

Experiences and concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative research with employees in the tourism sector of the Maldives

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ABSTRACT *The Maldives is a small country, solely, dependent on the tourism sector for its economic growth. The first known case of COVID-19 in the Maldives was reportedly a tourist from Italy in March 2020. As a result, the government implemented an overseas travel ban. Presumably, the effect of overseas travel ban was inevitable, which resulted in a complete shutdown of resorts. This paper covers a component from a research project conducted March-May 2020, by the Ministry of Economic Development with technical assistance from UNDP, as a rapid livelihood impact assessment of COVID-19 in the Maldives. The data reported in this paper is concentrated on the qualitative dataset collected to investigate the experiences and concerns of resort employees at the onset of COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 31 participants across 13 resorts were randomly selected. The data were generated through in-depth interviews which lasted 40-60 minutes either by conference calls or Zoom meetings based on preferred choice of the participants. Detailed notes were made during the conversation and were analysed thematically using the topics from the structured interview guide from the rapid livelihood assessment. The findings highlight the employees' heightened anxiety about the exposure to COVID-19 and its possible impact on their health and safety. The findings also highlight the economic impact on the resort workers because of the restrictive pay packages offered by the resorts in dealing with the sudden closure of the resorts in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The findings have useful inputs and implications on future strategic plans of small countries such as the Maldives that depend predominantly on a volatile tourism sector susceptible to external shocks such as the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic.*

KEYWORDS *COVID-19, Maldives, Economic impact, Tourism employees, Health and safety*

Pandemic refers to global outbreaks spread among people. This occurs when a virus could infect a huge number of people in an uncontrolled manner (Dubb, 2020; Lofgren & Rapazzo, 2017). More specifically, when an “epidemic spread

involving two or more continents”, it is known as a pandemic (McDonnell, 2020, p. 1). Several pandemics have been reported over the centuries. For example, in the early 19th century, some countries witnessed, 1918-‘Spanish flu’, 1957-the ‘Asian flu’, 1968-‘Hong Kong’ flu, and 1977-Swine flu (Dubbs, 2020; Hire & Derle, 2018; Kilbourne, 2006; Page & Yeoman, 2007; Pageet al., 2006; Taglioni et al., 2013; Wood, 2001). In the twenty first century, the world has experienced three other pandemics, including Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002, ‘Bird flu’ in 2009, and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012 (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). The most recent pandemic is the COVID-19 outbreak. The first patient with COVID-19 was reported in Wuhan city, China, in December, 2019 (Elavarasan & Pugazhendhi, 2020), and it was officially, declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in February, 2020 (Zhou et al., 2020). In order to control the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO advised to follow certain strategies such as extensive testing and contact tracing, strict quarantine and isolation measures along with hospital preparedness for COVID-19 huge caseloads, restricting non-essential travels, following strict border control measures and social distancing measures (Davalgi, et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020).

A few weeks into COVID-19’s declaration as a pandemic, it had relentlessly marched across many countries. Consequently, policymakers and health sector professionals have become concerned about its unprecedented impact on health and safety of people across the globe. More importantly, recommendations were put forward to take careful considerations and maintain safe work environments for employees across all sectors including the tourism industry. When a pandemic occurs, it is the responsibility of the government bodies to seek the best ways to manage and control the community spread specific to different countries. Some researchers believe that many countries such as Italy, the UK, the USA, and Sweden underestimated the severity of COVID-19 at its outset (Cohen & Corey, 2020), which led to the spread of COVID-19 to many countries globally. Further, Cohen and Corey (2020) suggest that it is crucial for other countries to learn from these experiences and avoid “repeating this error in more vulnerable countries” (p. 1011). These views immensely identify the need for thoughtful considerations and precautionary measures to take into account when managing the COVID-19 pandemic in small countries such as the Maldives.

The Maldives as a small country, relies heavily on the tourism sector for its economic growth (Faizal, et al., 2005; Kundur, 2012). Although the Maldives started its tourism industry very modestly with only a few resorts in the early 1970s (Kundur, 2012), the industry has seen an exponential growth over the years, establishing itself as a high-end popular tourist destination world-wide. The resort-island concept, with one resort per island, offers Maldives a unique competitive advantage in the international tourism industry (Domroes, 2001). At present, there are 156 resort islands registered under the Ministry of Tourism, Maldives, that are scattered across different atolls (MoT, 2020). The Maldives celebrated its 1.5 millionth tourist of the year on 24th December 2019 (Karantzavelou, 2019) and was set for a record high tourist arrival in the year 2020 with a projected annual tourist arrival set at 2.5 million by the year 2023 (ADB, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably affected this trajectory.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the Maldives received tourists from many countries that have already witnessed COVID-19, such as China, Italy and

the United Kingdom (UK). The first COVID-19 case reported in the Maldives was an Italian tourist in March 2020. As a result, the government implemented the travel ban decision from overseas to ensure safety of the people in this small country. While this was a positive action for the containment of the spread of the coronavirus, the negative effect of overseas travel bans was inevitable, resulting in a complete shutdown of resorts across the country in March 2020 leading to employment disruptions to the entire resort sector.

The employees in the tourism sector are the most vulnerable group of people likely to have a devastating impact on their health and livelihood due to the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic. Firstly, the impact may include the exposure of employees to tourists who may have already been infected by the virus. Secondly, the inevitable restrictions on business operations may result in job redundancy and/or income loss. It may even have an exacerbated negative impact on employees as most resorts are owned by private investors who will have full control over their business. This could mean that the employees may not have much room for negotiation regarding the decisions made on their employment status during the pandemic situation. Shakeela and Weaver (2017) argue that regardless of a Government Tourist Board (GTB) being established by the Ministry of Tourism in 1976, it has never been properly implemented in the resort management practice, which in fact is “leaving tourism policy, planning and development in the hands of investors and operators as informal processes” (Shakeela & Weaver, 2017, p. 8). In such conditions, one can argue that the employees’ concerns might be overlooked in the decision-making process, particularly, in a crisis condition. Consequently, a question may raise whether or not employees’ benefits were considered during the COVID-19 crisis in the Maldives.

This paper aims to capture the experiences of employees to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the livelihood of resort employees. The paper focuses on two important questions. First, what measures of employee well-being was implemented in response to the onset of the pandemic and prior to the resort closures? Second, how does the resort closure impact on employees’ livelihood?

The next section reviews the literature to understand the context of the pandemic situation, and its impact on employees’ in the tourism sector.

Literature Review

The literature focuses on understanding the readiness of the work environment for pandemic situations and what measures and strategies would be required in order to protect employees from being exposed to health risks. The second section will scrutinise the literature around the economic impact of pandemic situations on tourism employees.

Nature and context of tourism employment

In general, the tourism employment has been described as an attractive and promising field of work. Riley, Ladkin, and Szivas (2002) argue that characteristics of its attractiveness include its easy accessibility, as the industry accommodates a variety of skills and with low skill levels. In other words, it is attractive because of its ease of entry. Another is that the work in the tourism sector relates to work and leisure time. A third aspect is people who love to mingle find it interesting to work

in the industry as they seek direct contact with new audiences (Riley et al., 2002). Choy (1995) believes that the level of job satisfaction among tourism employees is high as the travel and tourism employment can offer fun, rich experiences, and ways to contribute constructively to the communities who they interact with. The review here outlines characteristics such as attractiveness, easy accessibility, fun, leisure, and good pay, as important features that employees seek in the tourism sector.

However, some early researchers have a contrary view on the characteristics of the employment in the tourism sector. For example, Pizam (1982) states that tourism employees receive minimum wages and are often “uneducated, unmotivated, untrained, unskilled and unproductive” (p. 5). This view to a certain extent agrees with Riley et al. (2002) who also noted the low skill levels of the tourism employees. The examples of such low paid positions were identified by Tew et al. (2008), who spoke about employees working in the housekeeping jobs, as room boys, or waiters who work in food and beverage. These employees are the closest group of people who will have direct contact with guests, when such pandemics arise. These employees are the first group of people who are likely to be in danger as well during a pandemic situation (Tew et al., 2008). The important question here is how far these employees might have been protected or how far they were affected due to COVID-19. More specifically, if they were left redundant in the worst-case scenario, how their livelihood was impacted. It is an important question to pursue, especially given their limited skill set to move to other sectors.

Tourism sector is vulnerable to external factors such as the global economic crisis (Kapilki, 2012) and this is not any different in the Maldives that relies on the economic viability of international tourists. Other impactful external factors include the spread of pandemics and diseases which will impact on tourists’ influx (Jamal & Budke, 2020). Jolliffe and Farnsworth (2003) argue one of the main features of tourism employment is its seasonality of the industry. In an example, outlining a pandemic situation related to SARS in the tourism sector in Toronto, Canada, Tew et al. (2008) state that the tourism sector is often unprepared for such pandemics, as it is not common. Most opted strategies in reacting to a crisis are cutting costs, laying off workers, closing facilities, reduction in operational hours (Tew et al., 2008). In such situations, it is crucial to investigate issues involving the welfare of employees such as the actions considered, in order to reduce the economic impact on the resort business due to the closure. This may also include how employees on different contracts were dealt with, and how that may have impacted on employees’ welfare. These are important areas to explore and seek answers for this paper.

Precautionary measures required for the tourism sector

Often, the precautionary measures due to a pandemic are more carefully considered when it comes to health sector work environments, as health professionals will be in closer contact with the infected people (Basta, Edwards, & Schulte, 2009). However, this could be observed inversely in other sectors such as tourism. In this globalised world, every country depends on each other, particularly, when it comes to the tourism industry, hence the effect of pandemics is inevitable. The World Health Organization (2020) states that all countries should be fully prepared for the worst-case scenarios of the COVID-19 pandemic, advising to

develop society and business continuity plans at different phases of its spread in the community. It is crucial to explore whether the Maldives as a small country worked through it closely following the guidelines advised by the WHO at the very onset of COVID-19 pandemic. The cancellation of flights from China in Jan/Feb 2020 was the first reactionary measure taken in the Maldives in response to the epidemic in Wuhan city as the epicentre of the COVID-19. Further to this, and following the first detected case of COVID-19 in the Maldives in an Italian tourist, travel bans were quickly implemented first by limiting arrivals from certain countries where the virus was spreading and later a full travel ban for all tourist arrivals.

Apart from these it is important to check whether, or how far precautionary measures were implemented or considered by the management at various island resorts. Understanding this is not merely important for ensuring safety of tourists but also for the safety of employees who probably will have close contact with many travellers from all over the world. Occupational exposure is one of the major avenues through which the COVID-19 has been reported to spread. For example, in the initial cases from Singapore, 17 (68%) out of the 25 locally transmitted cases were by means of occupational exposure. This includes staff in the tourism, retail and hospitality industry, transport and security workers, and construction workers (Koh, 2020). Employees are considered to be at higher risk of contracting the disease as well as transmitting to others in the community due to characteristics such as more frequent interactions with the public and being in close quarters with other workers (Baker, Peckham, & Seixas, 2020).

In a situation of pandemic, employers can play an important role to protect employees' health and safety, and ensure the required measures are considered at the workplace (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2007). The role is more clearly outlined in the way the guidance and advice are provided to monitor and maintain health and safety measures in the work environments. In the resort work environment, it is crucial to assume that any tourist may have the virus since they have travelled through many airports and likely have contacted with many people on their way to the tourist destinations. In speaking about maintaining preventive measures, Taglioni et al. (2013) argue that it is not easy to change a mindset or behaviour of people when it comes to developing daily habits. In line with this idea, Cohen and Corey (2020) state that changing the behaviour with a clear understanding on how the virus transmit from one person to the other is one of the most effective ways to control COVID-19. The COVID-19 is highly contagious, which can spread from person to person, through respiratory droplets, close contact, and by touching surfaces or objects contaminated by the virus (Ramesh, Siddaiah, & Joseph, 2020). Lescanne et al. (2020) identify some preventative habits such as wearing a "long sleeve clean outfit, a surgical mask and gloves in case of contact with the patient's mucosa" (p.1). These researchers alarm the need for careful precautions with regard to the nature of COVID-19's easy spread through the "airborne", "contact", and "droplets" (Lescanne et al., 2020), while also advising to take additional precautions when contacting suspicious cases. These researchers also discuss the non-medical interventions such as frequent hand washing and avoidance of crowded places that are crucial to controlling the pandemics in work environments. Describing several measures to be considered, Page and Yeoman (2007) report the importance of the planning process, including scenario planning, economic forecasting and in-house workshops to scope the range of issues to address in preparing a contingency plan for a flu pandemic. Based

on these findings, it can be concluded that increasing awareness of employees and monitoring their daily routines are imperative, as simple behaviours could lead to huge impacts on health and safety of both employees and tourists.

Workplaces are often favourable environments for transfer of diseases. For example, influenza transmission rate at the workplace can exceed 20% during a pandemic situation (Reed et al., 2013). The risk of disease transmission is expected to be higher for the hospitality industry which could possibly be the initial point of contact eventually resulting in local outbreaks (Hung, Mark, Yeung et al., 2018). Hotels should have relevant hygienic measures in place to combat potential disease outbreaks and train staff adequately to ensure safety of both the customers and the employees themselves. Other important components of the mitigation plan include contingency arrangement, acquisition of protective equipment and surveillance mechanisms that should be in place during the outbreak period (Chien & Law, 2003). Social distancing is recommended as a key mitigation measure that has been successfully applied in alleviating many previous pandemics (Ahmed, Zviedrite, & Uzicanin, 2018). This encompasses measures to reduce risk of person to person transmission of the diseases by observing physical distancing and reduced frequency of contact. According to Chia-Lin Chang (2020), social distancing in a tourism setting must be observed more closely at the check-in and check-out lobbies, in restaurants and cafes serving meals, and during social activities. Other important measures include screening of incoming guests, effective reporting and isolation of infected persons (Chien & Law, 2003). Health authorities of countries such as Hong Kong have developed guidelines for infection control and prevention for hotels after the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak in 2003 (Centre for Health Protection, 2018). The tourism and hospitality industry should be perceived as a crucial player in controlling epidemics and disease outbreaks. Standard guidelines have to be imposed to warrant safety and wellbeing of all people involved including the tourist, industry workers and the whole community.

In addition, Page et al. (2006) identify two important areas that need additional attention in the tourism industry, one is to follow careful scrutiny of the measures to be considered and the other is take appropriate response strategies preparing for any outbreak without leaving room for any damage to the tourism business. During the SARS pandemic in 2009, in Taiwan, the fund managers and investors bought and held biotechnology stocks and rearranged their portfolios to obtain investment profits, maintained portfolio returns, or lower investment risks during the SARS outbreak period (Chun-Da, Chin-Chun, Wan-Wei, & Bor-Yi, 2009). Such appropriate planning is crucial for future arrangements of reopening the resort islands. A salient question emerging from this literature is whether investors of the Maldives tourism industry should have foreseen a pandemic such as COVID-19, and what impact it could have on employees apart from the likelihood risk and damage on their business. More specifically, should they have pre-thoughts on how such pandemic could disrupt the health and safety of employees, and what protocols might need to be maintained when it comes to work environments. This is important in the case of some resort islands in the Maldives, as many local people who work in the resort islands live on nearby resident islands, who perhaps would have daily travels in between. It is likely to be more serious when it comes to COVID-19 as a highly contagious disease.

Economic impact on the tourism industry

Many researchers have discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the global economy. SÂMbotin, et al. (2013) argue that the history holds evidence that every corner of the globe could experience a disaster due to pandemics, which can also make the tourism industry most vulnerable of all other sectors with the occurrence of a widespread virus. In an earlier writing, speaking about a pandemic situation, Page and Yeoman (2007) stated that “international travel and tourism will be the first industries to be hit” (p. 170). Affirming the vulnerability, Yu and Aviso (2020) recognise the alarming effect of COVID-19 on human lives and the economies of the countries. Some researchers also assert that the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing the world to move from over-tourism to a completely non-tourism situation (Gössling et al., 2020). Agreeing with the same idea, Ozili and Arun (2020) identify that the lockdown periods, policies and decisions regarding the economic activities and international travel restrictions could have severe damage on the economy of the countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several researchers describe the influence of COVID-19 as a ‘spill-over’ negative impact on tourism and travel industries. Ozili and Arun (2020) reiterate that COVID-19 outbreak led the governments of many countries to impose restrictions on travels, saying “indefinitely suspending tourism travel, work visas and immigrant visas”, led to “a complete travel ban on all forms of inward or outward travel, shutting down all airports in the country” (p. 6). In fact, the travel bans across countries was seemingly the first appropriate decision advised by the WHO to control the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organisation, 2020). Davis et al. (2013) also claim that detecting travel-related cases appeared to be one of the important ways to control spread of the virus from one country to the other, recommending restrictions and protocols of travels as highly crucial. In line with this, Page and Yeoman (2007) mention that all countries are required to issue travel advisories recommending their people to avoid infected countries when arranging their travel destinations. Ramesh et al. (2020) advise to record the history of travellers regarding the visited countries, airports, taxi travels, transports, public places, and people who had close contact with the visited countries, while also keeping them isolated when returning until laboratory confirmation of COVID-19 infection clearance. These views notify the critical condition of a pandemic such as COVID-19 that could impact the tourism sector of a country, such as the Maldives. It also signals the negative impact of COVID-19 on tourism employees due to the implementation of travel bans and the subsequent decisions regarding the closure of resort islands.

The travel restrictions and bans could lead to other more devastating factors to employees of the tourism sector. Shader (2020) claims that COVID-19 pandemic could lead to overwhelming stresses due to loss of employment and financial insecurity. This includes a massive part of what might happen to employees in the tourism sector due to the resort closures. He further clarified that it may even result in economic depression among tourism employees. Fernandes (2020) provides a historical comparison of different pandemics and the economic impact that COVID-19 could have on the world economy, while stating that governments would require “preparing contingency plans, and aid packages to sustain their economies” (p. 2). Shader (2020) recommends all leaders across the globe to carefully consider that both “economic depression and emotional depression/

demoralization need to be addressed” to minimise COVID-19’s adverse effect on employees who are at risk of losing their jobs due to closure of the resort islands. Karim et al. (2020) argue that the tourism industry of Malaysia including hotels, resort islands, and travel agencies have largely suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has left unprecedented loss on both investors and employees in the sector. Arguably, these are valid issues involving the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry of any country, which raises questions related to what actions that investors might have planned or decided regarding the employment contracts, or what considerations they might have thought about making it justified for both parties (employers and employees).

Some researchers note the actions carried out by investors in order to tackle the economic impact of pandemics on the tourism industry. One of the most recent reports by the Norwegian tourism organisation revealed that due to a huge number of booking cancellations, approximately 78% of the workforce in the tourism sector were laid off (Gössling et al., 2020; NHO Reiseliv, 2020). An example from an American company, Fantozzi (2020) reports that some CEOs of the restaurants implemented certain measures to protect their employees during a time of slowed business and out-of-work employees. This includes opening a refund policy for the employees which was a huge help considering 80% of them are laid off and perhaps going through difficult times. On the contrary, considering an example in Malaysia, Karim et al. (2020) report that employees from different hotels as well as resorts were asked to carry on with unpaid leave overlooking the economic loss for employees. Both these examples signify the economic loss that employees might have to suffer during a pandemic situation in the tourism sector. However, the way both investors dealt with the situation was varied. The possible economic loss was more carefully considered by one investor, while the other sent employees on an unpaid leave overlooking the impact.

Given that both the examples are from more advanced countries in terms of their economy, it is important to investigate how the Maldives, an economy centrally dependent on the tourism sector, deals with the crisis and what impact the tourism employees might have to suffer. These views also visibly underline the importance of understanding what decisions were made, or plans were put forward by the resort investors or what sort of closure packages were offered for the employees, if offered. While looking at these reviews, it is apparent that most countries are dissimilar to the context of the Maldives, where the economy is solely dependent on tourism. The adverse effect on the businesses and tourism sector employees, therefore, could be much more severe than one can anticipate when it comes to a small country, as the Maldives. The next section provides a brief outline of how the research was carried out in order to answer the research questions outlined earlier.

Research Design

This paper covers a qualitative research component from the rapid livelihood assessment of COVID-19 in the Maldives, carried out during March to May 2020, by the Ministry of Economic Development (MED) with technical assistance from the UNDP (MED, 2020). Data for this qualitative research component was gathered through in-depth interviews with resort employees. A total of 31 employees

across 13 resorts were interviewed. The employees include those registered in the Maldives government's online job portal (MED, 2020). The inclusion of at least 3 employees from most of the selected resorts, and similarity in their experiences confirmed the consistency of the information shared by the informants and thereby ensures the reliability of the data.

The in-depth interviews with employees took place during the lockdown period in the Maldives in April 2020 and was completed with the onset of the month of Ramadan. Due to the lockdown situation, the interviews were conducted using online modes either conference calls or Zoom meetings based on participants' preferred choice. A structured interview guide was prepared by the research team for the rapid livelihood assessment (MED, 2020), in accordance with the major themes of their appraisal. The interview guide was piloted with six resort employees to add clarity to the questions and seek validity of the focus. At the outset of the in-depth interview scheduling, all ethical measures were taken into consideration. Prospective participants were randomly selected across 13 resorts from the employee contact list retrieved from the job portal. An initial phone call to the prospective participants invited them to participate, and explanations were provided about the details of the project as well as the implemented anonymity and confidentiality measures. An online meeting was scheduled only if they consented to participate. A total of 32 employees consented to participate, but one declined to join the scheduled meeting. The interviewees felt data saturation was reached by around the 25th interview and continued to complete the scheduled calls, and further recruitment was not carried out.

The in-depth interviews took approximately 40-60 minutes with each participant. Data were gathered in the form of detailed notes. Primarily, one researcher interacted with the participant and another researcher took notes, while in between some clarifications were made by the notetaker to add clarity to the notes. At the end of each interview, a reflective conversation was held between the interviewer and the notetaker to feed both researchers' thoughts while also to enrich the data collected. The process of notetaking instead of audio-recording the interviews was opted for, for confidentiality of informants and to gain their trust. Although the resorts' names would be anonymous, it was vital to make employees feel comfortable to share any of their concerns and raise issues involved in their work environment without reluctance. The data analysis was carried out using strategies of generating initial codes based on the themes from the interview guide, consolidating these themes and maintaining constant comparison to seek connections between and across different participants and resort islands. The research findings are presented in the proceeding section.

Findings

The focus of this research was on understanding experiences of tourism employees regarding exposure to contacting the virus and the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their livelihood on the onset of the pandemic. The findings are presented in the form of reported speech referring to numbered pseudonyms given to informants of the interviews. The section includes mainly two sub-themes, one is employees' experiences prior to the closure of the resort islands, and the other is the immediate economic impact of COVID-19 on their livelihood.

a)Employee experiences before the closure of resort islands

Several informants expressed their concerns regarding the way the resort management dealt with the first two months of pandemic situation. In some resorts, informants noted that resort management dealt well with the COVID-19 situation by providing necessary information and monitoring the precautionary measures across different locations in the resorts. Conversely, across three resorts, several informants expressed that they do not believe that the management was deeply concerned about the health of employees. Some informants also noted that the management did not necessarily observe any specific awareness sessions that were arranged for the employees to keep them informed about COVID-19.

“The resort management did not attend the management level meeting organised by the HPA [Health Protection Agency] and the Ministry. They [management staff] said it was a short notice, so could not attend... Resort management was careless about implementing the precautionary measures. They did not take it seriously”. (#12)

“No awareness sessions, notices or no information about social distancing given to staff”. (#16)

“There were no activities or awareness sessions before 2nd March. There was not much talk about COVID-19 or concerns before this time even among staff. (#14)

“No specific awareness or information provided by the management. Only once the resident doctor read out the points in the circular from HPA [Health Protection Agency] but no real awareness. (#18)

The employees believed that resort management was not particularly concerned regarding the safety of employees, perhaps due to the early stage of COVID-19, it was not considered in a serious note. Yet, some employees did express their satisfaction with how the resort management dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. A few employees indicated that their management team took the pandemic situation more seriously unlike other resorts. Some examples were shared as below:

“In order to deal with COVID-19 pandemic, HPA announcements were displayed on the notice board. All staff were advised to use masks and gloves to maintain precautionary measures when attending rooms. Sanitisers were provided in different locations. Information about COVID-19 and its precautionary measures were provided to all staff”. (#13)

“The resort is run by an incredibly good company who are concerned about staff welfare. Management is very good with the staff”. (#20)

Considering these views, it can be seen that some employees indicated that their employers have followed the HPA guideline to ensure safety of the employees in the work environment. While in some resort islands COVID-19 situation was not taken on a serious note.

Apart from awareness programmes, many informants also reported concerns in dealing with guests. Some of the concerns they raised include, being in contact with an asymptomatic person who may be carrying the virus, with themselves being susceptible to catching the virus and later carrying this and infecting their own family members. Additionally, having to shake hands with guests, and providing service without proper safety measures such as wearing masks and gloves

for a better hospitality experience for tourists were being considered as adverse factors over the wellbeing of the employees. Many informants who work in the front line of guest interactions, including airport reception, housekeeping and transport logistics staff, service side of food and beverage, and direct contacts in tourist experiences such as diving, talked about their individual experiences of safety and precautionary measures to stay protected from possible exposure to the COVID-19. Some examples were shared by the employees as below.

“Nothing was provided for myself or my colleague at the airport receiving guests to and from the resort. A mask was provided during the last week of guest departure, no sanitizers even then!” (#9)

“Did not have enough protective measures, even when the guest became positive, the staff did not have enough sanitizers, and masks. Due to the fear of losing employment, staff worked without proper protective measures against disease. The management did not do enough when the resort was under orange alert.” (#30)

“Since working as a room boy, some concerns were there due to exposure to guests. We change bedding and take out waste from the guest rooms. Also, on social media read about positive cases from guests visiting Maldives. Most people were concerned that guest arrivals were still happening, and management wanted to bring in as many guests if this was still allowed”. (#18)

Some informants clearly indicated that the required precautionary measures were not considered during their work at the time of pandemic in some resorts. This included work environments such as airport representative and housekeeping positions. Further, an informant also reported that regardless of the concerns of exposure to COVID-19, he continued with the work due to his fear of losing the job.

Collective findings from 10 informants indicated that precautionary measures were being implemented in some resorts but limited in other resorts. There were information sessions about the coronavirus, and they were provided with enough sanitizers throughout the resort.

b) A huge impact of COVID-19 on employees' livelihood

Several informants mentioned that the resort management dealt well regarding the arrangements followed by the resort closure decision, such as establishing new work contracts considering the impact on the industry. However, some informants highlighted issues related to how the management changed the contract overlooking employees' concerns and loss. Some highlighted issues related to pay-cuts, while indicating that it was inevitable considering the situation of COVID-19 pandemic. Some employees also agreed that there was nothing much that could be done to make it more considerate and beneficial for employees. Speaking about this, employees in two resorts noted that the management had difficulty to decide the pay cuts.

“This is an unavoidable situation and can understand the reason for pay cuts. 20% deduction in salary. (#20)

“I am still an employee, just on a no-pay leave because there is nothing the resort can do” (#11).

“Salary issue was discussed among staff, feeling stressed or uneasy due to the salary cut, but there was nothing much that anyone could do”. (#16).

“No other choice given in the new contract, choice is 50% of the salary or resignation. 50% is three months’ full pay and remaining 3 months no pay. Have been in the resort for 7 years but they did not give any opportunity to talk or negotiate the terms” (#22).

However, there were some optional cases. Some employees were offered to remain in the resort as part of the core team (the staff who were offered to stay and continue work) to maintain the resort during the closedown period. In each of the resorts included in this study, the core team was offered a slightly better payment terms than those who were sent off on reduced pay leave, no pay leave, or made redundant for the three months of resort closure. According to one of these informants, the offered amount was not worth it to work in an unfavourable environment and away from family. As he clarified:

“Choice was given to stay in the resort and work for a 50% of the basic salary. Gardening and construction work, renovation work planned for the period of resort closure. This would add up to around MVR 3000 per month (USD 200). This is not worth staying back and working during Ramadan and the food is not good. This is not worth it to work under poor conditions in the resort especially when you have a family dependent on you. So, I decided it was better to go to my home island with no pay” (#22).

Some other informants from two resorts reported that they will be paid 30% of the basic salary for those who would be outside the resort, and 50% of the basic pay for those staff who were taken as the core team to work in the resort during the closure period. The general understanding from the informants was that the core team will receive a monthly pay not less than MVR 5000.

“There is a total of 182 staff in the resort, 35-40 staff will be staying back and engaged in renovation work. All other staff are on no pay. ... some staff were offered to stay back with a 50% reduction (3 months’ salary with basic + 3 months no pay)”. (#21)

The examples revealed here represent that the employees had great loss in terms of their pay and had not much choice except agreeing with what has been decided by the employers.

Furthermore, all informants talked about the income loss in the wake of COVID-19 and fall in guest arrivals from February and March 2020. It was clear that the resort closure packages offered have impacted on employees’ livelihood with a huge economic loss. Some employees clarified that in the normal seasons, they receive a high rate of service charges apart from the basic salary. However, due to COVID-19 pandemic, taking the loss of the service charge, their take home salary during the resort closure will have at least 80% loss from their normal average monthly income.

“Take home salary for February was low around \$500 ... In other years we usually get at least \$900 as service charge during these peak months. During average months, the service charge is around \$500 at most. My basic salary is around \$300. So, the loss is huge for the next 3 months” (#10).

It is also noteworthy to mention that in some resorts a few variations of pay packages were also observed such as asking employees to take all their annual leaves ahead of their reduced

pay packages, some were forced into redundancy indicating unavailability of jobs, and there were some terminated cases such as those who were on probation and casual contract employees. Among the informants, there were only a few who were on probation and none who had casual contracts. But some participants talked about staff on probation in their conversation, indicating that all staff will have three months-probation at the start. One employee stated that:

“Most staff become permanent once they complete probation of 3 months. ... Roughly there would have been about 17 staff [on the resort] who were on probation. Staff who were on probation were terminated” (#17)

“[The normal staff had], a new contract for three-months [of resort closure] was signed due to COVID-19, 25% of the salary will be paid for the 3 months, which start from April, we did not have any choice”. (#18)

In another resort, two informants mentioned that the reduced pay package offered 20% to 30% of their basic salary. However, the reduced percent varied across different levels as explained by some employees. One example is:

“Pay package following COVID-19, there was a 30% reduction for level 1,2 and 3 executive and managerial level staff. Level 3 are service managers, but the salary range is wide... from \$900 to \$1200 but 30% reduction from all. Basic salary of level 1 executives is 6000-8000 USD. Lower level staff 20% deduction. There was 20% deduction of the salary which is 40-50% deduction from the take home salary. Major income is from service charge and tips”. (#19)

Some of the details of income loss expressed by the informants highlight the unfortunate situation the resort employees were facing due to COVID-19 pandemic. The concerns were quite similar and yet varied depending on the socioeconomic status of the person whether married, have children, etc. The general areas of concern include: difficulty in paying school/ tuition fees, worry about paying rent (those living in Male' and having children studying in Male'), having to save on food and electricity, the lack of even casual employment, and plans to relocate from Male' to islands to save on rental costs, etc. The following quotes are only a select few examples representing a different aspect of their living that has been impacted by the income loss.

“I have not received any income since March, I am having great difficulty managing my everyday expenses and have cut-down much of what I have planned, to reduce the expenses. I have a child with a disability, I am the only income earner in my family. My wife does not have work. I am even concerned about managing the expenses until the end of Ramadan. I have no option left, as unable to do any work during this lockdown. Wonder how life is going to be like [with a sad tone]” (#16).

“I am concerned about paying rent, my child's school fees, and wife's tuition fees. I cannot leave the rental accommodation and go back to my parents' house because it is crowded and my vacated room has already been refurbished and taken up by a sister” (married male from Male' living in a rental accommodation, [talked in a sad tone]). (#10)

The finding summarises that employees of the tourism sector have shared that precautionary measures were not closely considered at the work environments in most resort islands. They also talked extensively about the huge economic impacts of COVID-19 on their lives, raising

concerns and issues involving the closure packages offered by the resort owners without negotiations with the employees. The next section discusses the findings synthesising with the reviewed literature earlier.

Discussion

The research focused on understanding the impact of COVID-19 on resort employees' livelihood. This included identifying the precautionary measures implemented in the resorts on the onset of the pandemic prior to the resort closure while also recognising the economic impact the employees might have realised after the resort closure. Each of these is discussed answering the research questions outlined previously.

1) What measures were considered to ensure employees' safety and welfare in the resort work environment prior to the resorts' closure?

The findings highlight discrepancies regarding the way the precautionary measures were maintained in the resort islands. Several employees, across different resorts, raised concerns about the management team not being serious enough regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, thus, precautionary measures were overlooked. However, some other employees, admittedly, described the careful precautions that were closely considered, as advised by the HPA. Further concerns were shared by some employees who were in a closer contact with tourists such as airport representatives, room-boys and boat crews stating that they were not provided safety gears neither were advised much on maintaining social distance when contacting with tourists. The literature clearly outlines the high risk that employees at the tourism and hospitality sector would have during pandemic situations (Chien & Law, 2003; Chun-Da et al., 2009; Hung, Mark, Yeung, Chan, & Graham, 2018; Page et al., 2006). Given the contexts in these studies are dissimilar from the Maldivian tourism sector, in which both the employers and employees perhaps have had very little experience regarding any pandemic situation prior to COVID-19, it is likely to have some difficulties and challenges in managing such measures at the time of the unexpected pandemic. According to some informants, they were neither careful about maintaining social distancing with tourists nor with their colleagues. It could also be argued that the uniqueness of the situation may cause confusion as well as underestimate the magnitude of the impact even after constant advice by concerned authorities.

Many researchers who have studied previous pandemic situations, have noted that precautionary measures such as social distancing and other hygienic measures have proven to be effective in ensuring employees' safety (Ahmed et.al, 2020). It could be argued that both resort management and employers were not concerned as there have not been many reported cases in the resort islands at the onset of the COVID-19. More specifically, the data was gathered about two to three weeks from the time since the early cases of COVID-19 were reported. As the Maldives has never experienced such pandemics since the establishment of the tourism industry of the Maldives in 1972, it is very likely that the planning for the required precautionary measures was inactive at the beginning of the pandemic

situation. It is also noteworthy to mention that the Ministry of Tourism have already published strict measures to be implemented at the time of reopening the resorts in July 2020 (China Global Television Network, 2020). This implies that the precautionary measures will be more carefully implemented at the time of reopening the resort islands to ensure safety and wellbeing of both tourists and employees. The current pandemic can be taken as a learning experience by the tourism industry to better prepare for any potential health emergencies. The level of health and safety measures observed by the business will be a major decisive factor for choosing a travel destination in the short-term future. It is advisable for the health authorities to develop comprehensive risk-based guidelines for infection control and prevention for the tourism sector in order to limit the impact of future pandemics or other health emergencies. Mechanisms must also be in place to monitor the implementation of guidelines during obligatory situations.

2) How does the resort closure impact on employees' livelihood?

Nearly, all informants have shared their stress and concerns regarding the drastic income loss that was experienced by employees at the time of resort closure. This included not receiving the service charge, enforced paid leave with basic salary, and uncertainty of the reopening of resorts. Some have also spoken about the more vulnerable employees who were in probation conditions in which their contracts were terminated at the time of the closure. Some resorts served out redundancy and employees agreed that there was not much that they could do, within their rights according to law and regulation the resorts have to follow as employers. The informants understood that the resort management was probably acting through advice from qualified lawyers as the contracts were officially signed, and therefore there was no space for the employees to contest the decisions made by the management. Thereby, highlighting how easily resort owners can manipulate such a crisis for their advantage with no real consideration for the employees' welfare. Additionally, despite these negative experiences, all informants were of the view that they will return to the resort job as soon as they are allowed to. This signifies the lack of choice for the vast majority of resort employees in moving to other job sectors and over dependence on the resort sector even though the employees are not offered the job security they deserve.

Conclusion

While synthesising answers of both questions, it is evident that while some resorts have proactively taken precautionary measures to ensure health and safety of their employees, other resorts were less concerned. It could be argued that the uniqueness of the situation, as outlined by Tew et. al (2008) in their research looking into SARS, may cause confusion as well as underestimate the magnitude of the impact even after constant advice by concerned authorities. However, this may also imply that these resorts had their best interest in keeping the tourists' content and their businesses intact even during a pandemic. Almost all resorts facilitated frequent handwashing for the staff by providing hand sanitizers or running water as this is often a general practice imposed by resorts as part of their health and safety procedures. Some resorts provided necessary protective gear for employees working in the frontline of on the resort island and applied social

distancing and quarantine measures to an extent, but assumedly neglected those working off the islands such as airport representatives. The current pandemic can be taken as a learning experience by the tourism industry to better prepare for any potential health emergencies. The level of health and safety measures observed by the business will be a major decisive factor for choosing a travel destination in the short-term future.

In conclusion, as tourism is the main contributor to the economy of Maldives, careful consideration is needed to impose measures that would protect all parties concerned. This should specifically address frontline employees such as airport representatives and housekeeping staff who are predisposed to exposure from incoming tourists. It is advisable for the health authorities to develop comprehensive risk-based guidelines for infection control and prevention for the tourism sector in order to limit the impact of future pandemics or other health emergencies. Mechanisms must also be in place to monitor the implementation of guidelines during obligatory situations. The findings also highlight the drastic income loss all informants across the 13 resorts were subjected to. The findings also highlight the vulnerability of probationary staff to be terminated without further consideration and the vulnerability of resort employees to any external factor, such as the coronavirus pandemic, with no power vested in the employees to negotiate decisions that affect them. These findings magnify the need for stronger regulatory measures by the government and other stakeholders to ensure job security of resort employees as well as introduce measures to reduce livelihood impact in future pandemic or crisis situations. Improved resilience in the tourism sector is essential for the viability of Maldives' economy. More importantly, the findings highlight the urgent need to address the livelihood impact of the resort workers, especially during the gradual recovery of the industry from the current pandemic.

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