# WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS FROM NEPAL

## KEY STATISTICS

# CONTENTS

# ABSTRACT

This brief presents some of the key statistics relating to Nepali women's migration for foreign jobs. The findings are based on an analysis of publicly available migration-related data and raw datasets provided by government institutions, including the National Population and Housing Census, the Nepal Living Standards Survey, the Nepal Labour Force Survey, the Foreign Employment Information Management System and the Foreign Employment Welfare Management System. The brief also discusses the limitations in existing migration data and highlights the need for gender-responsive policies and procedures to enhance women's access to safe, orderly and dignified migration. A set of recommendations are presented at the end for the systematic collection and management of migration data to support gender-responsive policy formulation and programming.

*Photo: UN Women/Srijana Bhatta*

# BACKGROUND: MIGRATION AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE DATA

Sex- and gender-disaggregated[1] data are essential to better understanding migration flows and developing gender-sensitive plans and policies.[2] Roles, expectations, relationships and power dynamics associated with gender impact all stages of migration.[3] Gender also interacts with other characteristics of migrants, such as caste/ethnicity, age and geographical location, and influences decisions, experiences, access to information and resources, among other factors.[4] Thus, a genderresponsive approach to migration data is very important, and this approach includes collection and use of "sex- and, whenever possible, gender-disaggregated migration data."[5] Such an approach to migration data is even more important in the case of Nepal as Nepali women are increasingly migrating for work and education and migration pathways taken by women migrant workers lie below the official radar as they are forced to use irregular channels owing to restrictive policies enforced by the government. Women migrant workers made up about 8 per cent of then total of more than 600,000 labour permits issued to Nepali workers by the Department of Foreign Employment

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1  'Sex refers to the biological and physical differences between women and men. Gender refers to socially constructed differences in attributes and opportunities associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy and to the social interactions and relations between women and men'. UN Women, *Module 1: What is Gender Data and How to Use it for SDG Monitoring?* (no place: UN Women, n.d.).

2  Jenna Hennebry, Hari KC and Kira Williams, *Gender and Migration Data: A Guide for Evidence-based, Gender-responsive Migration Governance* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2021).

3  Ibid.

4  Ibid.

5  Ibid.

(FEB) for employment in countries other than India during the fiscal year 2021/22.[6] Women made up about 5 per cent of the nearly 1 million estimated Nepali workers in India in 2017/18.[7]

An analysis of available migration-related data suggests that Nepal does not have nationally representative gendered data on key areas of migration, such as recruitment costs borne by migrant workers; costs borne for remittance transfers; sources used to finance migration abroad; status of loans and indebtedness; migrant workers' physical, sexual and reproductive health; the number of migrant workers in jail, missing and in shelters in destination countries; migrant workers with coverage of social protection in destination countries; and migrant workers in need of psychosocial support. Furthermore, the national census and national surveys, which are major sources of migration data, are conducted at intervals of five to 10 years. Hence, this data is not very valuable in the long-term. There is also a lack of systematic gendered data on migrant workers in general, seasonal migrant workers who migrate to India for work in particular and migrant workers who use irregular pathways to go abroad.

There are some limitations in the data available from the government's data portals, the most important source of migration data in Nepal. Data on labour permit issuances available through the Foreign Employment Information Management System (FEIMS) only include migrant workers travelling to international destinations beyond India using regular channels. The data thus exclude workers travelling to India for employment as well as those using irregular channels for labour migration to other countries. Workers who use other types of visas, such as visit visas, to migrate abroad for employment are also not included in these data. Likewise, data on the deaths of migrant workers recorded in the Foreign Employment Welfare Information Management System (FEWIMS) are based on the financial assistance provided by the FEB to the families of deceased migrant workers. Workers are covered by this scheme for up to one year after the expiration of the labour permit. Families of the deceased workers who travelled without a labour permit or whose labour permit had expired more than a year earlier are not eligible for financial assistance from the FEB, and such workers are not included in the FEWIMS data on deaths. Similarly, in the case of internal databases, there is no mechanism to produce sexdisaggregated data of migration variables. For instance, the Foreign Employment Tribunal, where cases of fraud, deception, etc., are filed, records information on the number of new cases and cases that were adjudicated. But there is no data system that records this information disaggregated by sex, age, caste/ethnicity and other indicators to provide comprehensive information.

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[6]   Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS), *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022* (Kathmandu: MoLESS, 2022).

[7]   Jeevan Baniya, Sadikshya Bhattarai, Binay Jung Thapa and Vibhav Pradhan, *COVID-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants: Impacts and Responses* (Kathmandu: Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility, 2020).

*Daimaya Gurung, a returnee migrant woman, drives an e-rickshaw in Nawalparasi. Photo: UN Women/Merit Maharjan*

# RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

While remaining within the limitations of the existing data on migration, including gaps in availability of sex gender-disaggregated data, this brief presents some of the key statistics relating to Nepali women's migration for foreign jobs, drawing on data from various secondary sources (as discussed in the section to follow).[8] Data related to men migrant workers are occasionally presented for comparison to show how women migrant workers compare with men migrant workers along different indicators. The brief also explains trends and explores reasons for a particular outcome as far as it is possible within the limitations of the available data and the scope of the study. A set of recommendations in the final section calls for the strengthening of existing mechanisms for the collection of systematic gender-disaggregated migration data and collaboration between key stakeholders.

This brief contributes to an understanding of migration trends, particularly related to women migrant workers, which is essential to harness the positive impacts of migration, minimise potential risks and make migration safe and orderly.

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[8]  As all available data is disaggregated only by sex, not by gender, the paper does not discuss any statistics disaggregated by gender.

# METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

This brief primarily uses publicly available migration-related data and raw datasets provided by government institutions. The key data sources are: the National Population and Housing Census (1952/54 to 2021), the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) 2010/11, the Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS) 2017/18, the Foreign Employment Information Management System (FEIMS) (fiscal years 2006/07 to 2021/22), the Foreign Employment Welfare Management System (FEWIMS) (fiscal years 2008/09 to 2021/22) and data recorded by the Safer Migration (SaMi) Programme (fiscal years 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22). The (raw) data available from these sources were analysed across different variables, such as sex, age, education qualification, province of origin and destination country, using SPSS Statistics software. Publications from other sources have also been used where relevant.

# KEY FINDINGS

## An increasing number of women are migrating to foreign countries.

There has been a five-fold increase in the number of women migrating to foreign countries in the past two decades, from 82,712 in 2001 to 406,163 in 2021 (Figure 1).[9] Women made up 19 per cent of Nepal's over 2 million international migrants in 2021. This figure is an increment of about five percentage points from a decade ago, when women made only 14 per cent of the total international migrant population from Nepal.

**Number of migrants abroad and percentage of women migrants among total migrants**
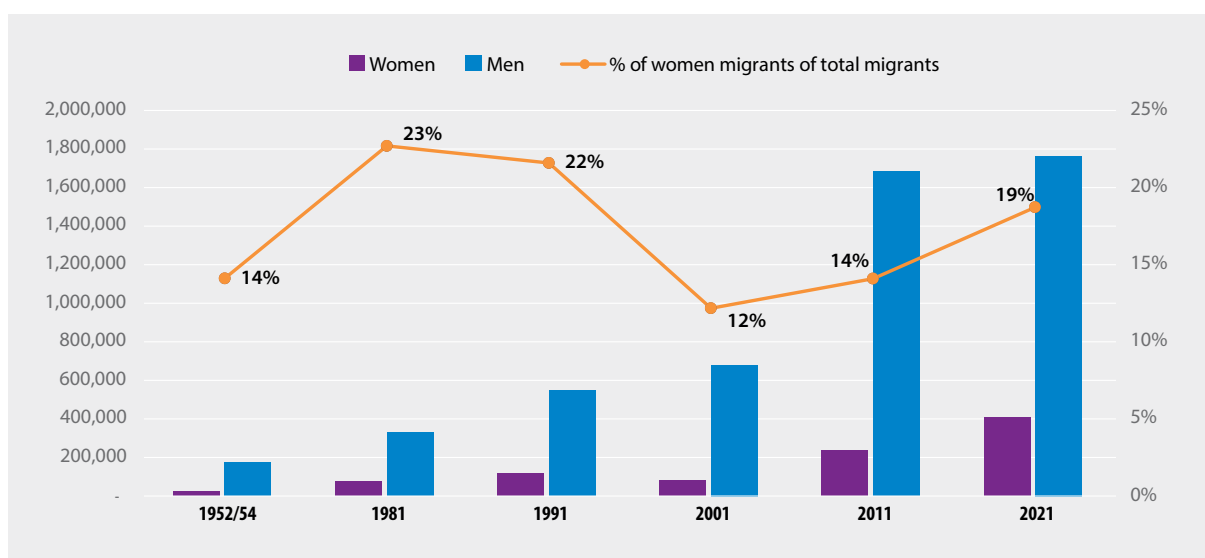


*Source:* Padma Prasad Khatiwada, 'International Migration and Citizenship in Nepal', in *Population Monograph of Nepal* (2014): 211-237; Central Bureau of Statistics, *Preliminary Report of National Population Census 2021* (Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

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9   These migrants are defined as 'absentee population' in census reports. An 'absentee' is someone who was living outside Nepal for more than six months at the time of the census.

## Most women migrants are leaving for work and education and as dependants.

Work and education jointly account for the reasons for migrating among nearly half (48 per cent) of women migrants. Many women (34 per cent) also migrate as dependents of a family member and this rate is about 16 times higher for women in comparison to men migrants (Figure 2). A small proportion of women migrate for other reasons, such as business or fleeing conflict (armed and political) in Nepal.

**Figure 2**

**Proportion of Nepali women and men abroad, by purpose of migration, 2017/18 (percentage)**
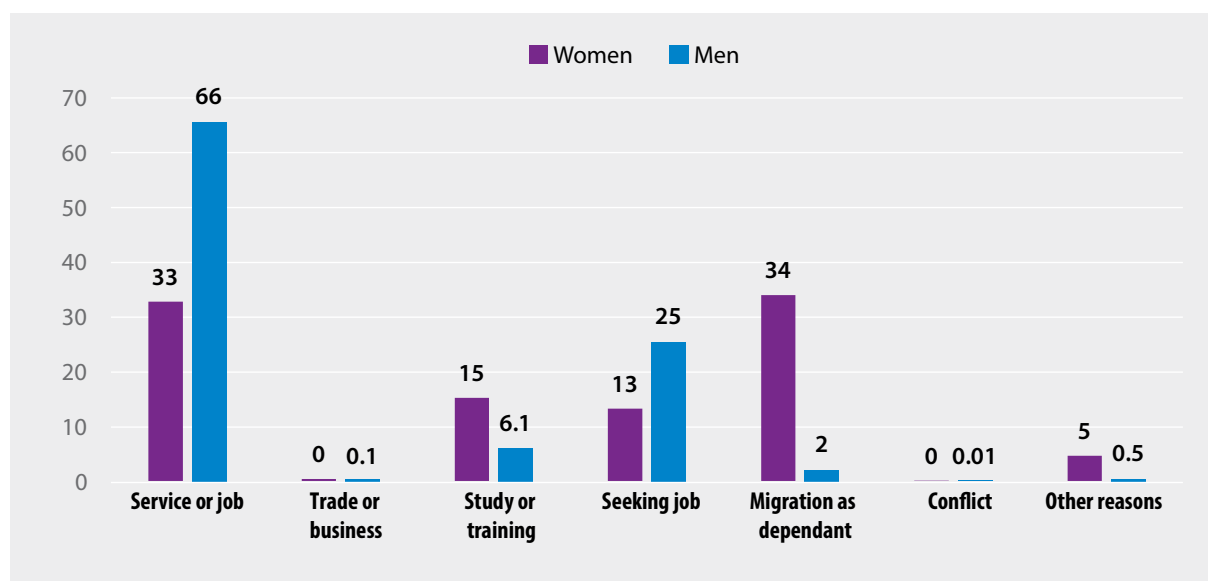


*Source:* Research team's calculations based on NLFS 2017/18.

*Note:* Those who go abroad without a definite job but with the intention of finding work only after reaching the destination are placed under the category of 'Seeking job'.

Studies suggest that Nepali women are increasingly involved in labour migration for financial reasons, such as improving their family's economic condition, paying for children's education and repaying debts.[10] Many women also migrate to escape social-cultural prescriptions at home and violence in the family.[11]

## The number of labour permits issued to women workers is increasing.

Nepali migrant workers are required to obtain a labour permit from the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) to migrate to countries beyond India. Unregulated migration between Nepal and India is facilitated by the open border between the two countries.

Data from 2006/07 to 2021/22 show an overall increase in the number and proportion of labour permits issued to women workers (Figure 3).[12] While only 4 per cent of total labour permits were issued

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[10] UN Women, *Returning Home: Challenges and Opportunities for Women Migrant Workers in the Nepali Labour Market* (Kathmandu: UN Women, 2018), 1.

[11] UN Women, *Returning Home*; Arjun Kharel, 'Female Labor Migration and the Restructuring of Migration Discourse: A Study of Female Workers from Chitwan, Nepal' (PhD diss., Kansas State University, 2016).

[12] This figure only includes labour permits under the 'new entry' category. Under this category, migrant workers going for a new job abroad either at an individual level or via recruitment agencies are included. DoFE also maintains records of renewal of labour permits by migrant workers who are returning to the same job on a renewed contract. In the fiscal years 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22, 10,547, 11,545, 10,227, 4,278 and 16,066 women migrant workers, respectively, renewed their labour permits.

to women workers in 2008/09, that proportion increased to 8.7 per cent in 2018/19, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic, and 9.5 per cent in 2021/22. The years 2019/20 and 2020/21 expectedly saw a significant drop in the number of permits issued due to disruptions created by the pandemic globally, but picked up pace in 2021/22.

**Figure 3**

**Number and proportion of labour permits issued by sex, 2006–2022**
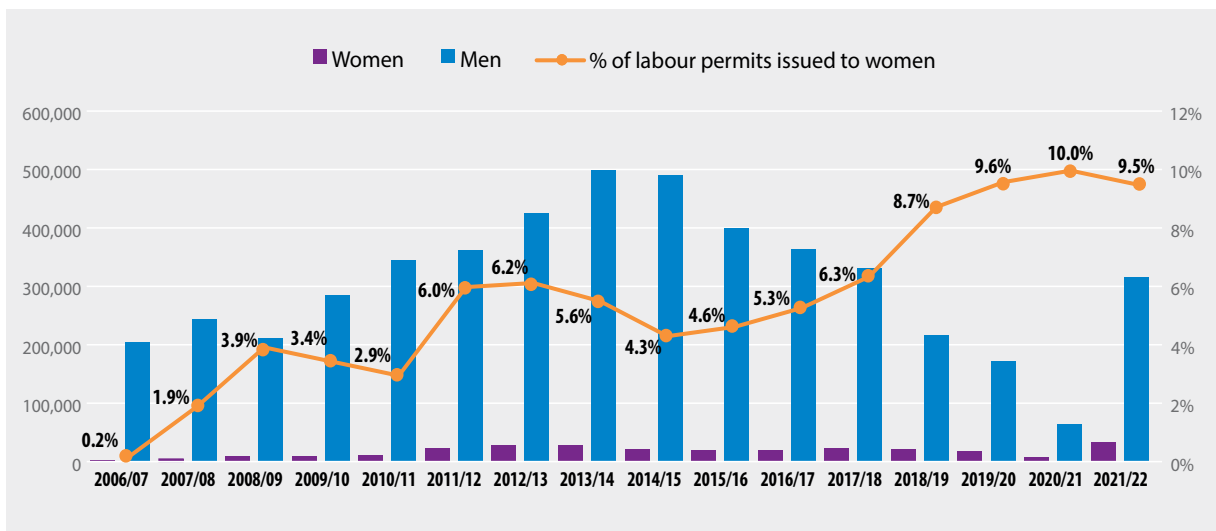


*Source:* MoLESS, *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022.*

The available official figures on women's labour migration must be treated with caution. The figures of labour permit issuance published by DoFE are less likely to truly represent the magnitude of women's migration for work.[13]  These numbers do not take into account the cross-border migration to India and the use of irregular channels because of restrictive policies imposed on women's migration.[14] Over the past four decades, the government has imposed different restrictive measures on Nepali women migrant workers, such as the need to obtain the consent of guardians or local authorities to go abroad for employment, a complete ban on the migration of women migrant workers, a ban on migration for domestic work abroad and a n age ban in migration.[15] Although the Foreign Employment Act, 2007 lifted all restrictions on women migrant workers' mobility, new restrictive measures have been implemented since 2008 amid increasing cases of violence and exploitation of women migrant workers. These include a ban on Nepali women's migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia in 2008 and to Lebanon in 2009; an "age ban" in 2012, which prohibited Nepali women below age 30 from migrating as domestic workers to the GCC countries; and a complete ban in 2017 on the migration of women and men migrant workers for employment for domestic work until Nepal signs a bilateral labour agreement (BLA) or memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the host country for the protection of domestic workers.

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[13]   Arjun Kharel, 'Female Labor Migration and the Restructuring of Migration Discourse: A Study of Female Workers from Chitwan, Nepal'.

[14]   Giovanna Gioli, Amina Maharjan and Manju Gurung, *Neither Heroines nor Victims: Women Migrant Workers and Changing Family and Community Relations in Nepal* (Kathmandu: UN Women, 2017).

[15]   Mark McCarthy, *A Comprehensive Analysis of Policies and Frameworks Governing Foreign Employment for Nepali Women Migrant Workers and Migrant Domestic Workers* (Kathmandu: ILO, 2021).

Owing to these policies, many Nepali women migrate through irregular channels, often by crossing the Nepal-India border to travel to other destination countries. Their migration is not always captured in official statistics, which is a grave shortcoming since most migrant workers leaving Nepal through informal channels are women.[16]

**Figure 4**

**Nepali women migrant workers by age group, 2017/18**
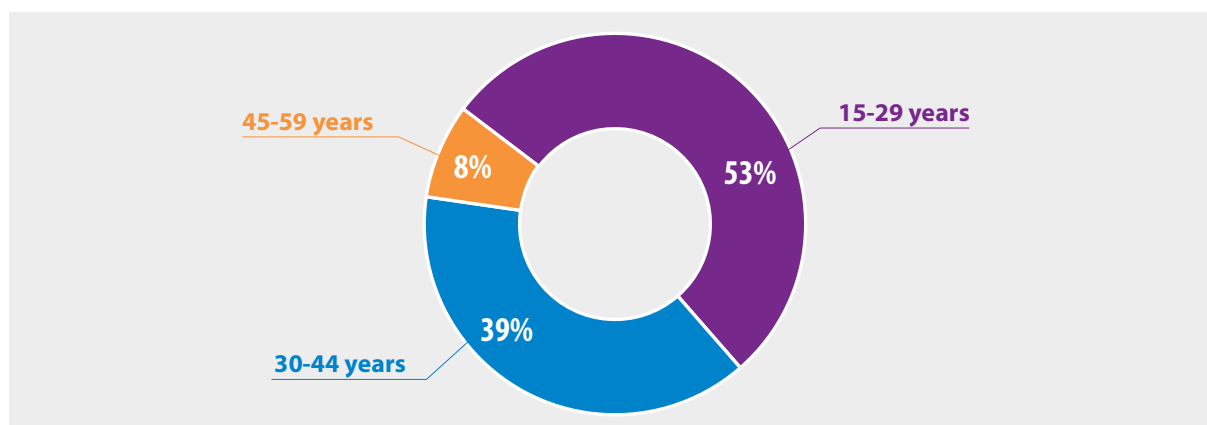


*Source: Research team's calculations based on NLFS 2017/18 for migrants travelling for work-related reasons.*
*Note: The figure does not show 'Above 60' age group as its value was less than 1 per cent.*

The NLFS data shows that most women migrant workers are in the age group 15 and 29 years.

## Women from diverse educational backgrounds are participating in labour migration.

The NLFS 2017/18 data shows that women from diverse educational backgrounds are participating in labour migration. Women with secondary and primary education form the two largest groups, followed by those with a high school degree and those who are illiterate (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

**Women and men migrant workers, by educational qualification, 2017/18**
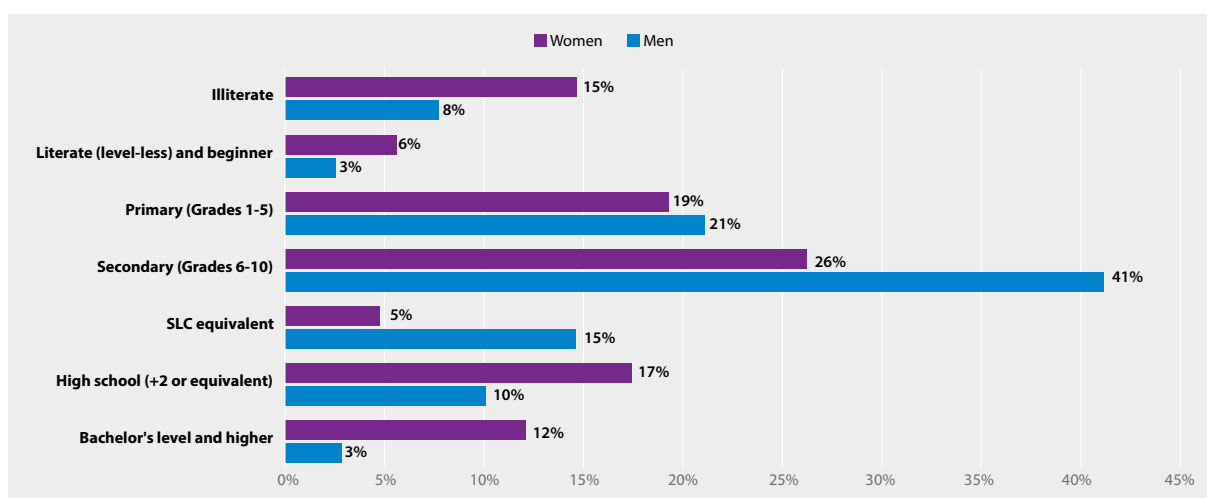


*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on migrants who migrated for work-related reasons.*

**Note:** *Completion of 10-year long primary and secondary education leads to a School Leaving Certificate (SLC) or Secondary Examination Education (SEE) certificate. SLC/SEE is a nationally administered examination. This is followed by a two-year higher secondary education that consists of Grades 11 and 12.*

16   Bandita Sijapati and P M Nair, *Gender and Safe Mobility: Promising Global and Regional Practices* (Kathmandu: IOM, 2014).

## Most women migrant workers originate from Bagmati Province and Province 1.

The NLFS 2017/18 data, which includes migration through unauthorised channels and migration to India, show that over two-thirds of women migrant workers originate from three provinces: Bagmati (24 per cent), Province 1 (22 per cent) and Lumbini (21 per cent) (Figure 7). In contrast, Lumbini and Madhesh are two top provinces sending men migrant workers abroad (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

**Women and men migrant workers' province of origin, 2017/18**
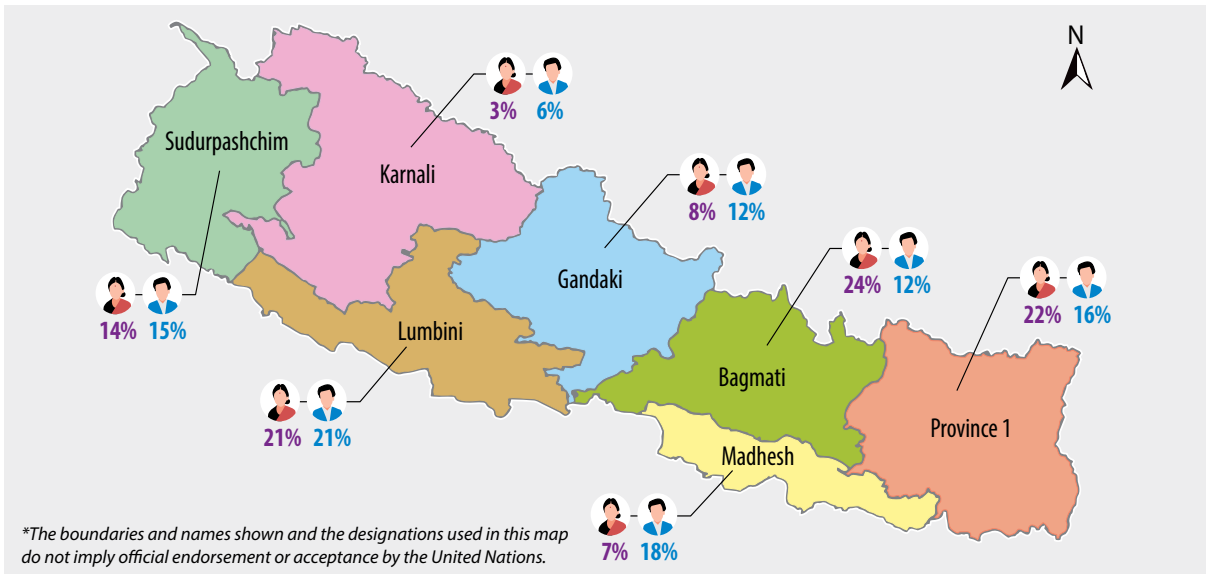


*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on migrants who migrated for work-related reasons.*

## Women migrant workers are mostly employed in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

Migration of Nepali women is concentrated in the GCC countries, especially the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Malaysia (Figures 7 and 8). In recent years, the destination of women workers has diversified with a sizable number of Nepali women going to Cyprus, Croatia, Jordan, Maldives, Romania and Turkey for employment.

**Figure 7**

**Top destinations of women migrant workers as per labour permits issued, 2021/22**



*Source: MoLESS, Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022.*

**Figure 8**

**Top destinations of women migrant workers, 2017/18**



*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on migrants who migrated for work-related reasons.*

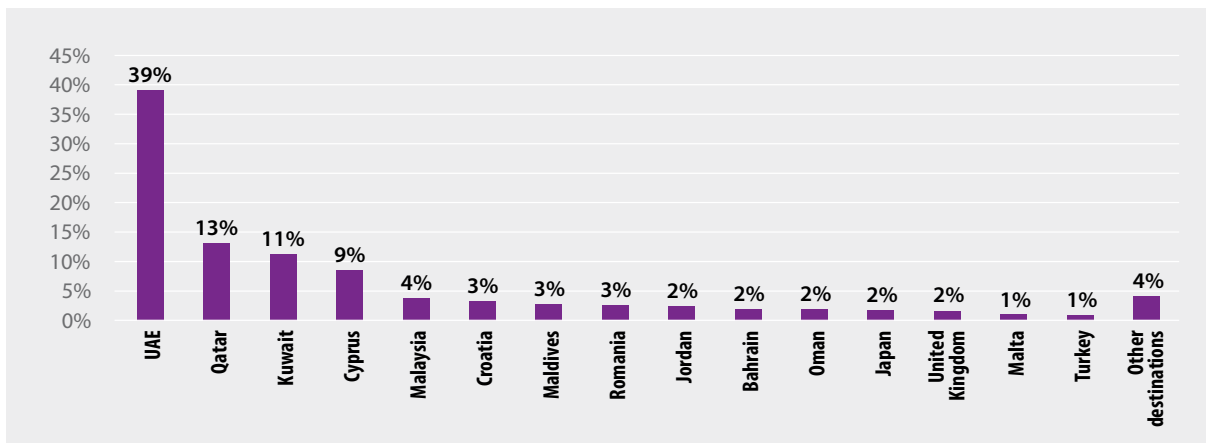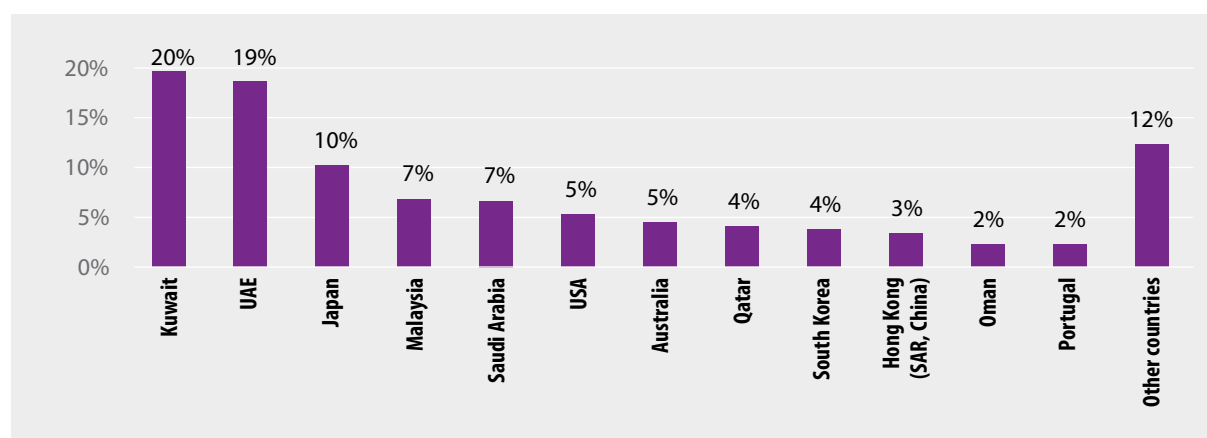## Women migrant workers' destinations vary based on their educational qualification and caste/ethnicity.

According to data from the NLFS 2017/18, a higher proportion of Nepali women migrating to the GCC countries, India and Malaysia have completed secondary level of education (Figure 9). In contrast, women migrant workers in South Korea and Japan have education qualification of higher secondary (equivalent to the 12th grade) or above. Compared to those going to the GCC countries and Malaysia, most women migrant workers going to South Korea and Japan belong to the Hill Castes. A significant proportion of women migrant workers going to the GCC countries, India and Malaysia are from Dalit groups (Figure 10).

## Most women workers pay significant recruitment fees and related costs.

The Government of Nepal has adopted an 'employer pays' modality for labour migration from Nepal , which is commonly known as the 'free-visa, free-ticket' policy.[17] This policy is also evident in Nepal's bilateral agreements with major labour destination countries. However, most workers, including women migrant workers, still pay huge sums of money in recruitment fees and other related costs. The amount spent varies between destination countries. Although data generalisable at the national level is unavailable, a study conducted at the sub-national level indicates that women migrant workers pay between NPR 40,000-150,000 (ca. USD 305-1145[18]) as recruitment fees for migration to the GCC countries.[19] The same study also finds that most women migrant workers (75 per cent) use loans to finance their migration, and the average amount of a loan to go to GCC countries is around NPR 110,000 (ca. USD 840). Recruitment costs and the size of loans are significantly high, especially in relation to migrants' incomes. The NLFS 2017/18 data shows that Nepali women migrant workers in the GCC countries and Malaysia earn only NPR 15,000 to 30,000 (ca. USD 115-230) on average in a month (see Table 2).

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[17]  The Government of Nepal introduced the 'free-visa, free-ticket' policy in 2015 for labour migration to the GCC countries and Malaysia. The policy requires employers to bear the expenses related to a migrant workers' visa costs and a round-trip air ticket. Recruitment agencies are allowed to charge up to a maximum of NPR 10,000 for their services.

[18]  USD 1=NPR 127.741, https://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/ (17 November, 2022).

[19]  Arjun Kharel, Sadikshya Bhattarai, Dogendra Tumsa, Shalini Gupta and Pawan Sen, *Province 1 of Nepal: Migration Profile* (Kathmandu: SDC and CESLAM, 2022).

Migration costs and sources of funds are crucial because economic hardship is the primary push factor for migration and the high cost of migration further adds to the economic vulnerability of women migrant workers. The centralised structure of labour migration-related services further add financial burdens on migrant workers. Although the government has decentralised some of the labour migration-related services, such as financial assistance applications at the FEB and labour permit renewal services,[20] most labour migration-related services are still only available in Kathmandu. In addition, as there are hardly any recruitment agencies outside the Kathmandu Valley, aspirant migrant workers need to travel long distances, often several times and for long periods, to complete their labour migration process.

**Figure 9**

**Women and men migrant workers' country of destination, by educational qualification, 2017/18**
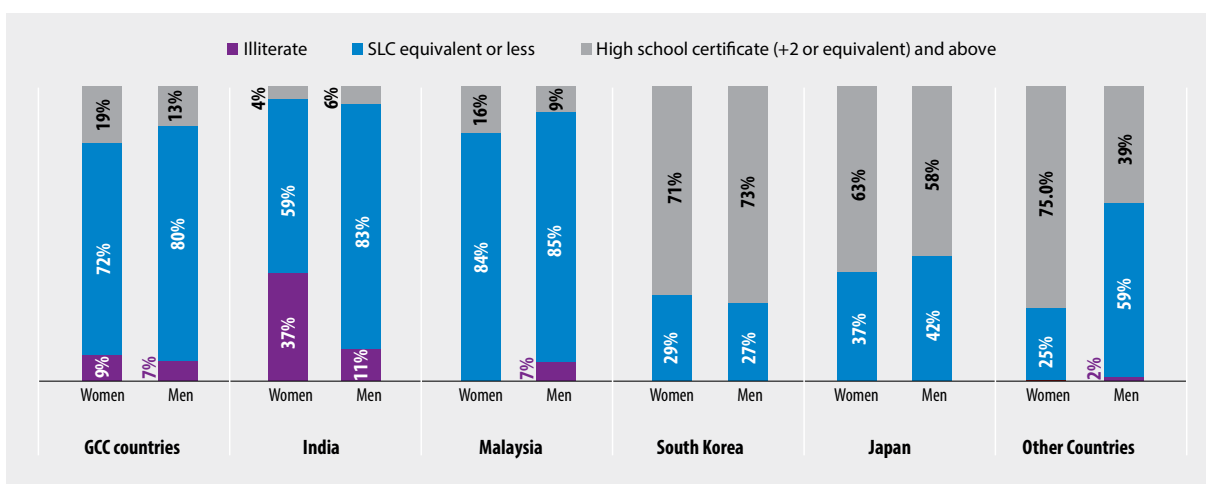


*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on migrants who migrated for work-related reasons.*

**Figure 10**

**Women and men migrant workers' country of destination, by caste/ethnicity, 2017/18**
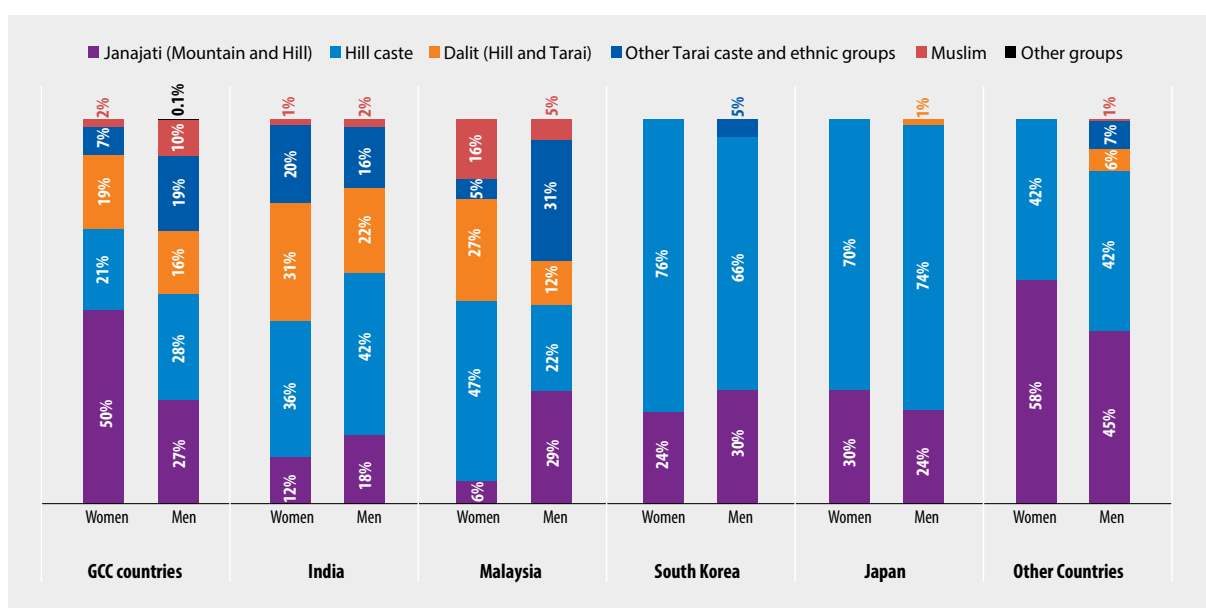


*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on migrants who migrated for work-related reasons.*

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20   MoLESS, *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022*.

## Women migrant workers are concentrated in elementary occupations.

Data from the NLFS 2017/18 showed that household members are not always knowledgeable (thus report 'unknown') about the occupation of the migrant family members in the destination, and this is comparatively higher in the case of women migrant workers than for men (Table 1). The NLFS 2017/18 also showed more than half of the women migrant workers in the GCC countries, Malaysia and India engaged in 'elementary occupations,' namely domestic workers and helpers, cleaners, launderers and manufacturing labourers, followed by 'service and sales' work such as salespersons, restaurant service workers, etc.[21] In countries other than those from the GCC, Malaysia and India (categorised as 'other countries' in the table), the topmost occupation is 'service and sales work,' followed by elementary occupations.

### Table 1

**Women and men migrant workers' occupation by destination countries, 2017/18 (percentage)**

|  | GCC Countries and Malaysia | | India | | Other Countries | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | **Women** | **Men** | **Women** | **Men** | **Women** | **Men** |
| **Unknown** | 21 | 21 | 20 | 9 | 41 | 21 |
| **Managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals** | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 15 | 4 |
| **Clerical support workers** | 4 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 3 |
| **Services and sales workers** | 17 | 19 | 13 | 36 | 20 | 31 |
| **Skilled – agriculture** | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| **Craft and related trade workers** | 1 | 12 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 4 |
| **Plant and machine operators and assemblers** | 0 | 11 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 10 |
| **Elementary occupations** | 56 | 34 | 63 | 36 | 16 | 23 |
| **Armed forces** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 2 |

*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on migrants who migrated for work-related reasons.*

## Disability, injury or sickness are the main reasons women workers return from overseas employment.

The NLFS 2017/18 provides statistics of household members who have returned after spending more than three months in a foreign country at any point in the last five years (who are defined as 'returnee migrants'). The survey found there were approximately 758,000 returnee migrant workers in Nepal. Among them, around 29,000 (or 4 per cent) were women.

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[21] The classification of occupations in the NLFS 2017/18 follows the Nepal Standard Industrial Classification (NSIC). As per the classification, 'elementary occupations' are jobs such as street vendors; helpers; cleaners; or labourers in the manufacturing, construction or agriculture sectors; among others, which may require the use of hand-held tools and considerable physical effort and includes unskilled workers. 'Service workers and shop and market sales worker' are those that work in the travel industry, housekeeping, catering, personal care as well as selling goods in wholesale or retail shops or similar establishments, stalls or markets and which requires a certain level of skill.

**Figure 11**

**Women and men migrant workers' reason for return, 2017/18**
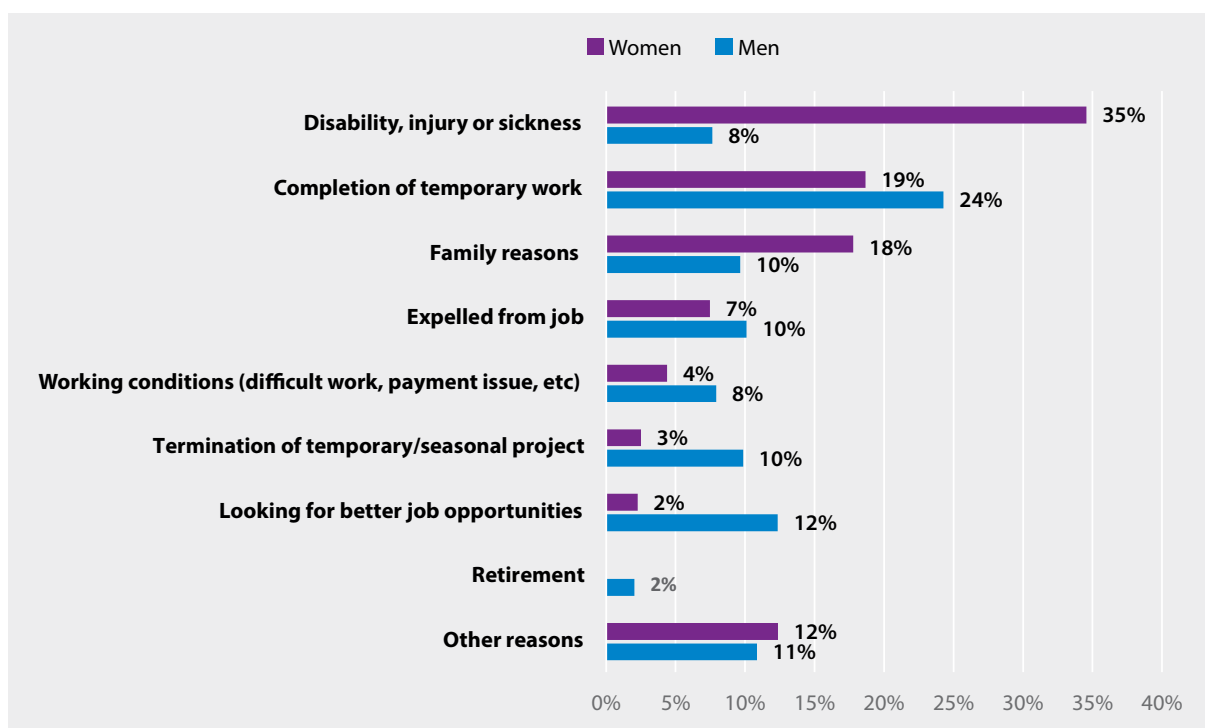


*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on returnee migrants (18-64 years of age) whose main reason for migration was service or job, trade or business and seeking job.*

Most women migrant workers had returned home due to disability, injury or sickness (37 per cent), followed by completion of contract (20 per cent) and family reasons (19 per cent) (Figure 11). The data shows a higher proportion of women returning home due to family reasons compared to men, which further points towards the unequal burden of unpaid care work on women.

## Most returnee women migrant workers are unemployed.

Reintegration of returnee migrant workers in local labour markets has emerged as an important policy agenda in Nepal. The issue gained increasing attention especially in the context of the mass return of migrant workers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the government is drafting policies and programmes to facilitate employment/self-employment of returnees, an understanding of the employment situation of women migrant workers can be helpful in this regard.

The NLFS 2017/18 found most migrant workers, both women and men, unemployed in Nepal after their return from foreign labour migration (Figure 12). The situation looks even more dismal for returnee women migrant workers. In comparison to 55 per cent of the men, 82 per cent of the women returnees were unemployed. In terms of the country of last employment, women who returned from Malaysia had the lowest employment rate, at 5 per cent, while those returning from India had the highest rate of employment at 29 per cent.

**Figure 12**

**Migrant workers' employment situation in Nepal after return, by sex and country of last employment, 2017/18**



Legend: ■ Employed ■ Unemployed

India — Women: Employed 29%, Unemployed 71%; Men: Employed 37%, Unemployed 63%
Malaysia — Women: Employed 5%, Unemployed 95%; Men: Employed 52%, Unemployed 48%
GCC Countries — Women: Employed 20%, Unemployed 80%; Men: Employed 46%, Unemployed 54%
Other Countries — Women: Employed 12%, Unemployed 88%; Men: Employed 44%, Unemployed 56%
All Countries — Women: Employed 18%, Unemployed 82%; Men: Employed 45%, Unemployed 55%
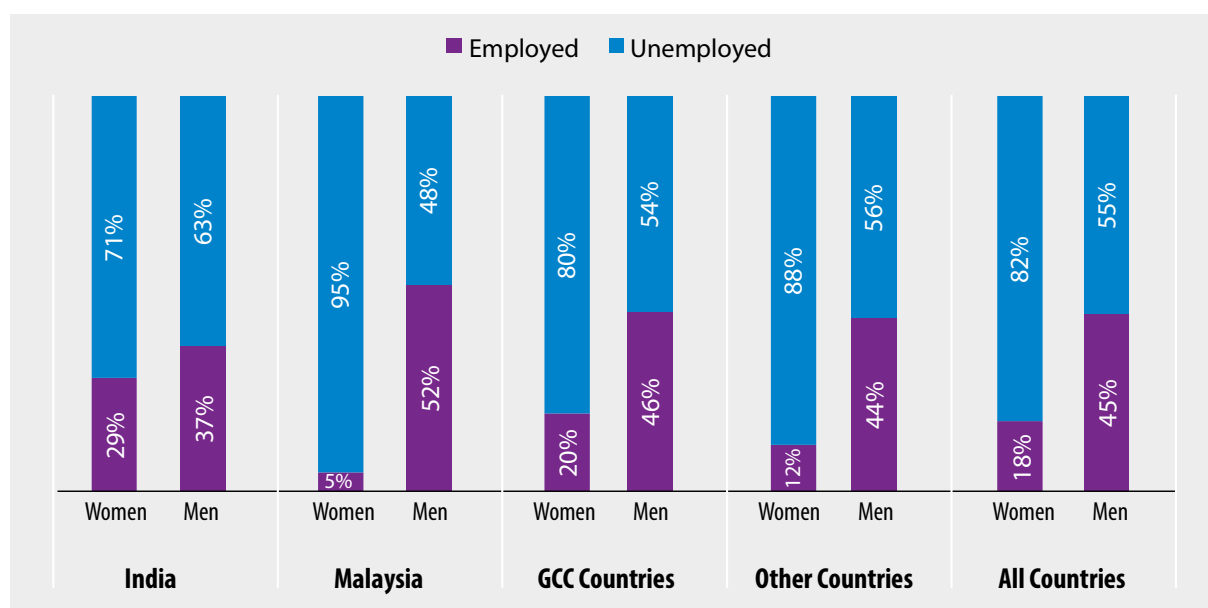
*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data for returnee migrants (18-64 years of age) whose main reason for migration was service or job, trade or business and seeking job.*

Studies in Nepal and elsewhere show that returnee women migrant workers face more challenges than men in reintegrating into local labour markets.[22] Care and domestic responsibilities; lack of decent opportunities; inability to access existing support services, such as employment programmes and concessional loans; and other reasons hinder women returnees from engaging in employment or self-employment in Nepal.

**Figure 13**

**Returnee women migrant workers' occupation in Nepal, by country of last employment, 2017/18**



Legend: ■ Elementary occupation ■ Services and sales work ■ Clerical support work ■ Craft and related trade work ■ Plant and machine operation and assembly

GCC Countries — Elementary occupation 91%, Services and sales work 9%, Clerical support work 0%, Craft and related trade work 0%, Plant and machine operation 0%
Malaysia — Elementary occupation 23%, Services and sales work 21%, Clerical support work 12%, Craft and related trade work 0%, Plant and machine operation 44%
India — Elementary occupation 57%, Services and sales work 19%, Clerical support work 0%, Craft and related trade work 25%, Plant and machine operation 0%
Other Countries — Elementary occupation 42%, Services and sales work 7%, Clerical support work 51%, Craft and related trade work 0%, Plant and machine operation 0%

*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on returnee migrants (18-64 years of age) whose main reason for migration was service or job, trade or business and seeking job.*

22   UN Women, *Returning Home;* Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), *Sustainable Reintegration – What Do Women Migrant Workers in the South Asia-Middle East Corridor Say?* (Bangkok: GAATW, 2022); Eleni Diker, Sarah Röder, Mohammad Khalaf, Ortrun Merkle, Lisa Andersson and Sonja Fransen, *Comparative Reintegration Outcomes between Forced and Voluntary Return and Through a Gender Perspective* (Geneva: IOM, 2021).

Among the employed returnee women migrants, most had returned from the GCC countries and India, and were engaged in elementary occupations[23] after their return (Figure 13). Meanwhile, almost half of the women returnees from Malaysia were working as 'plant and machine operators and assemblers' and those from other countries as 'clerical support workers.' The NLFS 2017/18 also found that the work experience gained abroad helped only 0.4 per cent of returnee women migrant workers in finding their current job compared to 10 per cent in the case of male returnees.

## Women migrant workers are generally paid less.

Data from the NLFS 2017/18 on the monthly income of returnee migrant workers when abroad shows that the average (median) monthly income of women migrant workers is the lowest in India, at NPR 12,000 (ca. USD $90) per month, while it was the highest in Japan at NPR 100,000 (ca. USD $760). Women workers' median income was NPR 15,000 (ca. USD $110) in Malaysia and NPR 30,000 (ca. USD $230) in Qatar. Their monthly income in India was lower than the minimum monthly wage of NPR 15,000 prescribed by the Government of Nepal for private sector workers, while it is similar in Malaysia and higher in Qatar and other countries.[24]

A recent study conducted in Province 1 also had similar findings on women workers' income in destination countries. The study found 42 per cent of women migrant workers in the GCC countries and Malaysia earning between NPR 20,000 to 30,000 (ca. USD $150-230) and 33 per cent between NPR 30,000-40,000 (ca. USD $230-305) in a month.[25] The same survey also found that 45 per cent of women migrant workers in the GCC countries and Malaysia on an average saved between NPR 20,000-30,000 (ca. USD $150-230) in a month.

| Table 2 | | |
|---|---|---|

**Average monthly earnings of migrant workers (in NPR)**

| | Women | Men |
|---|---|---|
| Japan | 115,842 | 182,468 |
| Qatar | 30,000 | 30,176 |
| United Arab Emirates | 26,494 | 39,356 |
| Kuwait | 25,265 | 36,794 |
| Saudi Arabia | 23,421 | 34,463 |
| Malaysia | 21,667 | 30,366 |
| Oman | 20,000 | 35,637 |
| Bahrain | 17,000 | 38,730 |
| India | 12,677 | 16,012 |
| South Korea | - | 101,469 |

*Source:* The Research team's calculation based on the NLFS 2017/18 data on returnee migrants.

*Note:* Data for the average earnings per month for Japan, Israel, South Korea and Lebanon is based on a small number of respondents – 8, 2, 12 and 2 responses, respectively. In the case of South Korea, there were no women returnee migrants in the sample.

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23   See footnote 21 for a definition of elementary occupations.

24   See: https://bit.ly/3ULe6Wi.

25   Kharel, Bhattarai, Tumsa, Gupta and Sen, *Province 1 of Nepal.*

The salaries of women migrant workers are consistently lower across destination countries compared to that of men (Table 2). For example, women migrant workers in the UAE earn approximately NPR 26,000 (ca. USD 200) on average while men earn an average salary of NPR 40,000 (ca. USD 305) in a month.

## Most returnee women migrants are unaware of subsidised loans and other government schemes.

National, provincial and local governments of Nepal have implemented various schemes for employment and concessional loans to support returnee migrant workers. One such is the soft loan scheme for returnee migrant workers, which was launched in 2018 by the Government of Nepal. The scheme aims to provide collateral-free loans of up to NPR 100,000 (ca. USD $765). Another scheme is the Prime Minister Employment Programme (PMEP), which aims to provide 100 days of employment and free skills training to the unemployed, including returnee migrants. Along with these, provincial and local governments have also implemented employment, skills training and soft loan programmes for unemployed youth that would cover returnee migrant workers as well. However, available small-scale studies show that most migrant workers, both men and women, lack access to the subsidised loan and employment schemes. A study conducted jointly by the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) among 1,400 returnee migrant workers (including 84 women returnees) found that only 15.7 per cent of returnees were aware of any government programme that provides funds to establish small or medium-scale enterprises.[26] In the case of women returnees, an even smaller number, only 13.1 per cent, knew about these schemes.

## Most women workers migrate without skills training.

A small proportion of migrant workers receive skill trainings prior to their migration. The MoLESS and IOM study found that only 14 per cent of migrants had received job-related training prior to their migration.[27] The areas of training included driving, cooking, waitering, and for being a security guard, among others. Another study found that only 14 per cent of women migrants (n=44) had taken some skills training prior to their migration and such training was related to hospitality, beauty care, caregiving and agriculture.[28] It is possible that most migrant workers travel without skills training as either they are employed in elementary occupations (see Table 1), which do not require prior skill, or there is a provision for on-the-job training at the workplace. The lack of access to training institutions can be another reason for the low rate of skills training among migrant workers.

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[26]  Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS) and International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Profiling Returnee Migrant Workers for Labour Market Integration* (Kathmandu: IOM, 2021).

[27]  Ibid.

[28]  Kharel, Bhattarai, Tumsa, Gupta and Sen, *Province 1 of Nepal.*

## Many women experience fraud and deception during the migration process.

Nepali migrant workers often become victims of recruitment malpractices, such as contract substitution, fraud and deception by labour intermediaries (i.e. recruitment agencies, agents and sub-agents).[29] According to data on cases registered at migrant resource centres (MRCs),[30] cheating by recruitment agencies and agents and contract substitution were the most common types of fraud experienced by women migrant workers (and aspirant migrant workers) between 2019/20 and 2021/22 (Table 3).

**Table 3**

**Cases registered at MRCs, by nature of case and migrant workers' sex, 2022**

| Type of case* | Women (%) | Men (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **Fraud and deception by recruitment agencies, informal agents, etc** | 23 | 36 |
| **Death-related, including referrals to relevant agencies** | 13 | 13 |
| **Rescue and repatriation from destination countries** | 12 | 7 |
| **Contract substitution** | 8 | 10 |
| **Missing person/no contact** | 8 | 3 |
| **Injuries and health problems** | 6 | 3 |
| **Assistance for migrant workers in jail** | 5 | 4 |
| **Withholding of passport in Nepal and in destination country** | 3 | 4 |
| **Detention by government of destination country** | 3 | 0 |
| **Withholding of both money and passport** | 2 | 4 |
| **Non-payment of wages** | 1 | 2 |
| **Abuse (sexual, physical, etc) by employers** | 1 | 0 |
| **Withholding of money in Nepal** | 1 | 4 |
| **Others (assistance in recovering money from agents/agencies after failing medical evaluation in Nepal or destination country, support in application for financial assistance for injury/illness and death of migration workers from the FEB)** | 13 | 11 |
| **Total (percentage)** | **100** | **100** |
| **Total number of cases (N)** | **555** | **9,587** |

*Source: SaMi Programme, 2022*

*\*These categories were originally used for case registration at the MRCs. Only a few of them were merged and placed under 'Others' by the research team.*

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[29] Jeevan Baniya and Sadikshya Bhattarai, *Analysis of Recruitment Reviews from Migrant Workers* (Kathmandu: GEFONT, 2022); Amnesty International, *Turning People into Profits: Abusive Recruitment, Trafficking and Forced Labour of Nepali Migrant Workers* (London: Amnesty International, 2017); Amnesty International, *False Promises: Exploitation and Forced Labour of Nepalese Migrant Workers* (London: Amnesty International, 2011).

[30] Migrant resource centres have been set up in 38 districts (and one at the Department of Passport in Kathmandu) under the Safer Migration (SaMi) Programme. SaMi is a bilateral initiative between the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS) and the Government of Switzerland. Through the MRCs, "potential migrant workers are provided orientation on safe migration processes, and are referred to other SaMi partners for accessing (free) skills training, legal aid and associated support, psychosocial counselling and financial literacy classes" (Safer Migration Project, accessed 17 August 2022, https:// sami.org.np/province-and-local-level).

## Suicide and 'natural death' are leading causes of death among women migrant workers.

According to FEWIMS data on financial assistance disbursed to family members of deceased migrant workers, between 2008/2009 and 2021/2022, a total of 258 women lost their lives during employment abroad. Another 92 women suffered from illness and injuries in the same period. This figure may not provide a full picture of the extent of occupational and health risks faced by women migrant workers since all such cases are not included in this data. The highest number of deaths was reported for 2021/22, when the families of 42 women migrant workers were provided financial assistance (Figure 14).

### Figure 14

**Trend of reported deaths and injuries/illnesses of women migrant workers abroad, from 2008/09 to 2021/22 (number)**
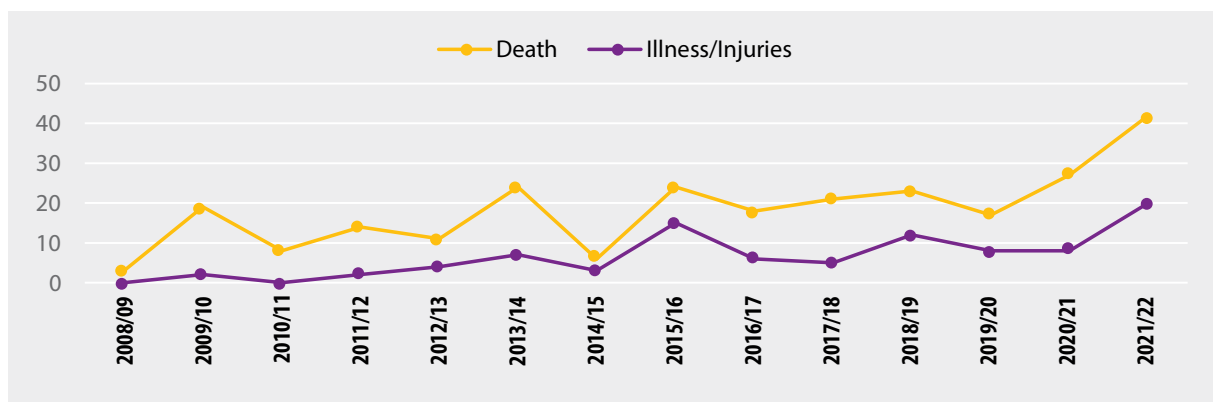


*Source:* Data obtained on 28 July 2022 from FEB

*Note:* Data on death of migrant workers recorded by the FEB is based on the financial assistance provided to families of deceased migrant workers. The year mentioned in this report corresponds to the year the financial assistance was provided and not the actual year the migrant worker died or was injured.

FEWIMS data also suggest that suicides and 'natural causes' are the leading causes of death among women migrant workers (Table 4). Studies have highlighted that most deaths of migrant workers due to 'natural causes,' particularly in the GCC countries, are related to their living and working conditions.[31] These include long working hours and overwork; heat stress; lack of rest days, especially in the case of domestic workers; workplace accidents; lack of personal protective equipment (PPE); physical and psychological abuse; unhygienic and congested accommodation, etc.[32]

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[31]    Vital Signs, *The Deaths of Migrants in the Gulf* (no place: Vital Signs, 2022).

[32]    Ibid.

**Table 4**

**Number of migrant workers' deaths from 2008/09 to 2021/22, by cause of death and sex (total)**

| Cause of Death | Women | Men |
|---|---|---|
| Suicide | 66 | 1,137 |
| Natural death | 36 | 2,061 |
| Traffic accident | 35 | 1,326 |
| Kidney disease | 26 | 1,421 |
| Sickness | 24 | 678 |
| Disease | 18 | 523 |
| Heart attack | 17 | 718 |
| Cardiac arrest | 16 | 1,460 |
| Workplace accident | 13 | 745 |
| COVID-19 | 3 | 209 |
| Others | 3 | 190 |
| Murdered | 1 | 66 |
| Cancer | - | 26 |
| **Total** | **258** | **10,560** |

*Source:* *Data obtained from the FEB on 28 July 2022.*

As discussed above, FEWIMS data incorporate only migrant workers who migrate after receiving labour permits, contribute to the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund and who are eligible, or whose family are eligible, to receive financial assistance. Hence, women migrants who migrate via informal channels, those who are otherwise ineligible for the financial assistance[33] and those who do not apply are excluded from this figure.

## Women migrant workers experience gender-based violence during different stages of the migration process.

Due to multiple intersecting factors, including identity (gender, age, religion, migration status and others) and structural and gender inequalities, women migrant workers face various forms of gender-based violence (GBV) during all stages of the migration process and from employers and recruiters as well as family and intimate partners.[34] While national-level data is unavailable, various small-scale studies find a significant rate of GBV against Nepali women migrant workers, by spouses at the pre-departure and post-return phases and by employers during overseas employment.[35] The same studies also find that the occurrence of violence, both prior to and after return, and in some cases, violence in the family, is a major cause of women's decisions to migrate in the first place. The rate of GBV by

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[33]  A migrant worker or his/her family can only apply for financial assistance till one year after the date of labour permit's expiry. Anyone who migrated with a labour permit but does not apply within the aforementioned time period is ineligible for financial assistance.

[34]  Inkeri von Hase, Michael Stewart-Evans, Katie Kuschminder Younghwa Choi, Alethia Jimenez, Michelle Mendes Meireles Silva and Dina Deligiorgis, *From Evidence to Action: Tackling Gender-Based Violence Against Migrant Women and Girls* (New York: UN Women, 2021).

[35]  Arjun Kharel and Amrita Gurung, 'Women's Participation in Foreign Labour Migration and Spousal Violence: A Study on Returnee Women Migrant Workers in Nepal.' In *Molung Educational Frontier* 12, No. 1 (2022): 7-36. https://doi.org/10.3126/mef.v12i01.45891. Arjun Kharel, 'Female Labor Migration and the Restructuring of Migration Discourse: A Study of Female Workers from Chitwan, Nepal'.

spouses is higher for women migrant workers from underprivileged backgrounds, such as those from historically marginalised caste/ethnic groups and with lower educational qualifications.[36] Other studies on GBV against Nepali women in general have also found the rate of violence to vary by geographical location and socioeconomic status, with women from rural areas, underprivileged groups and with lower educational backgrounds at higher risk of violence from their intimate partners.[37] Women migrant workers from Nepal are mostly employed abroad in the unregulated sector of domestic work, which puts them at a high risk of experiencing GBV. Studies indicate that women migrant workers experience different forms of GBV at the workplace from employers and their families.[38]

## Women migrant workers' remittances are mainly used to pay for daily consumption and household needs.

According to the NLSS 2010/11, Nepali women migrant workers sent home approximately NPR 120,000 on average (Table 5). This figure is higher than the average of NPR 97,000 sent home by men migrants in the same period. In terms of the destination country, those employed in South Korea, Israel, Australia and Japan remitted home the highest amounts while those in India remitted the lowest (Table 5).

### Table 5

**Average amount remitted, by destination country and sex, 2010/11 (in NPR)**

|  | Women | Men |
|---|---|---|
| **South Korea** | 617,321 | 168,026 |
| **Israel** | 314,790 | 438,683 |
| **Australia** | 215,537 | 334,570 |
| **Japan** | 195,407 | 358,825 |
| **United Arab Emirates** | 188,043 | 133,177 |
| **United Kingdom** | 178,185 | 204,490 |
| **Malaysia** | 102,425 | 94,737 |
| **Qatar** | 55,812 | 118,445 |
| **Saudi Arabia** | 48,893 | 112,636 |
| **United States of America** | 44,511 | 327,629 |
| **Hong Kong, SAR China** | 44,473 | 85,541 |
| **India** | 13,039 | 34,901 |
| **China** | - | 181,478 |
| **Other countries** | 386,064 | 292,084 |
| **All countries** | **122,789** | **97,591** |

*Source: Research team's calculations based on the NLSS 2010/11 data for working age (18-64 years) migrants who migrated for work related reasons.*

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Madhu Sudhan Atteraya, Shreejana Gnawali and In Han Song, 'Factors Associated with Intimate Partner Violence Against Married Women in Nepal', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 30, No. 7 (2014): 1226–1246. Prabhat Lamichhane, Mahesh Puri, Jyotsna Tamang and Bishnu Dulal, 'Women's Status and Violence Against Young Married Women in Rural Nepal'. *BMC Women's Health* 11, No. 1 (2011): 1-9. Ministry of Health and Population, *Women's Empowerment and Spousal Violence in Relation to Health Outcomes in Nepal: Further Analysis of the 2011 Nepal Demographic and Health Surveys* (Kathmandu: MoHP, 2013).

[38] Arjun Kharel, 'Female Labor Migration and the Restructuring of Migration Discourse: A Study of Female Workers from Chitwan, Nepal'.

In terms of caste/ethnicity, Hill and Mountain Janajati women migrant workers in general remitted higher amounts in a year on average than women from other caste and ethnic groups (Figure 15). In contrast, among women migrant workers in India, Hill caste women sent a comparatively higher amount home than the others.

**Average remittance from women migrant workers, by destination country and caste/ethnic group, 2010/11 (in NPR)**
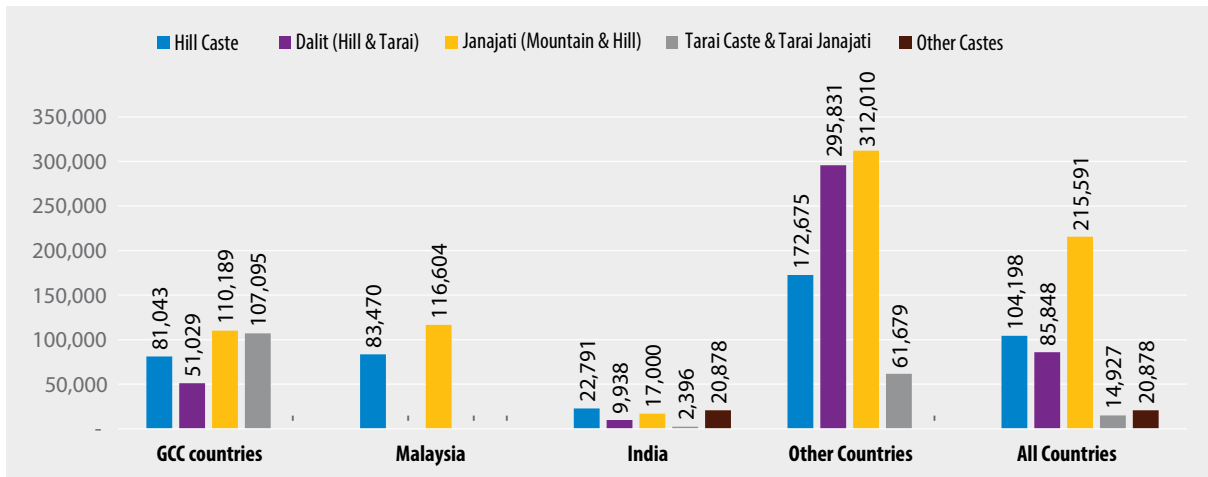


*Note: Research team's calculations from the NLSS 2010/11 data on for working age (18-64 years) migrants who migrated for work-related reasons.*

Remittances from both women and men migrant workers are mostly used to meet daily household needs, repay loans and for their child's education (Figure 16). A lower proportion of remittances from women migrant workers was spent on education and repayment of loans. On the other hand, the situation was reversed when it came to savings.

**Figure 16**

**Usage of remittances, by remitters' sex, 2010/11 (percentage)**
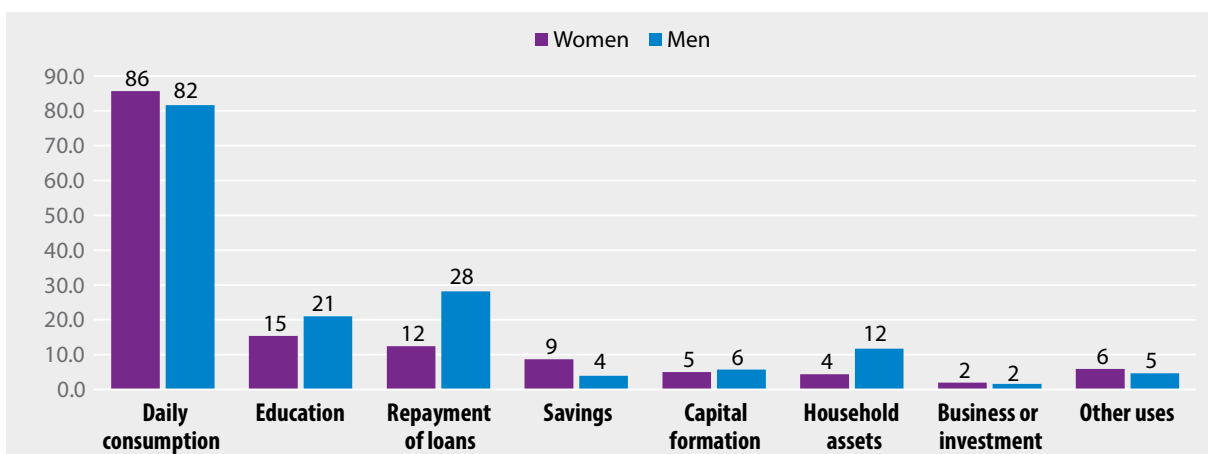


*Source: The research team's calculations from the NLSS 2010/11 on working age migrants (18-64 years) who migrated for work-related reasons.*
*Note: Multiple responses*

*A woman passenger pushes a trolley with suitcase outside the Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu, Nepal in May 2023. Photo: UN Women/Srijana Bhatta*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The available key statistics on women migrant workers from Nepal show the need for gender-responsive policies and procedures, including the removal of gender-based discrimination in labour migration, in order to enhance women's access to safe, migration so that their contributionto the development of Nepal can be maximised. Specifically, findings point to the need for coordination among all tiers of government to monitor recruitment agencies and agents as well as recruitment practices and control recruitment costs, ensuring that women migrants, especially in poorly regulated sectors, get occupational safety and health training either before their departure or after arrival in the destination country. Similar coordination is required with Nepali diplomatic missions, governments of destination countries and relevant international organisations to improve working conditions abroad. What is also required is a re-evaluation of restrictions on the mobility of women migrant workers. Equally pertinent will be collaboration between government agencies, civil society organisations (CSOs), trade unions and other stakeholders to disseminate information on available grievance registration mechanisms among migrant workers and their families while also supporting research and consultations that will help elucidate the barriers that hinder women migrant workers from utilising their skills.

The study also shows the limitations in existing migration data and highlights the need for the collection and management of gender-responsive data. A set of recommendations, presented below, discusses how migration data can be systematically collected and managed to support genderresponsive policy formulation and programming.

**Framework to guide gender-responsive migration data for data consistency and inclusiveness:** Producing gender-responsive migration statistics and addressing the gaps and challenges in genderresponsive data requires collaboration among the National Statistics Office and relevant ministries and departments. There should be a legal framework to guide the collection of gender-responsive migration data.

**Periodic representative survey on migration and revision of existing surveys:** The government should consider conducting new surveys and revising existing surveys to produce enriched migration data with gender-responsive approaches and mechanisms. The first step can be the incorporation of some key nationally identified priority indicators (such as the SDG targets and indicators) in existing surveys, but eventually a periodic national survey on migration should be initiated not only to track changes in migration patterns but to also assess the effectiveness of various interventions on migration implemented by the government and non-governmental sectors.

**Consistency among concepts and terminology of migration indicators:** Definitions of concepts and terminologies on migration indicators, including sensitive topics such as violence, should be consistent across surveys and all government and non-government agencies. The concepts should be defined following international standards but may need to be adapted to the local context. Terms and concepts should also be defined in such a way that they can be measured with precision.

**Mechanisms for data collection at the local level:** Specific mechanisms and procedures for collecting data at the local level (including ward level) on the mobility of people need to be developed, and they must be gender-sensitive and socially inclusive. Such mechanisms will be instrumental in capturing cross-border migration and migration through informal channels. This will require coordination and cooperation between national, provincial and local government agencies. International organisations can provide technical support in developing such mechanisms.

**Explore the potential of information systems to record additional information:** There are some indicators, such as social and economic characteristics and access to information, that can be included in the applications submitted by migrant workers and which form the basis of information systems such as FEIMS and FEWIMS. The government should explore the potential of these systems to record additional information on migrant workers.

**Use Nepali Port to capture detailed information on returnee migrants:** Nepali Port is an important instrument to collect information on returnee migrant workers. The possibility of using this system to capture information on returnee migrants, such as their destination, reason for return, remigration plans, skills/occupation in destination country, etc. as well as indicators, such as social and economic characteristics of migrant workers and their ability to access to information, among other aspects of their migration, should be explored.

**Resolve issues with data management:** Disaggregated data on the deaths of Nepalis in foreign countries are not maintained at the Department of Consular Services and not readily available. Similarly, data available at DoFE and the FEB on individual and institutional cases in foreign employment, including on fraud and deception, are not disaggregated by sex and neither are other indicators such as the nature of cases, caste/ethnicity, etc. Hence, issues related to management and availability of such data should be prioritised.