



## GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT WORKING PAPER SERIES

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### Migration and the Gender Impacts of COVID-19 on Nepalese Women<sup>1</sup>

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Working Paper 2020/1

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The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives globally. While most attention has been on the various challenges faced by each country, there are also the people ‘stranded’ overseas with little if any support in getting home. The stranded people could be short- or longer-term migrants—tourists, visiting families, students—or they might be migrant workers whose remittances bolster the household and home country’s national GDP. Such disparate groups of migrants are often overlooked in COVID-19 responses. One group in particular is women who are employed in the domestic work sector, who are often the last on repatriation flight lists and returnee policies and programs.

This paper will look at Nepali women migrant workers in Lebanon, and how COVID-19 has made an already precarious working life even more so. It will focus on how women in these situations have been able to exercise their agency in a complex socio-political environment and how this has been disrupted by COVID-19 and the hostile political and social environment at home for these Nepali women in Lebanon. This research is based on relevant literature, contemporary newspaper reports, and key informants interviews with people working on migration issues in Nepal.<sup>2</sup>

#### Background

By June 2020 the lives of domestic workers had been completely thrown into turmoil by COVID-19. In Lebanon, this has been exacerbated by the *kafala* (sponsorship) system where the worker’s in-country sponsor, usually their employer, is responsible for their visa and legal status. The *kafala* system has been heavily criticized by human rights organizations and others as it leads to the exploitation of workers (Ayoub 2019). The ‘This is Lebanon’ support network has been set up to protect the abused, with its main task being to publicly expose abusers and their abuse under the *kafala* system. It is however limited in its reach in COVID-19 related support, but it does republish cases of government neglect under COVID (e.g. Dabbous 2020). There is also a small network of Nepali women in Lebanon supporting each other, however they are also constrained due to their lack of recognition by the Nepali government (Gurung and Sharma 2020). First-time Nepali migrant women are not recognized by the Nepali government, and they thus lack supporting documents that would allow them to be in Lebanon legally beyond the *kafala* sponsorship. These women have arrived in Lebanon via India, crossing the porous India-Nepal border, rather than through the official route via Kathmandu (Sabkota 2013; Gurung and Sharma 2020; Sitoula 2020). By travelling in this

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<sup>1</sup> This publication is part of the ‘Gender-Sensitive Risks and Options Assessment for Decision Making (ROAD) to Support WiF2’ project funded by the Centre of Excellence for Development Impact and Learning, supported by UK aid from the UK Government. The authors are also grateful to Nichole Georgeou and HADRI for the support they have provided for this research; and Claudia Ringler and IFPRI for giving us this opportunity.

<sup>2</sup> We wish to thank the following people for generously giving us their time and insights: Ms Manju Gurung (Chairperson) and Dr Dipendra Sharma (Executive Director) of Pourakhi Nepal; Dr Arjun Kharel is research coordinator at the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM); Ms Sandiya Sitoula from ILO Nepal; and Narayan Adhikari from the Accountability Lab.

manner they become ineligible to receive the Nepali government sponsored pension fund, and other benefits. Domestic workers returning to Lebanon to be re-employed by their previous employer are however recognized by the Nepali government, which sees the risk of their exposure to sexual harassment or assault as being much lower, due their existing experience as a migrant (Kharel 2020). For the Nepali government a reduced exposure to risk is important to maintain *chokoh* (the concept of purity), which is related to honor. However, even this recognition does not help migrant women in obtaining affordable flights home, and nor does it help with those who experience abuse and exploitation, or those who have lost their passport and identification papers due to abusive employers.

The significant contraction in the Lebanese economy caused by COVID-19 associated travel restrictions has led to a massive loss of income to the middle class, and left many employers unable to pay salaries due to the crisis (Dabbous 2020). The 4 August 2020 Beirut port warehouse explosion destroyed large parts of the capital. Damage to infrastructure, coupled with the pandemic-induced recession, has made the situation for migrants intolerable (Jaafari 2020; Yazbeck and Tlozek 2020). By August 2020, many workers were seeking to leave *en masse*, including those that had been in Lebanon for many years (Siddiqui 2020). This combination of events has turned the lives of migrants working in Lebanon into what can only be described as a human catastrophe.

Looking back to the more ‘normal’ times of 2019, another part of this story is how migrant women navigated the *kafala* systems and gained some sense of personal agency in a heavily constrained socio-political context. As Gioli et al. have argued, these women have traversed “the polarized oscillation between structure and agency” (2017: 4). It is this “oscillation”, this complex set of negotiations and re-negotiations between employee and employer, that the current chaos has thrown into turmoil. When times are good there is space for the domestic

workers to exercise their agency through their networks and experience, and they gain leverage with their employers; but when times are bad, this leverage quickly evaporates. With the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant women cannot escape to their home country, and with the recession, their employer cannot pay them, and nor are they able to find alternative employment. In this sense, discussions on abolishing the *kafala* systems are only one part of a broader solution—broader social protection is required both at home in Nepal and in the work destination country. Domestic workers are an important source of domestic labor in both Lebanon and Jordan, and the associated remittances support Nepal’s economy. In Nepal the role of remittances may be grossly underestimated—around half of all remittances may not end up in the national accounts due to the lower transfer costs of informal systems. Such informal systems move many relatively small sums of money, but these pay for the day-to-day family costs back at home. Such transfers may never see a bank account, and they may never be counted (Maher 2018).

As Fernandez notes:

we should move beyond the dominant depictions in media and policy discourses of migrant women as victims of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. Instead... interpret the actions and inactions, the words and silences, of these women as multiple dimensions of their agency, even though such agency may often be heavily constrained by their employment circumstances (2020: 1).

Even with increased agency, for Nepali migrant women who have worked as domestic workers overseas, returning and finding viable jobs is not easy. Domestic workers in Nepal are paid much lower than those overseas, and it is difficult for returned migrant women to find other jobs because many have low literacy levels or are without other vocational skills (Social Science Baha 2018). Some women have saved enough to start or contribute towards family businesses, but for those women who return empty-handed due to unscrupulous and exploitative work

conditions, the prospect of homecoming is not one of a heroine's return, but of shame and disappointment.

### **The Reason(s) for Migration**

From a macro-economic perspective, short-term migration is an important source of national income through the remittances that come into the country. For Nepal, what has been counted as remittance payments amounts to \$7.3b or 25% of GDP (Mandal 2020). For the sending households, remittances are an important source of income for children's education, housing costs, and to repay loans that a migrant has accrued (Sapkota 2013, 2020). These are not however the only motives for migration, as studies have shown that migrant women also migrate to permanently change their lives, and those of their families, by putting them on a new footing with increased assets, education for their children, and new opportunities (Fernandez 2020: 4; Gioli et. al. 2017; Kharel 2020; Sapkota 2020; Social Science Baha 2018). Another reason is to escape a difficult family situation, such as an arranged marriage (Fernandez 2020: 8), or to repay debts incurred by a husband, or another (usually male) family member: "...women's migration is not imagined [for them] as a first choice but as a patch to repair family crises" (Blanchet 2019: 12). Finally, for some, there is a desire for adventure and to see the world (Fernandez 2020: 8; et. al. 2017; Kharel 2020). In this context, labour migration offers opportunities not merely to remit money, but also to experience different lives. This fact may account for the high level of re-migration, where women return to the same country and employment over a period of many years. For Nepal, this is dependent on how migrant women gain local knowledge and language skills, and whether they were able to form friendships and networks during their first migration experience (Gomes 2018, Saguin 2020, Kharel 2020).

### **Agency in Migration**

The issue of what agency women from the Global South have in migration is vexed: the 2000 UN Convention on Transnational Organised

Crime (the Palermo Convention) and its Protocols on human trafficking refer to the fact that 'the consent of a victim of trafficking shall be irrelevant', while trafficking in services forms part of the Convention's application (UNGA 2000, Article 3b). The International Labour Organization's Protocol to the 1930 Forced Labour Convention Article 2.1 on the other hand, specifically refers to giving consent as being a reason for labour not to be regarded as forced (ILO 1930). The issue of consent or 'agency' to undertake labour is never fully free, and it is by its very nature bounded. Ahearn (2001: 112). qualifies agency as "...the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act", and in practice in service industries the workers make a series of trade-offs that sit along a continuum which ranges from exploitation to decent employment conditions.

At one level—a level that applies to around one-quarter of domestic workers—migrant women are heavily restricted in their movement, and are usually not allowed out of the house unaccompanied or to have days off (Frantz 2014). This is particularly the case with first-time migrants from Nepal (Gurung and Sharma 2020; Kharel 2020), who find their movements heavily restricted (as the employer is typically not trusting of a new employee), unless they are return migrants. At the other end of the continuum, there are domestic workers who not only have their days off but, with the employer's acquiescence, have a second job cleaning or working in a shop for a few hours in the middle of the day. There is also another group who freelance and deliberately break their employment contracts to undertake a range of domestic duties for a number of different employers. While this is illegal, it is increasingly more common, and employers and authorities may turn a blind eye to it in return for a 'commission' (Fernandez 2020; Blanchet 2019; Kharel 2020). This latter practice is more likely among returning migrants from Nepal who have official permission.

Women have other opportunities through their networks if they are able to go out, and through

their ubiquitous mobile phones if they are allowed to use them, however as noted above first time Nepali migrants have fewer opportunities. The women meet with members of their networks in cafes or other social settings to find out about new work opportunities, or to be tipped off about police raids. All these ways demonstrate how women exercise agency in establishing their lives in a new country, and then increase their chances of being able to return for future assignments (Fernandez 2020; Blanchet 2019). For Nepali housemaids in Lebanon, the aim is surviving the first migration and being able to return. After this they not only have contacts, some language, and local experience, but also official support from Nepal with their insurance and pension fund covered, which offers increased protection. Nepalese migrants to Jordan also experience poor living conditions, but are better protected during their first assignment, and have fewer complaints due to the migration agreement between Jordan and Nepal (Sitoula 2020).

### **Enter COVID-19**

When the COVID-19 pandemic locked down the world in the first quarter of 2020, it had a devastating impact on the domestic service sector. This disruption was experienced in a number of dimensions: the loss of employment as employers themselves lost income; the loss of networks; not being able to return; being vilified in the host country; and, for those able to return, being vilified once arrived in the home country. These have had, and continue to have, a particular impact on Nepali women migrants, some of whom have managed to return, however others remain stranded.

#### *The loss of employment and support networks*

The loss of employment for a housemaid can also mean a loss of accommodation and the real possibility of being homeless. For example, in Lebanon, domestic workers are being

abandoned by their employers who literally dump the women and girls on the street. Some Ethiopian women and girls (Ethiopians are the most numerous domestic workers in Lebanon) have resorted to sleeping outside their embassy in Beirut (Yazbeck and Tlozek 2020). Due to poverty and travel restrictions, these women are trapped in Lebanon. The loss of employment is not only for the individual workers concerned, but also for their families, who depend on remittances for their own livelihoods, and face impoverishment in their home communities.

The lockdown and the 4 August port explosion in Beirut have disrupted the networks the majority of domestic workers in Lebanon and Jordan had in place. They are no longer able to go to the market, to meet their support networks to share information, to 'gossip', or to feel their own circumstances were not in some way unique, or their 'own fault', all of which were very important for emotional and mental health wellbeing. For domestic workers who have a precarious relationship with their home family (e.g. some women migrate to leave an unhappy or abusive family life), friendship and support from other workers are vital. With their networks cut off, migrant workers are in vital need of support and resources as they navigate through the pandemic. Nepalese migrants tend to be 'hidden' due to their lower numbers, the smaller networks they have in place, and for those who arrived through India, their lack of official recognition (Sitoula 2020; Kharel 2020).

#### *Not being able to return home*

Pressured to take action about the human rights abuses faced by migrant workers, in 2017 the Government of Nepal imposed a ban on labour migration by women below the age of 24 to Gulf states. Ostensibly, this ban was to protect women, but it represents a very patriarchal practice of protecting a women's *chokho* (purity) (Kharel 2016: 73).<sup>3</sup> While this legislation was created on the grounds of protecting Nepalese

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<sup>3</sup> The bans on travel started following the murder by an employer of a Nepal maid in Kuwait in 2009, and continued on and off over the following ten years.

citizens from exploitation, it did not deter women from poor households who were determined to migrate overseas. The ban has effectively placed women into even greater risks and vulnerabilities, as women now go through unofficial channels to arrange travel to India and then make their way to the destination country (Sitoula 2020). The ban also makes it very hard for them to return, as they lacked the necessary paperwork to be an 'official migrant', and the host government does not provide support for their return. These travel bans have been supported by all political parties following a parliamentary committee inquiry that visited a number of middle east countries (Dahal 2017). As a result, prospective migrant women workers have to cross into India, often surrendering their passport to the agent, and later to their employer, and because the migration is illegal, migrant women workers find themselves in an exploitative situation. As a result of the travel bans, the women are less able to seek assistance from the Nepalese government at home, or from their embassies and missions abroad. Meanwhile, a Nepali housemaid can owe as much as \$US20,000 to the agents for the "cost" of travel, accommodation, and being placed with an employer (Kharel 2020).

While the Government of Nepal is currently exploring ways of supporting migrants who have returned home with grants to start off small businesses, female domestic workers who went via India are excluded as they have not contributed to the official pension fund or insurance (Gurung and Sharma 2020). The concern is more about the significant number of Nepalese women who are trapped overseas, with no support, and also the fate of those who return home with no assets or money, especially if they became pregnant whilst overseas (Gurung and Sharma, 2020). Under Clause 5.2 of the Nepal Citizenship Act 2006, if the child's father is

non-Nepalese, then the child must acquire citizenship through the naturalization process which is a lengthy and bureaucratic process.<sup>4</sup> There is still much stigma associated with pregnant migrant women workers, and while the local and national governments have a strong role to play in supporting their return and being well-treated back home by their family, there is no evidence of having systems in place to do so. If a woman can return with assets and gifts then she is accepted, but if not—which is often the case in a COVID-19 situation where the quarantine areas on the border with India are crowded and inhumane (Shrestha 2020)—when she returns she can be badly received by her family, and face further stigma. Some women have sought refuge in women's shelters, such as the one set up by Pourakhi, a Nepalese NGO that provides support for migrant women (Gurung and Sharma 2020).

Regional differences also play a part in how migrant women workers are treated. Nepalese women from the 'hills' are generally poorer, less educated, and more vulnerable when away from their more liberal communities. Women from the Terai or plains (lowlands) often go via India simply because it is easier than travelling through Kathmandu, but on return, if they do not bring assets and 'gifts' due to COVID-related hardships, they may suffer stigma and from their more conservative family and communities.

## Conclusion

Migrant women workers from Nepal face difficult challenges in destination countries as well as upon return. Historically, remittances have contributed a significant bulk of Nepal's GDP. Policies and legislation have however been gender-blind to the realities faced by migrant women workers, as well as the economic and social contributions they make. The global pandemic and resulting lockdown, border

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<sup>4</sup> Under Clause 5 Acquisition of Citizenship by Naturalization of the Nepal Citizenship Act 2006, Clause 5.2 states:

(2) A child born to a Nepali female citizen from marriage with a foreign citizen in Nepal and having

permanent domicile in Nepal may be granted naturalized citizenship as prescribed, provided the child has not acquired the citizenship of the foreign country on the basis of the citizenship of his/her father.

closures, and economic recessions have a detrimental impact on the migration and remittance economy, while gender-blind repatriation policies have meant Nepalese women are trapped overseas, or face stigma upon return. Although civil society organizations have tried to fill this gap through support and services, there is an urgent need for national, provincial and district level governments to negotiate both repatriation and a comprehensive support package (financial, health, welfare) to ensure Nepal's migrant women can return in safety, and that their contributions are recognized.

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**To cite:** Kilby, P. & Wu, J. 2020. 'Migration and the Gender Impacts of COVID-19 on Nepalese Women', *Global Development Working Paper Series*. 2020/1. HADRI, Western Sydney University, Australia. <https://doi.org/10.26183/59d6-7s16>

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