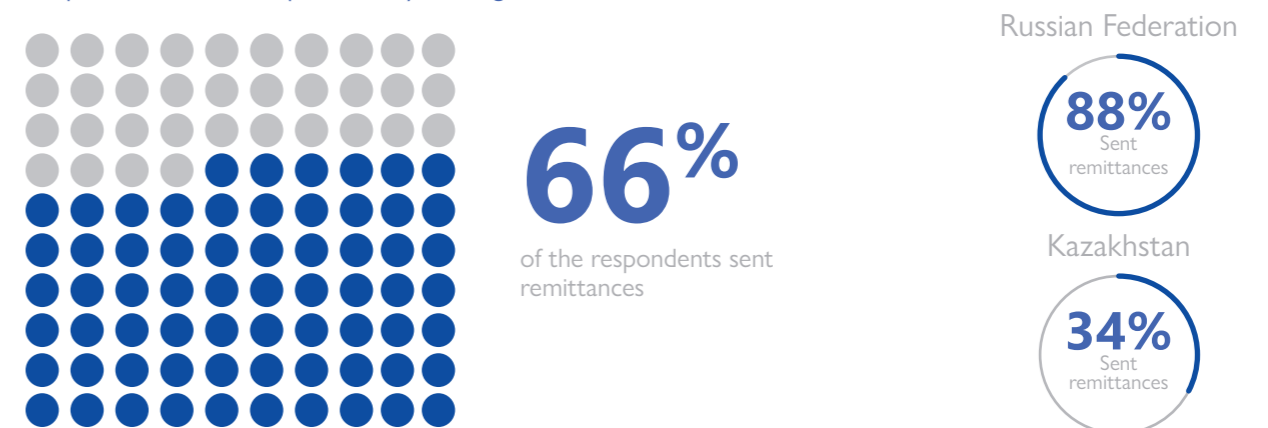
In total, more than 6 in 10 respondents were sending remittances to their home country. The average respondent would send remittances on a monthly basis. The share of individuals sending remittances was much higher amongst stranded migrants living in the Russian Federation as compared to those living in Kazakhstan. When looking at sex, the data indicates that female stranded migrants both in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan were less likely than males to send remittances back home. By far, the main reason for sending remittances was to support family and friends. The most common migration sending mechanisms used were bank or money transfer operator offices, or banks and money transfer operators' apps or websites. The data analysis indicated that COVID-19 severely impacted the sum of remittances sent by survey participants. During the lockdown in the Russian Federation 2 in 5 respondents had to stop sending remittances, and this disproportionately impacted female respondents. In Kazakhstan, 3 in 5 individuals had to reduce or completely stop sending remittances due to COVID-19.

#### Remittances sent

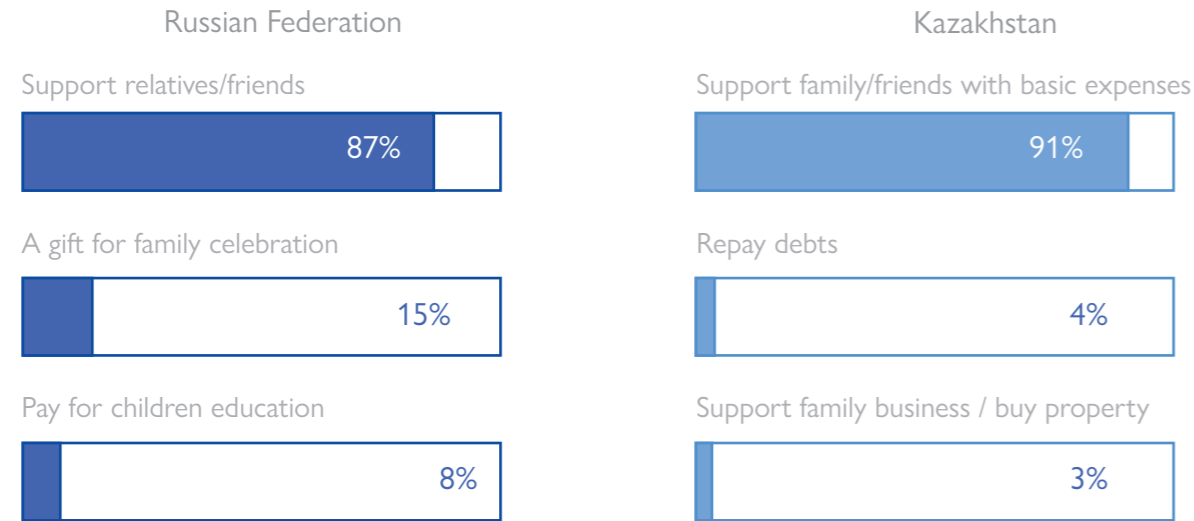
For many migrant-sending families, remittances represent an important form of income. At the household level, during periods of economic downturn, remittances can act as a consumption smoothing mechanism, and the community level, they have a development potential, which can be enhanced by government policies. For these reasons, a part of the questionnaire focused on remittances and the impact that COVID-19 had on remittances.

Overall, it was found that 66 per cent of the respondents sent remittances to their home countries. Stranded migrants in the Russian Federation were significantly more likely to send remittances (88%), as compared to their counterparts interviewed in Kazakhstan (34%). This result could be linked to the different sampling approach used in the two studies. In the Russian Federation, all stranded migrants were in employment. When looking at sex, the data indicates that female stranded migrants both in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan were less likely than males to send remittances back home. In the Russian Federation 92 per cent of male respondents were sending remittances, while this share was 83 per cent among females. In Kazakhstan, the share of male migrants who were sending remittances was 40 per cent, and amongst female migrants this share was 20 per cent. The data analysis shows a correlation between working in the formal sector and the ability to send remittances back home. In Kazakhstan 42 per cent of the respondents working in the formal sector were sending remittances, while just 36 per cent reported the same in the informal sector. When asked why they were sending remittances, 87 per cent of the respondents in the Russian Federation mentioned to support family and friends, 15 per cent to buy a gift for a family celebration, and 8 per cent to pay for children education. In total, 91 per cent of the stranded migrants in Kazakhstan sent remittances to support family and friends in meeting basic expenses, and 4 per cent to repay debts. In terms of frequency, 63 per cent were sending remittances on a monthly basis, with limited difference between respondents in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan. In the Russian Federation, stranded migrants who did not send remittances to their home countries were asked why they did not. The most mentioned reasons were that they did not earn enough money (33%), or that they did not have a family to send money to (24%).

Graph 36 – Share of Respondents by sending remittances

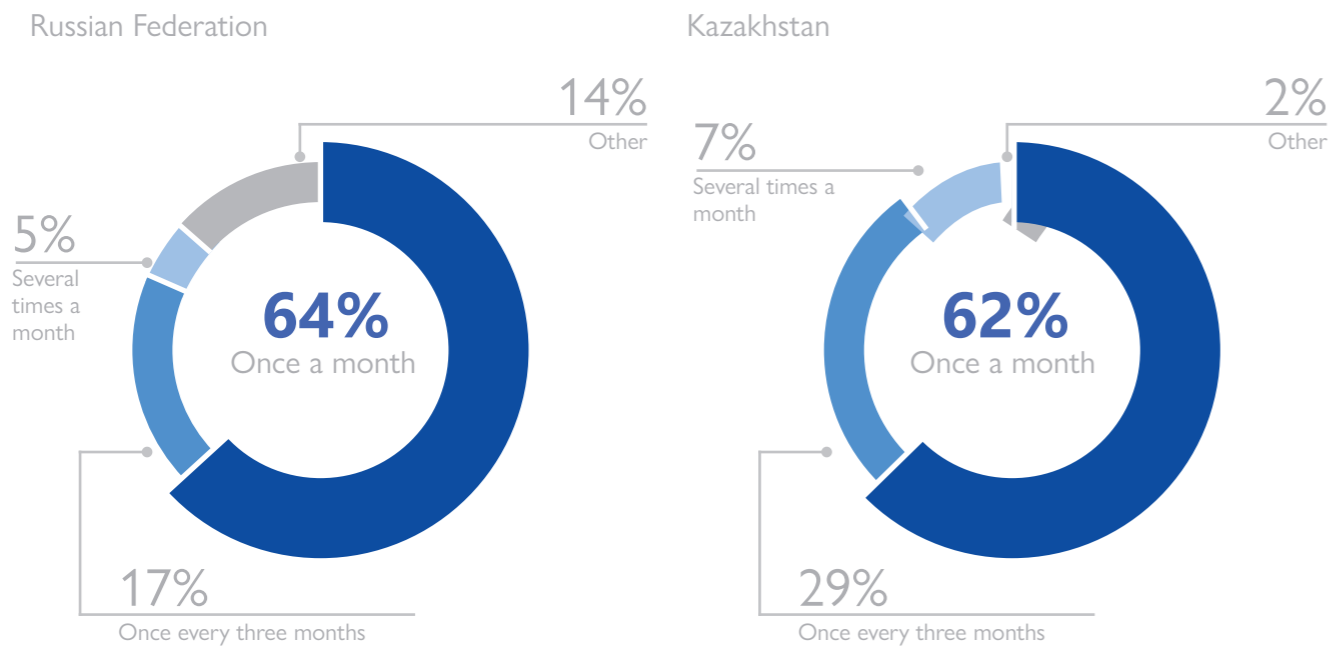


Graph 37 – Share of Respondents by main reasons for sending remittances



Note: In the survey used in the Russian Federation this question was a multiple answer option. This question was asked only to respondents who sent remittances back home.

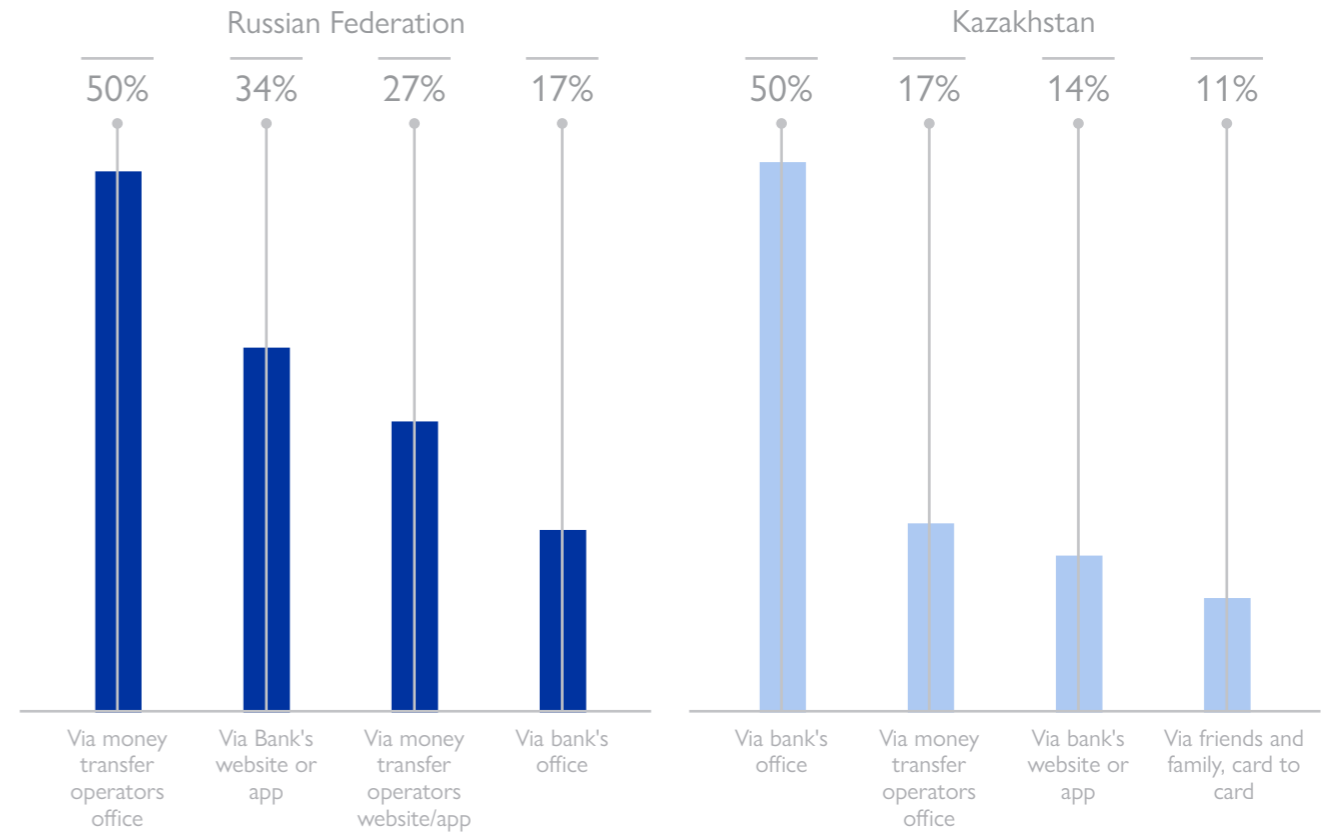
Graph 38 – Share of Respondents by how often they send remittances



Note: This question was asked only to respondents who sent remittances back home.

In terms of modalities for sending remittances, the data analysis highlighted some differences between stranded migrants in the Russian Federation and in Kazakhstan. In the former country this question was multiple choice, and it was found that 1 in 2 migrants (50%) sent remittances via a money transfer operator office, 34 per cent via the bank website or app, and 27 per cent via money transfer operator's app or website. The use of apps and website was less common amongst stranded migrants in Kazakhstan, who were more likely to send remittances from the bank office (50%), or from the office of a money transfer operator (17%).

Graph 39 – Share of Respondents by preferred way of sending remittances

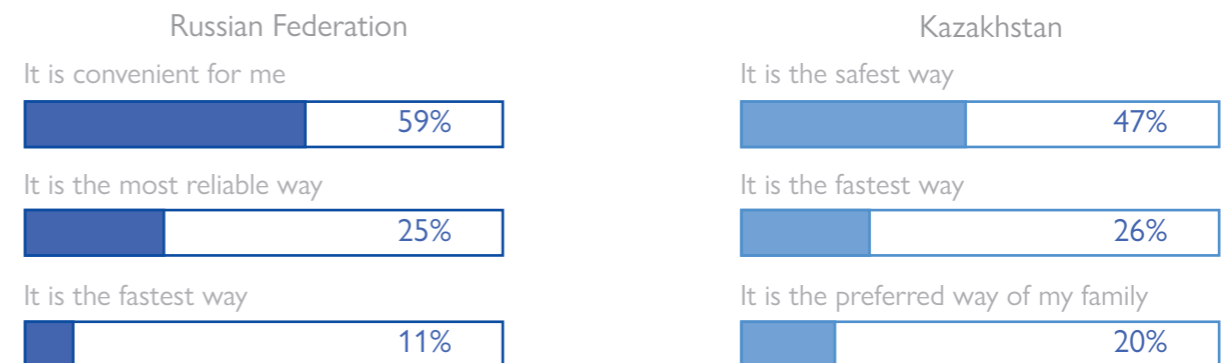


Note: In the survey used in the Russian Federation this question was a multiple answer option. This question was asked only to respondents who sent remittances back home.

The higher reliance on e-tools for remittance sending of respondents in the Russian Federation was also highlighted by the fact that 80 per cent of them sent remittances via phone at least once. The data also indicated that 83 per cent of them had a bank account, and 84 per cent had a bank card.

In terms of preferred modalities for sending remittances, respondents in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan reported similar reasons. For the latter, the safety of the modality used was cited by 47 per cent of the respondents. In addition, 27 per cent reported the speed of the modality, and 20 per cent used that modality because it was the preferred way by their family back home. Stranded migrants in the Russian Federation used a specific remittance sending instrument because for them it was convenient (59%), reliable (25%), and fast (11%).

Graph 40 – Share of Respondents by reason for preferring a specific way of sending remittances



Note: This question was asked only to respondents who sent remittances back home.

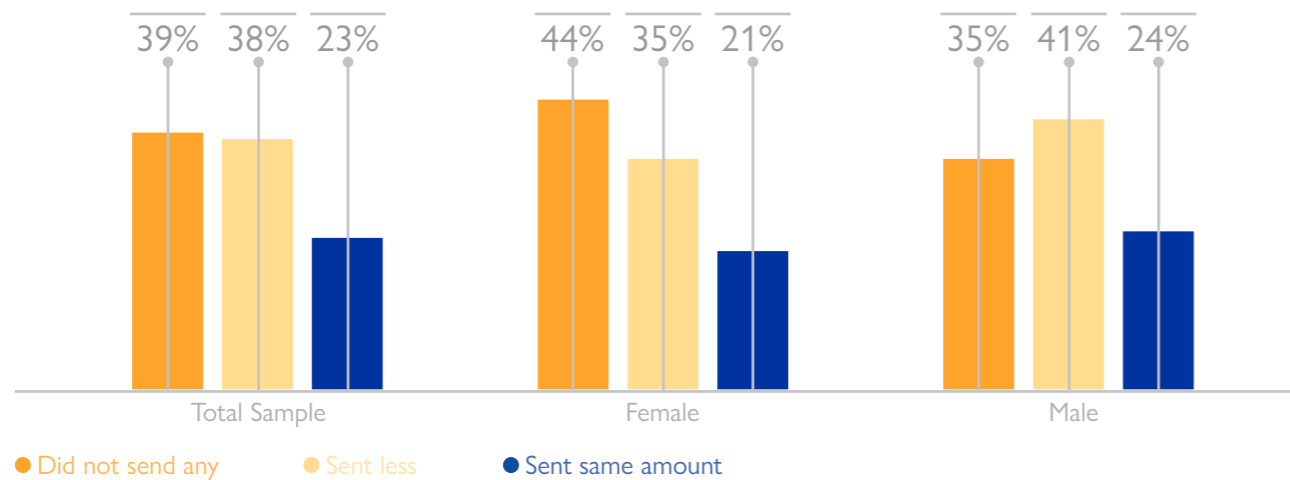


### COVID-19 Impacts on remittances

In the Russian Federation, 4 per cent of the sample population reported changing the way they were sending remittances (via bank office, mobile app) due to the current pandemic. During the lockdown (April to June 2020), 77 per cent of the stranded migrants in the Russian Federation had to either stop sending remittances (39%) or sent less remittances (38%), while 23 per cent were able to send the same amount as during the period prior to lockdown. The impact of COVID-19 on remittances was stronger amongst female respondents as compared to males. In total, 44 per cent of female stranded migrants had to stop sending remittances, as compared to 35 per cent of male respondents. Such an uneven impact between males and females might be linked to the gender segmentation of the labour market. Female respondents were more likely than males to be working in service industries such as hotels and accommodation, wholesale and retail trade. Both of these sectors were severely impacted by the lockdown, especially when compared to construction, which was the main sector of employment of male respondents.

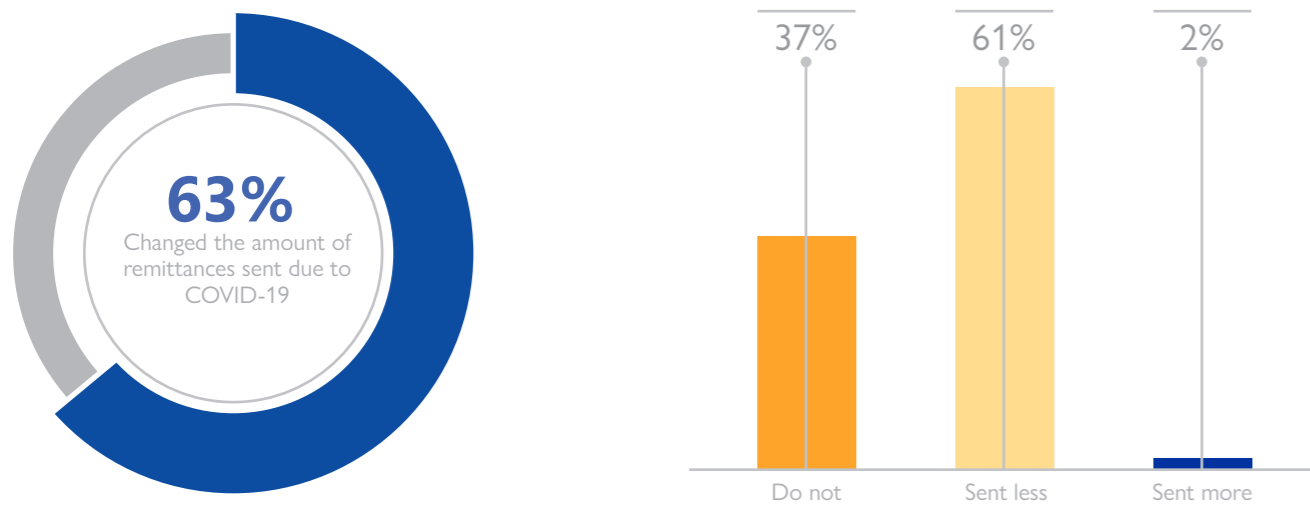
In Kazakhstan, 63 per cent of stranded migrants changed the sum of remittances sent due to COVID-19. Overall, 61 per cent of them reported that due to COVID-19 they were sending less remittances, while 37 per cent had to stop sending remittances.

Graph 41 – Share of Russian Respondents by changes in remittance sending during the lockdown (April – June 2020) and sex



Note: This question was asked only to respondents who sent remittances back home.

Graph 42 – Share of Kazakh Respondents by COVID-19 impacts on remittances



Note: This question was asked only to respondents who sent remittances back home.

### Thematic Area 4 – Employment situation

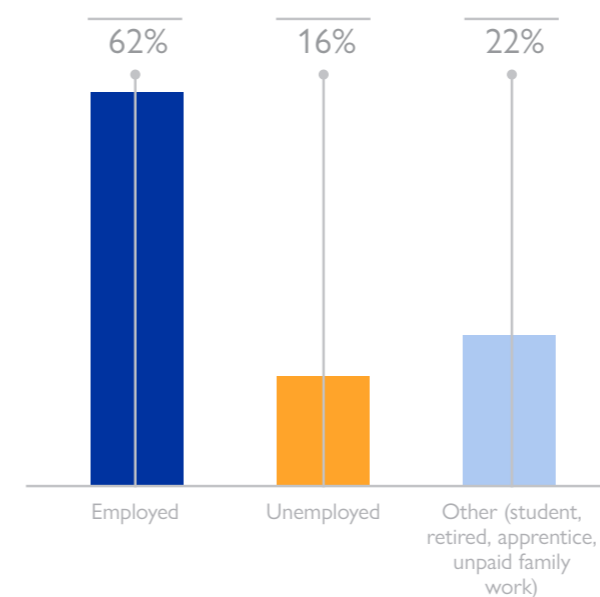
COVID-19 had significant impacts on the employment situation of stranded migrants. At the time of the assessment, 1 in 3 individuals interviewed in Kazakhstan were unemployed, and this represents a two-fold increase as compared to the situation before migration. The unemployment rate before and during migration among female respondents in Kazakhstan was around twice as higher than the unemployment rate of males. Even when employed, more than 1 in 2 respondents reported earning less now as compared to the period before the COVID-19 outbreak. The share of respondents working in the informal sector was around 50 per cent, and it was higher amongst respondents in Kazakhstan than amongst interviewees in the Russian Federation. Sectors of employment before and during migration were similar, and most respondents were employed in construction, wholesale and retail trade, hotels and accommodation, and other services and activities. A nuanced gender dimension of the labour market was found, with very different employment sectors for female and male respondents. While construction was predominantly a male sector, the wholesale and retail trade, and hotels and accommodation were mostly employing female workers. The set of stranded migrants in the Russian Federation reported that there were mostly migrants doing their type of job, and that locals did not apply for that type of employment. Perhaps, this finding indicates a structural demand for migrant labour, which is assumed to be particularly relevant for the specific sectors of employment mentioned above.

Given the importance of labour migration for countries in Central Asia and the Russian Federation, this section of the survey focused on the employment and the economic situation of stranded migrants. This part of the survey analysed the economic and employment situation before, during and after migration. In addition, a set of questions was designed to further unpack the effects of the current pandemic on international labour migrants.

#### Employment status prior to migration

Prior to migration, 62 per cent of the sample population were employed, while 16 per cent were unemployed, and 22 per cent were either retired, studying, or doing unpaid family work. The employment rate was higher amongst stranded migrants living in Kazakhstan (74%) as compared to respondents living in the Russian Federation (54%). Yet, unemployment rates were similar between the two sets of respondents. This is largely explained by the finding that for respondents in the Russian Federation it was much more common to perform unpaid family work (20%) as compared to respondents in Kazakhstan (5%). Quite interestingly, the unemployment rate prior to migration found amongst stranded migrants was similar to the one reported by returnees, further corroborating previous evidence on unemployment rates. No differences between sexes in terms of unemployment were found amongst respondents in the Russian Federation. However, for the respondents interviewed in Kazakhstan, gender was correlated to the employment status before migration. In total, 30 per cent of female respondents reported being unemployed before migration, and this share was 12 per cent for male stranded migrants.

Graph 43 – Share of Respondents by employment status prior to migration

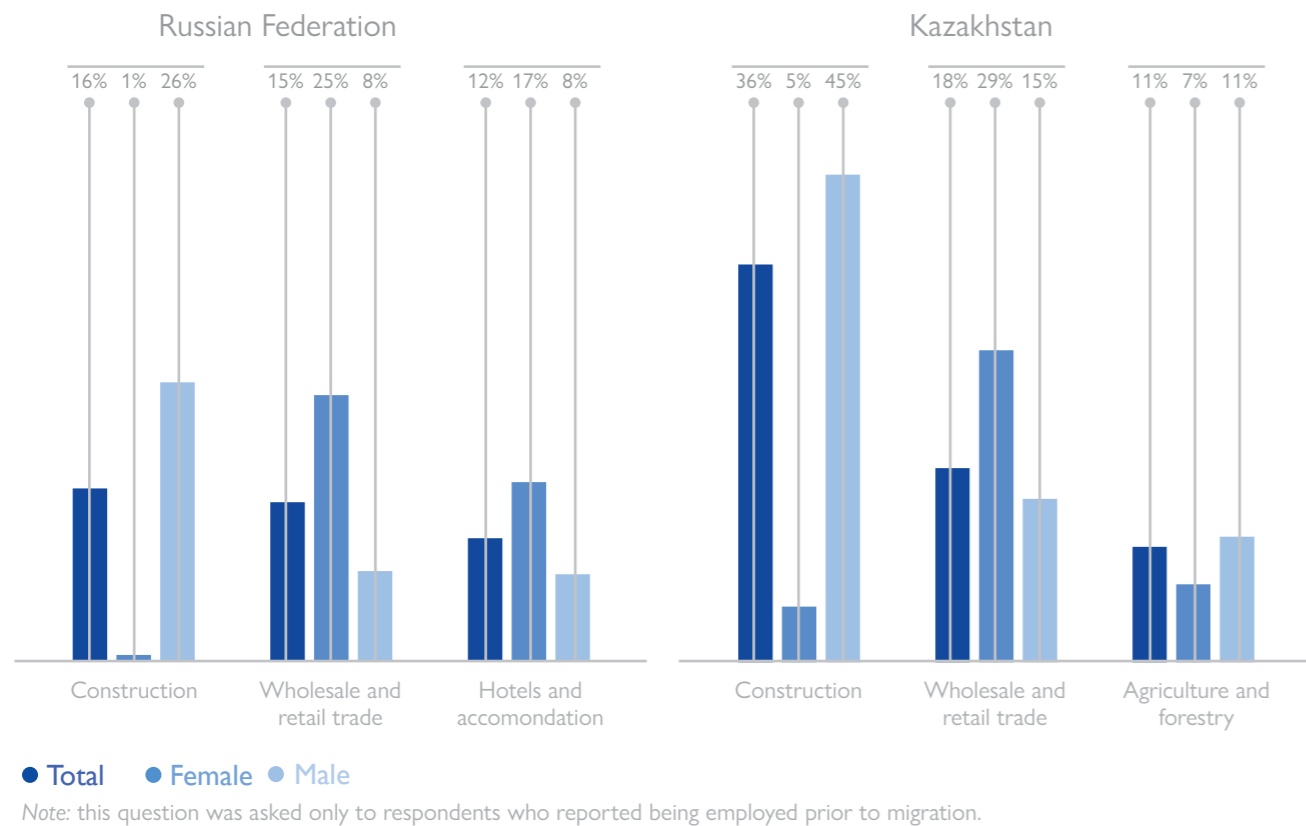


If employed prior to migration, participants were asked to specify their sector of employment.

Construction, wholesale and retail trade, hotels and accommodation, agriculture and forestry were the primary sectors of employment of the sample population. By analysing answer options by the sex of the respondents, a strong gender dimension of labour migration was found. In the Russian Federation, males were much more likely than females to be working in construction (26% versus 1%), transportation (10% versus 0%), and agriculture and forestry (9% versus 3%). At the same time, the female respondents who worked before migration were more likely to be employed in wholesale and retail trade (25% versus 8%), hotels and accommodation (17% versus 8%), education (12% versus 5%), and health care (11% versus 1%). This finding further corroborates the gender segmentation of the labour market indicated in the returnee survey.



Graph 44 – Share of Respondents by sector of employment prior to migration



When looking at the sectors of employment of stranded migrants in Kazakhstan prior to migration, the gender segmentation described above remains evident. In total, 29 per cent of female respondents were working in wholesale and retail trade as compared to 15 per cent of male respondents. The divide is even greater when considering the share of respondents working in hotel and accommodation services, where the share of female employed was 22 per cent, and the share of males was 3 per cent. Construction was a more common sector of employment for male respondents (45%) as opposed to females (5%).



Filed researcher in a bazaar © IOM 2021

Current employment status

The data analysis indicates that the unemployment rate at the time of the interview amongst stranded migrants in Kazakhstan was up to 31 per cent. This represents a two-fold increase as compared to the unemployment rate prior to migration, but is still half of the unemployment rate experienced by returnees in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Accordingly, it appears that migrants who decided to stay in migration during the pandemic were more successful in finding income generating opportunities as compared to these migrants who returned to their home countries. This finding might indicate that legal and safe pathways for international labour migration should be created to reduce the negative effects of COVID-19 on migrants, returnees, and their families. In terms of current employment status of stranded migrants in Kazakhstan, it was observed that unemployment was higher for female respondents (43%) as compared to male interviewees (27%).

Graph 45 – Share of Respondents in Kazakhstan by employment status during migration

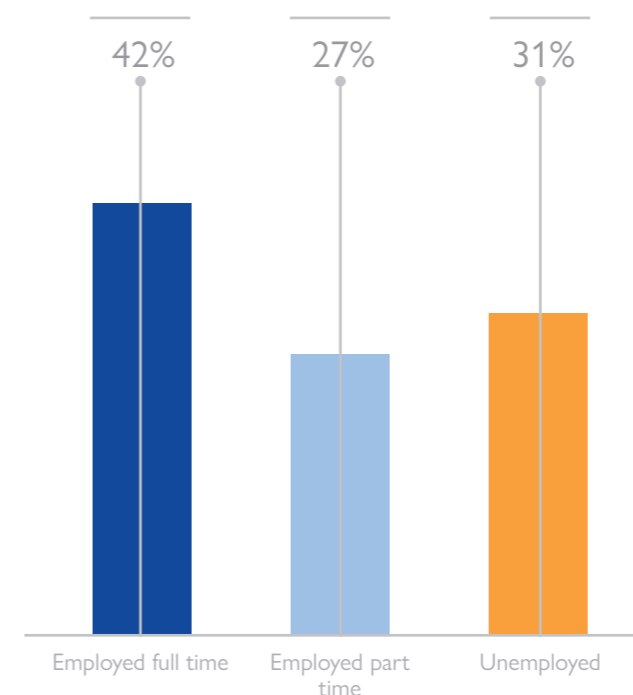
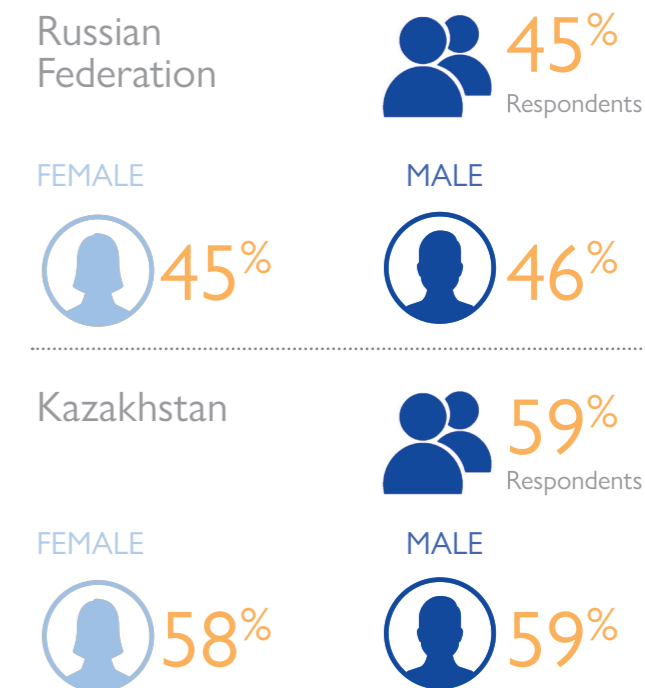


Figure 10 – Share of Respondents by working in the informal sector during migration



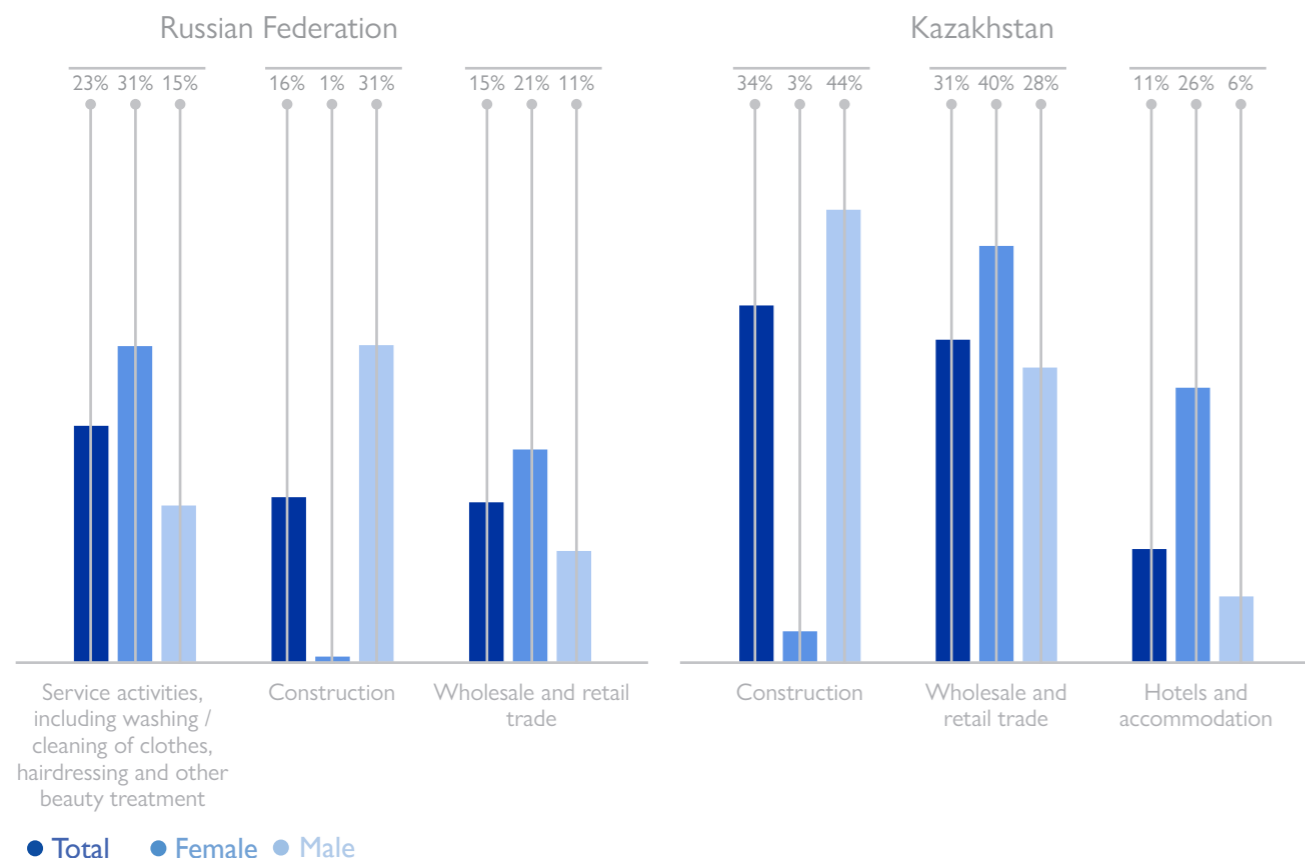
Note: this question was asked only to respondents who reported being employed during migration. In the data collection tool used for the Russian Federation, working without documents was used as a proxy for this question.

If employed at the time of the interview, stranded migrants in Kazakhstan were asked if they were working in the informal sector, while respondents in the Russian Federation were asked if they had a contract (as a proxy for informal work). The data analysis indicates that the share of respondents working informally was 45 per cent for the Russian Federation, and 59 per cent for Kazakhstan, with negligible differences between sexes. A total of 61 per cent of the respondents in the Russian Federation cited not needed a contract as a main reason for not having a contract, while 32 per cent reported employers' reluctance to sign one.

The data analysis indicates that the most common sectors of employment at the time of the interview remained construction, wholesale and retail trade, service activities, hotels and accommodation. Differences between sexes rose when considering a sector of employment at the time of the interview, and similar patterns as the ones previously reported were found.



Graph 46 – Share of Respondents by sector of employment during migration



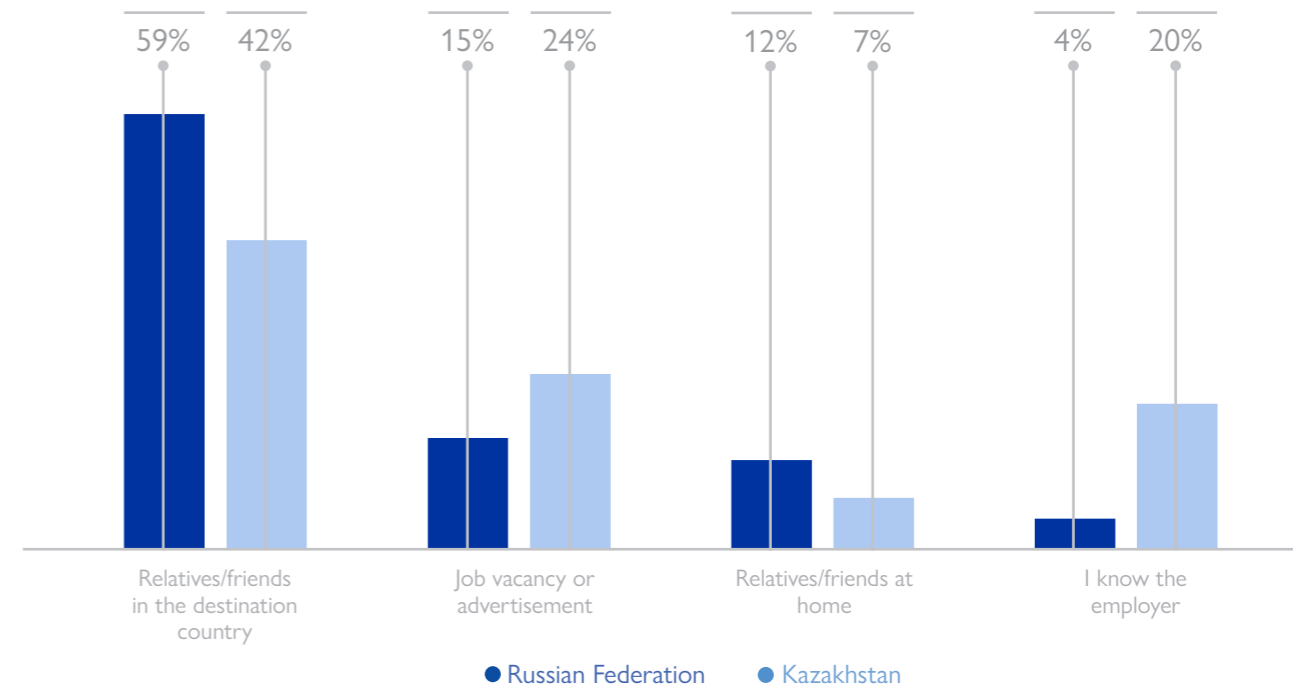
Note: this question was asked only to respondents who reported being employed prior to migration.

In the Russian Federation, the most common sector of employment was service activities (23%), in which 31 per cent of female respondents and 15 per cent of males were working. The next most common sectors of employment were construction (16%), wholesale and retail trade (15%). In Kazakhstan, construction was the first sector of employment (33%), where 44 per cent of male respondents and 3 per cent of female stranded migrants were working. Another large proportion of the sample population was working in wholesale and retail trade (31%), hotels and accommodation (11%).

For stranded migrants in Kazakhstan, the most common ways to find employment were through relatives and friends in Kazakhstan (42%), job vacancy or advertisement (24%), or their previous acquaintance with an employer (20%). For stranded migrants in the Russian Federation, the data analysis illustrates that jobs were mostly found through relatives and friends in the Russian Federation (59%), job vacancy or advertisement (15%), and through relatives and friends in the home country (12%).

In terms of recruitment, in Kazakhstan, 92 per cent of the sample population reported that they did not go through an official recruitment process to find their current job. In general, 96 per cent of respondents in Kazakhstan reported that they did not have to pay a fee in order to find employment, and 73 per cent of respondents were earning above the minimum wage. The share of respondents earning below the minimum wage was 13 per cent. When asked why they did not go through an official recruitment process, 49 per cent cited using their social network to find employment, and 28 per cent reported being unaware of official recruitment processes.

Graph 47 – Share of Respondents by how they found employment



The data collected in Kazakhstan highlights that COVID-19 had a strong impact on employment. In Kazakhstan, 56 per cent of respondents who were working at the time of the survey as well as before COVID-19 reported that currently they were now earning less money. In total, 45 per cent of them reported working less hours, and 45 per cent was working the same number of hours.

The survey tool used in the Russian Federation provided additional information on the employment situation of stranded migrants living there. It was found that 43 per cent of them were paid informally, cash in hand, which is similar to the share of people working without a contract (45%). When asked who works next to them, 42 per cent of the respondents replied that they were mostly migrants, and 32 per cent reported that in their work place there were half migrants and half Russian citizens. In addition, 29 per cent of the sample population reported that local workers do not work nor apply to the jobs they do. These findings corroborate the idea that international labour migration is responding to a structural demand for workforce in particular sectors of employment. Therefore, creating safe and legal pathways for international labour migration would ensure protection of labour migrants and targeted support for these respective businesses in coping and recovering from the current pandemic.



Survey respondent  
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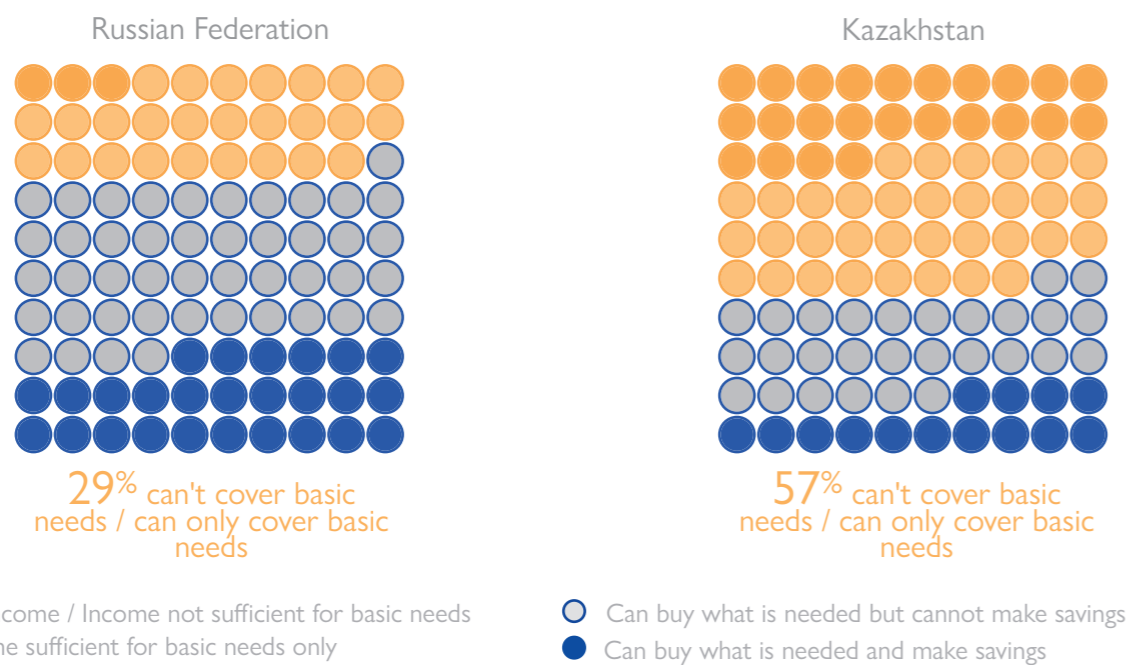
### Thematic Area 5 – COVID-19 impacts and vulnerabilities

In total, around 7 in 10 respondents reported that their financial situation deteriorated due to COVID-19, and overall, COVID-19 impacts appeared to be more significant in Kazakhstan as compared to the Russian Federation. In Kazakhstan, the deterioration of the financial situation was reflected by a total or partial income loss, debts, and no income or insufficient level of income to cover basic needs in 24 per cent of the sample. The data analysis indicates that the financial situation of female migrants in Kazakhstan was significantly worse as compared to male respondents. Almost 7 in 10 respondents in Kazakhstan reported facing COVID-19 related challenges at the time of the assessment, and this share was higher among female interviewees. The most reported problems were insufficient income, salary reduction, unemployment, debts, mental stress, and the desire to leave but inability to do so. In Kazakhstan, 70 per cent of respondents reported that they started to face problems only after the outbreak of COVID-19. In terms of COVID-19 vulnerabilities, it was found that most stranded migrants find COVID-19 related information in the internet, social media, or messaging apps, and this should be considered when developing information campaigns. When looking at COVID-19 needs, the data indicates that access to hand sanitizers and information should be prioritized.

#### COVID-19 impacts

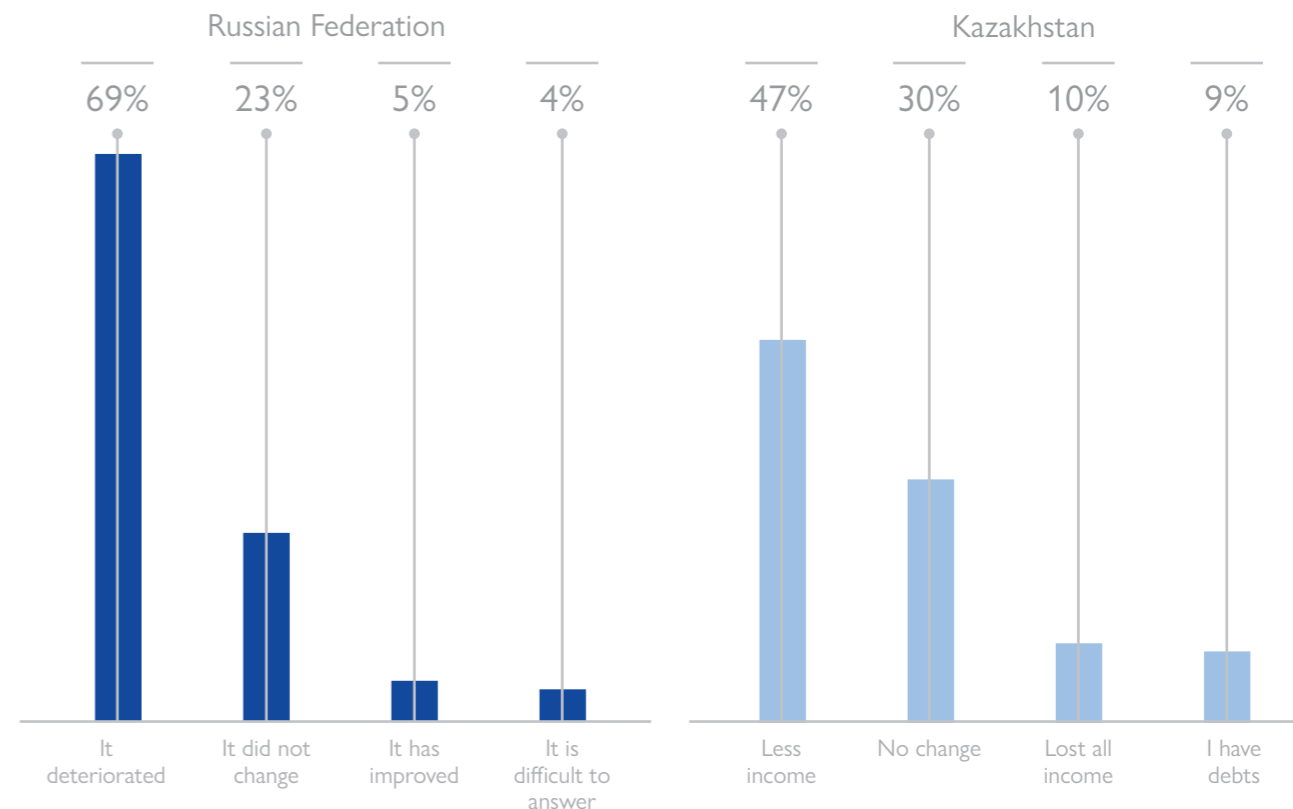
The data analysis indicates that COVID-19 had severe impacts on the financial situation of stranded migrants. In the Russian Federation, 29 per cent of the sample reported that their income was not sufficient to cover basic needs (3%), or that was sufficient for basic needs only (26%). The data shows that the situation in Kazakhstan was worse than in the Russian Federation. In total, 24 per cent of respondents in Kazakhstan had no income or insufficient level of income to cover basic needs. In addition, 34 per cent of the sample population reported that their income was solely sufficient to cover basic expenses. In the Russian Federation, the financial situation of stranded migrants was consistent between sexes. In Kazakhstan, females had a worse financial situation as compared to male respondents, with 55 per cent of females reporting insufficient incomes, or just enough to cover basic needs, while this was lower for males (44%).

Graph 48 – Share of Respondents by current financial situation



\*Basic needs are defined as housing, food, health care and education.

Graph 49 – Share of Respondents by changes to the financial situation due to COVID-19



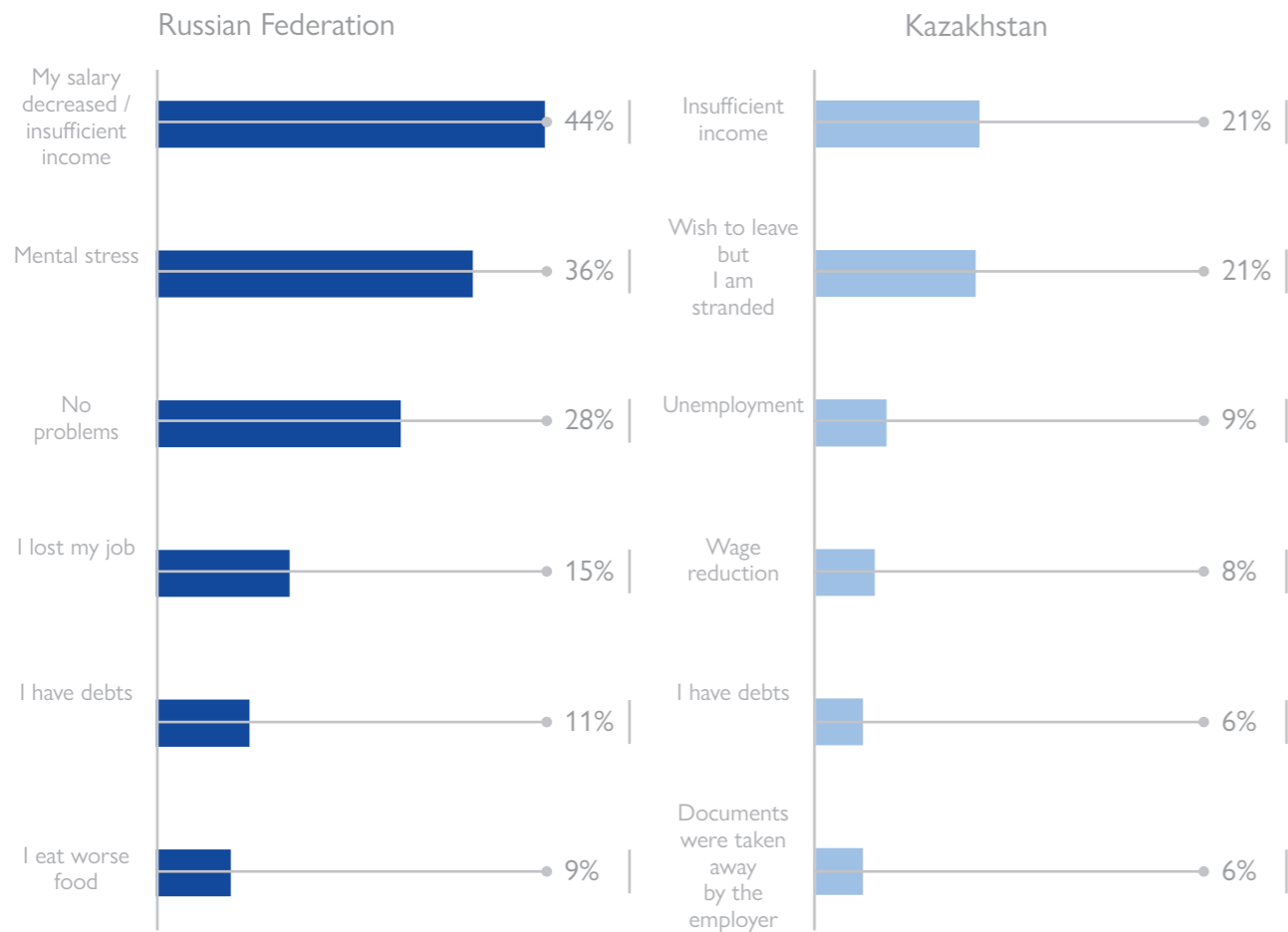
Interviewees were asked how the financial situation reported at the time of the assessment changed as compared to the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Russian Federation, 69 per cent of the sample reported that their financial situation deteriorated. In Kazakhstan, 47 per cent of the stranded migrants interviewed said that they now have less income, and 10 per cent that they lost all income sources.

To further unpack COVID-19 impacts on stranded migrants, the sample population was asked what were the main challenges related to COVID-19 at the time of the assessment. The survey tool for the Russian Federation this this question as multiple choice, and 7 out of 10 participants mentioned various problems linked to COVID-19. Insufficient income / salary reduction was mentioned by 44 per cent of the sample population, 36 per cent referred to mental stress, and 15 per cent indicated a job loss. Other common problems linked to COVID-19 were debts (11%), and reduced food quality (9%).

In Kazakhstan, 65 per cent of the sample population reported that they were facing COVID-19 related challenges. In total, 73 per cent of female respondents faced COVID-19 related problems and 61 per cent of males reported the same. When asked to describe such challenges, 21 per cent cited insufficient income, another 21 per cent reported that the main issue was that they wish to leave but they were stranded. Other issues were linked to unemployment (9%), wage reduction (8%), debts (6%) and documents taken away by the employer (6%).



Graph 50 – Share of Respondents by challenges related to COVID-19



Note: in the Russian Federation survey tool this question was multiple answers.

Kazakh respondents who faced problems were also asked whether these problems occurred before the COVID-19 outbreak, after, or both. In general, 70 per cent of the sample population reported that they started to face challenges only after the outbreak of COVID-19. However, 24 per cent reported facing problems both before and after the pandemic, and 4 per cent were facing problems just before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Only in Kazakhstan, interviewees who faced COVID-19 related challenges, were asked if they sought for help, and if the person or entity who they reached out to was able to support them. The data analysis indicates that 48 per cent of the stranded migrants who faced problems asked for help, and that this share was higher amongst female (54%) than male respondents (45%). Overall, 69 per cent of the sub-group of respondents who sought for help, reported that their problem was partially solved by the person or entity they reached out to. Another 27 per cent indicated that their problem was solved after they sought help.

Figure 11 – Share of Respondents in Kazakhstan who faced challenges only after the COVID-19 outbreak



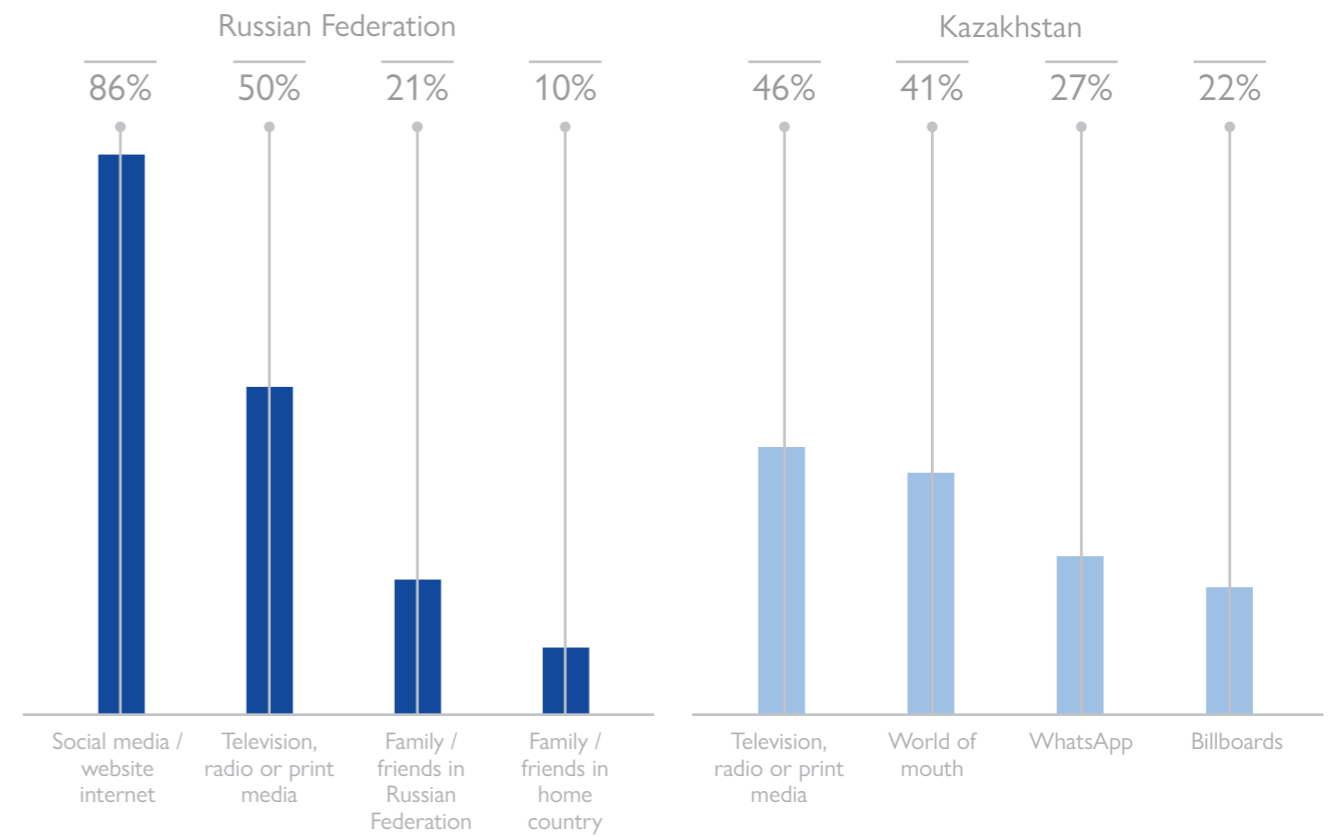
Of the respondents in Kazakhstan who faced problems, started to face them only after the COVID-19 outbreak.

COVID-19 information sources and infection risks

In this section of the survey tool, stranded migrants were asked about the main COVID-19 information sources, what they would do if they get sick, and if they had daily access to various hygiene items that have been proven useful for the prevention of COVID-19 and other diseases.

The data analysis indicates that the majority of the sample population interviewed in the Russian Federation gathers COVID-19 information from social media, websites, or the internet (86%). The second most common source used were television, radio or print media (50%), family or friends in the Russian Federation, or family and friends in the home country (10%). In Kazakhstan, the data shows that 46 per cent gather COVID-19 information from television, radio or print media, 41 per cent by word of mouth, 27 per cent via WhatsApp, and 22 per cent via billboards. Another 47 per cent of respondents indicated that they gather information from the app Telegram (18%), other social media platforms (17%), Facebook (7%), or websites (4%). These results suggest that when developing an information campaign for migrants in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, the prominent role of social media and messaging apps should be taken into account.

Graph 51 – Share of Respondents by COVID-19 information sources (multiple answers)



In terms of specific COVID-19 needs, stranded migrants in Kazakhstan were surveyed about the daily access they had to specific hygiene items and water for domestic use. The findings of this study indicate that access to hand sanitizers was an issue for 27 per cent of the sample population. Other main needs were linked to the lack of access to face masks (15%), and lack of access to COVID-19 information provided by official sources (22%).

In the Russian Federation, respondents were asked what they would do if they get sick. While 43 per cent of the sample population would go to a doctor for urgent needs, and 21 per cent had medical insurance, 13 per cent would do nothing when they get sick, and another 13 per cent would get medications advised by friends or by the television. This data shows the importance or the need for information campaign related to building awareness for health care options for migrants.

Graph 52 – Share of Russian Respondents by how they get treated if they get sick

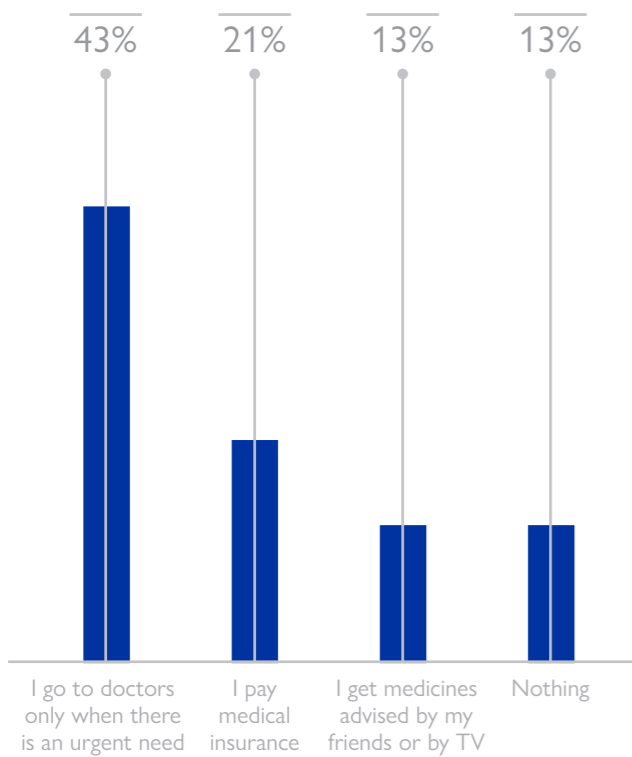


Figure 12 – Share of Respondents in Kazakhstan without daily access to the following items



# 3.2 Conclusions

## Summary of Key Findings

### Sociodemographic profile

The stranded migrant population was mostly composed by young, married males between 26 and 34 years old in the Russian Federation, and between 35 and 44 years old in Kazakhstan. In both, the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, female respondents were less likely than males to be married. In terms of the education level, the majority of the sample population have completed secondary education or higher, while the share of respondents with no education was less than 1 per cent. Education level was considerably higher amongst respondents interviewed in the Russian Federation as compared to those interviewed in Kazakhstan, and amongst females as compared to males. Most stranded migrants came from Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, further indicating that there is a strong regional dimension to international migration to the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan.

### Migration trajectory

The data analysis highlights that the main reasons for migration were of economic nature, with the desire to make money, low wages, lack of work and finding employment being the most common reasons for migration. Considering the reasons for selecting a specific destination country, the data on stranded migrants in Kazakhstan illustrates that having worked there before, geographical proximity, and higher salaries were the most important factors in influencing this decision. When asked about their migration journey, the data shows that over half of the sample population used savings to finance their migration journey, and below 4 in 10 participants had to borrow money in order to pay for their migration. In Kazakhstan, male stranded migrants were more likely than females to borrow money to pay for the migration journey. The length of migration changed between stranded migrants in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, with the former being more likely to stay in migration for over 3 years.

### Remittances

In total, more than 6 in 10 respondents were sending remittances to their home country. The average respondent would send remittances on a monthly basis. The share of individuals sending remittances was much higher amongst stranded migrants living in the Russian Federation as compared to those living in Kazakhstan. When looking at sex, the data indicates that female stranded migrants both in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, were less likely than males to send remittances back home. By far, the main reason for sending remittances was to support family and friends. The most common migration sending mechanisms used were bank or money transfer operator offices, or banks and money transfer operators' apps or websites. The data analysis indicated that COVID-19 severely impacted the sum of remittances sent by survey participants. During the lockdown in the Russian Federation 2 in 5 respondents had to stop sending remittances, and this disproportionately impacted female respondents. In Kazakhstan, 3 in 5 individuals had to reduce or completely stop sending remittances due to COVID-19.



## Employment situation

COVID-19 had significant impacts on the employment situation of stranded migrants. At the time of the assessment, 1 in 3 individuals interviewed in Kazakhstan were unemployed, and this represents a two-fold increase as compared to the situation before migration. The unemployment rate before and during migration among female respondents in Kazakhstan was somewhat twice as higher than the unemployment rate of males. Even when employed, more than 1 in 2 respondents reported earning less now as compared to the period before the COVID-19 outbreak. The share of respondents working in the informal sector was around 50 per cent, and it was higher amongst respondents in Kazakhstan than interviewees in the Russian Federation.

Sectors of employment before and during migration were similar, and most respondents were employed in construction, wholesale and retail trade, hotels and accommodation, and other services and activities. A nuanced gender dimension to the labour market was found, with very different employment sectors for female and male respondents. While construction was predominantly a male sector, the wholesale and retail trade, and hotels and accommodation were mostly employing female workers. The set of stranded migrants in the Russian Federation reported that there were mostly migrants doing their type of job, and that locals did not apply for that type of employment. Perhaps, this finding indicates a structural demand for migrant labour, which is assumed to be particularly relevant for the specific sectors of employment mentioned above.

## COVID-19 impacts and vulnerabilities

In total, around 7 in 10 respondents reported that their financial situation deteriorated due to COVID-19, and overall, COVID-19 impacts appeared to be more significant in Kazakhstan as compared to the Russian Federation. In Kazakhstan, the deterioration of the financial situation was reflected by a total or partial income loss, debts, and by 24 per cent of the sample being without income or with an income insufficient to cover basic needs. The data analysis indicates that the financial situation of female migrants in Kazakhstan was significantly worse as compared to male respondents. Almost 7 in 10 respondents in Kazakhstan reported facing COVID-19 related challenges at the time of the assessment, and this share was highest among female interviewees. The most reported problems were insufficient income, salary reduction, unemployment, debts, mental stress, and the desire to leave but inability to do so. In Kazakhstan, 70 per cent of respondents reported that they started to face problems only after the outbreak of COVID-19. In terms of COVID-19 vulnerabilities, it was found that most stranded migrants find COVID-19 related information in the internet, social media, or messaging apps, and this should be considered when developing information campaigns. When looking at COVID-19 needs, the data indicates that access to hand sanitizers and information should be prioritized.

## Recommendations

*The impacts of COVID-19 on stranded migrants go beyond the situation of immobility that they are living and include deteriorated finances, inability to meet basic needs, and additional challenges that are affecting their livelihoods as a whole.* Unemployment doubled as compared to the period before migration, and even respondents who were working at the time of the assessment reported earning less as compared to the period before the COVID-19 outbreak. The deterioration of the financial situation resulted in partial or total income losses, debts, and inability to meet basic needs. The majority of the sample population faced such problems only after the COVID-19 outbreak, indicating that the current pandemic is simultaneously exacerbating older problems and causing new ones. This data analysis also indicates that the pandemic is negatively affecting migrant families in their home countries. Interviewees reported that they mainly sent remittances back home to support the family with basic expenses, but due to the current situation, most of them had to either stop or reduce the sum of remittances sent.

*It is recommended that the Governments, IOM, and partners working on international migration issues in Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation implement a two-pillar strategy based on policy development and implementation, and primary research to reduce stranded migrants' needs and vulnerabilities.* The operational data collected under this project should be used to implement policies to improve the condition and livelihoods of stranded migrants and their families. The data collection structure created under this project and the data collected should serve as a basis to run additional surveys and research activities aiming to monitor how needs and vulnerabilities evolve over time, and measure to what extent support policies and programmes will reach the desired outcomes.

## Policy recommendations

*Legal and safe return migration corridors with adequate precautions to cope with the current pandemic should be created.* This data analysis on stranded migrants strongly indicates that a substantial number of individuals, stranded migrants, are in physical and legal limbo.

The data analysed under this study shows that regional migration is driven by economic factors, and that labour migration is key to many individuals in the region. In addition, the data indicates that migrants who decided to stay in migration during the pandemic were more successful in finding income generating opportunities as compared to those who returned to their home countries. This shows that there is a potential productivity loss in altering international migration in the region. Furthermore, stranded migrants in the Russian Federation indicated that most Russian nationals would not apply or perform their jobs, which are mostly done by migrant workers instead. This indicates that labour migration might be structural to some sectors of employment, and closing legal migration pathways could negatively affect these sectors of employment. Stranded migrants reported that border closures, lack of money and lack of documents were the main barriers impeding their return. It is considered in the best interest of all parties involved – stranded migrants, host government and government of the home country – facilitate the orderly and safe return of migrants home.

*Incentives to work in the formal sector for both employers and employees should be created.* This data analysis indicated that around 1 in 2 respondents was employed in the informal sector, which negative outcomes are two-fold. For stranded migrants, informal employment results in the lack of access to social protection policies, benefits, and health care, but it could also lead to abusive situations, payment below the minimum wage, and other ill-treatment. For central and local governments, it results in less tax revenues, constraining their ability to operate, intervene, and function at the best of their capacity.

*Distribution of food, cash-based assistance, and personal protective equipment (PPE) to alleviate the current situation of stranded migrants should be implemented.* This data analysis indicated that stranded migrants have an extremely poor financial situation, characterized by debts, high unemployment rates and various challenges. This perilous situation can only worsen in the months to come unless development programmes will be implemented or COVID-19 regulations on travel are lifted.

*COVID-19 information material should be provided by official sources to stranded migrants.* A well-informed public is believed to be essential to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and comply with government policies. This data analysis indicates that all respondents had some level of education, were able to read and had high electronic literacy. For this reason, digital information campaigns should be prioritized, particularly those carried on social media and messaging apps, as these tools are already used by the stranded migrant population to gather COVID-19 related information.

## Research recommendations

*Research on the needs and impacts of COVID-19 on stranded migrants and their communities of return should be run regularly.* Needs and vulnerabilities evolve, and change over time, and the current situation is particularly dynamic. At the same time, the data collected under this project can be used in further assessments as a baseline, to compare a before and after situation, or to run longitudinal studies. The data collection structure created under this project should be used in the upcoming months by IOM, in coordination with Governments and other partners, to keep collecting operable data to respond to the current pandemic.

*It is recommended to implement research activities on the challenges of stranded migrants, including gender, labour, and health indicators.* This research showed that 1 in 2 respondents, during migration, was working in the informal sector. It also showed that female migrants were generally more impacted by the current pandemic as compared to males. It was found that the problems that stranded migrants are facing are new, meaning that they were not present before the outbreak of COVID-19. This new situation deserves further attention, as exploitation, challenges and abuse of stranded migrants already appear to be changing.



