

[REVIEW ARTICLE]

Retaining the returnee migrant workers: Lessons learned from COVID-19

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Abstract

This paper presents facts and figures of returnee migrant workers in Nepal during the COVID-19 crisis. Nepal, affected by the coronavirus pandemic late after the fourth week of March 2020, the government decided to lockdown due to the appearance of two incidences of infection crossed over one million. Using secondary sources of literature, the paper mainly analyses the facts and figures concerning the COVID-19 crisis and migrant workers' issues. During this period, a severe crisis affected the country with a 75 per cent fall in remittance from the already counted 25 per cent of total gross domestic product. In the beginning, around 1.5 million migrant workers were expected to return by losing jobs in major destinations - India, the Middle East and Malaysia - which is over one-fifth of the total migrant workers abroad. This rate of return however was not recorded to that number. The growing tension of the virus was not limited to the state level only but basically, the individuals losing jobs, killing hopes of getting involved in new jobs and remaining unattended by the state authorities for a longer

time amid confusion and dilemma of policies and programmes. Those involved in the informal sectors, particularly the women and other marginalised communities were severely affected when they could not collect food for their families, pay back rents or survive in the place. Reducing the impact of the pandemic, all the stakeholders needed to resume their work by getting proper knowledge and information on the impact of COVID-19. It necessitated concentrating on the immediate priorities such as current living conditions and utilising best practices available and possible in the local communities for reintegration by adopting the tight of the migrant workers. Although the government announced packages to retain nearly one million returnees, this could not properly happen and with dismay, the returned migrants opted to work and jobs abroad.

Keywords: COVID, Workers, Jobs, Remittance, Priority

INTRODUCTION

The Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic virtually affected the entire world and Nepal did not remain an exception. Migrant workers remained the most affected people, among others. During the crisis, these migrant workers had to face problems in their destination countries. Many of them faced inhuman treatment, suffered physically and mentally and were compelled to forceful deportation. Coming back to their own country too, they were treated badly, such as naming them as "the vectors of COVID-19" and in many other ways. They were also banned from entering the homeland. Thus these migrant workers fell in a situation of statelessness.

Nepal faces a significant poverty challenge and as a result is known worldwide as one of the migrant sending countries. According to the data published in 2017, 8.1 million Nepali people are in a head-to-head poverty situation (OXFAM, 2019). Similarly, more than 17 per cent were recorded as multi-dimensional poverty (CBS and OPHI, 2020). This means these people lack access to essential services like food, clothes and shelter in a manner the policies and laws have determined. Inequality between rich and poor also becomes the major issue for the growing unemployment which is proved by another fact published in Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS) 2017/18. According to this survey, out of more than one-fifth (20.7%) million people of the economically active population, 7.1 million were employed while against 11. per cent who were unemployed in Nepal. The number of unemployed females was higher (13.1%) compared to males. A fact established in the Nepali economic market for a long is that annually 500,000 people enter Nepal's labour market which is 2.8 per cent according to CBS, 2019. The 2011 Population and Housing Census indicated one quarter (25.4%) of Nepal's households having at least one member with exposure to overseas work. This percentage has been found reduced to 23 per cent in the 2021 census (NSO, 2023). Labour migration has a positive effect on Nepal's economy. This connotation has a series of socio-economic impacts on the welfare of Nepali nationals abroad and their communities. Facts and figures representing exploitation are responsible for the migrant workers in situations undocumented having impact as trafficking or smuggling (IOM, 2019). They happen to choose unsafe and insecure routes to their destination. They are cheated by agents/ brokers. They lack proper documents like a contract letter mentioning salary, accommodation and other facilities.

Against this backdrop, this paper on retaining the returnee migrant workers: Lessons learned from COVID-19 presents the facts and figures on how Nepal dealt with the returnee migrants' issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper then highlights the lessons that can be taken for the future generation in similar types of humanitarian crises in times of emergency.

DATA AND METHODS

Data sources for migration can be broadly obtained from census and surveys which are known as statistical sources, official records and innovative sources. Foreign migration and workers-related data are collected and made available by the National Statistics Office (NSO), Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) and the Ministry of Health and Population (MOHP) in Nepal and updated and analysed by UN agencies like the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), International Labour Organisation (ILO), universities and research institutes. NSO collects these data through the national census as well as periodical surveys like the Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS), Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) and Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). The DoFE, one of the key agencies of the government responsible for the labour permit from Nepal is the main source of information to generate labour migration data as well as issues and records related to them. Aspirant migrants wishing to emigrate for employment have a lot of limitations. First, it comprises

only the number of labour permits issued by the government; importantly, therefore, the large number of Nepalis who go to India is not recorded. According to the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Nepal and India, no labour permits are required for Nepalis wishing to migrate to India for employment. Secondly, by only indicating the number of permits issued, the figures cannot show whether one individual has received multiple permits or cases where permits may have been issued but then not used (IOM, 2019).

Nepal does not have an effective regular data record-keeping system. The earlier Vital Registration Department under the Ministry of General Administration and Federal Affairs has now been established under the Ministry of Home Affairs as the Department of National ID and Civil Registration. This Department's major role is to register data related to civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS). They are conventionally known as data related to birth, death, marriage, migration and dissolution. The Department however needs help for the coverage of National ID which itself has been a huge undertaking. Experts in the related field are hardly appointed under the current curriculum of the Public Service Commission. Although collecting and updating both the international and internal migration-related data is the business of the Department of National ID and Civil Registration, this has not happened in Nepal yet. Nevertheless, this Department has been making efforts to regulate migration data as well.

As a lack of the apex authority to collect and update all types of migrants' data in Nepal, the number of returnee migrant workers due to the COVID pandemic is difficult to figure out in Nepal. However, some bases can be established to figure out. During the COVID-19 period, a couple of studies were carried out by the government and United Nations agencies like the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and so forth. This paper is mainly based on these secondary sources. The paper mainly utilises data collected mainly from IOM (2020), ILO (2020), and NSO (2023). Data collected by GEFONT (2020) on rapid assessment during the COVID-19 is also utilised in this study. Other sources used for analysing COVID-related data concerning migration are from MoF (2020), Firstpost (2020), Informal (2020) and The Economic Times (2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the historical ear, Nepali migrant workers searched wage-earning jobs mainly in India, however from the mid-1980s, Nepalis started also to migrate to the Gulf States and Malaysia for work which resulted in an increase in migrant workers as well as in a proliferation of labour recruitment agencies and brokers. As a result of this, migrant workers suffered a lot due to exorbitant fees from brokers. One of the studies conducted by NIDS (2010) showed an instance of debt bondage, in which youths were both enticed and forced by brokers to go the third countries to earn to pay the debts their forefathers were said to borrow. Local moneylenders asked young persons, mainly men, who or their families are said to be indebted to the moneylenders, to go abroad mainly to the Gulf countries for labour, and pay the debt incurred by their parents or grandparents.

Passport issuance from the district level in Nepal has facilitated the unskilled migrant workers to abroad which resulted in unskilled and semi-skilled labour force from Nepal. In recent years, the number of Nepali women migrant workers has been growing. Whereas 10 years back only slightly over 200 thousand migrant workers were women, this number rose by double according to the 2021 census (NSO 2023). This proves Nepali women migrant workers are being recognized in the international market as one of the major economic actors. The risk of exploitation and abuse of women migrant workers is high, particularly in largely unregulated sectors such as domestic work and the Government has put in place a series of measures seeking to protect women migrants. Before 2010, female migration to the Gulf for

low-skilled work was restricted. A new restriction was made in 2012 that applied to women under the age of 30 migrating to Arab States for domestic work. In 2014, this restriction was expanded to women of all ages. In 2015, another directive reopened migration for female domestic workers aged 24 years and above (ILO, 2015). These measures have met with limited success and there is still evidence that many women migrants are in situations of risk. The process for Nepalis to migrate for employment is complex and can be time-consuming, which has spurred the increase of recruitment agencies. It also means that many migrant workers use irregular channels to access foreign employment, not going through the process of obtaining a labour permit (IOM, 2019).

According to DoFE, more than 700 thousand Nepali migrant workers are in different parts of the labour-receiving countries (DoFE, 2023). This number was 4,099,926 between 2008/2009 and 2018/2019 comprising 3,888,035 males and 211,891 females (DoFE, 2019). An estimate made at the end of 2022 shows that apart from 500,000 Nepali migrants in Malaysia, the most popular labour destination for Nepali workers followed by Qatar with over 400,000, Saudi Arabia with 334,451, the United Arab Emirates 224,905 and Kuwait with 70,000 (DoFE, 2022). These five countries alone accommodate over 1.5 million Nepalis. Due to the fear of COVID 2019, more than 700,000 workers have returned from India as reported by various media in Nepal. The country already facing pressure to bring home at least 70,000 Nepali migrant workers from the Gulf nations (Kathmandu Post, 2020). Another study by GEFONT showed that 2.46 per cent of Nepali workers were completely jobless in Malaysia and Gulf countries. Among them were mainly the workers whose contracts had expired, who did not have any documents and been granted amnesty. The remaining other workers were either employed or placed in camp quarantine due to corona infection. Among the workers abroad, whose employment contract period remained, 2.93 per cent had not received their wages, 10.98 per cent of workers received only partial wages and 86.09 per cent received full wages. With this finding, GEFONT concludes that there is no provision for overtime, so it is clear that the income of workers has decreased and some of the workers are even not getting wages or only partial wages (GEFONT, 2020). Indicating the poor quality of the quarantine, another study by ILO suggested the Malaysian government 'provide migrant workers access to quarantine facilities that permit social distancing, where such facilities are available for other groups. Such facilities should include safe spaces for women migrant workers, and privacy, hygiene and sanitation provisions' (ILO, 2020).

Migrant Workers' Issues Concerning COVID in Nepal

Migrant workers remained fearful due to the potentiality of losing jobs in the informal sector. It happened that they could not feed their families, pay their rent or survive in the city due to the lockdown hitting jobs in construction, manufacturing, restaurants, travel, tourism, and domestic work/house help.

When lockdown began, people had some money, some food and others to survive and this is also applicable to the migrant workers. But the lockdown period extended and even more severely, they were in a situation of emptying both the stored food grains and money. In many places, workers had no savings whatsoever so the economic effects of the crisis were felt immediately. In Nepal, although the government offered, during the early days of lockdown, some relief packages, they were all in kind and thus could not meet the necessities felt by the workers. South Asia, particularly India, where millions of Nepalis are residing as workers, is the movement of migrant labourers who cross the state borders to reach their villages. There specific interstate transit bus terminals (ISBT) across the country were crumbling under the weight of the migrant daily wagers wanting to go home. This created an unprecedented situation as the coronavirus pandemic was on the move. So many people gathered at one spot, all clustered and crowded in a location, also created new hotspots for the

virus. According to The Economic Times, an online portal published from India, hundreds of migrant labourers gathered near Bandra station, Mumbai on 13 April 2020 'after hearing news about the government running trains to transport them back to their home states'. The crowd had gathered for more than an hour led to fears of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and was finally dispersed by the police (The Economic Times, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 on families and economies will remain for a longer period in a country like Nepal is dependent on the remittance economy (Informal, 2020). The Secretary-General of the United Nations in his address underscored the fact that “remittances are a lifeline in the developing world – especially now”. This suggests an urgent need to have a special focus on the gender dimensions, that is, focused on women who had to bear the additional burden of unpaid care work at home and loss of paid work (since they are usually and mostly in the informal sector). In many situations, women were bypassed by state-provided support if any at all (News 18.com, 2020).

Due to this crisis, Nepal's main option for the promotion and expansion of agriculture for the returnee migrant workers needs to be to encourage subsistence agriculture without destroying the principle of “subsistence” – transform “household subsistence” to “national subsistence”. Equally important is to make the agriculture work prestigious by diversifying agriculture as food, vegetables, medicinal plants, animals and meats, forest products, etc.

As a response, the government has conducted some crucial tasks about migrant workers abroad. During the pandemic crisis, the government stopped issuing labour permits for those seeking to go for foreign employment from 23 February 2020. With this, according to the source DOFE, more than 110,000 potential migrant workers aspiring to labour in Gulf countries and Malaysia were deprived of going there. However, the government could not make any plan at that time for their involvement in the economic sector inside the country. The Government initiated the repatriation of migrant workers in need of return giving priority to pregnant women and those people who had lost their jobs, those with health problem issues, those losing family members inside Nepal, and those overstaying visas (ILO, 2020).

During the COVID-19 period, the government initiated to repatriate the migrants from Gulf countries and Malaysia. The budget speech, for example, for the fiscal year 2020/21 declared NPR 700,000 employment opportunities and many of them have been projected for the returned migrant workers (MoF, 2020). Notable achievements could not be seen in the government's declaration to retain nearly one million returnee migrants in Nepal. A couple of reasons for this can be noted here. First, the modality of employment and the sectors of mobilisation were not developed and thus the action could not be properly materialised. Second, proper planning was not done to materialise these sorts of activities in terms of both the short-term and long-term priorities for sustainably retaining the returnee migrant workers. Third, measures to identify the immediate priority of the returned workers could not be devised in terms of who, where, and current living conditions: home-based (mixed up or self-isolated, and any special condition. This indicates the need for issue-based coordination in all three levels of government for prioritising the issues in collaboration with stakeholders like non-government organisations as well as private sectors.

CONCLUSION

The impact of COVID-19 remains long on the migrant populations all over the world and especially on the poorest of the poor among the migrants in/from Nepal. We need to think of interventions to reduce the impact of this pandemic on workers, remittance and their livelihoods. The involvement of the Ministry of Labour Employment and Social Security (MOLESS) is utmost for generating data, experiences and lessons learned about the impact of the COVID -19 crisis concerning migrant workers.

In the capitalist mode of production, the value of work is discarded and COVID-19 has given them an explicit benefit, that is, the capitalist class is profiting off the crisis. Workers with expiry contracts, having no proper documents and those granted amnesty and lacking wages should be addressed with policies and programmes.

The government through annual budget speech declared retention strategies of the returnee migrant workers. However, this could not be materialised as expected. COVID-19 has given an important lesson for all to make short-term and long-term strategies for retaining migrant workers returning from abroad.

To reduce the risk of exploitation and abuse of women migrant workers in the Gulf countries, strict monitoring mechanisms should be in place focusing on the unregulated sectors such as domestic work. These overall findings reveal that Nepal lacks consistent data sources for workers-related data concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. For responding to this, collecting facts and figures should be the main priority followed by utilising international expertise and experiences in managing migration during crisis as well as in the normal situation.

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