

Feminist COVID-19 Storybook

Stories of Migrant Women

Over a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how it hits hard the marginalised communities - migrants, women workers, women in poverty, minority groups, rural and indigenous communities. Women in all their diversities bear the brunt of the crisis as they face multiple intersecting discrimination, exclusion and violence.

Not only at a heightened risk of contracting the disease, but migrant women are also exposed to the risk of joblessness, starvation, poverty, violence, the rise of indebtedness. With the strict lockdown and movement restriction measures imposed by the governments, many migrant women have been stranded in their host countries or resorted to dangerous ways to return home.

The pandemic also exposed how the current system has failed to deliver basic needs to the peoples. In this critical period, migrant women found themselves with no access to the public health care system, social security, accurate and timely information, and government support, which have further isolated them in overcoming and recovering from this global crisis.

Despite all the challenges and hardship, migrant women organisations work relentlessly to support migrant women, migrant domestic workers, internal migrants, and domestic violence survivors. They provide information, hotline services, and shelters to women in crisis. They also documented migrant women and their communities' experiences on how they strive through the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Feminist COVID-19 Storybook is a collaboration of **APWLD** and our partners, **National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders (NAWHRD)** and **Aaprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha Nepal (AMKAS Nepal)** - a Feminist storybook that documented our collective journey in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis - the struggles, challenges and act of resistance of our migrant sisters and their communities. This book is an evidence of reality - the suffering and pain of the migrant women and the actions of building our feminist spirit, solidarity, hope, and demands for women's human rights and Development Justice.

THE JOURNEY OF A MIGRANT WOMAN

I migrated not by choice.

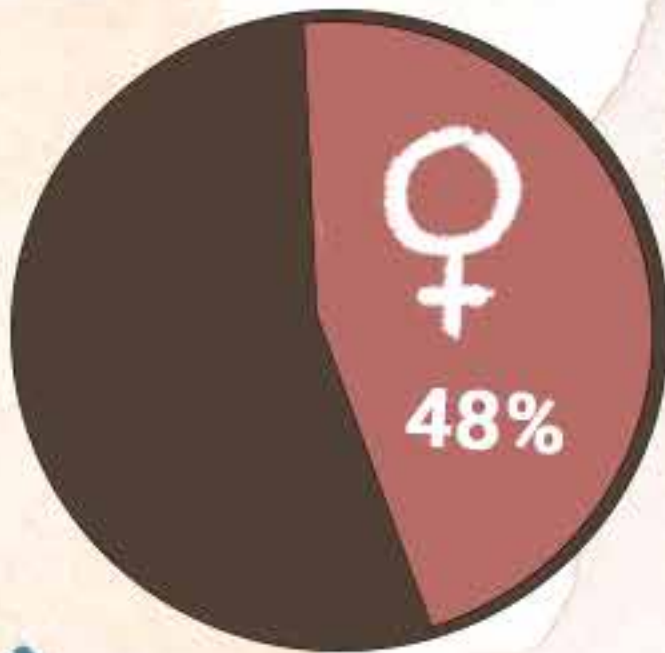
Poverty, loss of land, No jobs, Violence, Privatisation



My family is very poor and my husband abused me, working abroad is the only way for me to raise my two young kids
-MUNA

Feminisation of migration:

48% of the total migrant populations in the world are women.



Most of them left their countries because of:



POVERTY



LACK OF JOB OPPORTUNITIES



ESCAPE from gender-based violence in their home countries.



Privatisation of public services is growing and public spending on **EDUCATION AND HEALTH SERVICES** is declined.



FORCED EVICTIONS

due to land grabbing, rural-urban development gap and frequent natural disasters induced by climate crisis are the main structural drivers of migration.



Poor families prefer to send boys to school when they could not afford the education fee for all children.

Girls have a higher school dropout rate and marry early due to lack of educational opportunity



GLOBAL CARE CHAINS:

Women from poor countries move to fulfil the shortages of reproductive labour in the rich countries.

After I migrated, I thought I could have a better life, but..
discrimination, no decent jobs, exploitation

I was a teacher, but my
qualification was not recognised here.
I can't continue to work as a teacher,
but a house cleaner.

-SAMILA

Working as a domestic worker
is my only option. I work so
hard from day to night,
but only paid with low wages.

-BASANTI

NEOLIBERAL GLOBALISATION
removes the regulation of economic
policy and labour protection, promotes
privatisation of services and resources.

economic
policy

labor
protection



Migrant workers from poor countries are being
treated as commodities to fill up the
3Ds (Dangerous, Dirty and Difficult) jobs
in the rich countries/cities.

support their families in
their home countries

and take care of other
families in the destination

DOUBLE BURDEN:

Migrant women have to take up the
economic function within their family and at
the same time maintain the caring
responsibilities



During Covid-19

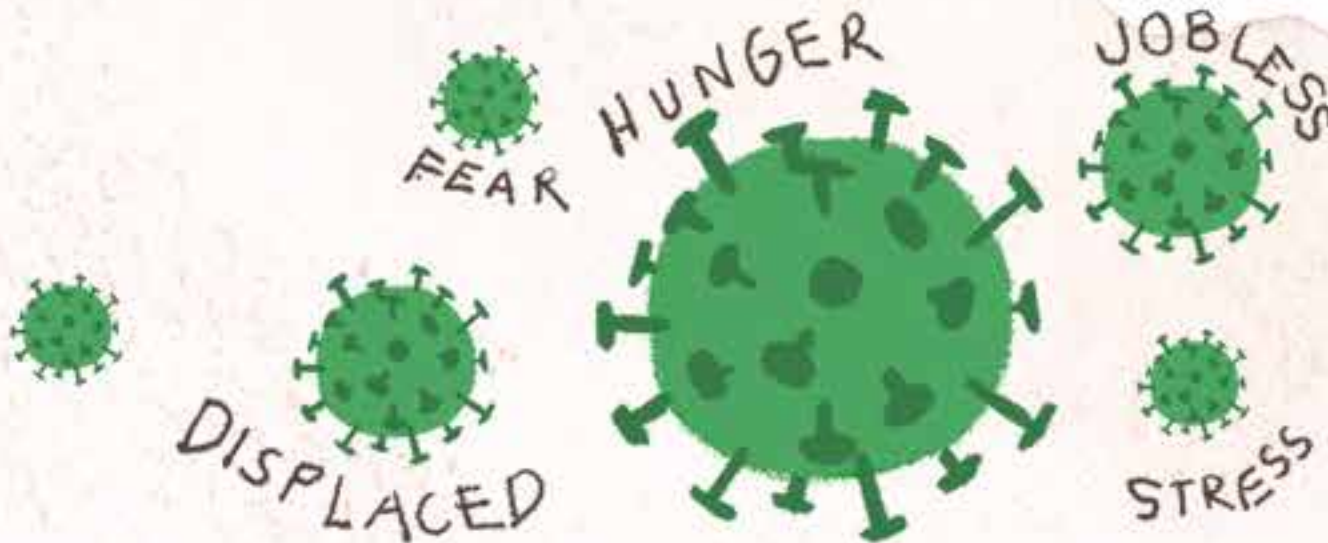
No social protection, job lost, stranded, lack of information, Anxiety

THE STRUCTURAL EXPLOITATION IS FURTHER EXACERBATED DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

The immediate challenges faced by the migrant workers after the lockdown mainly related to food, shelter, loss of incomes, fear of getting infected and emotional distress. The pandemic has increased the exposure of migrant women to the risk of starvation, violence, rise of indebtedness.

We ran out of food and my four children are starving, but we cannot receive any relief kits from the government.

-TARA



Rise of Militarism: Security personnel of Army, Police and Armed Police Force were deployed to implement the nation-wide lockdown and strict curfews.



With no public transportation services, migrant workers flee to their villages by walking through a long journey. Some people had died due to exhaustion and accidents at the journey.



EMOTIONAL BURDEN: In response to the anxiety and fear induced by the pandemic, migrant women intensified their virtual contacts with their own family members to provide emotional support.



We are now stranded in the UAE without income and food. Our government should come up with some plans!

-ZAANA

At the same time, migrant women are being cut off from their support network in the host society with intensified workload and many uncertainties due to the pandemic.



I returned not by choice

WOMEN MIGRANTS' DILEMMA

Should I stay or Should I go: After losing their jobs, many migrant women immediately lost the ability to afford their basic needs in the host society. The decision of returning to their native village became the only survival strategy of many migrants. However, return back home also increases the risk of joblessness, poverty and debt bondage.

I am scared of being sent back home to Nepal. I am 43 years old already and I don't think I can come to Bahrain to work again.
-MUNA

HOME?

POVERTY FAMILY

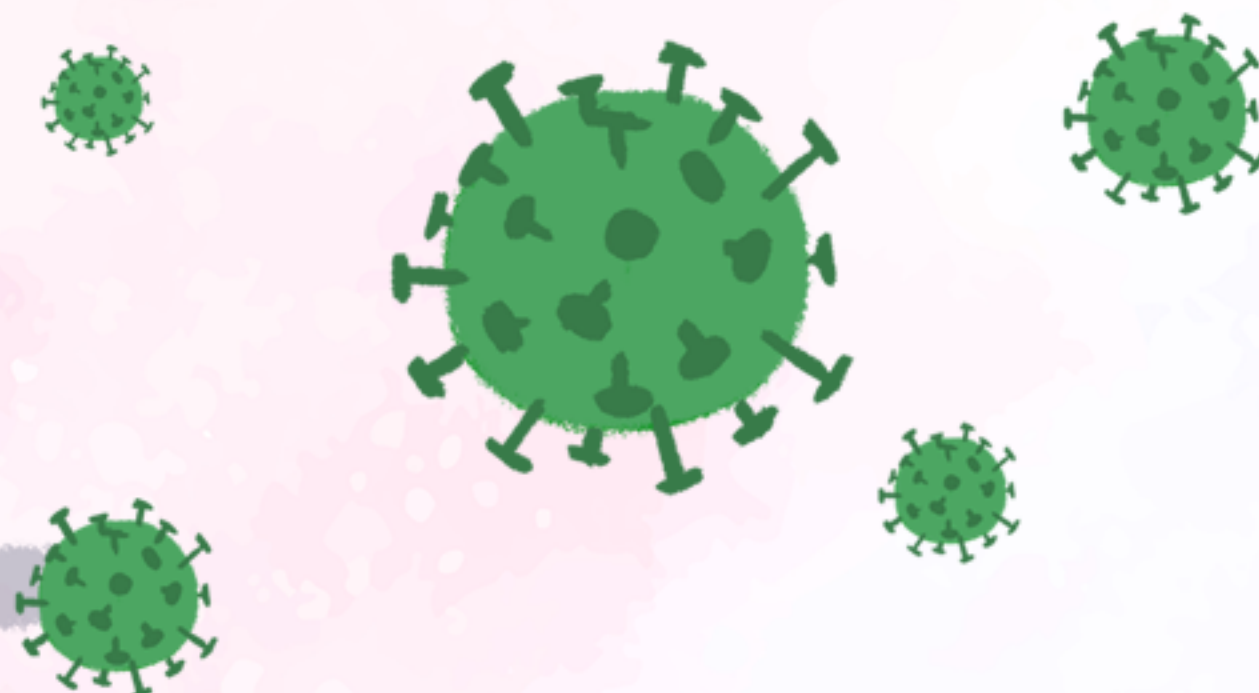
DEBT NEEDS

JOBLESSNESS



STIGMATISATION OF RETURNEES

Returnee Migrants have often been stigmatised as virus carriers and scapegoated for endangering their neighbours. Stigmatisation and discrimination can negatively impact the ability of migrants to integrate into society.



In the following stories, APWLD documents the stories of migrant women and their communities as we strive through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Zaana is from Sunsari, Dharan. In 2014, she migrated to Dubai to work as a waitress. Since then, her work has helped in supporting her family back home.

Muna is 43, and a beautician working in Bahrain. She was separated with her husband who was abusive. She was married off at 18 due to poverty and became a mother of two at a very young age. She married off her daughter at 19 and is already a grandmother now.

Sarmila, 29 was born in Sindhupalchowk and worked as a teacher before. She needed to migrate to Sinamangal, Kathmandu with her husband, and they had a daughter. In the city her education was not enough to continue her previous profession, hence she became a house cleaner.

Basanti Shretsha is originally from Dhanusha district. She now resides in Kathmandu with her two children. She is a domestic worker with a low salary and her husband is a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia.

Tara Thapa came from a large and poor family in Dhading. At the age of 15, she was forced to marry due to poverty and lack of access to education.

After her marriage Tara and her husband migrated from their village to the city in Sunakothi, Lalitpur district and she has worked as a domestic worker. They have three daughters and a son.

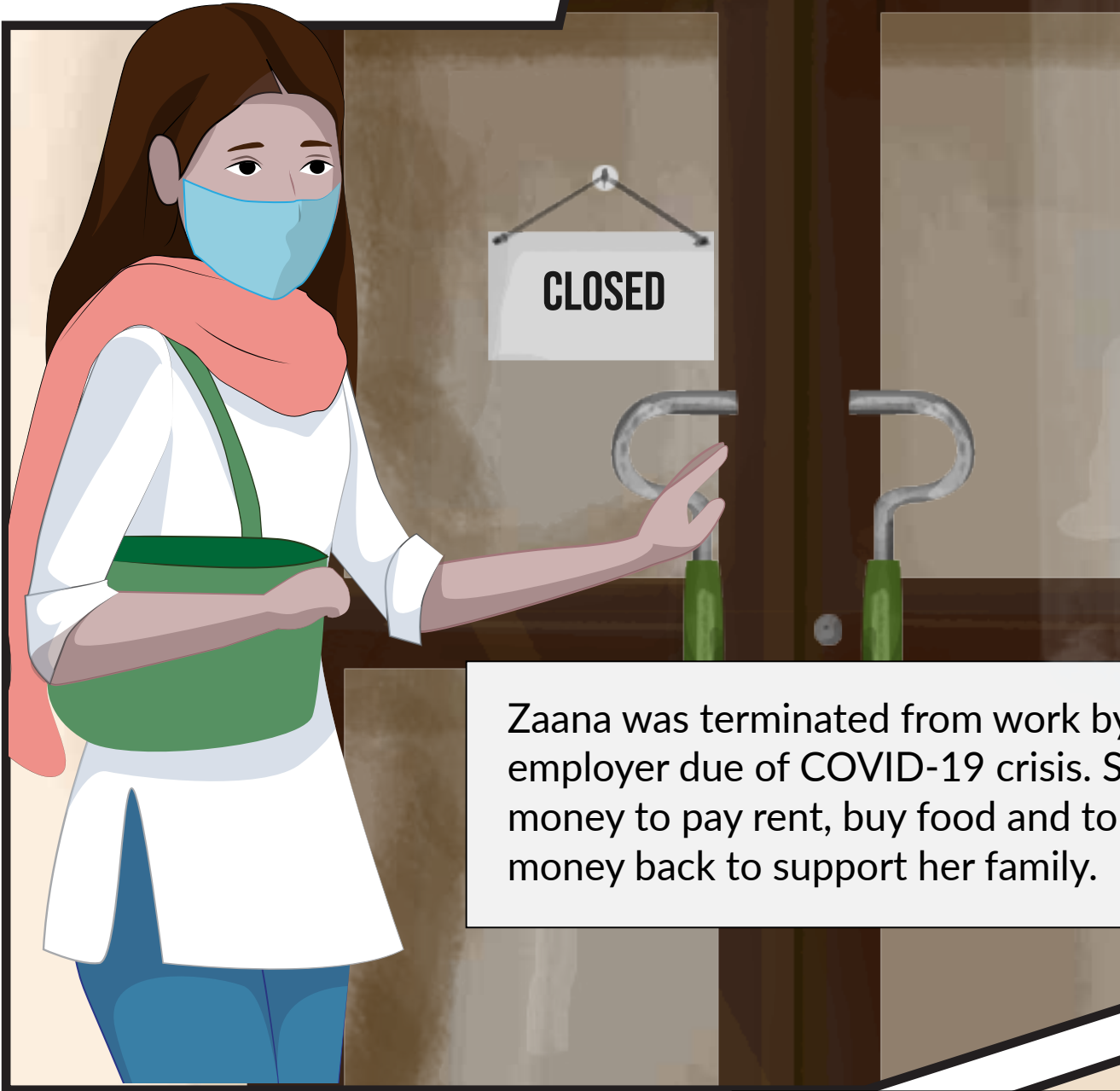
Kabita from Gorkha district migrated to Kathmandu to work as a domestic worker. She lives there with her husband and two children.

Sita is from a remote village in Nuwakot District and from a small-income farming family. She had migrated to Cyprus in June 2019 to pursue a nursing bachelor. Before the pandemic, she had a part-time job in a toys land store.

In the stories, it is evident that even before the pandemic, migrant women were already suffering from intersectional issues such as poverty, lack of economic opportunities, access to government services and support, and access to education. They also shared experiences of domestic violence and early marriages.



ZAANA



Zaana was terminated from work by her employer due of COVID-19 crisis. She has no money to pay rent, buy food and to send money back to support her family.

ON AUGUST 7, 2020 , THERE ARE 21,750 PEOPLE INFECTED BY THE CORONA VIRUS IN NEPAL.

COVID 19

FLASH NEWS

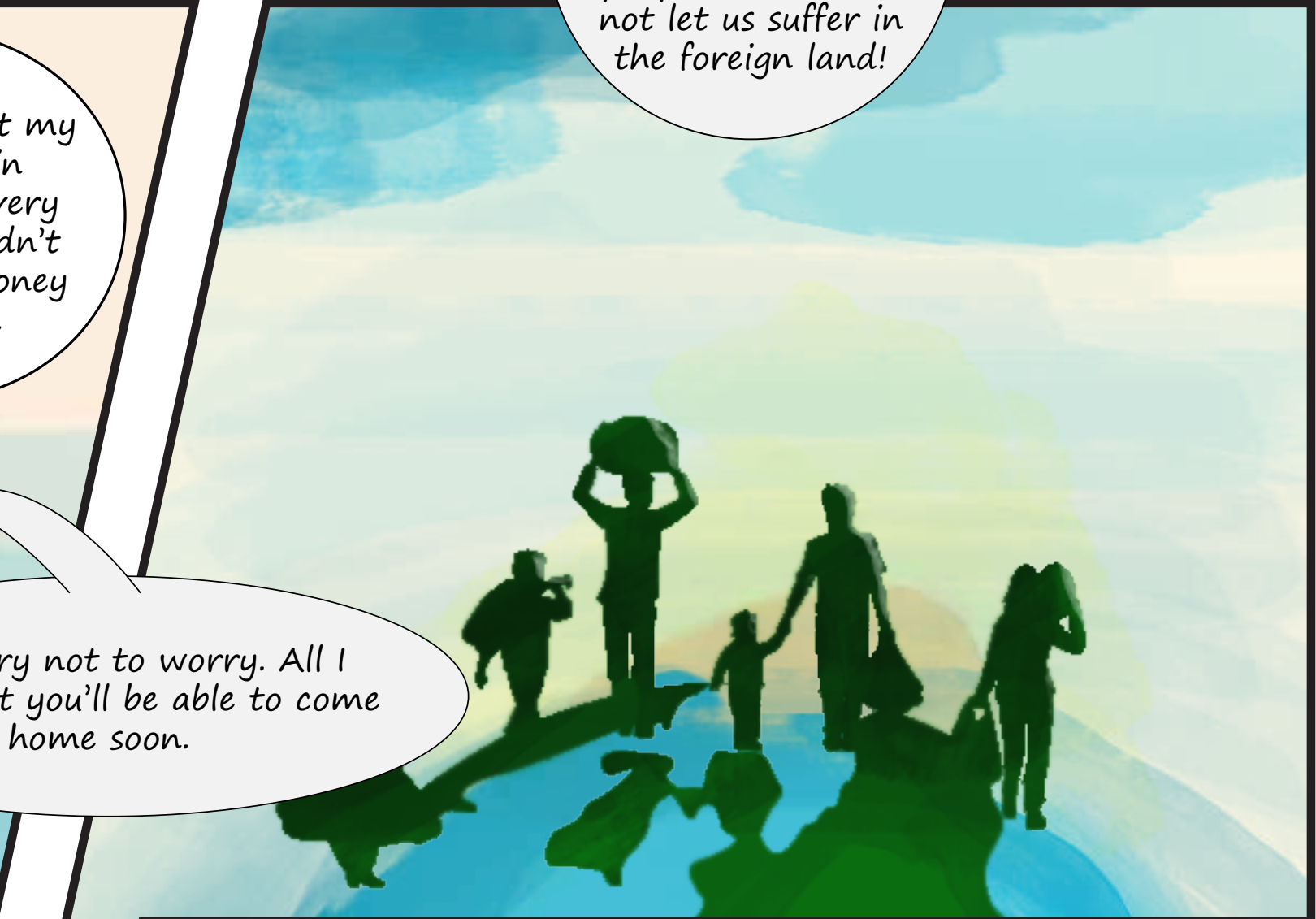
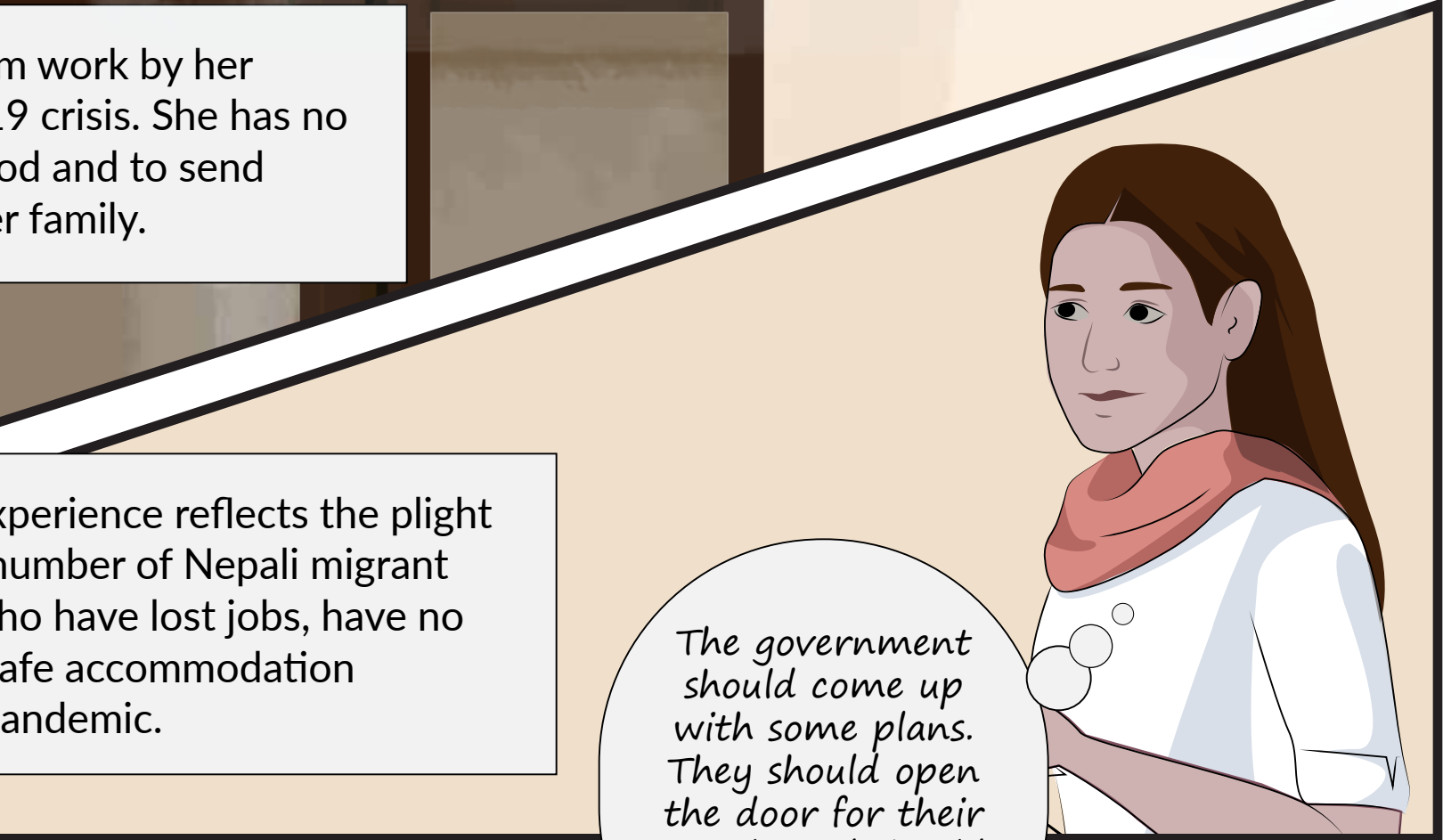


Zaana 's experience reflects the plight of a large number of Nepali migrant workers who have lost jobs, have no food and safe accommodation amid the pandemic.

Pa, I just lost my job here in Dubai. I'm very sorry I couldn't send you money for now.

Zaana, try not to worry. All I hope is that you'll be able to come home soon.

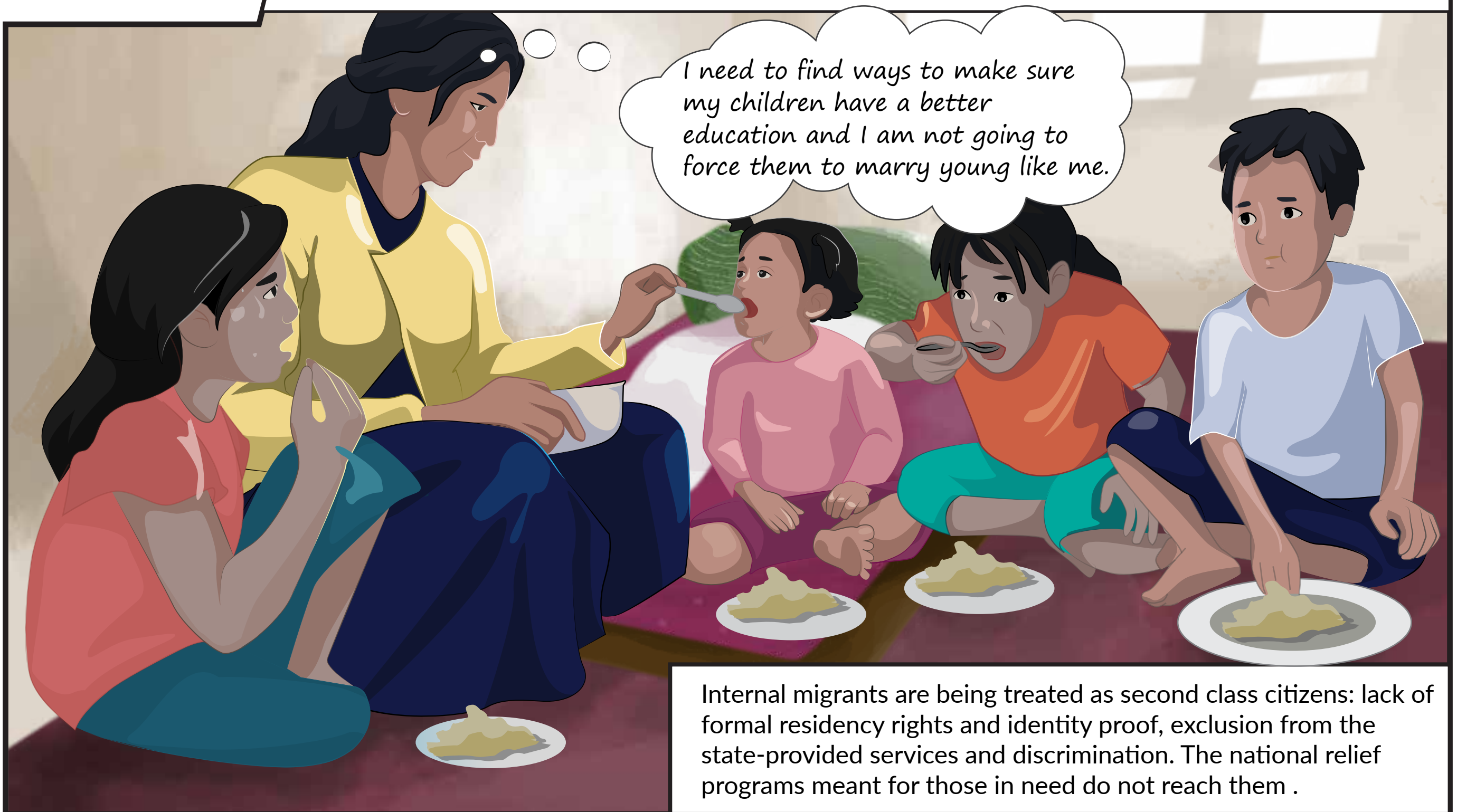
The government should come up with some plans. They should open the door for their people and should not let us suffer in the foreign land!



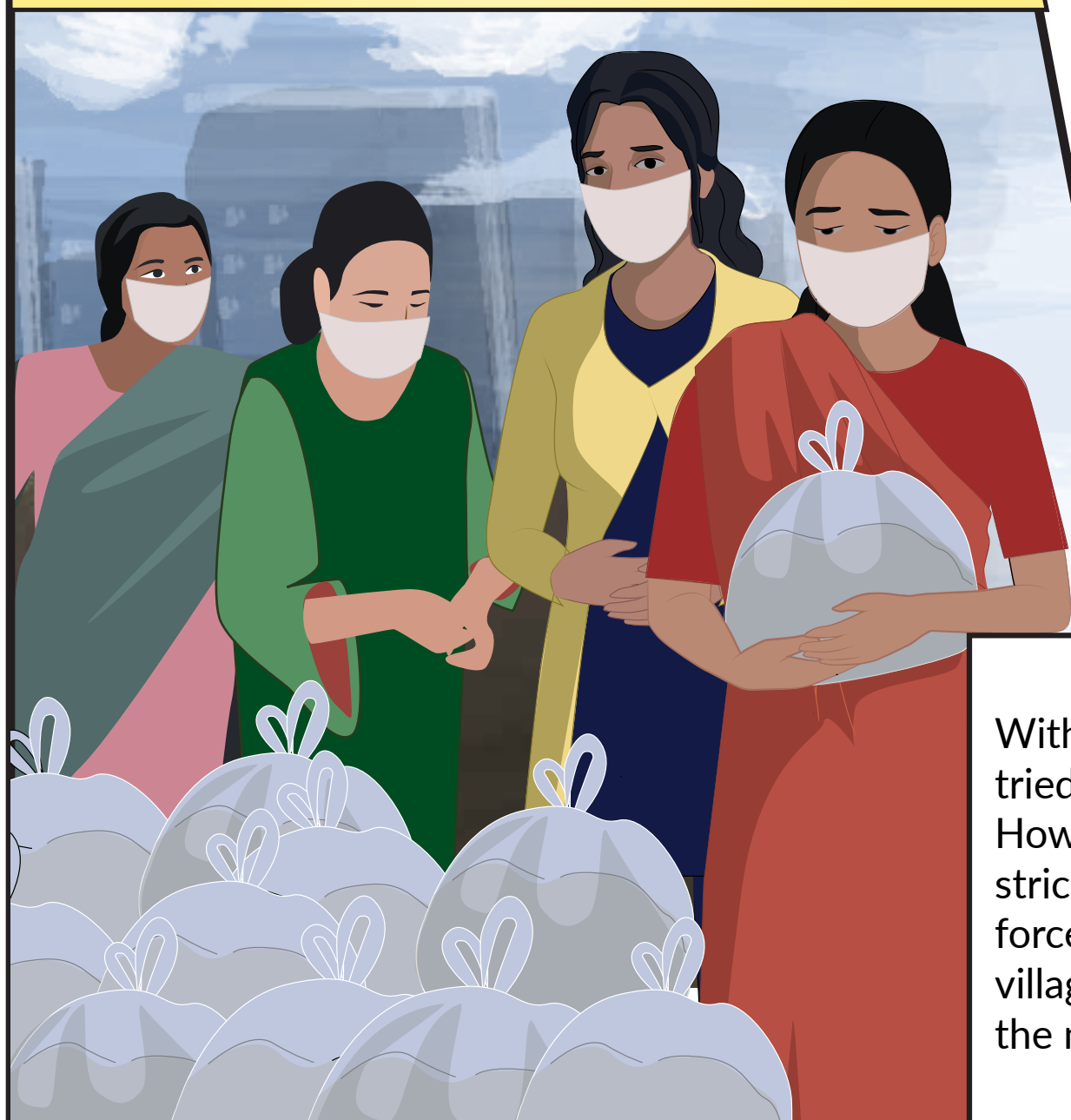
Nearly 500 Nepali migrant workers in UAE have gone on strike as their salaries have not been paid for two months. The migrant workers who lost their jobs demand the Nepali government to assist them back to the country, but the government has no concrete timeline and plan for their repatriation.

TARA

Tara is one of the many domestic workers, who has no income during this pandemic. Her family could not access the government relief programs despite all their efforts.



The government of Nepal has initiated social protection projects such as food distribution, discount on utility, and support to informal workers who have lost jobs, but most of the time these efforts are not reaching the most marginalised and in need.



Without income and food, Tara tried to return to her village. However, they were stuck due to strict lockdown. There are people forced to walk a long way to their villages and some of them died in the middle of the journey.



SARMILA

How can we manage the food for the coming days?

In Sinamangal, Kathmandu, she works for two shifts as a house cleaner to support her family.

Sarmila was well educated and she was a teacher in her village with very low wages. She then moved to the city to work as a house cleaner to support her family. During the pandemic, she has not earned any money for the past two months.

The government distributed relief which only lasted for less than a week. It was not sufficient to survive in the continuously extended lockdown

Mama, I'm hungry. What will we eat for dinner?

Domestic workers like Sarmila need to sustain their family income and at the same time bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work.

80.8%
INFORMAL
WORKERS

NEPAL

1.4
MILLION
HOME-BASED WORKERS
AFFECTED SIGNIFICANTLY
SINCE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
STARTED.

An estimated 80.8% of workers in Nepal are in the informal sector, and the 1.4 million home based workers who are almost all women have been affected significantly; more than 70 per cent of domestic workers suffered from job loss and reduction in working hours since COVID-19 started.

SITA

Sita's parents have sold most of their land assets to support Sita's education costs in Cyprus. Therefore, Sita had to take a part-time job on the sidelines of her college schedule to support her parents back in Nepal.

Due to the nation-wide lockdown in Cyprus, Sita is taking online classes. But she has lost her job without any salary compensation and health support. Institutional discrimination exists in both private and public sector.

I feel discriminated against in our situation. I didn't receive any support from the company nor the government. And why only European students who also work part-time like me, were being provided by health support!

Apart from little support from their own governments, migrants like Sita are often left out of response policies in countries of destination, which usually focus on their citizens. The pre-existing challenges in accessing social protection and economic support have been further exacerbated by the crisis.

Yes, and the government waived the college fees for European and local students only. This is so unfair to us!

Sita, we are worried about you.

Our Government and Cyprus Government should work together to take care of people like us and treat us equally as locals.

Everything okay there? You two do not have any income and I lost my job too. Please take care of your health. Hospitals are far away from our place. Our government should do something.

MUNA

Muna is a stranded migrant worker in Bahrain since the strict nation-wide lockdown policy. She is scared of being sent back home to Nepal with no money and losing the job and can never go back to Bahrain due to her age-43 years old. She has no idea what the Bahrain and Nepal Governments have been doing to help stranded migrants like her amidst COVID-19 crisis.



Stress, fear and worrying about their family members in their home country have led to the worsening of mental health conditions of many migrants, for which little support is available from the government.



BASANTI

Since the start of the pandemic, Basanti has no income and is currently taking care of her children, her mother and grandmother.

Care work responsibilities have increased for women and girls during lockdown, including but not limited to housework and looking after children and the elderly.



I just lost my job here and I've already used up our remaining savings. I don't know how we will survive this pandemic.

There's so much work in the house everyday..."



I hope to send you a little money, but we have difficulties here due to the services closure.

Counting for over one fourth of Nepal's GDP, remittance flow into Nepal is predicted to fall by almost 30% in 2020, leaving millions of families struggling for livelihood. Despite the decline of remittance inflow, the government should prioritise the national spending on social welfare and public services.



KABITA

Kabita was a domestic worker and her husband was a labourer in a rice warehouse.



In order to prevent the spread of coronavirus, the Nepali government imposed a nationwide lockdown on March 24th, 2020. Kabita and her children moved back to their maternal village, in Gorkha hoping the lockdown would end soon.

We have lost our jobs and no support from the government. We also need to pay our house rent. Taking loans is the only way for us to survive right now.

With increasing poverty, increasing limitations in access to resources, and heavier care work burdens at home, girls' education is affected severely by the crisis.



My employer has found another worker to replace me. But taking loans will put us into the cycle of debts.



We have no choice now but to take the loans. With the current situation, we'll be trapped in debt and suffer even more.

Domestic work is not recognised as work. It is estimated that globally 90% of domestic workers are legally excluded from social security systems . Lack of social security and income support has pushed many domestic workers and their families further into poverty and debt bondage.

The stories of migrant women is the story of us. Each story builds our feminist spirit, solidarity and collective act of resistance, response, and hope for women's human rights and Development Justice. APWLD members and partners started organising to address migrant women's issues since the beginning of the pandemic.



APWLD partner, NAWHRD advocates for the recognition of domestic work as work.

1. We organise training that tackle how COVID-19 impacted women workers.
2. We conduct survey on how COVID-19 impacted women's mental health and reproductive health
3. We advocate for gender-sensitive budgeting and activities that:
 - invest on women entrepreneurship, such as agriculture and animal husbandry
 - invest on women's education



APWLD partner, Aprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha (AMKAS), supports many overseas migrant women who have lost their jobs during the pandemic.

1. We support the transportation and quarantine shelter of 150 overseas migrant women who went back to Nepal.
2. We launch psychosocial training to address mental health and reconnect the returnees with their families.
3. We conduct mask-making training and provide sewing machines and fabrics as a source of income.



APWLD stands in solidarity with migrant women in the region and across the globe, who are suffering from COVID-19 pandemic and other interconnected crises, calling on governments of origin and destination country to:

1. Develop an integrated database of migrant workers and organise impact mapping as a basis for planning and distributing the national economy relief packages;
2. Provide an adequate and easily accessible information system regarding COVID-19 and any existing national relief programmes for migrant workers and their families;
3. Include migrant workers and their families in national COVID-19 crisis responses such as free test and medical care, food aid, national social safety net regardless of their labour status. This inclusiveness should not entail any burdensome requirements to migrant workers and their families;
4. Provide the repatriation support in safe ways and appropriate quarantine center for returnee migrant workers with a management and procurement system that is comprehensive and accommodating to the needs of migrant workers, especially women and children;



5. Consult the plan and implementation of gender-responsive budget with women and civil society. The government must prioritise providing support and services to women and marginalised communities affected by the COVID-19;

6. Recognise domestic work as work and protect their labour rights by ratifying ILO Convention 189 on decent work for domestic workers as well as incorporate it into national laws and policies;

7. Revoke the policy that bans women to migrate in search of work and stop criminalising those who choose to migrate through irregular procedures as the result of the policy.

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