

## Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Labor Force Employed in the Translation Industry of Saudi Arabia

Mubarak Alkhatnai\*

King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Mubarak Alkhatnai, E-mail: malkhatnai@ksu.edu.sa

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### ABSTRACT

The on-going pandemic caused by COVID-19 has undoubtedly created huge impact not only to human health but to livelihood as well. The translation industry is a key player in the economy of multi-linguistic nations like Saudi Arabia, and the labor market inherent to it faces imminent challenges posed by this global health crisis. It is the intention of this study to look into the economic status of translators working in Saudi Arabia in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Email interviews were conducted to random translators from different agencies in the country. After a thorough descriptive analysis of their pre- and post-COVID labor situation, it was found that there was generally a decrease in income of the translators whose portfolio is comprised by the translation business by 50%. Nonetheless, there are very few of those who consider translation as the main source of income who benefitted from the situation. Translation rates also had to be reduced by 7% to 8% in order to become competitive in the market. This applies to the various sectors utilizing translation services including post-editing machine translation, transcreation, and localized engineering, among others. However, among the sectors covered in this study, the demand for translation services was observed to be most significant in the healthcare, life sciences, and medical and pharmaceutical sectors. It is then the hope of this study to contribute knowledge in finding effective means to alleviate the economic conditions of translators who, in one way or another, could be considered as frontliners in this trying time.

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 is an acute respiratory syndrome caused by a novel strain of coronavirus, which was identified amidst an outbreak in the Wuhan City of China (CDC, 2020). Initially declaring the outbreak of COVID-19 as a global health emergency (Gallegos, 2020; Wee et al., 2020), the World Health Organization (WHO) finally declared it as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the functioning of this world immutably, compelling the industry of translation and interpretation to quickly adopt the modern digitally designed technological tools so as to decrease the disruption in daily operational activities. During this turbulent time of health crises across the globe, businesses and corporations are becoming increasingly global whereby one-on-one meetings have been replaced by online video conferences. Without a shadow of any doubt, frontline healthcare workers are true heroes during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, but it goes without saying that translators and interpreters have an essential role to play in many sectors of a functional economy. The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic had a knock-on effect on the working styles of translators and interpreters – requiring them to acclimatize to remote working from their homes. This is a situation

which has become pretty much a new normal across the globe (Mangia, 2020).

While majority of the contemporary work in the field of sociolinguistics is more inclined towards the socio-symbolic function language, the COVID-19 infection outburst has underscored the significance of the communicative aspect of the language. This is associated with the fact that the real success in this mighty battle against the COVID-19 can only be realized through dissemination of prevention information to all segments of the society. Albeit no one is safe from risk of exposure to COVID-19 infection, some particular segments of the society, for example, displaced people, ethnic minorities and migrant population, are at an even greater risk to contract the coronavirus, as they have to face barriers in linguistic communication, which can be further compounded by inequalities due to their socio-economic status in the society (Godoy & Wood, 2020; Piller, 2020; Tan & Said, 2015; Uekusa, 2019). This is precisely the area where translators and interpreters have to play an important role in facilitating the healthcare information; thereby, ensuring that the information and knowledge related to health awareness is successfully delivered to everyone in the society in all applicable languages.

The population in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) was projected at 32.6 million in the most recent census that

was carried out in 2016 (Central Department of Statistics and Information, 2016). According to the official data from the United Nations, the annual population growth rate stands at 1.7% in KSA (The World Bank, 2019). The population of KSA reached 34 million people in 2019, according to the data presented by the report entitled “World Population Prospects 2019,” published by the United Nation’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division (United Nations, 2019). Nearly one-quarter of the population in KSA is comprised of expatriates (non-Saudis) – estimated at 10.8 million (Statista, 2019). Amongst the expat population, the highest proportion of the population is covered by Syrians (23%), followed by Indians (14%) and Pakistanis (10%). By language, besides Arabic, the other languages being spoken in KSA include Hindi (14%), Urdu (10%), Bengali (8%), Filipino (7%), Sinhala and Tamil (6%), Indonesia (4%), Turkish (1%), and other Western languages (1%) – making KSA multi lingual and culturally diverse society (Global Media Insight, 2021). Due to language barriers, the danger of miscommunication is quite high in KSA, which has a considerable foreign population of non-Arabic speaking people i.e. 51% of the expat population. This translates into 5.5 million people (10.8 million x 51%). Hence, multi-lingual awareness is covered by various translation agencies working in the country.

In the new millennium, the admission of KSA into the World Trade Organization (WTO), the creation of economic knowledge centers across many parts of the country, supplemented with well-diversified and huge number of business sectors entering into strategic partnerships with large tech companies such as Microsoft, has transformed the industry of translation and interpretation – subsequently, seen as a rapidly growing industry in the Saudi Arabia (Fatani, 2009). At the same time, the industry has become a lucrative opportunity for employment for trained translators and interpreters. KSA has a foreign population of 5.5 million people (Global Media Insight, 2021) who cannot translate and/or interpret Arabic language, and thus, are heavily reliant upon the translation agencies actively working across the country. This becomes especially important for foreign investors and workers who are required to get all the mandatory documents, developed or printed in their home countries in their official languages (English, Urdu, Hindi etc.), get translated in Arabic language. Moreover, tens of thousands of people visit holy places in KSA to perform either Umrah or Hajj. Umrah can be performed anytime during the year; whereas the Hajj is a once-yearly Islamic pilgrimage made by Muslims to the holiest city of Mecca. In order to fulfil the entire visa and travel related arrangements, the visitors are required to get their official documents translated into Arabic language.

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has posed a great deal of challenges – for both developing and developed economies. Global supply chains have been seriously hampered and what more, the globalized economies are facing a serious financial recession (Queiroz et al., 2020). At the one end, the countries being hit by the virus are implementing preventive measure in order to effectively curb the spread

of virus, and at the other end, recurring lockdowns and closure of businesses have seriously undermined the economic growth (Oldekop et al., 2020). Due to the prevailing effects of COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people have lost their jobs, and consequently led to increased amounts of depression, anxiety and stress, especially amongst the communities that have been hit hard by the pandemic (Blustein & Guarino, 2020). Moreover, the constant fear of losing employment or working at the same capacity as before for a lower wage rates has further exacerbated the job industry, and whether the most are skilled or unskilled – both have to bear the brunt of this COVID-19 pandemic (Akkermans et al., 2020). For a country like KSA, where the labor market is constantly transforming when the government has initiated a number of steps to support the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the abrupt onset of the coronavirus pandemic has tremendously distraught the sociodemographic and economic equilibrium, as most of the migrant population have been forced to leave Saudi Arabia, either due to mass unemployment or lack of required skills (Sawaya et al., 2020). Accordingly, the labor market has become more polarized, and the resilience in the job market is entirely dependent upon job security rather than wage rates or imminent growth of businesses (Gasana & Shehab, 2020).

The French Society of Translators entitled *Société française des traducteurs* (SFT) conducted a survey from June to July 2020 to assess the impact of the pandemic on the translation industry. A total of 526 participants took part in the survey where 57% viewed that the pandemic would have a bearing effect on their working income. Amongst these 57% participants, 48% expected to take on a side job to fulfil their living expenses, 23% considered undergoing a re-training program, 15% contemplated to temporarily halt their translating work, and 7% thought about leaving the translation industry permanently. These findings are indicative of the fact that the pandemic crisis has severely affected the translation industry – both professionally and mentally. As the results suggest, a small proportion of the surveyed population were thinking to quit the profession temporarily; whereas, some were thinking to change their profession. However, this survey was completed by a small proportion of the total French translators; and hence, the findings of this survey cannot be generalized.

A global survey was carried out by CSA Research Institute in August 2020. This survey had a sample population of 1,174 freelance translators from 97 countries (CSA Research, 2020). The survey revealed some interesting findings about the emerging trends of the translation industry during this pandemic era. Some of the prominent findings included decrease in income, decline in job opportunities, and hence, a reduced workload. About two-thirds of the surveyed population held that the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic are temporary, one-quarter viewed that the pandemic has completely transformed the translation industry, while only 10% believed that the pandemic effects had not brought any major changes in the translation industry. It is worth mentioning that the report highlighted that demand for translation service had been increased in some sectors, and

declined in some other professional segments of the society (CSA Research, 2020).

Even though the labor market of Saudi Arabia has become highly computerized, it is still not possible to accurately estimate the total number of translation agencies working in the country, as there is no formally approved commercial register recording the details of this field. Notwithstanding a list of authorized translation offices is issued by the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, the list is, by and large, inaccurate and hence, cannot be used as a reliable source (Fatani, 2009). This haphazardness makes it rather difficult in evaluating the digital transformation in the translation industry in Saudi Arabia such as machine translation (MT), computer aided translation (CAT) tools, and post-editing machine translation (PEMT), etc. (Fatani, 2009). Keeping in view the findings of the surveys conducted by SFT and CSA Research, the objective of this research study is to investigate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the economic status of translators working in Saudi Arabia.

### Method

This research utilized survey method and is quantitative in nature. Since there is no list of translation agencies available in the country that can be used as a credible source, it was decided to obtain the details of different translation agencies through internet surfing websites. Some of the web-links that yielded useful information about the list of translation agencies in KSA are as follows:

No	Website/Institution	URL Address
1	TranslationDirectory	<a href="https://www.translationdirectory.com/translation_agencies_in_saudi_arabia.php">https://www.translationdirectory.com/translation_agencies_in_saudi_arabia.php</a>
2	British Embassy, Riyadh	<a href="https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/912213/Word_document_Translators_list_2020__1_.pdf">https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/912213/Word_document_Translators_list_2020__1_.pdf</a>
3	GoodFirms	<a href="https://www.goodfirms.co/translation-services-companies/saudi-arabia">https://www.goodfirms.co/translation-services-companies/saudi-arabia</a>
4	Saudian Yellowpages	<a href="http://www.saudianyelowpages.com/TRANSLATION-SERVICES.php">http://www.saudianyelowpages.com/TRANSLATION-SERVICES.php</a>
5	Saudi Arabia Business Directory - SaudiaYP	<a href="https://www.saudiayp.com/category/Translation_services/city:Riyadh">https://www.saudiayp.com/category/Translation_services/city:Riyadh</a>

Using snowball technique, more translation companies/agencies were sought on telephone. All respondents were contacted via telephone. The purpose of the study was explained to them followed by seeking their informed verbal consent. When they agreed to participate in the study, the research instrument (questionnaire) was emailed to them. The questionnaire was developed and administered through *Google Forms*.

The target population of this research study was comprised of freelance translators, students working part-time in

translation agencies, and professional translators working in the public and private sectors. Among the 220 email recipients of the questionnaire, only 164 turned in their responses, demonstrating a response rate of 74.5%. After reviewing each filled questionnaire, 61 respondents were eliminated from the final sample size. The reasons for excluding these questionnaires included missing answers and some respondents had gone back to their home countries, i.e., they left Saudi Arabia. Since the purpose of the study was to assess and evaluate the perceptions of those translators who were still actively working in the country; thus, it was deemed appropriate to eliminate the expatriates from the final sample. The total number of finally approved questionnaires were 103 (n=103). Descriptive statistics was used in interpreting the data gathered.

## RESULTS

### Socio-demographics of Translator-Respondents

Some basic socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Their age range was from 18 to 70 years. The majority of them were between 18 and 30 years old followed by the second cohort of respondents falling between 31 and 45 years. Females (n=57) are more actively employed in the translation industry as compared to their male counterparts (n=46). The respondents were asked to provide information about their academic institutes from where they learnt translation skills. Most of the respondents (about three quarters) obtained their translation degrees from Saudi Arabia; whereas, about one-quarter obtained their academic qualification from abroad. Moreover, when asked if they were active in providing freelance written-language services, such as translation, localization, or transcreation, all respondents (100%) reported themselves to be active in the domain of providing freelance written-language services.

The respondents were asked regarding their experience in terms of years of practice in the job market. As seen in Figure 1, about one-half (48%) of them had 1-5 years of experience in the job market, 19% had 6-10 years, 13% had 11-15 years, while 13% accumulated 21 years and more.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic Information of Survey Respondents (n = 103)

	f	%
Gender		
Male	46	44.66
Female	57	55.34
Age Group		
18-30	49	47.57
31-45	38	36.89
46-60	11	10.68
61-70	5	4.85
Source of Training		
Saudi Arabia	77	74.76
Abroad	26	25.63

With respect to years of experience in the job market still, the smallest cohort was of 16-20 years, representing 8% of the sample population.

The respondents were classified into four categories: freelance translators, students working part-time in translation agencies, and professional translators working in the public or private sectors. As seen in Figure 2, 39% of the study respondents were working as freelance translator/interpreter, 29% were employed in the private sector while 26% in the public. Only 6% of the sample population were translation students working part-time in the translation industry.

**Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Translation Industry**

The respondents were asked if their translation business/job has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with respect to income, volume of work, and rates. The responses pertinent to these three independent variables are shown here in the Figure 3.

With respect to income, more than one-half of the respondents (55%) said that their overall business improved despite the pandemic. Only 14% admitted that there was decrease in income, while another 10% said that their overall income had not been affected. About 21% were unsure about the knock-on effects of the pandemic on their income levels and regarded it ‘too soon to say anything about it’.

With regard volume of work, the largest group (40%) of the respondents mentioned that they are having the same volume of work as even before the pandemic. About one-quarter

(25%) of the respondents revealed that it increased during the post-COVID-19 period. The volume of work was considered to be reduced for 17% of the respondents, while another 17% cannot fathom the difference yet.

In line with the rates being charged by the translators on an average basis, the perceptions of the respondents were almost equally distributed across the four options. A very low cohort of respondents (19%) mentioned that their rates had increased after the pandemic while another 26% shared that it was reduced. About one-quarter of the population (27%) stated no effects were observed in their rates while the remaining 27% were unsure to make any assertion and considered it too early to say anything about it.

When asked if the income levels of the respondents from the written language service had been affected by the pandemic, all the respondents (100%) reported to have observed a change in their income levels in the post-COVID-19 period. They were further asked to describe the extent of these effects on their income level and the results are presented in Figure 4.

Only 2% of the respondents stated that the proportion of their income from written language services was affected by the pandemic by only less than 5%. About one-third (34%) reported that their income level had been affected between 5% and 50%. Another one-third (34%) conveyed that the pandemic had affected their income proportion by between

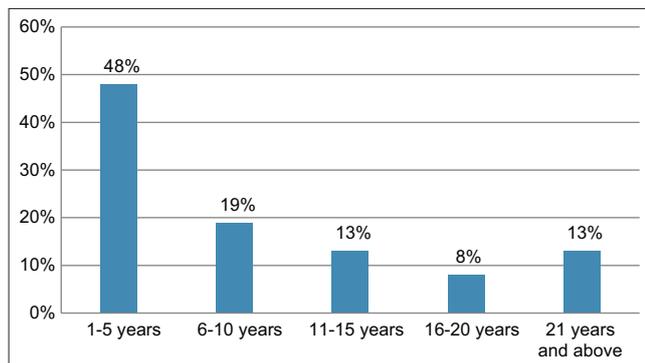


Figure 1. Length of experience in the job market (n=103)

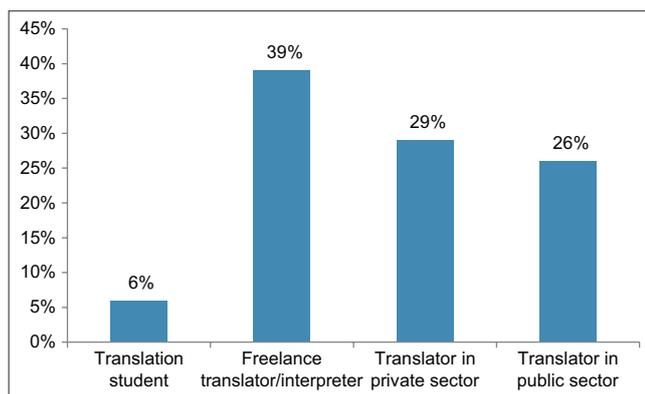


Figure 2. Current status of the study respondents (n=103)

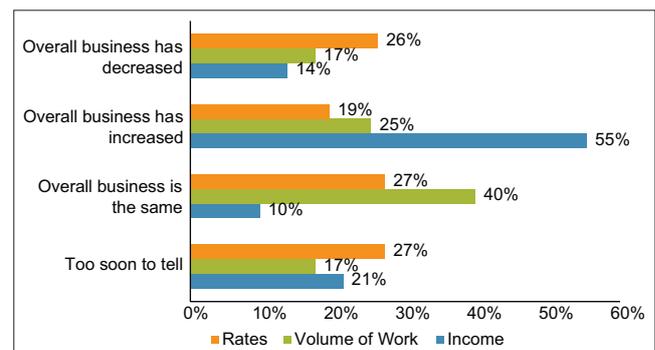


Figure 3. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the translation industry

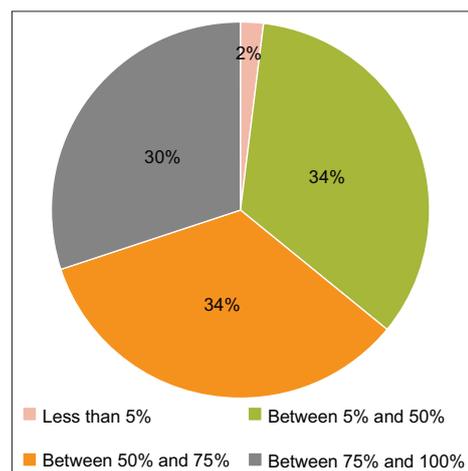


Figure 4. Change in income level from written language services due to COVID-19 pandemic

50% and 75%. The last group (30%) of the respondents cited that the pandemic had caused a change in their income level by 75% up to 100%.

The written-language service was disaggregated by type of service. The service types included 5 categories namely translation, post-editing machine translation, transcreation, localization engineering and any other types of service. To measure the effects of the pandemic on the income level of the translators, they were asked to state the percentage of their income being earned from each service type – both in the pre and post COVID-19 pandemic era. The results are presented in Figures 5a and 5b.

### Income from Translation Service

- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 4% of the respondents had been earning less than 5% of their to-

tal income from the translation services. However, a marginal increase was observed in the post COVID-19 era; whereby 6% of them reported income proportion from their translation service as less than 5%.

- Prior to the pandemic, about two-thirds of the respondents (64%) reported income from translation service constituting between 5% and 50% of their overall income. In the post COVID-19 era, this percentage dropped from 64% to 42%.
- Prior to the pandemic, about 19% of the respondents reported that income from translation service constitute between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage did not increase or decrease and even in the post COVID-19 era.
- Before the pandemic, about 13% of the respondents reported that their income from translation service had made up between 75% and 100% of their overall

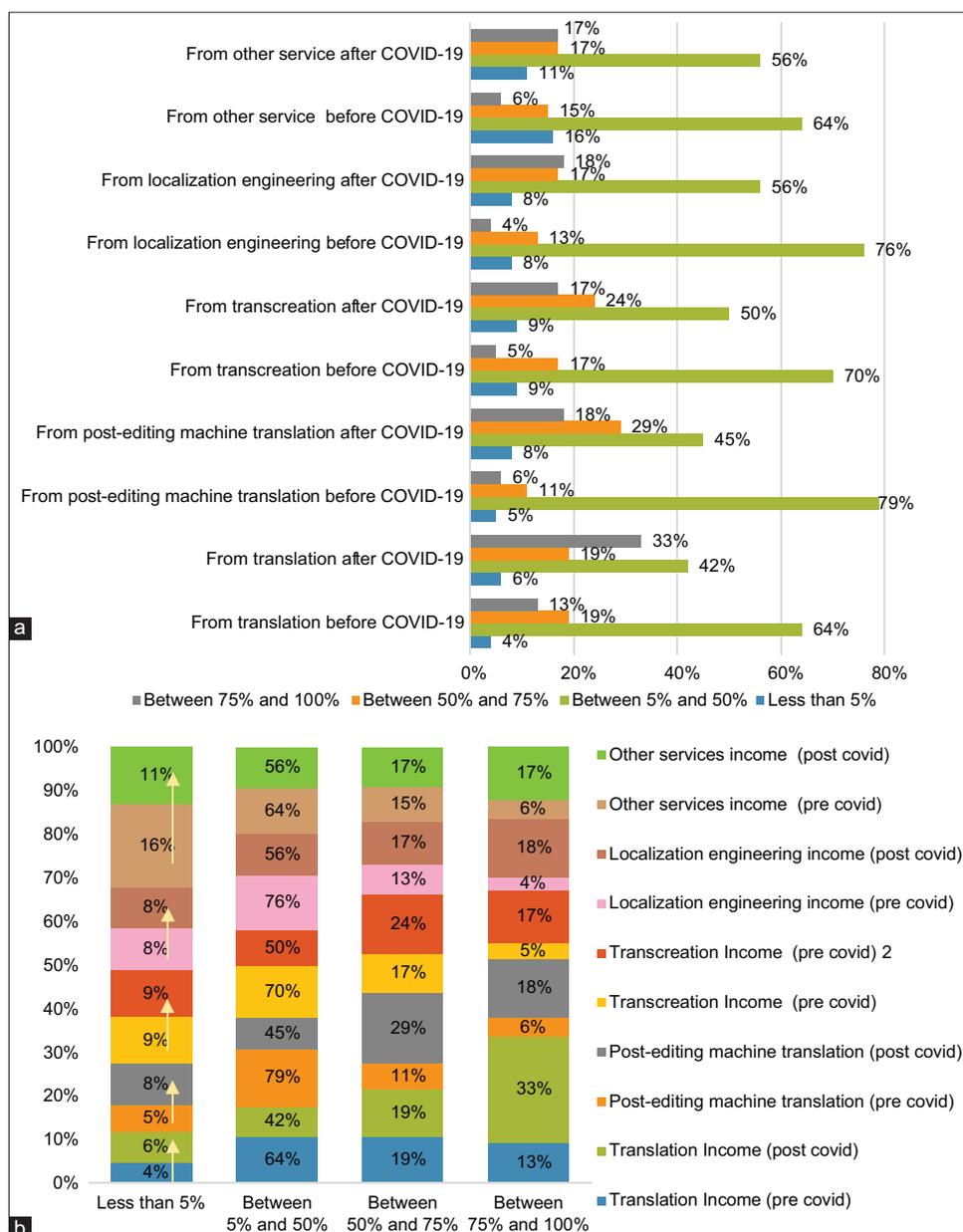


Figure 5. (a and b) proportion of income level in pre and post COVID-19 pandemic era according to type of translation related service

income – implying that translation service was the highest source of income in their overall income portfolio. This percentage substantially increased to 33% in the post COVID-19 era.

### Income from Post-Editing Machine Translation Service

Machine translation has brought a revolution in the digital translation industry by making the translation more economical, faster and accurate. However, it still requires the assistance of human translators to achieve maximum accuracy. Thus, post-editing machine translation, abbreviated as PEMT, is a useful technique that amalgamates the best of both, i.e. machine and human minds (O'Brien et al., 2014; O'Brien & Simard, 2014).

- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only 5% of the respondents had been earning less than 5% of their total income from the post-editing machine translation service; however, a marginal increase was observed in the post COVID-19 era; whereby 8% of them reported income proportion from their post-editing machine translation service at less than 5% of their total income.
- Prior to the pandemic, more than three-quarters of the study population (79%) reported income from post-editing machine translation service constituting between 5% and 50% of their overall income. In the post COVID-19 era, this percentage dropped to 45%. This indicates utilization of machine translation was significantly reduced in the post COVID-19 era.
- Prior to the pandemic, about 11% of the study respondents reported that income from post-editing machine translation service made up between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage increased by more than 2.5-fold during the post COVID-19 era, where 29% reported their earnings from post-editing machine translation service making up around 50% to 75% of their overall income.
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 6% of the respondents reported that income from post-editing machine translation service comprised between 75% and 100% of their overall income – implying that post-editing machine translation service was the highest source of income in their overall income portfolio. This group, comprising 6% of the study population, was heavily reliant on post-editing machine translation service for income generation. This percentage was substantially increased three-fold from 6% to 18% in the post COVID-19 era.

### Income from Transcreation Service

Transcreation can be described as combining the effects of copywriting and translation in one piece (Sattler-Hovdar, 2019). Transcreation cannot be regarded as simple form of translation, because it involves creating new content focusing on needs of the target audience. Transcreation is extensively used in the advertising domain where the primary aim is to sell the product or service to potential customers (Martínez, 2020).

- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 9% of the study respondents had been earning less than 5% of their total income from the transcreation service. This percentage did not increase or decrease in the post COVID-19 era.
- Prior to pandemic, slightly less than three-quarters of the study population (70%) reported income from transcreation service constituting between 5% and 50% of their overall income. In the post COVID-19 era, this percentage dropped to 50%. This group represents the highest number of respondents from the study sample and hence, it can be argued that majority of the respondents (70%; n= 72) had been earning between 5% and 50% from the transcreation service in the pre COVID-19 era.
- Prior to the pandemic, about 17% of the respondents reported that income from transcreation service comprised between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage increased by 7-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era, whereby 24% of the study population reported the proportion of their earnings from transcreation service making up between 50% and 75% of their overall income.
- Before the pandemic, about 5% of the respondents reported that income from transcreation service had made up between 75% and 100% of their overall income – implying that transcreation service was the highest source of income in the overall income portfolio. This group, comprising 5% of the study population, was heavily reliant on transcreation service for income generation. This percentage was substantially increased by slightly more than three-fold, i.e., from 5% to 17% after the pandemic, where 17% of the study respondents cited their earnings from transcreation service making up anywhere between three-quarters (75%) and full 100% of their overall income.

### Income from Localized Engineering Service

Generally speaking, localization engineering is comprised of all the activities that cannot be performed by the translators. This can be regarded as a critical phase whereby the technology of localization engineering is needed at various steps. The finished product could be a localized learning management system, a software application, multimedia content or website (Esselink, 2002).

- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 8% of the respondents had been earning less than 5% of their total income from the localized engineering service. This percentage did not increase or decrease in the post COVID-19 era.
- Prior to the pandemic, slightly more than three-quarters (76%) reported income being generated from localized engineering service making up between 5% and 50% of their overall income. In the post COVID-19 era, this percentage dropped from 76% to 56%. This group represents the highest number of respondents from the study sample and hence, it can be argued that majority of the respondents (76%; n= 78) had been earning between 5% and 50% from localized engineering service in the pre

COVID-19 era. However, in the post COVID-19 era, this percentage fell from 76% (n=78) to 50% (n=52).

- Prior to the pandemic, about 13% of the respondents reported that income from localized engineering service had made up between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage increased by 4-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era, where 17% reported the proportion of their earnings from localized engineering service making up between 50% and 75% of their overall income.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only 4% of the respondents reported that income from localized engineering service had made up between 75% and 100% of their overall income – implying that localized engineering service was the highest source of income in their overall income portfolio. This group, comprising 4% of the study population, was heavily reliant on localized engineering service for income generation in the pre COVID-19 era. This percentage substantially increased by 4.5-fold in the post COVID-19 era, where 18% cited their earnings from localized engineering service making up anywhere between three-quarters (75%) and full 100% of their overall income.

### **Income from Other Services**

The last category of the study respondents/translators was assessed with respect to their income being generated from any other written language translation services that were not inquired as part of questions raised in Figures 5a and 5b.

- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 16% of the study respondents had been earning less than 5% of their total income from any other written language translation services. This percentage decreased in the post COVID-19 era, where 11% reported earning less than 5% income from any other written language translation services as part of their overall income.
- Prior to the pandemic, slightly less than two-thirds of the study population (64%) reported income being generated from any other written language translation services making up between 5% and 50% of their overall income. In the post COVID-19 era, this percentage dropped from 64% to 56%. This group represents the highest number of respondents in the study sample and hence, it can be argued that majority of the respondents (64%; n= 66) had been earning between 5% and 50% from any other written language translation services in the pre COVID-19 era. However, in the post COVID-19 era, this percentage fell from 64% (n=66) to 56% (n=58).
- Prior to the pandemic, about 15% of the study respondents reported that income from any other written language translation services had made up between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage increased by 2-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era, where 17% reported the proportion of earnings from any other written language translation services making up between 50% and 75% of their overall income.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only 6% of the study respondents reported that income from any other written

language translation service had made up between 75% and 100% of their overall income – implying that any other written language translation service was the highest source of income in the overall income portfolio for this small population in the sample. In other words, we can say that this group, comprising 6% of the study population, was heavily reliant on any other written language translation services for income generation in the pre COVID-19 era. This percentage increased by almost three-fold in the post COVID-19 era, where 17% of the study respondents cited the source of their earnings from any other written language translation services making up anywhere between three-quarters (75%) and full 100% of their overall income.

### **Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Translation Industry (Sector-wise)**

The study respondents were asked about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on various business segments of the society from which they had been earning income. They were asked to choose five from the given options to choose from, to wit: healthcare, life sciences, medical, pharmaceuticals, social networks, gaming, government, travel and leisure, airlines, automotive, real estate and consumer goods. The results of research question are presented in the Figures 6a and 6b.

As seen in Figures 6a and 6b, 37% of the respondents did not have any clients in the healthcare sector. Only 9% reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation work in it; hence, no statement was made regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. About 15% of the respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the healthcare sector. About one-third of the respondents (33%) stated that their translation business had been increased in the post COVID-19 era; whereas, 7% respondents stated otherwise, i.e., the demand for their translation business in the healthcare sector had been reduced in after the pandemic.

On the other hand, 8% of the respondents did not have any clients in the life sciences, medical and pharmaceutical sector. About 29% respondents reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation work in the life sciences, medical and pharmaceutical sector and hence, did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. About 17% respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the life sciences, medical and pharmaceutical sector. The largest group of the study respondents for this research question was comprised of slightly more than one-third of the study population (38%) who stated that their translation business had been increased in the life sciences, medical and pharmaceutical sector in the post COVID-19 era; whereas, 9% respondents stated otherwise, i.e., the demand for their translation business in life sciences, medical and pharmaceutical sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

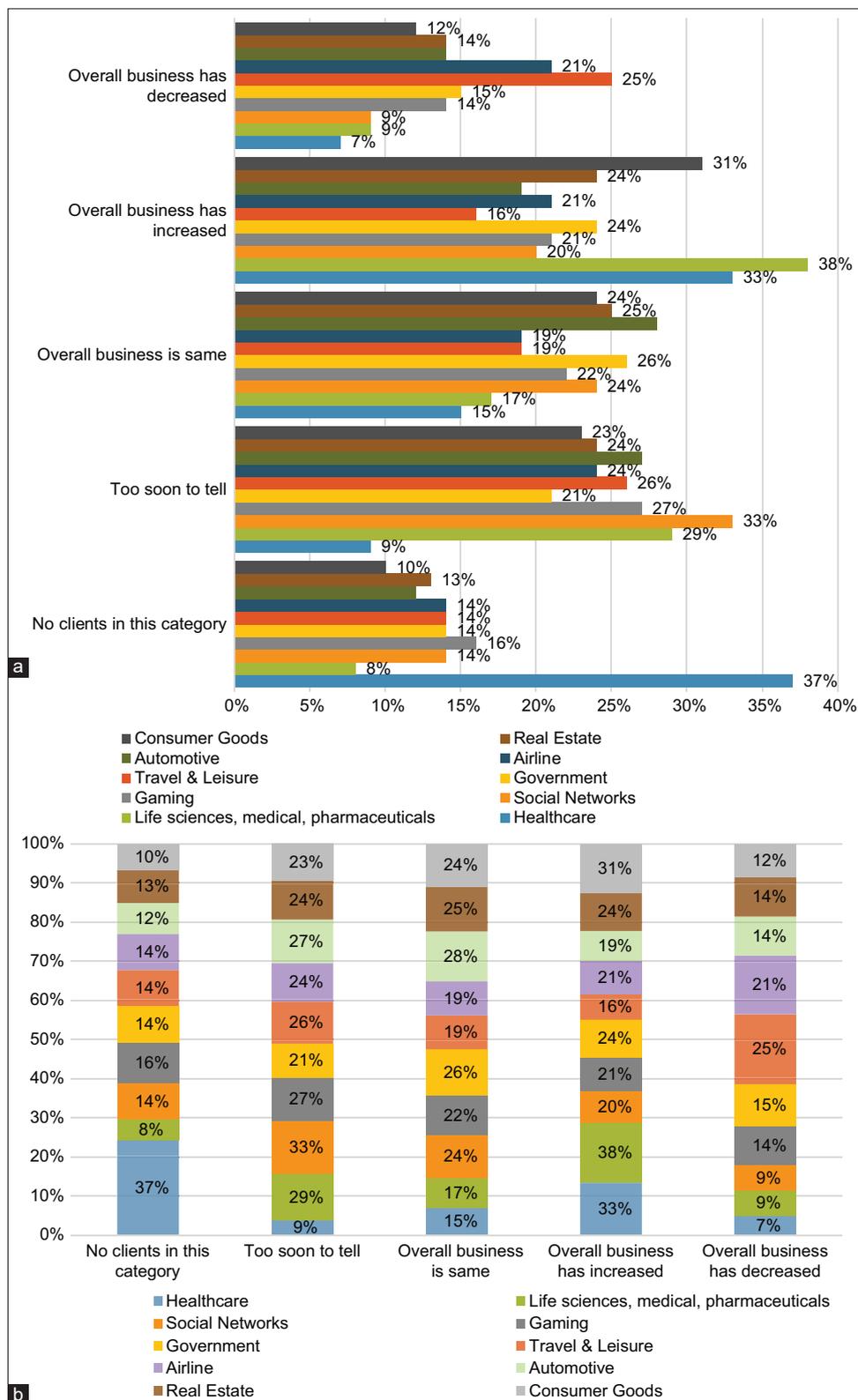


Figure 6. (a and b) Demand for translation services by type of sector in post-pandemic Era (n=103)

Meanwhile, 14% of the respondents did not have any clients in the social networking sector. About one-third of the study respondents (33%) reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation services in the social networking sector; and hence, did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation ser-

VICES in this sector. About 24% respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the social networking sector. About one-fifth of the study respondents (20%) stated that the demand for their translation business had been increased in the social networking sector in post COVID-19 era; whereas, 9% respondents stated otherwise i.e., the demand for their trans-

lation business in the social networking sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

Moreover, 16% of the respondents did not have any clients in the gaming sector. Slightly more than a quarter of the respondents (27%) reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation services in the gaming sector; hence, it did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. About 22% respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the gaming sector. Slightly more than one-fifth of the study respondents (21%) stated that the demand for their translation business had been increased in the gaming sector in post COVID-19 era; whereas, 14% respondents stated otherwise i.e., the demand for their translation business in the gaming sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

In the government sector, 14% of the respondents did not have any. Slightly more than one-fifth of the study respondents (21%) reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation services in government sector; hence, it did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. About 26% respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the government sector. Slightly less than one-quarter of the study respondents (24%) stated that the demand for their translation business had been increased in the government sector in post COVID-19 era; whereas, 15% respondents stated otherwise i.e., the demand for their translation business in the government sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

The travel and leisure sector had 14% of the respondents not having any clients. Slightly more than one-quarter of the study respondents (26%) reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation services in the sector; hence, it did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. About 19% respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the travel and leisure sector. For 16% of the study population, the demand for the translation business had been increased in the travel and leisure sector in post COVID-19 era; whereas, for one-quarter of the study respondents (25%), the demand for their translation business in the travel and leisure sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

The airline sector sees 14% of the respondents who did not have any clients. Slightly less than one-quarter of the study respondents (24%) reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation services in airline sector; hence, it did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. About 19% respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the airline sector. Slightly more than one-fifth of the study respondents (21%) stated that the demand for their translation business had been

increased in the airline sector in post COVID-19 era; whereas, another 21% study respondents stated otherwise, i.e., the demand for their translation business in the airline sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

In the automotive sector, 12% of the respondents did not have any clients in the automotive sector. Slightly more than one-quarter of the study respondents (27%) reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation services in automotive sector; hence, it did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. Another 28% respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the automotive sector. Slightly less than one-fifth of the study respondents (19%) stated that the demand for their translation business had been increased in the automotive sector in post COVID-19 era; whereas, another 14% study respondents stated otherwise, i.e., the demand for their translation business in the automotive sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

The real state sector shows that 13% of the respondents did not have any clients. Slightly less than one-quarter of the study respondents (24%) reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation services in real estate sector; hence, it did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. One-quarter of the study respondents (25%) respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the real estate sector. Slightly less than one-quarter of the study respondents (24%) stated that the demand for their translation business had been increased in the real estate sector in post COVID-19 era; whereas, another 14% study respondents stated otherwise i.e., the demand for their translation business in the real estate sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

Lastly, 10% of the respondents did not have any clients in the consumer goods sector. Slightly less than one-quarter of the study respondents (23%) reported that it was too soon to consolidate the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation services in consumer goods sector; hence, it did not make any statement regarding the aggregate effects of the pandemic on the demand of translation services in this sector. Slightly less than one-quarter of the study respondents (24%) respondents were of the view that the pandemic had not affected their translation business in the consumer goods sector. Slightly less than one-third of the study respondents (31%) stated that the demand for their translation business had been increased in the consumer goods sector in post COVID-19 era; whereas, another 12% study respondents stated otherwise, i.e., the demand for their translation business in the consumer goods sector had been reduced in post pandemic era.

### **Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Income from Freelance Spoken Language Service**

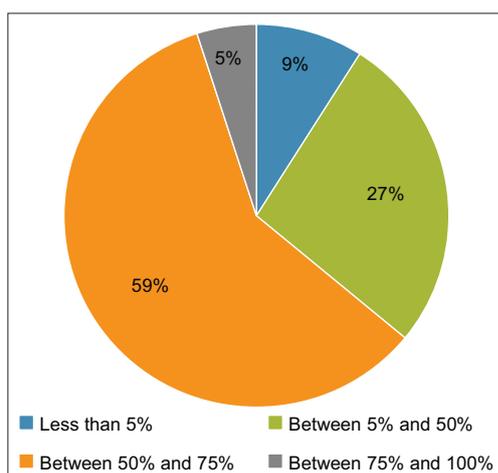
The study respondents were asked if they had been involved in providing freelance spoken language service such as in-person and remote interpreting and all the study respon-

dents (100%; n=103) answered “YES”. It was followed by a question inquiring about the income being generated from the spoken language service in the pre and post COVID-19 era, in order to find any effects of the pandemic on earnings from this line of business category. The respondents were given four choices in order to find out the change occurred in income level between pre and post COVID-19 era. These options included: “less than 5%”; “between 5% and 50%”; “between 50% and 75%” and “between 75% and 100%”. The results of this question are presented in Figure 7.

As shown in Figure 7, only 9% of the respondents were least affected by the pandemic as their income level from spoken language service was changed by merely less than 5% as compared to what they had been earning in the pre COVID-19 era. Slightly more than one quarter of the respondents (27%) reported that their income from spoken language service changed between 5% and 50% in the post-pandemic era. However, the majority of the respondents (59%) reported their income being changed between one-half to three quarters (between 50% and 75%) after the pandemic. The most distressed group of the population was comprised of 5% of the total population whose income from spoken language service was substantially affected – between 75% and 100%.

### Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Income Generated from Freelance Interpretation (by Service Type)

The study respondents were asked to report the extent of their income from freelance interpretation service being affected from COVID-19 pandemic. The freelance interpretation service was disaggregated by type of service, namely: on-site interpretation (non-conference), on-site interpretation (conference type), over-the-phone interpretation, remote simultaneous interpretation, and video remote interpretation. To measure the effects of the pandemic on the income level of the freelance translators, they were asked to state the percentage of their income being earned from each service type – both in the pre and post COVID-19 pandemic era. These results are presented in the Figures 8a and 8b.



**Figure 7.** Change in income level from spoken language service in post COVID-19 Era (n=103)

### Income from Freelance On-site Interpretation (Non-conference Type)

- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only 9% of the study respondents had been earning less than 5% of their total income from freelance on-site interpretation (non-conference) service; however, a considerable increase was observed in the post COVID-19 era where one-third of the respondents (33%) reported income proportion from it.
- Prior to the pandemic, slightly more than one-half of the study population (53%) reported income from freelance on-site interpretation (non-conference) service constituting between 5% and 50% of their overall income. In the post COVID-19 era, this percentage was dropped from 53% to 19%.
- Prior to the pandemic, about 29% of the study respondents reported that income from freelance on-site interpretation (non-conference) service had made up between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage was decreased by 11-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era, where 18% study population reported earnings from freelance on-site interpretation (non-conference) service falling between 50% and 75% of the overall income.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only a small percentage of the study population (9%) reported that income from freelance on-site interpretation (non-conference) service had made up between 75% and full 100% of their overall income – implying that this service type was the highest source of income in their overall income portfolio in the pre COVID-19 era. This percentage was substantially increased to slightly less than one-third in the post COVID-19 era, where 29% of the study population cited earnings from freelance on-site interpretation (non-conference) service falling between three-quarters (75%) and full 100% of their overall income.

### Income from Freelance On-site Interpretation (Conference Type)

- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only 10% of the study respondents had been earning less than 5% of their total income from freelance on-site interpretation (conference type) service; however, a considerable increase was observed in the post COVID-19 era; whereby more than one-third of the study respondents (36%) of the study respondents reported income proportion from the freelance on-site interpretation (conference type) service as less than 5%.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, slightly more than one-half of the study population (54%) reported income from freelance on-site interpretation (conference type) service constituting between 5% and 50% of their overall income. In the post COVID-19 era, this percentage was dropped substantially from 53% to 18%.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, 32% of the study respondents reported that income from freelance on-site interpretation (conference type) service had made up

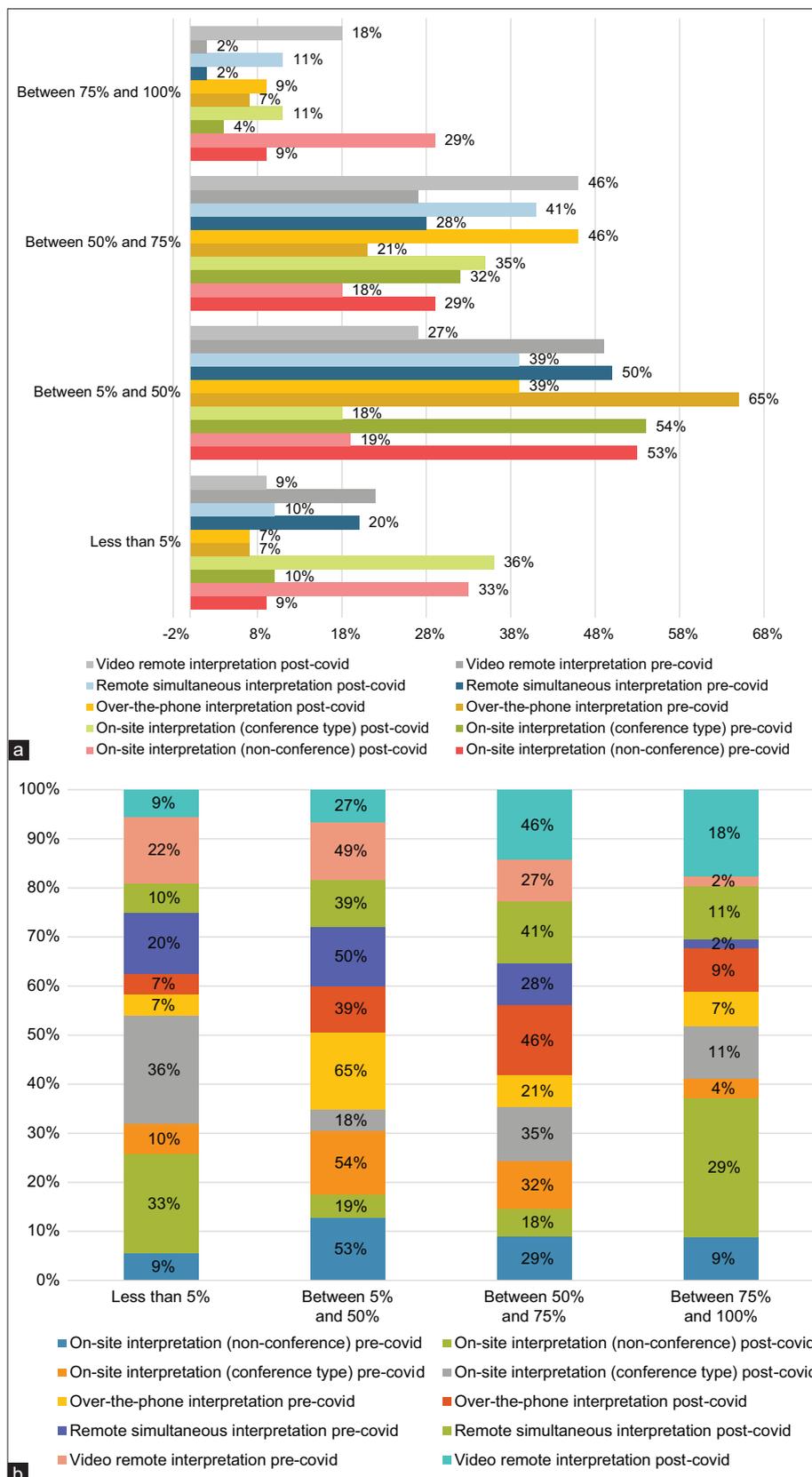


Figure 8. (a and b) Proportion of income level in pre and post covid-19 pandemic era (by type of freelance interpretation service)

between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage was increased by 3-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era, where slightly more than one-third of the study population (35%) reported earnings from freelance

- on-site interpretation (conference type) service falling between 50% and 75% of the overall income.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only a small percentage of the study population (4%) reported that income

from freelance on-site interpretation (conference type) service had made up between 75% and full 100% of their overall income – implying that this service type was the highest source of income in the overall income portfolio for this group in the pre COVID-19 era. This percentage was increased by 7-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era, where 11% of the study population cited earnings from freelance on-site interpretation (conference type) service falling between three-quarters (75%) and full 100% of their overall income.

#### **Income from Freelance over-the-phone Interpretation**

- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only 7% of the study respondents had been earning less than 5% of their total income from freelance over-the-phone interpretation service; however, still no change was observed in the post COVID-19 era; whereby once again 7% of the study respondents reported their income proportion from the freelance over-the-phone interpretation service as less than 5%.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, approximately two-third of the study population (65%) reported income from freelance over-the-phone interpretation service constituting between 5% and 50% of their overall income. In the post COVID-19 era, this percentage was dropped substantially from 65% to 39%.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, 21% of the study respondents reported that income from freelance over-the-phone interpretation service had made up between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage was substantially increased in the post COVID-19 era, whereby slightly less than one-half of the study population (46%) reported earnings from freelance over-the-phone interpretation service falling between 50% and 75% of the overall income.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only a small percentage of the study population (7%) reported that income from freelance over-the-phone interpretation service had made up between 75% and full 100% of their overall income – implying that this service type was the highest source of income in the overall income portfolio for this group in the pre COVID era. This percentage was slightly increased by 2-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era, whereby 9% of the study population cited earnings from freelance over-the-phone interpretation service falling between three-quarters (75%) and full 100% of their overall income.

#### **Income from Freelance Remote Simultaneous Interpretation**

- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, one-fifth of the study respondents (20%) had been earning less than 5% of their total income from freelance remote simultaneous interpretation service; however, this percentage was reduced by 10-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era; where 10% of the study respondents reported their income proportion from the freelance remote simultaneous interpretation service as less than 5%.

- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, one-half of the study population (50%) reported income from freelance remote simultaneous interpretation service constituting between 5% and 50% of their overall income. However, in the post COVID-19 era, this percentage was dropped from 50% to 39%.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, 28% of the study respondents reported that income from freelance remote simultaneous interpretation service had made up between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage was increased by 13-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era, where 41% of the study respondents reported earnings from freelance remote simultaneous interpretation service falling between 50% and 75% of the overall income.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only a small percentage of the study population (2%) reported that income from freelance remote simultaneous interpretation service had made up between 75% and full 100% of their overall income – implying that this service type was the highest source of income in the overall income portfolio for this group in the pre COVID-19 era. There was just above five-fold increase in the post COVID-19 era, where 11% of the study population cited earnings from freelance remote simultaneous interpretation service falling between three-quarters (75%) and full 100% of their overall income.

#### **Income from Freelance Video Remote Interpretation**

- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, slightly more than one-fifth of the study respondents (22%) had been earning less than 5% of their total income from freelance video remote interpretation service; however, this percentage was reduced by 13-percentage points in the post COVID-19 era; where 9% of the study respondents reported their income proportion from the freelance video remote interpretation service as less than 5%.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, approximately one-half of the study population (49%) reported income from freelance video remote interpretation service constituting between 5% and 50% of their overall income. However, in the post COVID-19 era, this percentage was dropped by nearly one-half from 49% to 27%.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, 27% of the study respondents reported that income from freelance video remote interpretation service had made up between 50% and 75% of their overall income. This percentage was substantially increased in the post COVID-19 era, where 46% of the study respondents reported earnings from freelance video remote interpretation service falling between 50% and 75% of the overall income.
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, only a small percentage of the study population (2%) reported that income from freelance video remote interpretation service had made up between 75% and full 100% of their overall income – implying that this service type was the highest source of income in the overall income portfolio for this group in the pre COVID-19 era. There was a profound nine-fold

increase in the post COVID-19 era, whereby 18% of the study population cited earnings from freelance video remote interpretation service falling between three-quarters (75%) and full 100% of their overall income.

## DISCUSSION

The findings in this study present mixed results with respect to economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the translation industry of Saudi Arabia. For the 55% of the study population, income has increased by more than one-half (55%), but it is worth mentioning that these translators had reduced their rates by 7% to 8%, implying that they had to provide the services at a much cheaper rate in order to lure the customers. This is contrary to the findings presented by the CSA Research in 2020, where 55% of the sampled translation service providers reported a decrease in business by 55% (CSA Research, 2020). This is probably due to the fact that Saudi Arabia has a multi-linguistic society with a major portion of the population from nationalities other than Arabic-speaking. The volume of work, as shown in preceding sections, increased by 25% for the study population who had reported an increase in income from translation business by 55%. Hence, for this reason, it can be contended that due to mass scale production of safety messages developed in Arabic, it was much needed to translate those messages in other languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Filipino, Indonesian, etc.

However, further analysis revealed that study respondents generally reported a decrease in income from in the translation business, and this is especially true for those whose earnings had been affected between 5% and 50% from translation business. However, only a small segment of the study respondents reported tremendous growth in their translation business who had been earning between 75% and 100% of their income from the translation services. It would be highly recommended for people wishing to undertake any research endeavors in the translation industry of Saudi Arabia to explore the differentiation between human and computer based translation service providers. It has been proposed so due to the very fact that machine translation and localized engineering are highly sophisticated skills that cannot usually be provided by freelance translators and businesses so they tend to contact specialized translation firms in order to get the best output. Computer assisted translation (CAT) tools are now being extensively utilized by the translators and interpreters to help themselves increase their productivity, while at the same time, allow them to achieve high quality translation products. However, literatures suggest that adoption of CAT tools is particularly low in the Arab speaking nations (Al-anazi, 2019; Al-Jarf, 2017; Alotaibi, 2017; Breikaa, 2016; Quaranta, 2011).

With respect to connecting translation service with other business sectors, it is obviously understandable that the demand of translation business was significantly increased in the healthcare, life sciences, medical and pharmaceutical sectors. The reason has been discussed above, i.e., due to the multi-linguistic nature of the society and in the post COVID-19 era. Important messages are being developed in other languages alongside Arabic before it gets disseminated

through mass communication campaigns. This is consistent with the findings of Zhang and Wu (2020) and Zheng (2020) who reported a rapid need for multilingual translators in the healthcare and medical sectors after the emergence of pandemic. Similarly, the findings of this study are consistent with the literature that translation industry has been severely afflicted by the pandemic with regard to their business earnings from the sectors such as travel and leisure, and airlines (Chen et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Lee & Chen, 2020; Thams et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Due to the global economic recession being caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, virtually all types of businesses have suffered, except healthcare, medical and pharmaceutical sectors. Translation industry is quite different in nature and has its own particular physiognomies, and thus, requires embracing the economic challenges and undertaking its own specific action plans to be able to better respond to the growing challenges of the time. The economic upheaval in the preceding year or so has rendered the future uncertainties for translation and interpretation industry. It is actually the uncertainty about the future events that is the most worrisome factor for translators and interpreters. It is no doubt that this pandemic crisis has brought about a huge deal of impediments for the translators. Notwithstanding the best efforts of the human capital in this sector, many are still struggling to find economic stability in such a precarious position. In order to effectively overcome the financial quandaries brought by this pandemic, the entire translation and interpretation industry will have to rely on their ability to anticipate some opportunities in the future, and above all, will have to work with new innovative and vibrant methodologies as we are not always facing business-as-usual circumstances.

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