

The Impact of COVID-19 on Nepali Women With a special focus on Women Migrant Workers

Surabhi Singh

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect all segments of the Nepali population, even after a year and a half since the first outbreak. A crisis like this heightens the vulnerabilities of certain groups that are systematically disadvantaged and caught in the intersection of poverty, marginalization, and inequality. Around the world, and in Nepal, women and girls are particularly facing disparate risks and implications of the Pandemic. Since the start of the Pandemic, Nepal has witnessed a surge in gender-based violence cases, women have borne the brunt of job cuts in the informal economy and there is increased unpaid care and domestic work for women and girls. This affects two of the most vital drivers of gender equality and empowerment - education and employment. Women migrant workers are caught at the intersection of two of the hardest hit population groups by the coronavirus crisis in Nepal – women and migrant workers. They face gender-specific restrictions in migration policies and are more prone to abuse and sexual and economic exploitation in times of strict movement restrictions across borders. As a consequence, women often turn to illegal ways to get to destination countries. This leaves them undocumented, vulnerable to exploitation, and beyond access to legal redress. In the context of the Pandemic, being an undocumented migrant worker has meant the lack of access to government safety nets such as evacuation or rescue, and increased vulnerabilities in an already risky environment.

Keywords: Woman migrant workers, Nepal, COVID-19, education, employment

Author Profile

Surabhi Singh is an international development professional with a Master's in Development Practice. Singh's perspectives on socio-economic and political issues draw from her legal background and work in the development sector. She focuses on research and impact evaluation related to development and social justice, especially gender, education, and the environment.

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Introduction

COVID-19 outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and by January 2020, Nepal had confirmed its first case making Nepal the first country in South Asia to record a positive case.

The pandemic has laid bare the profound insecurities and inequalities around the world (Razavi 2020). This global crisis has brought immeasurable human suffering, loss of life, and enormous economic and social repercussions to societies, especially in countries like Nepal where governments do not have proper health and social protection systems or the financial capacity to effectively mitigate the impact of such a crisis. As a lower-middle-income country, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lives and livelihoods, the economy, and social and political stability of Nepal.

COVID-19 was and continues to be, a wake-up call to all of humankind. It has revealed the impact of human activities on planetary health and the state of natural systems (Pachauri et al. 2021) and exposed the flaws in our ways of knowing and doing. COVID-19 divulged how we are unprepared as countries to respond to health emergencies and unmasked the lack of health infrastructure and disease surveillance systems, and the weaknesses in global supply chains.

In general, compared to the rest of the world, low-income countries are more susceptible to disproportionately experience the implications of aggregate shocks of any sort, whether it is conflicts, epidemics, or climate change (Bandiera et al. 2018). Although the driving factor for a worldwide shutdown was a public health crisis, the ripple effect of the pandemic has been at all levels in Nepal. A global pandemic of this scale exposes the weakest links and fragile sectors that are the most at risk. This time, the economic sector has borne the brunt of the pandemic. The rapid spread of the pandemic has led to economic disruptions, labor market shocks, and a complete transformation of the world of work (ILO 2021). This has meant a reduction in employment opportunities, dire conditions for daily-wage workers and families dependent on such work, and aggravation of existing inequalities in the labor market.

Differently situated social groups and populations across diverse geo-political contexts have experienced COVID-19 differently (Bowleg 2020). One of the most concerning, yet less discussed consequences of the pandemic is the widening of pre-existing gender gaps in social and economic outcomes in low and middle-income countries across the world (Levine 2021). Structural inequities skew the implications of a global pandemic to disfavor populations that are already in the most vulnerable conditions.

COVID-19 and Nepal

During the initial stages of the pandemic, the Government of Nepal (GoN) had no other alternative but to enforce strict and partial lockdowns to contain the spread of the virus, which was made effective from 24 March to mid-September 2020. The lack of economic activity during the lockdown effectively stifled the Nepalese economy as consumers spent only on basic necessities and medical expenses. Moreover, disruptions in supply chains wreaked havoc on the economy and it was projected that the Pandemic will likely push many vulnerable households into absolute poverty. Following the surge in delta variant cases in 2021, the GoN returned to smart lockdown from 29 April 2021, which was repeatedly extended up until the beginning of September 2021. The crisis, along with unplanned lockdowns by the government, has triggered a socio-economic fallout that is impacting the most vulnerable communities in Nepal the hardest, forcing hundreds out of work and into hunger, disrupting vital supply chains, and pushing food prices upward (Budhathoki 2021). At the precipice of the pandemic, GoN reported that three out of ten households lost their income and about 58 percent of the households did not have food stocks for more than one month (Singh 2021). Food insecurity and starvation have thus become as concerning as the virus itself.

As of September 2022, Nepal was inching closer to a million confirmed COVID-19 cases with a death toll of about 12,000. The latest statistics show that an estimated 70 percent of the total population has been administered two doses of the vaccine (Bhatia 2022). The pandemic came in as a public health crisis but very quickly morphed the socio-economic and political landscape of Nepal. The economy suffered the devastating effects of this global health crisis as repercussions surpassed the health and safety domains. The pandemic distorted the supply chains of goods and services, disrupted domestic demands, and slowed down overall economic growth affecting the incomes and livelihoods of millions. It hit specific sectors particularly hard. These are mostly sectors that employ daily-wage workers. Around 3.7 million workers earn their livelihoods from the sectors deemed most at risk. These sectors are projected to experience a significant (medium to high) reduction in economic outputs as a result of COVID-19.

It is estimated that about 1.6 to 2 million jobs are likely to be disrupted in Nepal, either with complete job loss or reduced working hours and wages (ILO 2020). ILO's assessment based on the Nepal Labor Force Survey data 2017/18 states that, in total, 631,000 female jobs (24.3 percent of the 2018 female workforce) are estimated as at risk in the higher impact scenario, compared to 1.3 million jobs for men (also 30.3 percent of the 2018 male workforce). Beyond economic and labor market shocks, the crisis has had devastating social implications. This has meant uneven impacts on the poor, marginalized populations due to their age, sex, ethnicity, employment, legal status, well-being, occupation, or a combination of these attributes.

A large portion of Nepal's working-age population is dependent on foreign employment for income. The pandemic disrupted the livelihoods of nearly 3.5 million Nepalese working and living abroad. Remittances contribute to about 26 percent of the national GDP and help keep the economy afloat. Initially, it was expected that Nepal would witness a steep decline in remittance inflows following the pandemic, which, in turn, would affect the country's imports, balance of payments, foreign exchange reserves, consumption, deposits, loans, and interest rates. The remittance contribution was expected to decline by 14 percent in 2020 considering pandemic-related travel restrictions on labor migration flows (ILO 2021) but Nepal reported better results than speculated for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2020/2021. During the early stages of the pandemic, Nepal witnessed a decline in foreign trade, tourism, and government expenditures, and a suspension of remittance inflows. For instance, the inflows decreased from NPR 79.3 billion in March 2020 to NPR 3.45 billion in April 2020 (Pokhrel 2021). However, Nepali migrant workers sent home a total of NPR 961.05 billion in the last fiscal year, between July 2020 and July 2021, a record-high money transfer to Nepal in more than two decades (Prasain 2021).

Some explanations for this could be increased use of formal channels, switch to cash instead of in-kind (like gadgets and gold) remittances, less impact on migrant stocks who did not return during the pandemic, and changes in consumption and expenditure patterns where migrant workers abroad were spending less in destination countries and sending more money home. In addition, the Nepali rupee's devaluation prompted many people living abroad to send additional money through remittances to provide support for their families during the pandemic (Pokhrel 2021). Although there was a larger inflow of remittance, a significant number of these migrant households were either already facing or were likely to face a rise in debts as they struggled to manage food and basic needs during the pandemic aftershock inflation in Nepal. The pandemic was projected to likely have a long-term impact on the remittances forecast in the following years, putting immense pressure on migrant workers abroad.

Some of the early assessments indicate that nearly 500,000 to 600,000 Nepali migrant workers intended to return home (Mandal 2020), followed by more recent Foreign Employment Promotion Board's estimates of at least 127,000 migrant workers in need of immediate repatriation from the seven major destination countries (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Malaysia) and 407,000 expected returnees from 37 different countries. The national Crisis Management Centre estimated that, including those in India, there are 1.3 million Nepalese who want to return home (ILO Rapid assessment).

Some migrant workers were affected because they were stranded in their countries of work, unable to travel back home whereas, a few others were unable to leave Nepal to return to their country of employment due to international travel bans and safety concerns. In both cases, the plight of migrant workers meant no income and a struggle to meet basic needs. The labor market situation in the country was already tense due to the pandemic. The situation

was projected to worsen as thousands of international migrant workers permanently returned or planned to return and expected the government to reintegrate them into the labor force as they sought livelihood opportunities in Nepal.

As part of its mitigation efforts, the GoN increased spending on the health sector, primarily to set up temporary quarantine centers and hospitals, procure medical equipment and additional medical supplies, and provide additional insurance coverage for medical personnel. The GoN also announced the provision of food rations, partial wage compensation to formal sector employees who lost their jobs, and subsidization of utility bills to ease the plight of the economically deprived. Those in the informal sector who were unemployed because of the pandemic were promised opportunities to work on public-works projects at subsistence wages while those who chose not to participate were to receive one-fourth of the daily wage as compensation. However, these opportunities were not rolled-out (IMF 2021). The government was barely able to provide some breathing space for people and enterprises in dire situations (ADB 2022). The World Bank projected that Nepal's growth rate in the fiscal years 2021 and 2022 will range from 1.4-2.9 and 2.7-3.6 percent respectively, in contrast to the President's projection that these years would see double-digit growth (Shrestha 2020). The decline in these projections can be attributed to the slow recovery even as poor households struggle to stay afloat in such an economy.

COVID-19 and Women

Nepal is rife with issues of social injustice and inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened these. The implications of COVID-19 have not been equally borne and have clearly affected historically disadvantaged populations like women and girls, the most. Many of the high-risk and most stressful frontline jobs, deemed essential in the pandemic context, offer low pay and are occupied by people at the most marginalized intersections: ethnic and indigenous minorities, women and girls, Dalits, and migrants (Bowleg 2020). Policies and mitigation efforts of the GoN reveal structural inequality that has systematically favored the "privileged" class, with a disproportionate risk and impact on those at the intersection of racial/ethnic minority status and class. Other factors such as sexual orientation, disability, age, and geographical location have also compounded the impacts faced by people due to COVID-19.

"In times of crisis, when resources are strained and institutional capacity is limited, women and girls face disproportionate impacts with far-reaching consequences that are only further amplified in contexts of fragility, conflict, and emergencies" (UN Women 2020). While the Constitution of Nepal safeguards gender equality as a fundamental right, women in Nepal like women across the world, generally earn less, save less, and disproportionately hold more insecure jobs in the informal economy. This places them in positions with less access to social protections. Consequently, women are less able to absorb the economic shocks as compared to men. Women and girls are amongst the worst affected populations facing the

gravest socio-economic implications of the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has had a devastating effect on gender equality and could set women back decades (UN Women, 2020).

COVID-19 is having an uneven impact on Nepali women's economic security as women are far less resilient against shocks than men. The general lack of gender-disaggregated data, however, leaves out this important insight when planning mitigation measures and relief responses. Often discourses around the Nepali labor market and the implications of COVID-19 in the informal sector fail to highlight the disproportionate effects that women workers face due to their special needs.

In addition to the risk of contracting the coronavirus, women and girls faced unique health challenges. During the pandemic, when most resources were reallocated to COVID-19 patients, women and girls had limited access to maternal, and sexual and reproductive healthcare. Even without a crisis, women and girls face health and safety challenges trying to access clean water, private toilets, and resources required to maintain feminine hygiene. With COVID-19, the risks they faced were significantly higher as access to contraceptives, sanitary napkins, or even toilets, were difficult during lockdowns. Moreover, due to travel restrictions and the general fear of going to hospitals amid COVID-19 in Nepal, the national lockdown halved health facility births and increased stillbirths and newborn deaths (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2020). This was a major blow to the progress Nepal had made in reducing maternal mortality and neonatal care.

Women's role as caregivers at home and their overrepresentation in the "pink collar" industry also made them more vulnerable to infection (Menendez et al. 2015). Many women in rural households did not have direct access to television, mobile/smartphones, internet facility, or literacy to access basic COVID-19-related information. This deprived them of general awareness about protective measures for their safety and wellbeing. They also had restricted mobility due to their roles in the household and were also unable to buy sanitation and hygiene products such as face masks, gloves, sanitizers, and soaps, which are essential in the current pandemic. Moreover, food insecurity, fear of contracting coronavirus, lack of alternate livelihood options, pressure to handle additional household chores, including care of children, pressure to earn as daily wage workers, and the general uncertainty of the future were some challenges that took a psychological toll on low-income household women.

Alongside the public health pandemic caused by COVID-19, women are also victims of a parallel pandemic that the United Nations has termed a "shadow pandemic". This is a term used to signify the surge in violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 related lockdowns; a gendered consequence of unplanned disease control measures (Vahedi 2021). Economic and social stresses combined with movement restrictions and cramped homes drove a surge in gender-based violence and sexual exploitation (UN Women 2020). Gender-based violence was already widespread in Nepal before the crisis began. With limited mobility because of the lockdowns and social distancing measures, many women and girls victims of gender-based violence were trapped at home with their abusers, increasing the risk

of other forms of violence. The pandemic compounded the preexisting vulnerabilities of women and girls.

The Women's Rehabilitation Center in Nepal reported 336 cases of GBV during the first-wave lockdown between 24 March and 29 May 2020, out of which, 48 were rape cases, 10 were attempts to rape, and 12 were sexual abuse. According to Nepal Police, incidence of other crimes decreased during the lockdown except for rape and suicide cases, and registered rape cases continue to rise. Similarly, a study published in the *Kathmandu Post* established: "Every ten minutes, a woman somewhere in Nepal dials 1145, the helpline operated by the National Women Commission, seeking assistance. Most of these calls are made by survivors of domestic violence who are either looking to report incidents of abuse or calling to inquire about the support services offered by the group" (K.C. 2020). Amidst rising coronavirus cases, these issues gathered less attention from an already overloaded healthcare system and a disrupted justice system that struggles to respond in a timely manner.

Even without a pandemic, women fare worse relative to men in all aspects of their socio-economic status. This only worsens for women who fall on the cusp of other strata subjected to marginalization. These strata include landless women, single women, women working in the adult entertainment sector, women from Dalit and Madhesi communities, gender and sexual minorities, differently-abled women, adolescent girls, displaced women, sex workers, women migrant workers, trans-women, all socially stigmatized, marginalized statuses or occupations not deemed "respectable" for women.

COVID-19, Women, Employment

The unparalleled socio-economic crisis has brought to light the fact that Nepali people employed in the informal sector in urban areas are more vulnerable to sharp economic slumps (Sharma 2020) in comparison to citizens in rural areas who can rely on farming for sustenance. Approximately 5.7 million or 80.8 percent of workers in Nepal have informal jobs (ILO 2020). Amongst those working in the informal sector, the service industry and care sector women are at a higher risk of falling into extreme poverty because they are overrepresented in these sectors (OHCHR, 2021). The informal sector in Nepal is rife with women working with no employment or work contracts, low wages, and excessively long hours. Without proper contracts, they are excluded from social and labor protection and face serious decent work deficits. If they stop working due to an economic downturn, sickness, or quarantine, they have no state-funded safety net. Female jobs are riskier than those held by their male counterparts simply because females hold more jobs in sectors that are expected to face the highest degree of disruption due to the COVID-19 crisis (construction, trade, and manufacturing being the top three). According to estimates, 4.5 percent of women's employment is at risk in the pandemic globally, compared with 3.8 percent of men's employment, just given the industries that men and women participate in (Madgavkar 2021).

In countries like Nepal, as for women in all low-and-middle-income countries, the gendered nature of work deems women responsible for household chores and providing care for

children (Levine 2021). In South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, the share of women in unpaid work is as high as 80–90% (Madgavkar 2021). For many families in both rural and urban settings, the mitigation efforts for the COVID-19 outbreak have meant members staying home to follow social distancing, which has increased the unpaid care and domestic workload for women at home, more so for working mothers. With mobility restrictions during the complete and partial lockdowns enforced by the government, women bore the brunt of extra childcare and domestic work. A study conducted by the GoN assessing the gendered impacts of the pandemic found a 337 percent rise in the number of women not involved in any paid work. Eighty-three percent of the 465 respondents across 12 districts reported losing their jobs and income during the pandemic (Rayamajhi 2021). School closure and responsibilities towards additional housework constrain the number of hours women could have spent doing compensated work and thus were seen losing jobs in greater numbers than men.

Similarly, non-pecuniary factors such as attitudes can reflect in decisions taken within families or at organizational levels, about who gets to keep their jobs. Traditional societal mindsets about the role of women often dictate the fate of many women and girls. Moreover, such age-old mindsets can also shape how women experience the socio-economic consequences of a crisis, relative to men. According to the global World Values Survey, “more than half the respondents in many countries in South Asia and MENA agreed that men have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce. About one in six respondents in developed countries said the same” (Madgavkar 2021). In such a socio-cultural climate, the increased workload at home forces women to either quit their jobs or permanently drop out of the labor force.

Another hard-hit informal sector is home-based workers. There are approximately 1.4 million home-based workers in Nepal – nearly all women – producing goods for export. The pandemic resulted in a global supply blockage, taking away the only source of livelihood for these women. Similarly, during the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent lockdown, many domestic workers, primarily women and girls, lost their jobs or experienced wage cuts. Many that lost their jobs were unable to find new employment due to the lockdown while some waited for their employers to call them back once it was safe. These are women that rely on day-to-day earnings to manage household expenses and food. Without any source of income, an alternative source of livelihood, savings, or collaterals, their vulnerability was amplified because of the pandemic as they had to rely on social security and relief provisions from the government or borrow money from their social networks to meet their basic needs (Sitoula et al. 2020).

COVID-19, Women, and Education

To control the rapid outbreak of the coronavirus, the government issued directives for the closure of all educational institutions on March 24, 2020. While schools, both private and public, started conducting classes online, many children could not participate due to a lack of essentials for such classes such as internet, laptop, mobile phones, or a proper learning space

at home. This not only exacerbated the current gender gaps in access to education but made it particularly difficult for girls in rural areas who had to share the added domestic workload with their mothers.

A study on the impact of school closures as a result of the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone found younger girls stayed out of school more (Bandiera et al. 2018). They also found that girls found it harder to re-enroll after schools re-opened and instead took up work. This is a scenario common in low to middle-income countries and is likely the scenario that could play out for girls in rural areas of Nepal after the pandemic. Although, statistics on children coming back to school after the pandemic are not yet out, the increased domestic load at home will likely decrease the participation of girls in online classes and increase the rate at which girls drop out in rural areas. The COVID-19 crisis is likely to have negative implications for the gains in girls' education in Nepal.

COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers

Nepal is on the list of countries that receive the highest remittances in proportion to its GDP. According to the economic survey of 2019/20, on average, remittance inflow over the last 10 years has been a staggering 25 percent of the GDP (Government of Nepal 2020). According to the Department of Foreign Employment in Nepal, as of mid-March of the fiscal year 2019/20, the number of labor permit holders for foreign employment is about 5 million whereas the number of workers that left for foreign employment is around 4.8 million. In addition, around 58,000 Nepalese have gone to South Korea from 2008 to 2018 as a part of the Employment Permit Scheme. Of the migrant workers, 4.5 million are men and just 0.2 million are women. The distribution for foreign employment labor is, that 1.5 percent are skilled, 24.0 percent are semi-skilled, and 74.5 percent are unskilled. This number does not include the migrant workers that have migrated to India or left through irregular channels. There is no official record of the number of Nepali migrant workers residing in India, however, the most recent Nepal-Living Standard Survey estimates that there are an estimated 587,646 Nepali migrants in India, most of whom are engaged in the service sector (ILO 2021).

In general, the top destination countries for Nepali migrant workers are Qatar, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait. But for Nepali women migrant workers, top destination countries are slightly different as they prefer countries like Bahrain, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Malaysia. In recent years, countries like Cyprus, Romania, Maldives, Malta, Jordan, and Turkey seem to have become employment destinations for Nepali youth. In Nepal, transnational migration for work is typically predominant amongst the male population. Over the last decade, however, female migrant workers account for a little over five percent of the total migrants. Female workers normally occupy the domestic worker's domain.

The global COVID-19 crisis led to upheavals in urban market economies and witnessed sharp declines in employment, including in major migrant-receiving countries. Transnational

migrant workers fall under the most vulnerable population bearing such economic shocks as they are excluded from social and wage protection mechanisms. It is estimated that some 20 percent of the Nepalese abroad are at risk of being unemployed (Baniya et al. 2020). As an implication of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nepali migrant workers faced numerous obstacles to earning a living, such as reduced work hours, non-payments or partial payments of wages and benefits, loss of jobs, being forced to go on unpaid leave, and being told to return home before the end of their contract period. They had limited or no access to basic rights such as health care and proper food. Migrant workers in destination countries are usually dependent on their employers for housing. It is a known fact that these housing provisions and working spaces are often substandard and overcrowded, making workers more vulnerable to infection. For some countries, smaller factories continued to operate during the pandemic where workers were reportedly made to work without adequate protective measures (WOREC 2020).

The Government of Nepal officially announced a nationwide lockdown in late March 2020. However, destination countries for Nepali migrants like Dubai, Qatar, and Kuwait had already begun their nationwide lockdown as early as January 2020. This led to the deportation of migrant workers before the international travel bans were enforced. Many were stranded in pre-deportation detention centers, which were overcrowded and unhygienic. The Nepalese government did not have any plans in place to evacuate these migrant workers which meant that Nepali migrant workers in these countries were out of jobs, at high health risks in their destination countries, and stranded without access to return to their homeland. It was only around mid-May 2020 that the Government of Nepal made announcements related to evacuation or facilitating safe passage for migrant workers willing to return home.

The study report on “Rights Migrant Workers in the Clutches of COVID-19 Pandemic” released by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) acknowledged that some of the problems and challenges being faced by female migrant workers in the cycle of labor migration are of special nature, which their male counterparts don't experience. Although the Foreign Employment Policy and Act of Nepal states that women pursuing foreign employment shall not be discriminated against on any ground, women migrant workers face gender-specific restrictions in migration policies and are more prone to abuse and sexual and economic exploitation with stricter movement measures, both within nations and across borders. They are subjected to workplace discrimination primarily in the form of unequal pay and harassment. Personal, social, financial, and political aspects of women migrant workers have always been subjected to public scrutiny in Nepali society which is deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms and values (WOREC 2020). This issue has exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis.

There was strong social antagonism against women migrant workers during the first wave of COVID-19. The women migrant workers returning home were traumatized by the negative media and social media attention they received, which was based on falsified information. Alongside the stigma on migrant workers as transmitters of COVID-19, insensitive videos

and unethical news reporting portrayed unmarried young women migrant workers returnees as being promiscuous in their countries of employment (WOREC 2020) because 94 women reportedly arrived pregnant. Only women migrant workers were subjected to such defamation and scrutiny. What if these returnee women were pregnant due to sexual violence or consensual sex abroad? The NHRC in its report stated that “children born from rape or consensual sex are likely to be rendered stateless as they will be deemed disqualified to acquire Nepali citizenship”. Regardless of whether they were pregnancies through or out of wedlock, the issue of the disparate treatment amongst the male and female migrant workers remains unaddressed. Such gross misconduct led to psychological as well as physical harassment of these innocent women to the extent that some reported violence against them from their family members (WOREC 2020). Women migrant workers have no support systems and COVID-19 made it worse. Voices of these ill-treated pregnant women did not garner much attention and the issue was shelved as something the government would investigate (Sen 2020).

Since the 1990s, the Government of Nepal has intermittently placed travel restrictions on returnee women migrant workers. The GoN still has travel restriction policies specifically directed at women (travel ban on certain countries like Israel, Dubai, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon). The reasons cited for these restrictions are the safety and security of women migrant workers, and if married, their children’s psychosocial welfare (WOREC 2020). The age bar and guardian consent requirements have increased the reliance on illegal channels for migration, further raising the risk of trafficking (*The Himalayan Times* 2020). The domestic work domain, particularly opted by women migrant workers, is also historically infamous for long working hours, physical abuse, and sexual exploitation, increasing the vulnerability of women in an unknown country. The “shadow pandemic” is prevalent for women migrant workers as well. Violence against women migrants has increased amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As employers and their family members stay home all the time due to the lockdown, women migrant workers who primarily work as domestic helpers have been forced to work extra hours without proper time for rest (*The Himalayan Times* 2020). The NHRC has stated that in some cases, the women workers have been exposed to violence and physical and mental torture.

The GoN requires that Nepalese going abroad for foreign employment obtain labor permits from the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security. The migrant workers contribute to a Foreign Employment Fund which is used to provide rescue, evacuation of migrant workers, and bring back bodies of documented migrant workers in the event of their death. Seasonal migrant workers and domestic workers who go to India for employment are often undocumented. Similarly, disparate policies that make it difficult for women workers to leave the country for destination countries in the Gulf often lead to women turning to illegal ways to get there. Recruitment agents often bypass policies and restrictions by flying them to these countries via third-country passage, mainly India. This leaves them not only undocumented and beyond legal access to redress (WOREC 2020) but also drastically increases their vulnerability to being trafficked. Moreover, if such women migrant workers

are injured or die during their illegal stay in their destination country, their family members are not entitled to any kind of financial assistance from the government (*The Himalayan Times* 2020). In the context of the pandemic, being an undocumented migrant worker has meant a lack of access to government safety nets such as evacuation or rescue.

Due to their undocumented status, the identification and evacuation of undocumented women migrant workers were very strenuous. Different organizations like Aaprabasi Mahila Kamdar Samuha (AMKAS)—an organization for, by and of returnee women migrants—and Women for Human Rights (WHR) liaised with Nepalese diplomatic envoys in the destination countries to locate and bring undocumented women migrant workers back to Nepal. Gender disaggregated data to show how many migrant workers were evacuated was not made available by the GoN till July 2022.

Moreover, during the COVID-19 crisis, there have been reports that Nepalese have been arrested and detained for unknowingly violating lockdown measures in their country of employment. According to estimates, there were more than 50,000 Nepalese, who received their labor permits and visas but got stuck in Nepal. This resulted in them having to pay huge sums to recruitment agencies and their agents even as the yield from their “investment” came to a naught (Baniya et al. 2020). Although the government and the respective diplomatic missions of Nepal were engaged in managing relief and working to facilitate the repatriation of migrant workers, there was little action in trying to figure out the legal options these migrant workers have to claim compensation or some kind of reparations for jobs lost. With the majority of women migrant workers being uneducated and falling under the unskilled category, their ability to access such redress is minimal. This places them in a more disadvantaged situation than their male counterparts.

Nepalese migrant workers are not eligible for the social protection that the destination countries provide for their citizens. This placed them in an extremely vulnerable position as they had to rely on their employer’s goodwill for any support during the lockdowns, especially when companies were not operational. It was worse for women especially those employed as domestic workers. The national COVID-19 Crisis Management Centre estimated that, including those in India, there are 1.3 million Nepalese migrant workers who want to return home. However, the GoN doesn’t have any system in place to bring these workers back and integrate them into the economy, which is already stretched.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As the OHCHR observed, the majority of socioeconomic COVID-19 responses adopted by States were surprisingly gender-blind, often failing to address the specific needs of women (OHCHR 2021). One of the biggest reasons for this was the underrepresentation of women at decision-making levels. “Globally, women make up 70 percent of the health workforce, especially as nurses, midwives, and community health workers, and account for the majority of service staff in health facilities as cleaners, launderers, and caterers. Despite these

numbers, women are often not reflected in national or global decision-making on the response to COVID-19” (UN Women, 2020).

A “one-size-fits-all” recovery approach will only exacerbate the inequalities that are already entrenched at the core of state functioning. The only way Nepal can retrench the devastating socio-economic effects of the pandemic is if it ensures that the recovery measures are equitable. One of the ways to achieve this is gender-responsive financing. Nepal government needs to work on improving economic inclusion for women through equal pay, flexible work options, equal distribution of care work, better job protection and employment opportunities in the formal sector, and expansion of social protection for workers in the informal sector. The government should also invest more into the care economy.

The country’s overreliance on social distancing and working from home to mitigate the spread of the virus caused domestic work overload and childcare burdens. This may cause more women to leave the labor market permanently. Along with the gendered nature of work, women often have to deal with stereotypes and less progressive attitudes towards certain areas of work (Jayachandran 2015), which includes foreign migration. Instead of implementing gender-discriminatory travel policies in the name of protection, the GoN needs to invest in building structures and systems that promote gender equality. We need policy action from the government to address the compounding existing inequalities (Levine 2021) and protect the vulnerable women migrant workers. The short-term redress could be to regulate potential exploitation through diplomatic missions who will bear the responsibility of ensuring that women are treated fairly and that their wages and benefits are paid in the recipient countries. However, the GoN also needs to start planning for the future when women will not be forced to find foreign employment due to their poor economic conditions. One way to reduce the number of women migrating abroad for labor could be to invest in skill development (both vocational and technical) for women that they can leverage for income in their own country. Women migrant workers may not possess skills that are readily transferable to the Nepali context, hence, they should be provided with opportunities for training, upskilling existing knowledge and orientation for a different career path. This can also help in creating employment opportunities for women in sectors that have underrepresentation of women.

The secure and dignified return of women migrant workers and their reintegration should be given priority by the Nepalese Government. Although the government’s action plan mentioned the early repatriation of women migrants, including those who are pregnant or have children, this was not seen in practice. The repatriation of women migrant workers and their reintegration into society needs careful consideration and attention as this is not just an economic issue but one that has a social and familial dimension as well. The women migrant workers returnees from Kuwait, during COVID-19, were reported to have been sent to their respective homes by the government without any specific rehabilitation and reintegration plans (WOREC 2020).

The Foreign Employment Board of Nepal plans to introduce guidelines focused on COVID-19 and its impact on migrant workers and their families. The planned survey, “The Socio-economic Impact of COVID-19 on Returnee Migrant Women Workers in Nepal” needs to have a gender lens because the realities of women migrant workers are very different from that of men. Similarly, the Board has proposed a pilot reintegration program for migrant workers. The board must ensure that this program is equity-centered such that returnee migrant workers can avail the budget and opportunities. Special consideration should be given to the diversity among women migrant workers in terms of socio-cultural background.

It is evident from the number of women migrant workers traveling illegally how restrictive policies based on welfare and protectionist approach have proved to be counterproductive. The GoN needs to start thinking differently and approach it with a right-based approach. The women migrant workers who travel through the third-party passage are often aware of the danger and illegality. It is their desperation that forces them to make these decisions. The focus hereon should be to study why women migrant workers choose to go abroad for work and how we can combat the human trafficking of Nepali women by providing them with a safe passage to foreign employment, should they opt for it. All of these issues relating to women migrant workers need to be made a political priority that gets reflected in the national budget. To guarantee that women migrant workers lead equal, dignified lives, we need to work on curbing the risk of human trafficking, safeguarding their protection and rights in destination countries, respecting their socio-economic well-being, and for proper rehabilitation if they choose to come back.

The COVID-19 crisis reminded the world of the importance of comprehensive and shock-responsive social protection systems. In this light, the GoN needs to adopt a more system-thinking approach in its recovery efforts. Policymakers must implement responses targeting the gendered consequences of disease control measures (Vehadi, 2021). In an economy that is in rapid fall mode due to the pandemic, the government needs to introduce a combination of employment, labor market, and social protection policies to facilitate the recovery process, and address the vulnerabilities of less protected population groups that have been most affected by the crisis.

The GoN needs to be more intentional in recognizing that a large part of the workforce is involved in the informal sector. There has been a perception shift in the lure of foreign employment as the nation witnessed the dire conditions workers abroad were in during the pandemic, either stranded or out of work. Workers who could not depart for employment abroad or who chose to stay back due to the pandemic should be offered employment opportunities through local bodies. For those who did return to their foreign employments, the GoN needs to look out for its citizen through diplomatic missions and ensure that they are paid and treated justly in the destination countries.

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