



# STRANDED IN-BETWEENS

COVID-19 CRISIS  
IMPACT ON NEPALI  
MIGRANT WORKERS

APRABASI MAHILA KAMDAR SAMUHA  
(AMKAS) IN COLLABORATION WITH  
**THE ASIA FOUNDATION**

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>AMKAS</b>	Aprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha
<b>COVID-19</b>	Corona Virus Disease-19
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>GCC</b>	Gulf Cooperation Council
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GoN</b>	Government of Nepal
<b>ILO</b>	International Labor Organization
<b>KSA</b>	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
<b>PPE</b>	Personal Protective Equipment
<b>SLC</b>	School Leaving Certificate
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>USD</b>	United States Dollars

# 1

## Introduction

Since 2016, AMKAS Nepal has been working to disseminate accurate and factual information to the migrant workers and their families about the migration process through a mobile application - Shuvayatra. Shuvayatra has been proved to be an important information dissemination channel among the migrant community, and AMKAS has primarily looked into community outreach programs for the app. In the course, for the half of the year 2020, various activities were planned to further extend the outreach and also strengthen the ties among the stakeholders. The Coronavirus crisis that started in January in China and gradually spread across the world hit Nepal in February resulted a nationwide lockdown since March 24, 2020. A complete ban on citizens' movement resulted in a total freeze across the country including all economic activities except for the essentials, and at the same time, lockdown became one of the most effective measures worldwide to contain the spread of the virus. This resulted modification the planned activities of AMKAS Nepal under the project "Sunaulo Mauka". The erstwhile activities that required congregation of people in the project areas were suspended and redesigned to address the emerging contemporary issues.

In April, a new concept was introduced and later named as 'Mero Sathi: Migrant Peer Support Initiative'. Under the initiative, the social mobilizers in Kaski and Sunsari districts were mobilized to virtually reach returnee migrant workers, preferably women, to contact and develop friendship at least two migrant workers abroad. The central idea was to promote 'a feeling of care' among the returnee and current migrants, and use the friendship to share hardship caused by the COVID-19 crisis. AMKAS also used the opportunity to explore the situation about the current migrant workers and, with the help of the social mobilizers and project staff, compiled case stories for each migrant abroad. The cases are then analyzed and presented as this document. This document is believed to be used as an advocacy tool to help policymakers better frame their policies and decisions, especially for the help to be rendered from the State to the migrant workers during crisis as such. Nonetheless, this document is also believed to be of some help for the advocacy groups such as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), bi-lateral and multi-lateral organizations, migrant self-help groups, and general public at large.

# 2

## Context

While we are writing this analytical paper, the world is facing the unprecedented crisis from a new disease that emerged in China in late 2019 and subsequently spread over the world - COVID-19. As the spread began to take a form of a global pandemic, many countries suspended, either fully or partially, all private and public activities that involved interactions among people. This resulted in what was later called as 'lockdown'. Suspension of economic activities aftermath lockdown across many countries in the world resulted loss in the employment opportunities, the migrants became the first and most vulnerable to losing jobs.

Globally, according to International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates, there are about 160 million migrant workers working in various sectors; more than 68 million are women. For Nepal, a large workforce is employed in foreign countries with more than 4 million migrants leaving Nepal for work, officially, only in the last decade (since 2008/09). As such, any form of suspension of economic activities that are directly related to migrant workers is a challenge not just for the migrant workers, but also for the entire economy. It is especially true for a country like Nepal where the remittance income, contributes significantly to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (over a quarter of GDP). According to a recent publication by the World Bank, remittance to Nepal is expected to drop by 14 percent, around 1.2 billion USD. The economic slowdown along with the travel restrictions would also mean

that the number of Nepalese emigrating for work will also go down, increasing the already heavy stress on remittance. Falling oil prices and other global economic indicators performing poorly are also expected to make the situation further worse.

At an individual level, COVID-19 and subsequent economic slowdowns, in both Nepal and destination countries, have made the lives of migrant workers and their families difficult. With the pandemic hitting hardest the unskilled workers, who make up more than majority among Nepalese migrant workers, they are the first ones to get unpaid, lose their jobs, and at worse, even losing a place to stay. Many migrants, during the recent economic slowdown in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia, the major destinations for Nepali migrant workers, had bitter time supporting themselves during the pandemic and subsequent economic slowdowns, let alone supporting their family members back home. It is expected that 20 to 25 percent of total jobs would be lost due to the pandemic/economic slowdowns, and in an average 500,000 to 600,000 would return to Nepal.

Repatriation of migrant workers, however, is not the only problem brought by the pandemic. Nepali migrant workers are equally at the risk of catching the disease, the health coverage for them is not accessible or not free from discrimination. Additionally, migrant workers who are still on their job during the economic slowdown or amid the fear of getting infected with COVID-19, live in generally overcrowded

poor conditions with inadequate sanitary or health measures in place. Some workers' camps had also report of becoming virtual prisons compounded with inadequate safety measures acting as a super spreader mechanism. The panic and concerns for safety along with the mental stress of being in state of helplessness is alarmingly high among the migrant workers which, on the other hand, could have enormous effect on their psycho-social being. These could result in lasting impact among the migrant workers.

Domestic migrant workers make the most vulnerable and affected groups among others. Domestic migrant workers in general lack legal protection and the power imbalance that exist between the employer and the workers put them at risk. Domestic workers face a multitude of restrictions, including but not limited to, weekly day-off, mobility, working for excessive hours without extra payment, delayed or non-payment of wages, and also in some cases, are victim

of physical, emotional and sexual abuse from the employers. While the COVID 19 crisis has limited the movements of people, the domestic workers are likely to work more, for longer hours that may result in illness, depression, and other challenges. The healthcare isn't as accessible for the domestic workers in general, despite the law provides either free or assigns employers to provide for free healthcare to the domestic workers in all members states of GCC except for UAE. This puts them in further risk, as the domestic workers' wouldn't have much or any say in case they are exposed to the COVID19 infection or contracting the virus. Furthermore, the low recognition of domestic workers; the likelihood of them getting to care for any infected member in the family; going to shops or supermarket to shop for family requirements; etc. put women migrant workers at risk. A safe return to home is also not feasible wherein Nepal, as many countries in the world, has halted international travel.

# 3

## Objectives

The aim of this advocacy paper is to explore and identify the status of current women migrant workers in terms of their livelihood, health and safety and return. The specific objectives are to:

- Study the financial, health, and other general context of the current women migrant workers currently working in destination countries amid Corona crisis.
- Recommend actions to ensure their safety and safe repatriation.



# 4

## Methodology

This work is a result of analysis of the case stories collected from returnee migrant workers in Nepal as they had conversation about well-being and general conditions of migrant workers in the destination countries. It, therefore, doesn't follow systematic research procedures, though certain steps were taken. Before the appointed returnees started talking to their peers via available social media channels in the destination countries, they were provided with a guiding questionnaire to seek answers from. The questionnaire was divided to be completed in eight weeks with the first week for introductions and/or rapport building. AMKAS didn't provide any specific way to identify the migrant workers in the destination countries - the returnees were free to choose from their

family/friends or anyone they would know to talk to. As no formal training was provided to the returnees, report writing team worked with the returnees and social mobilizers, back and forth, to get full information on the questions put forward. Collection of data, therefore, adopted an informal method. The returnees had conversation with their peers, the social mobilizers in their respective hometowns called these workers over phone and social media channels, and wrote the key points from the conversation. Such data from each returnee was then compiled to form case story for each migrant in the destination. The collected stories then were coded (open coding) and analyzed. During the analysis, the report writing team also consulted with various experts based in Kathmandu to validate the results.

# 5

## Limitations

This analytical paper should, in no ways, be considered as a full-fledged research report. Rather, it is an evidence based analytical paper generated through the analysis of case stories we received. Also, the priority of 'Mero Sathi' initiative was to help the migrant workers in the destination countries to have someone talk to without any fear or feeling of getting judged. The returnees were also asked to continue the friendship developed during this period and be the peer for current migrants for longer term. We have to wait

to see how these friendships really helped both the returnees and current migrants, especially psychologically, nonetheless, the early discussion with the returnees gave us an idea that the conversation was helpful for the current migrants to share their feelings and emotions with someone who had gone through the same or similar circumstances.

This paper features analysis of cases from 80 current migrant workers, and hence, may not be generalized for the entire migrant population.

# 6

## Demographic Characteristics

### Findings and Analysis

For the purpose of this paper, a total of 80 current migrant workers were reached. All of them were females. Around 20 percent of the respondents (N=80) were from Brahmin/Chettri/Thakuri (BCT) ethnicity, more than majority were Janajatis (60%) and rest were Dalits. No respondents were from Muslim and/or Madhesi community. The following table details distribution of the respondents based on their ethnicity.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents Based on Ethnicity

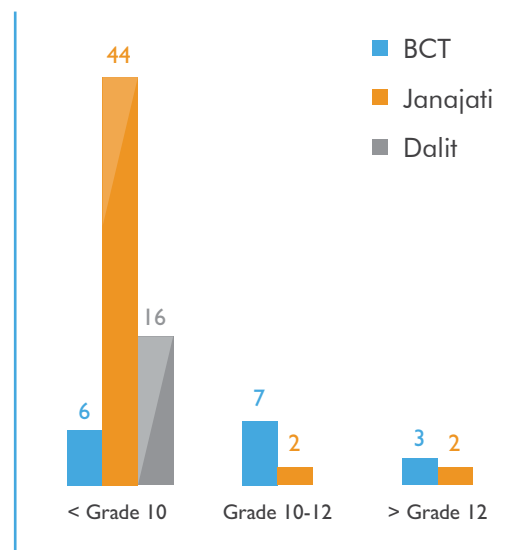
Ethnicity	No. of respondents			Percentage
	Sunsari	Kaski	Total	
BCT	4	12	16	20%
Dalit	10	6	16	20%
Janajati	26	22	48	60%
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100%</b>

The median age for our respondents was 35 years, the range of which started at 21 years and extended up to 51 years. Similarly, average duration of migration was 3.5 years, the range of duration was from five months to 12 years. The respondents were well spread across 14 countries of Asia and Europe - the Middle Eastern countries were dominant. Majority of the respondents were from UAE and Kuwait, around 63 percent, and only seven respondents were from European countries. One respondent in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) had to frequent Kuwait and Oman and another in UAE had to frequent Oman. The following table details the countries of destination from which the respondents came:

Table 2: Countries of Destination of the Respondents

Country	No. of Migrants	Country	No. of migrants
UAE	29	Kuwait	21
Malaysia	6	Lebanon	4
Israel	4	Cyprus	3
Bahrian	2	KSA	2
HK	2	Spain	1
Sweden	1	Singapore	1
Malta	1	Japan	1
Hungary	1	Iraq	1

A majority of the respondents didn't have education more than School Leaving Certificate (SLC) level (Grade 10). Out of 80 respondents, 63 of them were hadn't cleared their grade SLC examinations and dropped out even before attempting. Similarly, three other respondents had attempted SLC examinations, but couldn't clear it. In case of higher secondary education, seven out of total respondents had dropped out of higher secondary education, while the rest of the respondents had some college experience. Out of 14 respondents who were enrolled or cleared the higher secondary education, only four of them were Janajatis while the rest were from BCT ethnicity. The following chart describes the educational qualification according to the ethnicity of the respondents:



Out of total respondents, only three respondents (1 from Dalit and two from Janajati communities) hadn't ever went into formal education. Rest of the respondents had some years of schooling.

Among the respondents, 37 of them are working as domestic workers and rest of them are working in formal sectors. The working nature, however, remains as low-end workers wherein respondents are engaged as cleaner at hospitals or arranging goods at supermarkets. The following table distributes the respondents according to the nature of their jobs:

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents According to their Job

S.N.	Job Sector	No. of Respondents
1.	Domestic Work	41
2.	Manufacturing	14
3.	Cleaning Jobs (formal sector)	7
4.	Supermarkets	6
5.	Hospital/Clinics	4
6.	Hotel/Restaurants	4
7.	Saloons	3
8.	Enterprising	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>80</b>

# 7

## How Safe are Women Migrant Workers?

An account on safety of migrant workers has been discussed in the context section of this document. The section also pointed out that the safety of migrants would depend upon the country of destination; nature of work; support from the employers, governments of CoD, respective Nepalese diplomatic mission, Diaspora groups, and their own aptitude.

### 7.1. Financial Security

For the workers in European countries like Spain where the lockdown was imposed, women migrant workers who working in companies lost their jobs for the period of lockdown. For those working as domestic workers, they didn't lose their jobs or payment, yet the restriction of mobility was further compromised. One of the domestic workers in Cyprus said that she couldn't go out for shopping or any other personal chores, and that her employers would bring everything required for the household purposes at once. In countries like Sweden, Malta, Hungary and Hong Kong where no lockdowns were imposed or comparatively people's movement was free, the respondents had to follow the general protective measures as directed by the respective governments. In countries like Malaysia where all respondents were working in formal sectors, they reported that their working hours were cut resulting in no extra earning from overtime or they were limited to receiving the basic salaries only.

"We cannot work overtime because of the crisis. Our income has been limited; we are able to cover our living expenses only. We have not been able to send money home."

- A Chettri woman migrant worker in Malaysia, 30.

None of the respondents, however, complained about non-payment of salaries and/or wages due to lockdown. In one of the best-case scenarios, one of our respondents working at an American electronic company based in Malaysia said that she couldn't do overtime but the company increased their basic salary to cover what they would earn including from overtime works. Accounts from the respondents, therefore, presents a mixed result that largely depended on the companies they worked with. The case is, however, not the same when it comes to domestic workers.

As a majority of our respondents were domestic workers, they are mostly employed in countries like Kuwait, UAE, Lebanon, Israel and Cyprus. Only two out of 41 domestic workers we reached to said that their salary has been cut off due to the pandemic and/or subsequent economic slowdowns; rest of the women were getting their payments on time and also supporting their families back home. A 40-year old Janajati woman working as domestic worker in Hungary said that her employers have lowered her salary by 25 percent (she didn't disclose the amount though) and reported that it is not just her, but also a number of her friends who are working as domestic workers faced the same problem. Similar story was obtained from another domestic worker working in Lebanon. Her employers have lowered her salary by 16 to 20 percent.

For those working at hospitals in GCC countries are either asked to stop coming to

the work or to work for limited hours a day and only basic salary was provided to the workers excluding allowances for their food and accommodation. One of the workers working at a hospital in Kuwait said,

“We are six of us who are now jobless. We have been maintaining (surviving) somehow. We buy essentials on our own, sometimes on cash and sometimes on credit. We are provided with the basic salary only.”

- A Janajati woman working at a hospital in Kuwait, 28 years

Except for one Janajati woman working at a saloon in UAE (age 31), all other workers we talked to faced economic challenges due to the economic slowdowns. The women we talked to reported that they haven't got their salaries since March 2020 and facing challenges to meet their ends. One of the Dalit workers working at a saloon in UAE said:

“We got our salary till March 2020. Our saloon closed. They provide some money to cover our food expenses, and they are saying that they would stop this incentive from the next month. We don't know what to do next...”

- A Dalit woman, 35, UAE.

Those working in the hotels and restaurants are also hit the hardest by the pandemic and subsequent economic slowdowns. Women we talked to reported of losing their jobs and receiving no salary or allowance. It was not just the story of those working in GCC countries, but also those working in European countries. One of the respondents who used to work at a restaurant in Spain said:

“I used to work at a restaurant and it got closed because of the lockdown. I didn't get my salary for two months or so.”

- A Brhamin woman, 35, Spain.

Some countries, however, stood out in responding to the needs of their citizens and migrant workers alike. Japan, for example, provided about NRs. 100,000 to all. Also, the employers added 75 percent to the regular income of their employees to cope up with the pandemic. Similarly, those working in supermarkets in UAE also got their salary on time and resumed their quickly as soon as the imposed bans were lifted by the government.

## 7.2. Health Safety and Standards

One of the major concerns for migrant workers among their family members was their safety in regards to contracting the disease. As news of pandemic outbreaks spread, the news of close camps of the workers and their hygiene and sanitation were largely questioned. Our respondents too had concerns about their safety and those back at home. Our respondents who worked as domestic workers were found to be the safest among all. The respondents reported that since the outbreak they weren't allowed to move outside their job sites (households they work at) limiting interaction and exposure to COVID 19. This, on one hand, would mean that their mobility has been further limited, however. One of the respondents said:

“We used to go out on our weekly day-off when there was no lockdown. Since the lockdown, we haven't stepped out of our house (employers' house).”

- Dalit woman working as a domestic worker, 38, UAE

Similar accounts have been reported from those working in other sectors as well. For those working in hotels or restaurants too were asked not to move freely except for buying essentials. Except for the domestic workers, however, these restrictions were general for all residing in the countries where lockdowns were imposed. Only in

case of domestic workers, the mobility was restricted by their respective employers, either following the State's order or on their own. In countries where there was no lockdown, the respondents reported that they could go out of their accommodation sites given use of masks and gloves were made compulsory.

Among the respondents, only three said that they also tested for COVID-19, and that out of three two were found positive. A migrant woman living with three other roommates working together for a supermarket in UAE had her two roommates tested positive for COVID-19 following rapid actions from UAE government testing her, and disinfecting their room. Similarly, another migrant worker working at a hospital in Sweden tested positive for COVID-19 along with her husband, but didn't develop serious symptoms and recovered. Another migrant woman living with her husband in UAE and working at a supermarket also tested positive for COVID-19 and treated well. Cases of COVID-19 confirmed migrant workers were found to be treated well by the authorities of the countries' where they live in. None of those tested positive for the virus reported that they had to pay for the treatment - it was made free of cost by the governments of the countries where they work. In general, it is not found to as bad.

All domestic workers we reached to said that they are asked to use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for their safety and followed safety standards like hand hygiene and respiratory etiquettes well. But those involved in the care of elderly people still fear of contracting the virus, and their risk is not over yet. Those working in supermarkets too had to follow measures such as social distancing, use of masks and hand hygiene when their work resumed. Similar accounts were noted for those working in hospitality sectors including beauty salons. For those who resumed their works at hospitals were found to be provided with proper and adequate PPE and also induction on its use.

### 7.3. Return

We also asked if our respondents want to return to Nepal amid the crisis. The results were mixed - around 70 percent (56 out of 80) said that they would return only after the crisis is over or their visa period come to an end. But for those who wanted to return, one of the most pressing issues was the stigma against the migrant workers. The stigma that returning to Nepal amid the crisis would mean that they would be demeaned by their relatives and friends, authorities and general public as carrier of the virus. This stigma, however, has not surfaced only because of the crisis, but general perception towards the returnees. One of the respondents shared her past experience as:

"When I was in Kuwait in a few years back, my left leg got fractured. My employers were asking me to return. I pleaded them to cut my salary till my recovery but not send me back home. I was afraid that when I would return to Nepal with my broken leg, everyone around me would say that a Kuwaiti broke my leg."

- A Dalit woman working in Kuwait, age 43 years

The stigma against the returnee women migrant workers is even more against the young and unmarried ones. One of our respondents said that she wanted to return to Nepal and get married but couldn't because everyone would accuse her of returning with pregnancy. She said,

"I have to get married. My family is also pressing for it. But I was reluctant before because I knew I wouldn't get the salary I am getting as of now regardless of jobs I do in Nepal. Now, I want to return, but they say that all those women returning to Nepal from foreign employment are spoiled, promiscuous and that they would return only after being pregnant."

- A Janajati woman working in Kuwait, age 28 years.

These excerpts showcase the level of stigmatization against Nepali women working abroad. The COVID crisis has added to this. The respondents who were willing to return too had unfavorable perceptions towards the process of repatriation and quarantine regulations to be followed upon arrival. One of the domestic workers we talked to said:

"I have heard that the quarantine facilities in Nepal aren't good. We have been hearing news of accidents and even rape. We have been toiling in the foreign lands for so many years while also safeguarding our reputation; stories of rapes in quarantine centers makes me feel very bad. I know that no one considers domestic workers with dignity, but I don't think I can live with the stigma if I had to go through such incidents (rapes)."

- *A Janajati domestic worker working in Kuwait, age 44 years*

Our respondents were also worried about the general condition in quarantine, let alone the concerns for their safety against physical, sexual or any other forms of violence. This risk has been compounded for undocumented migrant workers. One of the workers working in Kuwait said,

"I don't have any of my documents. I am worried about my return. If I am to return now, I am not sure what procedures I need to follow or how long should I have to be in quarantine. I am a diabetes patient, and I have heard that the facilities in the quarantine centers in Nepal aren't sound. They say, stale rice is offered as meal."

- *A Janajati woman working in Kuwait, 41*

We are not in stage to comment or analyze the situation of quarantine centers set up in Nepal, but in general, the perceptions about quarantine centers among the migrant workers isn't very good. While we reached the above quoted woman, Kuwait government had just granted amnesty for undocumented workers, yet it is apparent that such news

hadn't reached to her ears. On the other hand, only 10 out of 24 workers who were willing to return had heard about the evacuation efforts started by the Government of Nepal. Those who had heard about it, none of them were domestic workers. Therefore, this poses a question, did the migrant workers we talked to had access to communication channels?

As noted earlier in the methodology section, all of our respondents were reached via social media channels. Majority of them (71 out of 80) were contacted using Imo App, and rest were contacted through a mixed channel of Viber and Facebook. Therefore, yes, all the workers we talked to had access to internet or some social media platform. This points towards the access to important information among the domestic workers. The access is further compromised when a migrant worker is undocumented. Another domestic worker working in Kuwait, undocumented, said that she wanted to return to Nepal but she didn't have enough information about where or whom to contact. She didn't know about any offers or programs offered by the Government of Nepal or Kuwait, and didn't know how to reobtain her lost passport.

Undocumented workers, regardless of the nature of jobs they were/are employed at, had to face the challenges in terms of return or even financially or access to health services. A worker who is working in Israel and is undocumented shared her experience as:

"I have been working here (in Israel) for the last 12 years. Last year, my employer died and according to the local law, my visa can't be renewed. I am hiding from the emigration police and working on petty jobs I get. Since the pandemic started, I lost my job and I am in hiding, locking in myself in my own room."

- *A Janajati woman working in Israel, age 38 years.*

The cost to return to Nepal was another challenge among those willing to return.



For the undocumented workers, paying exorbitant fees to be able to legally return to Nepal is topped up by the travel cost that got swollen during the crisis. One of the migrant workers who was preparing to return got stuck due to the crisis, and once she heard about the evacuation flights, the travel cost was too high for her to afford. She shared her experience as:

"This year, I was planning to return to Nepal but the pandemic stopped me. I heard of the evacuation and enlisted my name. As soon as I got enlisted, I heard that the air fare would be around 80,000 Nepali rupees. It was too high for me. Also, I wasn't notified about my turn for travel by the Embassy."

- A Janajati woman worker working in Kuwait, age 28 years.\

Nepali women migrant workers willing to return faced numerous challenges, let alone surviving or working during the crisis. On the other hand, the response from Nepalese Diplomatic Mission had been poor. The woman quoted above wasn't the only respondent who complained about the poor response from Nepalese Diplomatic Mission. Workers in all countries where our respondents are working expressed their discontent about it. One of the workers from Singapore said,

"Nepali Embassy doesn't seem to be concerned about Nepali citizens. There has not been even a single line of contact from them. Even worse, we tried to contact them, but they responded in a very rude manner. I have seen Embassies of other countries working day and night to protect their citizens, and ours doesn't buzz even if we call them."

- A Janajati woman working in Singapore, age 35 years.

Nepalese Diaspora that seemed to be active in normal times too are found non-responsive

during the time of crisis. In countries like Israel or UAE where many Nepali formed organizations are working for a number of issues don't seem to be interested in facilitating evacuation or repatriation efforts. A worker expressed her annoyance about the organizations formed by Nepalese in UAE as:

"In normal times, these organizations are so active that they reach us for every small event. But since the pandemic started, none of them have contacted me or any of my friends and colleagues. If these organizations can't stand for us during the hard times, I don't find worth of their existence at all."

- A Janajati woman working in UAE, age 24 years.

The role of Diplomatic mission was in question despite the facilitation by each mission for the evacuation Government of Nepal (GoN) carried out. This points out to the fact that the efforts by the Diplomatic Missions are not enough given the high number of migrants in the country. Since none of the respondents were positive about their roles, the reach of the missions among the women migrant workers seem to be particularly low. In case of domestic workers, who were totally unaware about any developments from the GoN. This suggests a sad reality and level of risk for the domestic workers. The same goes to the Nepalese Diaspora. In the same line, a women migrant right activist based in Kathmandu shared:

"Nepalese Diplomatic Missions abroad are short of human and financial resources. Also, they are highly influenced by the migration agents and recruitment agencies. As Nepal suffers from having strong presence in the CoD to protect its fellow citizen, the migrant workers are the ones who always suffer."

- A women migrant right activist, Kathmandu.

# 8

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### 8.1. Conclusions

The COVID pandemic hasn't spared any country in the world, both financially and meeting health standards. The unprecedented pandemic left many countries, even economically strong ones, to succumb, losing a great deal of resources and lives. In this battle of humanity against the unseen enemy, however, the migrant workers seem to be the biggest losers. Women migrant workers, on the other hand, are the most vulnerable. Except from the insecurities posed by the pandemic everyone is facing, they are also vulnerable to a number of gender-based violence (GBV) incidents. Our findings are in line to draw a conclusion that the increased vulnerability among women migrant workers have affected them more than any other group. The vulnerability further increases if a women migrant worker is undocumented or had little or no means to advocate for herself.

The financial insecurities faced by many of our respondents will certainly take some time to heal if the pandemic comes under control in the CoD they work, but only to some extent. Even if the pandemic comes under control in the CoD they work in, Nepal's condition too has to improve. If that doesn't happen, the migrant workers would be in additional pressure not just to support themselves in slowly recovering economy but also to support their families back home. Meanwhile, as reported before, many have lost their jobs or not paid, or haven't got their salaries in full. This means, the financial burden on them is going to increase, especially the interest of the loans they might have taken

for migrating. For undocumented workers, it is going to be even more difficult given their existing insecurity in regards to their jobs, accommodation or other survival needs. Surely, they too are not free from the financial burdens and responsibilities for providing the families back home. With the globally shrinking economy due to crisis, they will be hit the hardest.

Stories from our respondents allow us to generalize that the health and safety standards are generally good. But this doesn't provide a certainty that they would continue to be safe. Luckily, for our respondents, none of the domestic workers or their employers have yet contracted the virus. But if any domestic worker is to contract virus by any chance, the stigma and ostracism that follow would certainly take a toll on them. The domestic workers in the CoD are already under the control of their employers, and shunning of them is likely given the past evidences of violence inflicted upon them. Similarly, those working with the COVID-19 vulnerable group such as elderly population or people with pre-existing medical conditions are at higher risk. Apart from the PPE provided by the employers, they do not have adequate knowledge about the infection prevention and control measures. This may lead to a situation wherein the efforts GoN or respective Diplomatic Missions so far would be very little.

Analysis of the stories show that efforts from Nepalese Diplomatic Missions aren't adequate. As such, facilitation of repatriation for those who are willing to return is a big

challenge in the context that many women migrant workers are yet to be reached. Additionally, making the cost of return tickets affordable; making the processes, including for the undocumented workers, smooth; and ensuring safety of those repatriated are equally challenging. But only these don't complete the list.

Our respondents expressed their concerns about the conditions of the quarantine facilities in Nepal including but not limited to, food and accommodation, sanitation and hygiene, proper tests and security against any acts of GBV. Cases of rapes in quarantine centers are found to badly damaging the reputation quarantine facilities in Nepal hold. The safe repatriation of the migrant workers, therefore, also requires improvement in this front.

## 8.2. Recommendations

Based on the analysis and conclusion we drew on this paper; the following actions are recommended requiring immediate attention:

- The GoN should initiate bilateral discussions with the governments of CoD in order to ensure safety and security of Nepali migrant workers. For this, the government can use the existing diplomatic channels or regional platforms such as Colombo Process or Abu Dhabi Dialogue. While doing so, special attention should be given to uphold the rights of migrant workers to get their basic salaries, food and accommodation and proper medical care in event they contract the virus.
- The Diplomatic Missions in the CoD should mobilize all communication channels, including those of the Diaspora community to reach the unreached, especially the domestic migrant and undocumented workers to facilitate their repatriation. Labor Attaches can play special roles in this process while also maximizing the opportunities such as Amnesty calls by the government of CoD.
- The finding calls for immediate improvement in the quarantine facilities, making separate centers for male and female workers. The basic amenities should be immediately improved along with proper monitoring in place. Mechanisms to prevent GBV and bring the perpetrators to justice if GBV is committed should be developed and enforced with immediate effect.
- The CSOs, Diaspora and other organizations working for the rights and interest of migrant workers should, in unison, make a mechanism to actively reach and disseminate important information to all migrant workers. Our finding shows that social media channels, especially IMO, Viber and Facebook are the most effective media. The CSOs should also facilitate to respond to the problems of the migrant workers.

# 9

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