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# COVID-19's impact on Nepalese migrants: families. Vulnerability, coping strategies, and the role of state and non-state actors

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how COVID-19 has impacted Nepalese migrants' vulnerability and the actions they have taken to adapt to the situation. It investigates the problems created by COVID-19 from a disaster-risk management approach, the preparatory measures taken to deal with the disaster, and efforts by state and non-state actors in migrants' rescue, relief, and reintegration into society. Marginal migrants, including unskilled workers, women, undocumented individuals, have been most affected by the pandemic, something which was also overlooked by government policies. The study shows that because government subsidies for migrants were too meagre and came too late, migrants have started going back abroad, despite COVID-19 risks. Furthermore, the study reveals that Nepalese migrants' vulnerability depends on their levels of education, skills, gender, and legal status. In the light of these findings, the Nepal government needs a stronger institutional structure to help migrants navigate transnational spaces.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

As numerous reports have shown, the COVID-19 crisis has affected the livelihoods and incomes of already fragile Nepalese households.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true given that for years the Nepalese economy has been dependent on international labor migration, with half of the families having at least one member working abroad and about fifty-six percent of households receiving remittances.<sup>2</sup> The potential loss of income due to the pandemic is therefore a severe blow to households which are more integrated into the global economy. What happens in the global labor market has thus direct consequences in Nepal, affecting migrants' income flows as well as aspiring migrants' plans, and forcing men and women to adjust to an uncertain situation. In this context, we examine how

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<sup>1</sup>IoM and NIDS 2020; Sapkota 2021; ILO 2020; Baniya et al. 2020.

<sup>2</sup>CBS 2012.

current Nepali migrants, returnees, and potential migrants have been affected by the pandemic, how state and non-state actors have responded, and how migrants cope in the face of this crisis and the support available.

## Nepalese labor migration

The number of Nepalese migrants currently working in foreign countries is estimated at 3.2 million,<sup>3</sup> most of whom are men (ninety-five percent). Approximately forty percent of these migrants work in India.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, remittances totaled US\$ 8.25 billion, which was equivalent to twenty-seven percent of the national GDP that year.<sup>5</sup> Between 2009 and 2019, the Nepalese government issued approximately 5.9 million labor permits for work in 154 countries.<sup>6</sup> Of the 500,000 labor permits issued in 2018 and 2019, thirty percent were for Malaysia, twenty-seven percent for Qatar, twenty percent for Saudi Arabia, and thirteen percent for the United Arab Emirates.<sup>7</sup> After COVID-19 became a global pandemic in 2020, employment in jobs typically held by Nepalese migrants declined by thirty percent in the UAE and Malaysia and by twenty percent in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with the highest impact on women.<sup>8</sup>

About 280,000 Nepalese had already lost their jobs in these countries by March 2020 because of the pandemic and therefore wanted to return home.<sup>9</sup> By April 2020, 127,000 Nepalese migrants from Malaysia and the Gulf had to be urgently evacuated, and an additional 407,000 were expected to return from thirty-seven different countries.<sup>10</sup> The Nepal government estimated that as of April 2020, 1.3 million Nepalese foreign workers wished to come home.<sup>11</sup> In March 2020 alone, around 500,000 crossed the border from India without undergoing any health screening or other measures, and many more were expected to return.<sup>12</sup> By the end of July 2020, the government had only been able to bring back one in ten stranded workers (about 30,000).<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, the migration process undertaken by 328,681 aspirant migrants with pre-approval was suspended.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the pandemic, there has been a drastic decline in migration from Nepal, especially to countries other than India, making shrinking remittances a threat to the economy. For the time being, migrants and their families have drawn on their savings and borrowed from emergency funds to support themselves.<sup>15</sup> But once their reserves have dried up, remittance-receiving households are expected to be hard hit.

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<sup>3</sup>CBS 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Baniya et al. 2020, 3.

<sup>5</sup>World Bank 2020.

<sup>6</sup>MoLESS 2020. Nepali citizens do not need a labor permit to work in India.

<sup>7</sup>MoLESS (2019) 2018/19.

<sup>8</sup>Rimal 2021.

<sup>9</sup>Mandal 2020a.

<sup>10</sup>Mandal 2020b.

<sup>11</sup>Baniya et al. 2020.

<sup>12</sup>Reliefweb 2020.

<sup>13</sup>Khadka 2020a.

<sup>14</sup>IoM and NIDS 2020.

<sup>15</sup>Republca 2021.

## COVID-19 as an external shock

COVID-19 is comparable to a natural disaster that has exerted an external shock on the whole of Nepalese society, including migration dynamics. For analytical purposes, COVID-19 can be regarded as a natural disaster that has generated external shocks which have resulted in various vulnerabilities among migrants. However, natural events create disasters only in association with social vulnerability<sup>16</sup> – the susceptibility of social groups to the consequences of hazards, resiliency in the face of such hazards, and their ability to recover – which is largely caused by governance structures, policies, and implementation that lead to inequalities, injustices, and the denial of basic security (including subsistence, health, and shelter).<sup>17</sup> As foreign citizens deprived of access to political and social rights in the countries where they work, Nepalese migrants, like all such transnational migrants, are vulnerable in ways that local populations are not. In such a situation, transnational governance mechanisms, including international and national migration policies, have shown their limits in terms of the implementation of protection.

Numerous studies have shown the links between natural disasters (such as climate-change-induced direct and indirect disasters, droughts, floods, landslides, and earthquakes) and migration.<sup>18</sup> These studies demonstrate that during a crisis, migration is seen by people impacted by events as an adaptation measure – moving to a safer place, displacing labor, and diversifying means of livelihood to cope with a decline in food production or income.<sup>19</sup> Disasters are thus push factors for migration. However, the labor migration consequences of COVID-19 have affected not only departure countries but also host societies, which have become places from which migrants are expelled or from which they wish to escape. In Nepal, COVID-19 also has restricted potential migrants' movements to foreign countries.

Secondly, the effects of the pandemic can be likened to those of an economic recession in destination countries. For example, a 2009 study that examined the return of migrant workers to their countries of origin from Europe during the 2008 and 2009 global financial recession found that the impact varied according to the reasons for migration and employment status; labor migrants were more affected than political refugees, marriage migrants, or those who benefited from family reunion programs. Low-skilled workers were most affected, and their remittances were largely reduced. There was also a rise in anti-immigration sentiment.<sup>20</sup>

Although economic recessions and pandemics may force migrants to return home, these have different consequences. Over the course of a pandemic, migrants become more vulnerable because they put themselves and the destination society at risk while facing different types of discrimination. Despite this difference, the general reasons why some migrants wish to return home, others do not, and some are compelled to do so, are similar. There is no overarching theory to explain return migration during a financial crisis.<sup>21</sup> For example, push/pull factors help explain migration decisions

<sup>16</sup>Lauta 2015; Clark, Chhotray, and Few 2013; Verchick 2016.

<sup>17</sup>Douglass and Miller 2016.

<sup>18</sup>Loebach 2016; Do Yun and Waldorf 2016; Collins 2013; Asad 2015.

<sup>19</sup>Reid 2014; IoM 2009; Black et al. 2011a; Black et al. 2011b; Collins 2013.

<sup>20</sup>Beets and Willekens 2009, 20–21.

<sup>21</sup>Beets and Willekens 2009.

taken by individuals or families depending on their own circumstances. Meso-theories, such as social capital and network theory, help researchers to understand the role of social interaction among people located in different places and to facilitate migration by means of support and information. Macro-level theories deal with how high-level policies and the labor market situation trigger migration (in this case, return migration).

Lorenzo Guadagno argues that, for migrants:

... [their] ability to avoid the infection, receive adequate health care and cope with the economic, social, and psychological impacts of the pandemic can be affected by a variety of factors, including their living and working conditions, lack of consideration of their cultural and linguistic diversity in service provision, xenophobia, their limited local knowledge and networks, and their access to rights and level of inclusion in host communities, often related to their migration status.<sup>22</sup>

A major issue in the case of Nepali migrants is how their vulnerability has been heightened by this crisis and is very much dependent on class, gender, and place of residence.<sup>23</sup> These vulnerabilities translate into different personal risks, including the risk of contracting COVID-19, of not being able to access health care, complications due to pre-existing health conditions, psycho-social problems, and a loss of income and livelihood. The effects they produce are interconnected and relate to the lack of inclusion of migrants in existing social protection policies, poor living and working conditions, stigmatization, and xenophobia. Poorer, unskilled, and undocumented migrants, especially women, and those who lack strong social capital become more vulnerable.

The discussion that follows is based on an analytical framework we developed to understand COVID-19's impact on Nepalese migrants' return, reintegration into society, and potential re-migration, as well as on would-be migrants' first journeys abroad (Figure 1). Livelihood security and vulnerabilities being central to our argument, this framework also integrates disaster risk management, which examines vulnerability, preparedness, mitigation, and recovery. The role of the state and non-state actors is also integrated into this model.

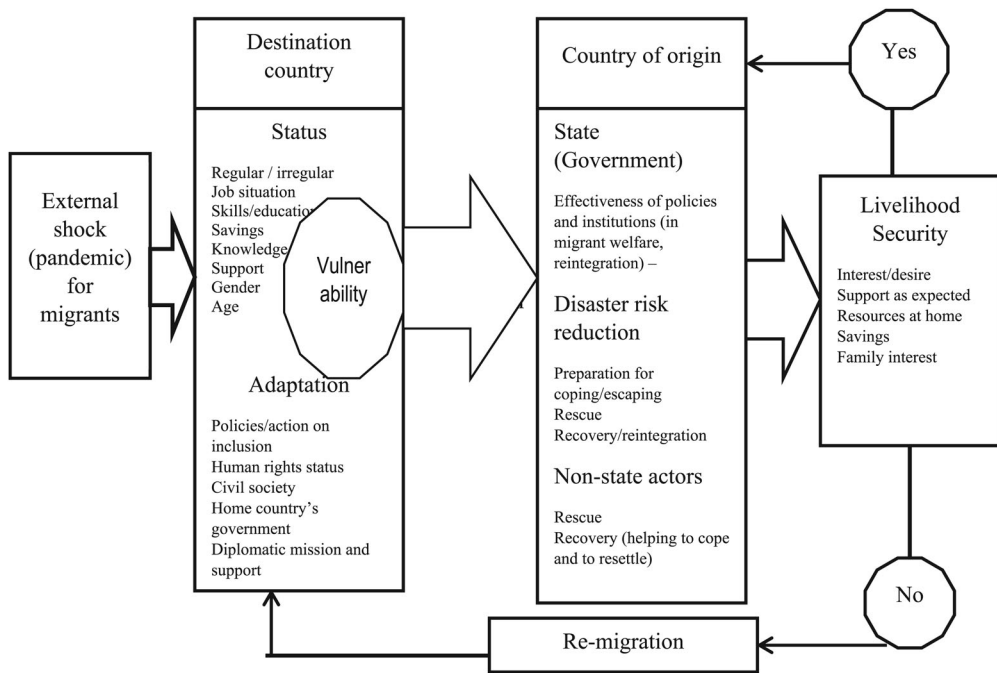
This study focuses on migrant vulnerabilities both at home and abroad, their plans to return home, management of their return, and their reintegration into society. We investigate three sets of research questions, related to migrants' experiences in destination countries, their lives in Nepal, and their plans to re-migrate. In particular, we examine how migrants have been affected by the pandemic in relation to employment, health (both physical and mental), and social protection, and how gender impacts these issues. For those who have returned to Nepal, we are interested in understanding migrant vulnerabilities during their return journeys and the support they have received from the government and civil society actors. Finally, we analyze how returned migrants have responded to the situation in Nepal and their decisions to re-migrate.

## Methodology

Because of the ongoing pandemic, face-to-face interactions were difficult. To overcome this problem, we surveyed migrants, government officials, and civil society

<sup>22</sup>Guadagno 2020, 3.

<sup>23</sup>Beets and Willekens 2009; Guadagno 2020; Liem et al. 2020.



**Figure 1.** Framework for examining the impact of the pandemic on labor migration at different stages.

representatives concerned with migrants' protection by phone. This phone survey was conducted from June 30 2020 to July 15 2020 by sixteen interviewers, under the supervision of the Nepal Institute of Development. We used a structured questionnaire to interview migrants and a semi-structured questionnaire for focus group discussions and key informant interviews. In selecting respondents, both purposive sampling and random sampling were followed. A total of 2,999 respondents were interviewed: 1,999 returned migrants, 499 aspiring migrants, and 501 current migrants. Respondents in the first category were in quarantine centers along the India-Nepal border and in different locations on the outskirts of Kathmandu.<sup>24</sup> In addition, 499 potential migrants who had obtained labor permits were interviewed, with assistance from the Department of Foreign Employment.

Finding respondents who were still abroad was more difficult. An initial list of people was obtained from the Non-Resident Nepali Association (the largest Nepalese diasporic association) in Gulf countries, Malaysia, and India, and from recruitment agencies in Kathmandu. We then asked individuals to suggest the names of others. These tactics led to an additional 501 interviews.

One set of questions related to working conditions and problems, health and safety risks, support received, and solutions migrants adopted. Other questions focused on

<sup>24</sup>Migrants' names and contact phone numbers were obtained from the Department of Foreign Employment, which maintains a list of 64,000 returned migrants. From this list, 1,000 people agreed to be interviewed. In addition, with the help of ten municipalities in western Nepal and five in eastern Nepal, 999 additional respondents were interviewed.

migrants' future plans and the support they expected from the government and non-state actors in Nepal. Civil servants were asked about their readiness to help migrants.

Besides this broad survey, we conducted ten key informant interviews with Nepalese bureaucrats and elected officials, as well as a focus group discussion with individuals from the National Network for Safe Migration, which is composed of various NGOs and civil society groups which assist migrants. At last, given the dense coverage of the pandemic in Nepal's media, we also drew on journalists' reports to get a sense of migrants' experiences abroad and at home.

Our sample roughly represents the Nepalese migrant population reflected by the country's 2011 Census.<sup>25</sup> About ten percent of our interviewees were women, and ninety percent were men.<sup>26</sup> In terms of ethnicity and caste, a significant proportion of respondents were upper caste Brahmin/Chhetri (thirty-eight percent), followed by indigenous nationalities (*janajati*) (thirty-two percent), and Dalits (twenty percent). In terms of age and education, eighty-two percent were between the ages of twenty and forty, and seventy-eight percent had some secondary or lower education, while eighteen percent had an intermediate (or 10 + 2) level of education.

## Findings

Almost all of our respondents (ninety-eight percent) stated that they had been affected by COVID-19 in their destination country. The issue of migrants' vulnerability is not new but, in this particular context, problems that may have been considered meaningless, or easy to solve, took on another dimension.

### *Labor-related issues*

Our survey revealed that the pandemic has led to job losses and a deterioration in working conditions. Nineteen percent of respondents had been laid off and eighteen percent had been forced to take unpaid leave with no guarantee of returning to their jobs. An additional twenty-eight percent reported cuts in working hours. Proportionately, more women (twenty-six percent) were fired. In the absence of any income, those who had been made redundant had difficulty supporting themselves financially; about fifty-one percent said that their employer paid for food and shelter, while forty-four percent relied on their own savings and, to a lesser extent, on support from friends and relatives.

Even those who still worked faced problems of irregular pay. A respondent reported that "there were irregular payments even in the past, but this has become common now." When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, only seventy percent of migrants in our sample were being paid on time. Comparatively speaking, more women (forty-one percent) experienced irregular pay than did men (thirty percent). This is because many female migrants work as domestic laborers in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Malaysia, where the bargaining power of migrant workers is low

<sup>25</sup>IOM 2019. In our sample, no questions about migrants' wealth and economic positions were asked.

<sup>26</sup>The proportion of women in the sample ranged from eight percent among current migrants, fifteen percent among aspirant migrants, and ten percent among returnee migrants.

because of unequal power relations.<sup>27</sup> In times of crisis, employers find it easy to delay wage payments, especially in the case of occasional, undocumented workers.

### ***Migrants' health and safety in the context of COVID-19***

Almost all current migrants (ninety-eight percent) reported having used COVID-19 safety measures at their workplaces in destination countries. Thirty-nine percent had used hand sanitizer, forty-five percent had respected physical distancing, three percent had used personal protective equipment (PPE), and twelve percent reported using other methods. Physical distancing was more prevalent in India, followed by Malaysia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the Maldives. Most migrants who worked in the building and service sectors did not report using safety measures, which could be because of their work outside. In general, physical distancing was more common among men than among women.

Fifteen percent of current migrants also reported that health and safety conditions in their workplaces were inadequate while about half considered these sufficient.

However, respondents reported more problems in their living places. Crowded and unsanitary accommodation (called “labor camps” in the Gulf region), with inadequate access to water, was a problem. In addition, an extreme form of segregation and isolation of migrants in their place of residence, compared to nationals, was reported by those who had lived in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> A few returnees who had experienced this kind of segregation in Qatar reported in conversations that migrants were seen as a risk to the local population. As one said, “we were kept in labor camps like prisoners and were not allowed to go outside.” On the question of how they coped with food and other necessities, migrants reported that very basic food stuffs were provided to them by their employers. In a very few cases, local civil society groups helped migrants by providing food and clothing, as well as pressing the government to ensure their protection (see below).

### ***Social security scheme for current migrants***

The lack of a social security program for migrants in destination countries, despite provisions in multilateral labor agreements, has long been a major issue for Nepalese labor migrants, and this has been heightened during the pandemic due to sudden job losses and health issues.<sup>29</sup> According to respondents, Malaysia and India provided social security coverage to less than half of the migrants working in these countries, while Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates provided better coverage. Kuwait, according to migrants, provided basic support.<sup>30</sup> Often taken on in a clandestine manner, female migrants, most of whom are domestic laborers, do not benefit from social security protection when their labor rights are violated.

Not surprisingly, those working in India receive the least protection because most of them work in the informal sector and do not have labor contracts.<sup>31</sup> Although the 1950

<sup>27</sup> Joelle, Zimmerman, and Roberts 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Hennebry and Hari 2020.

<sup>29</sup> See Khatriwada 2021.

<sup>30</sup> This is likely because Kuwait is a privileged destination for women migrants who secure work there as domestic helpers through informal channels. See Simkhada et al. 2018.

<sup>31</sup> As noted above, India is the main destination for Nepalese migrants; there are approximately 1.2 million Nepalese living in the country, thirteen percent of whom are women, according to the 2018 Labor Survey. See CBS 2018.

Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which enables the free movement of people between Nepal and India, states that each country should provide citizens of the other country with equal treatment, this is far from the case. Although both Indian and Nepalese workers in India have suffered from the pandemic and its consequences, Indian citizens can easily obtain identity and social security documents, with which they can purchase subsidized food. As a consequence, when the Indian government imposed a lockdown, many Nepalese migrants returned to Nepal.

### ***Psychological issues faced by migrants in destination countries***

Thirty-six percent of the migrants we interviewed reported that they had suffered anxiety because of the pandemic, the most important being financial insecurity (twenty-one percent). Other challenges include fears of loneliness and worries of not seeing their families again.

As labor migration is often undertaken to support family livelihoods and secure children's futures, the pandemic risked jeopardizing these plans. It is no wonder that migrants who remained abroad were concerned about supporting their families during the crisis and continued to send remittances, even by borrowing money.

### ***Restrictions on women's mobility, a case of increased vulnerability***

Women migrants reported multiple problems due to this pandemic. Particularly, women working as domestic helpers faced stricter restrictions on their movements. "As most family members stayed home all the time, the workload and pressure increased for domestic workers," explained Ms. Manju Gurung of Paurakhi, an NGO which provides support for stranded and victimized women migrants. Almost all women in our sample reported increased working hours and greater surveillance at home. Their experiences corroborate the findings of a study conducted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Nepal in 2021.<sup>32</sup>

Women's particular vulnerabilities were heightened because most Nepalese domestic helpers in the Gulf countries find jobs through irregular channels and often are illiterate or have a low level of education.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the Nepal government did not initially assist these irregular workers when the pandemic broke out because they did not contribute to the Migrant Welfare Fund (see below). But, still, many women, who, for diverse reasons (such as a fear of catching the virus or a desire to re-join their families), left their employers without their consent and took refuge in the various shelters established in Nepal embassies located in the Gulf countries, where they hoped to find some relief.<sup>34</sup> The setting up of these migrants' shelters is governed by the Foreign Labour Migration Act 2007, which states that the government should provide safe houses, especially for women, in countries in which Nepalese migrants work.<sup>35</sup> But until now, these exist

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<sup>32</sup>This study reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions on movement has severely impacted women migrant workers in particular, exposing and compounding the economic, social, and structural inequalities they already faced. See Gender in Humanitarian Action Task Team 2021.

<sup>33</sup>Khadka 2021b; McQue 2020.

<sup>34</sup>McQue 2020; Mandal 2020d.

<sup>35</sup>Mandal 2020f.

only in a few destination countries (the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman), and proved to be grossly inadequate during the pandemic. Writing in June 2020, Kathmandu-based journalist Chandan Kumar Mandal noted:

The number of Nepali workers reaching out to embassies based in labor destination countries, where exploitation of Nepali workers is rampant, has multiplied in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Stranded without food and no hope of income, workers have been thronging the embassies to return home.<sup>36</sup>

### **Vulnerable migrants on their way home and state support**

Once labor migrants managed to overcome administrative and financial hurdles abroad and were able to return to Nepal beginning in March 2020, they faced new challenges. Almost all our respondents reported that they faced some form of harassment from police and other authorities on their return trips. This was particularly the case for migrants coming back from India, who were stranded at the border when the Nepal government restricted their entry. They could not find adequate shelter because they were too numerous, while accessing food and water also proved difficult due to the lockdown. The government initially restricted entry because of COVID-19 fears, then established quarantine facilities in schools, on campuses, and in hostels, hotels, and other accommodation facilities.<sup>37</sup> However, the effectiveness of this policy is questionable because authorities stressed quantity (of migrants) over quality (of services). Migrants were put in crowded rooms and often had to share beds and utensils, all of which led to these facilities becoming COVID-19 hotspots.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, many returnees suffered mild to severe depression, anxiety, and worsened physical health.<sup>39</sup>

After finally returning to their home villages, some migrants reported that they were stigmatized as virus carriers. Forty-eight percent of our respondents talked about bad treatment by neighbors, village leaders, and even friends and family members. Some even faced verbal and physical violence. Such a bad reception was not the case everywhere: another study reported that one in four migrants received such bad treatment, but two in three migrants were treated with respect and empathy.<sup>40</sup>

Female returnee migrants generally faced a higher level of discriminatory treatment at quarantine facilities, at home, and in their communities. Some NGOs have reported a rise in unwanted pregnancies among returnees after they were sexually assaulted.<sup>41</sup> Because of the social stigma attached to unmarried mothers, some of these women have preferred to move to the anonymous environment of urban areas, so as not to face ostracism at home.<sup>42</sup>

### **Vulnerability and plans to return home**

Despite this situation, just over half (fifty-two percent) of the migrants who were still abroad expressed an interest in returning to Nepal. This is a particularly high figure

<sup>36</sup>Mandal 2020c.

<sup>37</sup>Paudel 2020.

<sup>38</sup>Aljazeera 2020.

<sup>39</sup>Bahadur et al. 2020, 2.

<sup>40</sup>See <https://english.khabarhub.com/2020/29/85649/>.

<sup>41</sup>See also McQue (2020) for discussion of a case of rape and unwanted pregnancy.

<sup>42</sup>GIHA TT 2021.

given that their return would mean abandoning, albeit temporarily, an important source of income for their families and becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of debt.

The main reasons they cited for returning to Nepal include job termination (twenty-eight percent), termination of their work contracts (twenty-one percent), regular leave (fourteen percent), forced leave (four percent), fear of COVID-19 (nine percent), and family pressure (three percent). As this data indicate, only a minority had willingly decided to go back home. Slightly more males (fifty-two percent) than females (forty-six percent) wanted to return home. In general, undocumented migrant women reported feeling stuck abroad, while men felt more pressure from their families to return home. Proportionately more migrants involved in the service, hospitality, manufacturing, production, domestic work, and agriculture sectors planned to return home.

### ***Government responses and other support***

COVID-19 has caused a situation in which migrants' individual preparedness has not been sufficient. It is not that migrants do not prepare for risks and uncertainties. Most recognize that there are various risks related to migration. Faced with the choice of working in an unsafe environment, such as in a factory in Malaysia or on a construction site in Qatar, migrants know that traveling abroad means putting their lives at risk. As one migrant said in an interview in 2016, "Everything [the migration process] is based on luck. What will the future be? What will happen? There are a lot of risks; we have to work, whatever the situation. Nothing is certain."

Being prepared for an unexpected disaster requires limiting personal consumption to save money and forming a close circle of friends – fellow workers from Nepal, friends from whom they can borrow money on a short-term basis. In this way, they could send money home in times of crisis and, therefore, there was no significant decline in remittances to Nepal, even with job losses.<sup>43</sup> Another coping mechanism has been to join a diasporic association, which can provide some support. During the pandemic, the Pravasi (Overseas) Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC) mobilized its members currently working in Gulf countries to help Nepalese migrants in distress.<sup>44</sup> It issued a notice that listed the names of members working in Gulf countries, as well as their contact addresses, whom migrants in destination countries could contact for help. These volunteers are generally well-established Nepalese migrants. A few respondents reported that they received material as well as emotional support from these volunteers. Country branches of the Non-Resident Nepali Association were also mobilized during this time, which were reported to have provided stranded migrants with food and temporary accommodation facilities.<sup>45</sup>

The Nepal government has developed some crisis policies. For example, it has made pre-departure training compulsory for all migrants at the cost of 700 Nepali rupees (US\$ 6.00). At these trainings, would-be migrants are told how to react when faced with abuse from their employer or with a violation of their human rights while working abroad.

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<sup>43</sup>Khadka 2021a.

<sup>44</sup>PNCC has representatives in six Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman) as well as in Malaysia. It mobilizes its national and international members in destination countries to provide support to Nepali migrants in dire circumstances. See <https://pncc.org.np/international-partners/>.

<sup>45</sup>Mandal 2020e.

They are also given the phone number of the Nepalese Embassy or of the labor attaché in their destination countries and must contribute 1,500 Nepali rupees to the Welfare Fund. The 2007 Foreign Labor Employment Act and 2008 regulations stipulate that this fund is to be repatriate to return migrants' remains in the event of death, support disabled migrants, and provide welfare to families affected by accidents. In addition, safe houses are maintained in destination countries to accommodate desperate migrants who have lost their jobs and are waiting to return home. Migrants also must obtain insurance coverage that pays up to 1.5 million Nepali rupees (US\$ 13,000) in the event of an accident.

Despite these provisions, the government was not prepared for a crisis like COVID-19. Safe houses did not have the capacity to accommodate all displaced migrants who wished to return to Nepal. Similarly, problems arose in providing welfare support for destitute migrants who had not gone through regular channels and had not paid the Welfare Fund fees. The government was initially hesitant to help these migrants.

### ***Assistance to migrants***

The Nepal government's assistance to migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic has been hampered by bureaucratic red tape and the participation of many actors. When the pandemic began, some migrants were working in places that were difficult to reach for Nepalese authorities, such as remote labor camps in Saudi Arabia. Diplomatic channels had to be used, which proved difficult for a politically weak country such as Nepal. Similarly, using other stakeholders, such as airlines, immediately after the disaster was also a complex issue.<sup>46</sup>

In mid-July 2020, the Nepal government took steps to repatriate Nepalese migrants by paying for return flights with money from the Welfare Fund, which at that time totaled approximately forty-eight million US dollars – contributions by migrants themselves.<sup>47</sup> On July 17, 2020, Nepal's Supreme Court issued an interim order that stated it was the government's responsibility to ensure employment for unemployed women migrants and, while repatriating Nepalese citizens, priority should be given to high-risk groups, including women, children, and persons with disabilities. The Supreme Court also ordered the government to collect and publicize gender-disaggregated data on women, children, and senior citizens who had been repatriated to Nepal.<sup>48</sup> This order required state authorities to not differentiate between legal and undocumented migrants. The government responded with a new decree, called the "Directive for Repatriation of Stranded Nepali Workers in the Course of Foreign Employment due to COVID-19 2020."<sup>49</sup> But, by the end of 2020, the Nepalese government had repatriated only 50,000 migrant workers (mainly from Malaysia and the Gulf countries), far fewer than the expected half a million.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Mandal 2020b.

<sup>47</sup>Prasain and Mandal 2020.

<sup>48</sup>Dhungana 2020.

<sup>49</sup>Khadka 2020b.

<sup>50</sup>Mandal 2020a. These policies and actions did not apply to migrants working in India, showing again the disparity in treatment.

The Supreme Court's order and government response show that current policies and other regulatory instruments such as government guidelines and directives are only concerned with the process of facilitating the outbound movement of workers. Government institutions, particularly the Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security (MoLESS), the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE), the Foreign Employment Board (FEB), and embassies in destination countries, which are supposed to provide support for migrants, were not able to implement even ad hoc measures that would have helped migrants. This was not only the case of inadequate resources. For example, the Migrant Welfare Fund, which is managed by the Foreign Employment Board, had a balance of almost US\$ fifty million in early 2020.<sup>51</sup> Adequate use of this fund to create infrastructures like safe houses and other facilities would have been useful for returning migrants. In addition, these institutions are not able to pro-actively act on the welfare of the migrants, especially in dealing with the consequences of possible disasters.

One of the reasons for the slow repatriation of workers and insufficient provisions for relief in destination countries was the lack of coordination among the government ministries (MoLESS, DoFE and FEB) and embassy staff, especially labor attachés who are responsible for the welfare of migrant workers. Embassies did not receive any guidance from the government about workers' support during the pandemic. Nepal has bilateral agreements for protecting migrant workers' welfare and rights, with Qatar, the UAE, the Republic of Korea, Bahrain, Japan, Israel, Jordan, Malaysia, and Mauritius. These bilateral agreements have prioritized establishing well-coordinated labor diplomacy through effective coordination among all stakeholders.<sup>52</sup> However, regular joint meetings between Nepali and destination country officials to assess migrant laborers' problems do not often take place.

During this period, apart from help from the state and its agencies, returnees also were assisted to a small extent by non-state actors. Civil society groups played a particularly important role in regard to migrants in India, as many middle-class citizens were moved by migrants' dire circumstances. Migrants who returned from northern India reported that they had received support in the form of food and clothing from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs). NRNA, for example, established a COVID-19 relief fund to facilitate the repatriation of migrant workers. A few of our respondents also told us that human rights organizations and humanitarian associations had offered them some material support, but this help had come too late and was insufficient.

### ***Reintegration into society***

Forty percent of our survey respondents reported that they wanted to remain in Nepal and start their own business. An additional thirty percent planned to return to farming (which is what they had been doing in their villages before going abroad), and twenty percent wanted to use new technology to grow cash crops like vegetables they could sell for cash incomes. We did not expect this willingness to go back to agricultural labor, given that migrants often say that their inability to earn a steady income

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<sup>51</sup>ILO 2021, 4.

<sup>52</sup>Khatiwada 2021.

from farming had driven them away from the villages in the first place. On the other hand, these responses could be explained by the fact that these migrants might have seen such modern ways of farming while working abroad. Indeed, a few returned migrants in Nepal have established such farms, inspired by their experiences overseas.<sup>53</sup>

Whatever their plans, migrants expected support from the government and non-state actors. About fifty-five percent expected government help in financial matters (such as soft loans, money for seed, and grants), thirty-four percent expected to encounter a conducive environment at home (appropriate laws and policies, as well as straightforward procedures), and nine percent expected help in developing a network for business. A government task force that was established to study the economic impact of the pandemic has estimated that the domestic economy needs to create 1.5 million jobs to avoid an imminent unemployment crisis (this was more than double the government's pre-pandemic 2020 jobs target).<sup>54</sup> Given existing resource constraints, the government faces a real challenge in reintegrating returnee migrants. The previous solution to unemployment and underemployment – facilitating the travel of citizens seeking foreign employment to generate remittances – is no longer feasible because of the pandemic, at least in the near-term.

The return of large numbers of labor migrants has forced the government to think about the reintegration of thousands of workers into society. However, instead of making new plans and programs, the government has presumed that existing programs (such as training courses and subsidized loans) would meet the needs of returnee migrants. One such program is the Prime Minister's Employment Program, which was launched in 2019 to reduce youth dependency on overseas employment by creating job opportunities within the country. This is supposed to guarantee a subsistence wage for a maximum of a hundred days' employment. However, this program only has provided an average of six days of work for 25,852 people out of 743,512 listed unemployed people.<sup>55</sup> In the wake of COVID-19, the government allocated thirty-seven million US dollars (four billion Nepali rupees) for employment initiatives, which is relatively little given the number of non-migrant youth and returnees. The government itself has estimated that it needs one billion US dollars (120 billion Nepali rupees) just for employment programs to deal with the impact of COVID-19.<sup>56</sup>

A proposed land bank program is also expected to help returnees to obtain land, but it has not yet been implemented. A program to provide soft loans to individuals to encourage self-employment initiatives has also produced only modest results. For example, a scheme called the "Youth and Small Entrepreneurs Self-Employment Fund," established in 2010, is supposed to provide loans with subsidized interest rates to encourage self-employment. Yet between 2010 and 2020, only 73,000 individuals took out loans within this program, including just 6,500 between July 2019 and July 2020. Lastly, the Central Bank of Nepal has also launched a scheme to issue subsidized loans at five percent interest to returnee migrant workers, among others. However, participation has been slow.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Carter and Khadka 2021.

<sup>54</sup>Sapkota and Khadka 2021.

<sup>55</sup>Sapkota 2021.

<sup>56</sup>Sapkota 2021.

<sup>57</sup>Sapkota 2021.

Accessing government programs is particularly difficult for marginalized groups like women as well as for both men and women who have returned from India because services are only available to labor permit holders. This means that thousands of undocumented Nepalese workers in India are not eligible for these programs. Nor do they have access to the Welfare Fund, which provides compensation in the case of death, injury, or serious illness. Returnee women face additional burdens in reintegrating into society and accessing support programs. Given what is often their long absence from home, they suffer stigmatization and discrimination in Nepal's highly patriarchal society, particularly in rural areas. This seems to have heightened during the pandemic. In addition, women returnees faced new labor burdens as they are expected to look after their family members, including elderly members.

Under these circumstances, non-state actors have also had a role in reintegrating migrants, but this mainly has been to support the government and to campaign for better policies on the behalf of migrants. Media outlets and civil society groups have called on federal, provincial, and local authorities to ensure safety measures for returnee migrants. The National Network for Safe Migration (NNSM), an umbrella organization of like-minded organizations working on migration topics, has urged the government to safely repatriate stranded migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Livelihood insecurity and re-migration**

As we have already noted, many migrants who returned to Nepal in the wake of COVID-19 plan to go abroad again if they believe their livelihood is not guaranteed in Nepal or if their expectations regarding support from the state are not met. Indeed, our study shows that despite the problems that led to their return, slightly more than fifty percent of our respondents have made plans to go back abroad to work. The main reasons they cited are, in order of importance, a lack of employment opportunities in Nepal (fifty-seven percent), poverty (twenty-eight percent), low income (ten percent), and family pressure (two percent).

Returnee migrants who have made plans to migrate again feel that they have few opportunities to generate income in Nepal. They do not expect this situation to improve. On the other hand, as discussed above, slightly less than half of returnee migrants have made plans to stay in Nepal if their expectations of support from government and non-government agencies are fulfilled.

It has yet to be seen whether many of them will eventually return abroad after COVID-19 has died down or disappeared. As of May 2021, the situation was grim and unsettled. Cases of migrants returning to India despite COVID-19 indicate that government programs have not really benefited them.<sup>58</sup> According to some of these returnees, they need to feed their families, something impossible to do in Nepal with its shortage of job opportunities.<sup>59</sup> In the case of return migration to countries other than India, government policies in destination countries and the delay of flights or stringent airline policies have restricted their return. COVID-19 has created an adverse environment for marginal migrants. A woman returnee explained, "I returned from Kuwait, where I worked as domestic help, after facing hurdles and oppression. I face the same

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<sup>58</sup>Khadka 2020b.

<sup>59</sup>Himalayan News Service 2021.

oppression, harassment, and social stigma even today in my society. I have no appropriate environment for being involved in economic activities. I do not know about the facilities and services provided by the local government for returnee migrants. Now, it appears that the ultimate option for me is to return to a foreign country for my livelihood.”

## Conclusion and recommendations

COVID-19 has adversely affected Nepalese migrants and their households, particularly those who are heavily dependent on remittances. However, destination countries have borne less responsibility for helping migrant workers, with the whole burden of disaster management (relief, rescue, and recovery/reintegration into society) falling on the Nepal government, NGOs, and migrants themselves. As our study shows, this external shock prompted return migration and restrictions regarding the latter. By applying pull–push factors and considering why some migrants decide to go abroad again, we are better able to understand how Nepalese migrants have responded to the pandemic. However, social networks and government policies also have been important factors for facilitating or constraining return migration or for staying in the destination country.

Among Nepalese migrants, marginalized groups – women, undocumented migrants, and workers in India – have suffered the most, not only because of a loss of jobs and incomes, discrimination, and stigmatization but also because that they are the least protected by formal policies and government programs. Their existing vulnerabilities have only increased due to the pandemic. This reflects a general lack of concern toward this category of migrants, although they constitute the largest proportion of Nepalese working abroad.

Even though COVID-19 can be seen as a natural disaster, its impact has been completely different from that of other such disasters. This pandemic, which has forced vulnerable migrants in destination countries to return to their countries of origin, has also created various types of vulnerabilities for migrants during the whole process of return migration. In the context of Nepal, women undertaking domestic jobs are particularly vulnerable, due to the often-irregular nature of their employment and Nepal’s patriarchal state, which has tried to restrict women laborers from going abroad. This in turn has accentuated their vulnerability as they are forced to pursue an indirect migration route.

The Nepal government has failed in its response to the pandemic in all aspects – preparation, relief and rescue, and re-integration into society. Programs that were introduced in the wake of the pandemic were inadequate and came too late, and insufficient resources were allocated. This demonstrates that a systemic approach to dealing with the consequences of disasters (both human and natural) is clearly lacking in Nepal.

Most of the returnees whom we surveyed initially made up their minds to stay in Nepal in the hope that support from the government and other agencies would help them support their families and themselves, even if this meant going back to agricultural labor. However, these expectations have not been fulfilled.

The full reintegration of returnee migrants has been an ongoing issue in Nepal and the absence of a proper scheme to ensure this happens is inducing people to choose migration as a long-term solution. This has become an inter-generational issue, both for informal migrants to India and formal labor migrants to other destinations.

A recent study shows that, until now, remittances have not significantly impacted domestic economic growth and in the long run, there is a possibility that remittances even could have a negative impact.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, a democratic form of governance is a major factor for successful economic growth. Sound policies and good governance are required to protect migrants and to use remittances to create employment and income opportunities within the domestic economy.

Government policies and institutional mechanisms should be strengthened to protect migrants in times of emergencies like pandemics. For this purpose, Nepal's government needs to act in four broad areas: support migrants' reintegration into society by helping them to use their skills and by providing technical and financial help to develop enterprises; support Nepalese labor migrants in foreign countries by making them aware of rules, regulations, and facilities available to them; develop policies and institutional mechanisms to respond to future disasters like a pandemic or sudden economic crisis; and use bilateral agreements to protect migrants.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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<sup>60</sup>Shakya and Gonpu 2021.

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