



Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Nepali Migrant Returnees amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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COVID-19 has deeply disrupted society and the economy throughout the world, making it one of the greatest disasters in the history of humankind which has severely impacted the workforce, especially the most vulnerable migrant workers around the globe. Drawing on the two studies that the authors were involved in titled *COVID-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants: Impact and Responses*, and *Rights of Nepali Migrant Workers in the Clutches of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, this article specifically describes the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on Nepali migrant workers overseas. It also delves into responses from the state in the economic and psychosocial reintegration and rehabilitation of returning migrant workers. With the initial response to the virus being characterised by a distinct unpreparedness on Nepal's part, the rationale of this article is to present Nepal's experience in the response to the reintegration of migrant workers after their return to Nepal. Migrant workers in the destination countries have lost their jobs and income, and are facing wage theft, ill treatments, forced deportation and stigmatisation, among others. Thousands of Nepali migrants have returned from several countries particularly India, Malaysia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries namely, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates after losing their jobs. A large proportion of these migrants are unskilled or low skilled workers engaged in elementary and blue-collar occupations such as labourers, cleaners or as sales and service-related workers. The remittance sent by these workers however is responsible for more than one-fourth of the country's GDP since 2012. As the jobs of these workers have been hard hit by the pandemic, it has directly impacted the economy of the country. Similar to the experiences of many countries globally, Nepal is also experiencing an overwhelmingly large scale reverse migration which has further undermined the preparation for and complicated the rehabilitation and reintegration of the returnees into society even more complicated for the Nepali migrants. The paper highlights the possibilities for effective and efficient reintegration of the returnee migrants into Nepali society through the current backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: *Reverse migration, COVID-19, Nepali migrants, social impacts, reintegration.*



Introduction

South Asia has a long history of international migration, particularly intra-regional or cross border migration within the countries of South Asia and inter-regional migration, migration to other foreign countries. Inter-regional migration from South Asia is dominated by migration to GCC countries especially after the 1970 as the oil prices increased in these countries. The oil industry created a perfect opportunity for the labourers in the countries with surplus labour and low-wage to migrate to the countries with scarce labour and high-wage (Bircan *et. al.* 2020). Another factor that played a major role in influencing this migration trend was the wage differentials between the labour-rich and capital-rich countries. Starting from the 1950s and 60s, qualified people, consisting mostly of professionals, started migrating from South Asia to developed Western countries. The rise in global oil demand and surge in oil prices in the 1970s led to an increase in investments in oil producing infrastructures in the countries of the Middle East, mostly in Qatar, Oman, Iraq and Libya, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, thereby creating a high demand of semi-skilled and unskilled manpower in these countries. In the 1980s, this labour market further extended to newly industrialised countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and the Republic of Korea which further created higher demand of manpower from South Asia for doing labour work (AHN, 2005). This trend of migration has only expanded, making South Asian countries, especially the SAARC nations, exporters of vast numbers of migrant workers to different Asian and the Middle East countries (Wickramasekara, 2011). Meanwhile, the changing patterns of migration in recent years due to many influencing variables has made it further unpredictable and complex (Bircan et al., 2020). However, at present, the migrant workers from these countries are at the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic which has now evolved into a global humanitarian and economic crisis, putting them at higher risk of contagion as well as the loss of their jobs and livelihood (UNESCAPE, 2020).

COVID-19 has raised major concerns in the international community regarding the policies and issues concerning labour rights, health inequalities and socio-economic impact concerning migration and its serious implications on the migrant workers and remittance dependent countries like Nepal (Bircan et al., 2020). With the initial response to the virus being characterised by a distinct unpreparedness on Nepal's part, the rationale of this article is to present Nepal's experience in the response to the pandemic, as well as to aim for fostering future policies for efficient and effective repatriation and reintegration of returnee migrants through facts-based research and detailed analysis.

However, the response of this pandemic by the Government of Nepal (GoN) has not yielded the intended outcomes, especially in controlling the spread, acquiring adequate infrastructural and public health measures, safe repatriation and reintegration efforts, and guaranteeing labour rights for the thousands of Nepalis working abroad. The situation seemed the same, even after the migrants returned back home. Also, the current situation has highlighted the need for sustainable reintegration and rehabilitation policies and plans to help thousands of migrant

workers returning and expected to cope up with the impacts of the pandemic. The two specific research questions being addressed in this paper concern themselves with the impacts of COVID-19 on Nepali migrant workers and their experiences and their reintegration response as returnee migrants.

Migrants and Crisis

Migrants are one of the most vulnerable groups of people in the world who are regularly subjected to violence, mistreatment, exploitation and trafficking (Husn, 2015). From the risk of violation of their human rights and risk of precarious working conditions with severe implications on their health, they also are on the forefront in bearing the brunt of global job and economic crisis and any calamitous situations and countless hardships during times of disaster making them even more vulnerable and susceptible to several of such risk factors (IOM, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered to be the historically consequential global health crisis of the 21st century that the human race has collectively faced since the Second World War. (Ouassif, 2020). Usually, a health crisis of such massive proportions is expected to entail a long humanitarian crisis (UNISDR, 2009). In any kind of conflict, diseases or even wars, power relies with the native population whereas migrants are fundamentally considered as outsiders. They are perceived as nothing more than labour and will invariably suffer the consequences of one's identity (Sammadar, 2020). Being a migrant also means bearing not only the monetary costs such as expenses related to your journey but also the non-monetary costs such as opportunity costs and cost of separation from your family and friends (Bircan et al., 2020). Hence, migrants have to face a greater deal of suffering in situations of disaster and crisis. Further, their situation is worsened due to lack of accurate and precise data on the impact of any given disaster on the migrant workers, thus rendering them most vulnerable on local, national and international levels. The difficulty also lies in assessing the number of informal and illegal migrants (Guadagno, 2015). On top of that, lack of international legal instruments that completely cover the rights of migrants affected by the crisis in their host countries make them the casualties of any crisis situation (IOM, 2017). The pandemic has also caused a sudden situation of 'forced migration' for migrant workers in a macro level worldwide, subjecting them to uncertainty regarding their futures (Bircan et al., 2020).

In most cases of crisis, the destination countries are indifferent to the vulnerabilities of the migrant workers. This indifference as seen in many past circumstances helped sustain crisis situations of an unprecedented proportion prompting stagnation and lack of swift action from both the home and destination countries (Boehmer & Peña, 2012). The COVID-19 virus spread is closely associated with various forms of human movements or migration, which started in China and spread to destination countries, which has claimed the lives of almost 800,000 lives globally by 15 August (WHO, 2020). Additionally, it has instilled fear of foreign migrants and



migrant returnees globally. The prompt steps taken by most countries in attempts to control the spread of the virus was a sudden shutting down of borders and human mobility. As a result of such drastic measures, many migrant workers were stranded in foreign countries, and in many cases, they were without basic amenities such as food, money or shelter. Even within the countries, thousands of migrants were stranded due to lockdowns and lack of transportation, forcing people to walk unimaginable distances on foot, closely depicting the physical realities of a war (Brain, 2020).

Socio-Economic Reintegration

According to International Organization of Migration (IOM) (2020), reintegration is, ‘*a process which enables individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and inclusion in civic life.*’ By this definition, there are three components of reintegration of returnee migrants such as social reintegration (which implies that the returnee migrants should be able to access the public services and infrastructures in his or her country of origin, including access to health, education, housing, justice and social protection schemes), psycho-social reintegration (which is the restoration of migrant’s personal support networks and civil society) and economic reintegration (which is the process of providing livelihood opportunities to the migrants) (IOM, 2020). The reintegration can be sustainably achieved only when the above-mentioned criteria is met at individual, community and structural levels of the society (IOM, 2019). The reverse migration in most cases in itself acts as a bigger crisis for the home countries (Kelly & Wahud, 2012). In such cases, there is a need to protect migrants within the home countries and for providing support for dignified reintegration and rehabilitation of the returnee migrant workers. Returnees face identity changes between who they are now and who they were or how they were perceived by the society prior to their migration stint, bringing with it the feeling of social exclusion. These can make it difficult for the returnees to fit into the society, thus affecting their emotional well-being and leading to negative psychological consequences such as depression and anxiety. This can make it difficult for the returnees to adapt and ultimately impact their livelihood (Carpio, 2020). Although the labour migrants’ social acclimatisation in their destination countries has been a commonly studied subject in the past, very limited research can be found on the social reintegration of returnee migrants in their home countries. This fact is also supported by the absent and incomplete data found for the returnee migrants whereas more focus has been given to the data on out migration (Wahba, 2015). The return and reintegration of migrants is often associated with the just act of migrants returning back home. However, it has further complex components and actors involved, some even independent of the state (Ndreka, 2019). These factors make the nature and process of return migration unpredictable and hard to assess and monitor (Lesińska, 2013). On the basis of impacts, COVID-19 can be considered a sudden-onset disaster that emerged quickly and unexpectedly (UNDRR, 2016). The pandemic has further made it difficult to predict the number of globally displaced people, increasing the pressures on the limited resources of different state and non-

state bodies, further exacerbating the already precarious situations migrants are currently experiencing (UNHCR, 2019).

In the current scenario, a state's policy towards return migration plays a pivotal role in efficient migration management. In the absence of strong return migration policies, the state usually employs reactive or passive state policy which is implemented in response to the already existing return migration due to various forms of crisis situations such as COVID-19 (Lesińska, 2013). This form of return migration is also called the return of crisis or forced return, which is caused by situations of political upheaval or different forms of disasters (Battistella, 2018). International labour migration has been a phenomenon that has been prevalent in Nepal for some time. But the emergence of migration as a means of income and its interconnectedness with Nepal's economy and development is a relatively new discourse (Wickramasekara, 2008). Migration and its linkages with remittances, return migration, circular migration, and other multiplier effects in socio-economic development has often been a debate about the type of development this has brought. The role of remittance is one particular area that has shed light on a range of issues, from the positive change in people's consumption habits and the change in people's livelihood patterns, to the negative rise of economic dependency and foreign loans, stunted national development, and other key financial and socio-economic repercussions (Bohra-Mishra, 2013). For countries like Nepal, remittance is often seen as the necessary propeller for economic growth. Parajuli (2013) argues that remittance increases three key areas of economic activities; increase in the capital and domestic investment rate, increase in capital accumulation and its spillover effect leading to increase in productivity, and thirdly, increase in national growth through the country's financial systems. Similarly, the economic motives of remittance as an effective tool of growth is also seen by the effect remittance has on the country's demand for money as remittance expands the supply of funds which leads to enhanced financial development and economic growth which is a result of either economies of scale, or positive political economy effect (Neupane, 2011 quoted in Parajuli 2013). On the other hand, remittance increases consumption and import dependency and also depletes the country's foreign currency reserve which could otherwise be utilised to finance balance of trade deficits or be invested in productive investment and social development (Barauh, 2006).

Hence, out-migration and the flow of remittance is something that needs to be studied with nuance and critical perspective. The migration-to-development perspective has particularly been pointed out by scholars to consist of several gaps that showcases a multitude of contradicting arguments against the role of migration and remittances (Rahman & Yong, 2015; Barauh, 2006). For many, the migration experience adds to the economic burden of the costs required to travel and live in a foreign land. For many others, the psycho-social burden of earning money to secure their and their families' livelihoods, along with the hassles faced in the destination countries add to the importance and implementation of labour related international governance and laws. Growing number of studies also show the need for female-friendly policies and feminisation of migration discourse that is cognisant of the rise of female



out-migration, and how that impacts on gender relations and families left-behind (Piper, 2008). Pertaining to Nepal, issues of human trafficking, gender-based violence, cross-border migration to India, language barriers along with physical and mental abuse faced particularly in the GCC states are areas of interest that add to the intersectionality that the study of migration and development nexus need to account (Ghimire & Upreti, 2012).

Labour governance is, therefore, imperative in strengthening Nepal's out-migration experience as it remains the key buffer that safeguards the rights of Nepalis in Nepal and abroad. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees the right to freedom, equality, labour and employment as fundamental rights and duties, and is a key source of labour governance. It provides the citizens of Nepal with the freedom to practice any profession, occupation, and establish industry, trade and business. Additionally, labourers have the right to get involved in any labour and receive appropriate remuneration, facilities and social security, and are allowed to form and join a trade union and get involved in collective bargaining. The constitution also emphasises the protection of the rights of the labourers and the abolition of all forms of labour exploitation. The Constitution also states that the sector of foreign employment should be managed, regulated, safe, and systematic, and encourages the mobilisation of capital, skills, technology and experience gained from foreign employment within Nepal. Additionally, there exists various state mechanisms and its mandated laws, acts, provisions, guidelines, procedures, etc. that govern Nepal's labour migration. Some of them includes the Foreign Employment Act 2007; Foreign Employment Rules 2008; Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act 2007; Foreign Employment Policy 2012, among others (CESLAM, 2017). Along with these, Nepal Government, through its national, provincial and local annual and periodic plans, also ensure effective labour-governance aimed to complement Nepal's economic growth.

Nepal is predominantly an agricultural economy. This sector employs over 65 per cent of the population and contributes to 27 per cent of the GDP (Economic Survey, 2019), which is closely followed by remittances received from foreign employment which has been contributing more than 25 per cent of the total GDP since 2012 (Baniya, Bhattarai, Thapa & Pradhan, 2020). In recent years, foreign employment has been seen as far lucrative by the newer generations of Nepal, hence, replacing agricultural practices with working overseas. Nepal is also one of the least developed countries in South Asia due to its low GDP per capita which was last recorded at USD 1,071 in 2019 (The World Bank, 2019). Hence, around 18.7 per cent of the population in Nepal still fall under the absolute poverty line (Economic Survey, 2019), whereas, the present unemployment rate in Nepal is 11.4 per cent (CBS, 2017). As per the Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS) 2017/18, a person is considered employed if s/he draws a salary of at least one hour a week by being involved in activities for producing goods and services.



As Nepal is a major labour-exporting country, Nepal is a signatory to several international treaties and agreements with different entities that govern Nepal's labour and migration governance vis-à-vis the existing international rules, norms and practices (CESLAM, 2017). Additionally, these signed MoUs and BLAs have aimed to abide by the GCM and SDGs. These bilateral understandings deal with organising recruitment procedures, contracts, accommodation and other facilities to the workers, and identification of mechanism for settlement of disputes, among others. Nepal has also been signatory to various relevant regional and global processes that aim for effective and efficient migration and labour governance. These include the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD), the Colombo Process (CP), the SAARC Plan of Action on labour migration, the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), the Asia-European Union (EU) Dialogue, among others. Apart from these, Nepal has been a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) since 1966, and Nepal has ratified many of the ILO Convention pertaining to labour and migration (CESLAM, 2019). Most prominent of these include the ILO Convention 29 – Forced Labour Convention, 1930; ILO Convention 98 – Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949; ILO Convention 100 – Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951; ILO Convention 105 – Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957; ILO Convention 111 – Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958; ILO Convention 138 – Minimum Age Convention, 1973; ILO Convention 144 – Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976; ILO Convention 169 – Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 and ILO Convention 182 – Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (ibid.). As there are many reasons for people to migrate abroad, similarly there also are many reasons for people to return. Different migrant populations are affected differently by a similar situation and hence the government should be wary that those repatriated or returned during different circumstances and for different reasons must be addressed accordingly (Bircan et al., 2020).

Methodology

This paper is based on the findings of a rapid assessment the authors were involved in, 'COVID-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants: Impacts and Responses,' carried out by the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) and 'Rights of Nepali Migrant Workers in the Clutches of the COVID-19 Pandemic' carried out by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Nepal, from 13 April 2020 to 29 May 2020. The study employs a mixed method research approach to explore and analyse the impacts of COVID-19 on internal and external Nepali migrant workers. Survey data from Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS) 2017/18 were utilised in the study. Relevant reports from various national and international news publications from December, 2019 to end of July 2020 were collected and analysed. Furthermore, perceptions of relevant stakeholders representing academia and research, human rights organisation, international organisations and migrant workers' networks were acquired during the study. Moreover, issues pertaining to migration and crisis, reintegration, remittance

and development were examined to give the arguments made in the paper a theoretical standpoint.

Findings

Socio-economic Impacts on Nepali Migrants and their Livelihood

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that nearly 155 million full time jobs were lost globally, in the first quarter of 2020 due to the pandemic (ILO, 2020). Further, the report suggests that under a normal scenario, the fourth quarter of 2020 will still face a loss of 140 million full-time jobs while in an opposite scenario with the second wave of the virus, it is expected that there will be 340 million jobs lost in the last quarter of 2020. Migrant workers were one of the hardest hit by the current pandemic, where they faced wage theft, loss of job and income, ill-treatments, forced deportations among others (ILO, 2020). As a result, this has caused a huge blow to the economy of a remittance-dependent country like Nepal, with estimates suggesting that Nepal will see a 28.7 per cent contraction in remittance, which is the highest proportion for any developing country (Prasai, 2020).

Nepalis have migrated to more than 153 countries in the last decade for work, education and other reasons (IOM, 2019). According to the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE), Nepal, more than a million Nepali migrants received labour permits in the last two years alone (mid-March 2018 to mid-March 2020) to several destination countries. Male migrants accounted for 93.4 per cent of the labour permits issued. Among the migrants, the dominant majority of them migrated to just four countries, namely, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Baniya, Bhattarai, Thapa & Pradhan, 2020). However, this figure does not include those who migrated to India and those who migrated through irregular channels. Nepalis do not require any permits to go to India due to the open border between the two countries. Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS) 2017/18, the most recent survey that provides an estimation of migrants abroad, showed that there are 3.2 million migrants overseas for various reasons, of which 2.8 million migrated for work related reasons (Ibid). India is the most popular destination of Nepali migrants; almost a million have migrated there for work in 2017/18. These migrants are mostly engaged in unskilled and low-skilled occupation. According to the DoFE, 56.3 per cent of male migrants who received labour permits in the last two years were for unskilled occupation while it was 60.5 per cent for female migrants (Ibid). A similar scenario is presented by the NLFS, where in 2017/18, 41.5 per cent of Nepali labour migrants were engaged in elementary occupation such as cleaner and labourers that do not require any skill whereas another 30.8 per cent were service workers and shop and market sales workers which requires certain level of skills (Ibid).

The current pandemic has adversely affected the labour migrants abroad (Baniya, Bhattarai, Thapa & Pradhan, 2020; Nepal, Baniya & Kshetri, 2020). Nepali migrants are facing various

human and labour rights violations in the countries of destinations. An estimated 280,000 Nepalis are expected to lose their job in GCC countries and Malaysia (Ibid). Wage theft, reduction or non-payment of the wage, which was already a huge issue for the migrants, has been growing exponentially due to the current pandemic (People Forum, 2020). Additionally, Nepali migrants are also facing discrimination and ill-treatments in the destination countries. Around 400 migrants were expelled from Qatar amidst the current pandemic, a violation of their human rights (Baniya, Bhattarai, Thapa & Pradhan, 2020; Nepal, Baniya & Kshetri, 2020). Furthermore, these migrant workers lacked easy access to testing, screening, treatment, as well as other basic health services. Similarly, they were confined to squalid and crowded living conditions such as labour camps, shelter and unsanitary dormitories, where maintaining WHO-mandated measures like social distancing was not effective, thus creating a high risk of virus transmission. With the large number of cases forced to stay in labour camps in GCC countries like Qatar, migrants were specifically targeted and stigmatized in both the countries of destination and origins as carriers of the virus (Parviz, 2020).

The pandemic has caused a major impact on Nepal's economy, most critically through a sharp decline in the remittance inflow to Nepal. As coronavirus has resulted in a global economic slowdown, with a sharp drop in oil prices, the flow of remittance in mid-April 2020 dropped by almost half to NPR 34.5 billion from NPR 71 billion for the same time period in the previous fiscal year (NRB, 2020). The World Bank in April projected that Nepal's remittance will drop by 14 per cent in 2020 (Ratha et al., 2020). The most recent projection by Asian Development Bank (ADB) reports decrease in remittance to Nepal by 28.7 per cent, the highest among the South Asian countries (ADB, 2020). The projected decrease in the remittance will have a significant impact for a country like Nepal where more than a quarter of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is dependent on the remittance. In 2019, Nepal received USD 8.1 billion in remittance, representing 27.3 per cent of the country's GDP (Ratha et al., 2020). Proportional to a country's GDP, this is the sixth highest globally and the highest of South Asian terms of the remittance's contribution to the GDP.

Returnee Migrants

Initially, when the coronavirus rapidly spread in late December 2019 from its epicentre in Wuhan, China, the GoN repatriated 175 Nepalis from the city in late February (Sharma, 2020). The people that were repatriated were mostly students. As the coronavirus rapidly spread globally from March onward, human and migrant rights groups increasingly called for the safe and dignified repatriation of migrant workers. Countries in South Asia, namely Sri Lanka, Pakistan and India started the repatriation process early on. This led to increase in calls from human rights activists and groups within Nepal to repatriate Nepali migrants stranded in several countries. In separate interim orders on April 7 and 16, the Supreme Court of Nepal directed the GoN to repatriate Nepali citizens stranded at the India-Nepal border as well as overseas, majority of whom were Nepali migrant workers. Later in 25 May 2020, the GoN passed an



executive order to facilitate the repatriation of stranded Nepali citizens to return home and allocated entry points along the Indo-Nepal border for migrants returning from India. Following this an action plan was prepared to implement the order. The government started the first phase of the repatriation process from 5 June 2020.

According to a preliminary estimation made by the Foreign Employment Board (FEB) of Nepal in May 2020, 127,000 Nepalis needed to be immediately repatriated while 407,000 Nepalis were expected to return from the GCC countries and Malaysia in the coming months as a direct result of the pandemic. However, this estimation did not include migrants in India as well as other destination countries. India being the most popular destination for Nepali migrants in search of work, thousands of migrants have returned and are expected to return from India as well. Amidst the spreading pandemic, as of 16 August 2020, almost 49,000 Nepalis have been repatriated from more than 29 countries (Himalayan Tourism News, 2020). However, there is no concrete data on the number of Nepali migrants returning via land from India. An early estimate showed that more than 750,000 Nepali returned from India between the last week of March and the first week of June (Baniya, Bhattarai, Thapa & Pradhan, 2020).

Response from the Nepal Government

The GoN, in the budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 2020/21, announced the plan to create 700,000 employment at home through various programmes to address the unemployment caused by the pandemic. These plans targeted both the domestic labour force as well as returnees and those waiting to go overseas for employment. One of such programmes is the Prime Minister Employment Programme (PMEP) which will be implemented at the local levels targeting the returnee migrant workers in all the districts of Nepal. PMEP was initially introduced in the FY 2018/19 with the objective to discourage overseas labour migration of the Nepali youth by providing them with employment for a minimum of 100 days in various development works of the federal, provincial, and local level governments (MoLESS, 2020). For the FY 2020/21, the GoN has allocated NPR 11.6 billion, double the amount from previous year and plans to provide jobs to 200,000 unemployed Nepalis. However, according to a report by a government task force studying the impacts of COVID-19 on foreign employment sector and the economy, the government needs to create at least 1.5 million jobs in order to accommodate all the unemployed including those returning from overseas (Shrestha, 2020).

The Constitution of Nepal has provision to utilise the skills and expertise gained by migrant workers in the productive sectors. GoN's 15th Periodic Plan and FEB's Policies, Programmes and Budget for the fiscal year 2019/20 highlights the use of skills, knowledge and expertise of returnee migrant workers in the productive sector through entrepreneurship, self-employment and professional jobs (GON, 2019). Similarly, on 15 May 2020, the GoN announced the 'Annual Policies and Programmes' for the fiscal year 2020/2021 which included plans to support returnee migrants with seed money to start enterprises in Nepal, to upskill, to improve



labour market situation and decent work, and to improve social security provisions. Similarly, the vast majority of the returnee migrants will be ‘unskilled’, followed by ‘skilled’ and ‘semi-skilled’ (Baniya, Bhattarai, Thapa & Pradhan, 2020). Comparatively, lower numbers of migrants will be ‘professional’ and ‘high skilled’. Challenge, therefore, remains on how the reintegration plans and policies reflect and utilise the skills and resources accordingly.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also showcased an ineffective role played by local and provincial governments in the reintegration efforts of migrant workers. The unprecedented level of reverse migration from India in the initial days of the pandemic led to confusion and incapacity of the local government due to lack of concrete delineation of federal versus provincial rights and resources allocated during such crisis time (Khadka, 2020). This was also highlighted by the lack of quarantine shelters, health facilities, and other infrastructural mechanisms in the local level. However, by August, the local levels have sprung up from their initial lackadaisical approach to formulate local and provincial plans that cater to the short- and long-term employment opportunities for the thousands of returnees. For most local level governments, the reintegration efforts currently include the utilisation of the PMEP to create employment opportunities for the returnee migrants. Already, the budget of the PMEP has been doubled to create more employment opportunities that are to be allocated to local governments, with coordinators having been set up in all the 753 local governments (ibid.). The Foreign Employment Act 2007 and the Foreign Employment Policy 2012 have mentioned that returnee migrants and their families will be provided economic, social and psychosocial supports for reintegration (GoN, 2007; MoLESS, 2012; CESLAM, 2017). FEB has been mandated to cater to these supports and supports. However, they are very limited in numbers and resources allocated. Hence, such programmes have not been able to facilitate their integration. Recently, as per the SOP for reintegration, the FEB has introduced some programmes to provide supports to returnees with financial literacy trainings and then facilitate for access to finance, skill and enterprise trainings, shelter and psychosocial supports to needy returnees, among others (Nepal Association of Humphrey Fellows, 2020).

Issues for Reintegration and Rehabilitation

Every year around 500,000 youth enter the Nepali labour market (GoN, 2019). As a result of the current pandemic, ILO estimated that more than 1.6 to 2 million jobs are at risk in Nepal which already has an unemployment rate of 11.4 per cent. Furthermore, Nepal is expected to experience a decreased economic growth rate in the current year. According to the GoN, the growth rate of Nepal will go down to 2.3 per cent instead of their previous projection of 8.5 per cent for the current year (UNDP, 2020). Similar downward projection of the economic growth of Nepal compared to the pre-COVID-19 forecast for the current year has been made by the World Bank (from 6.4 per cent to 1.5-2.8 per cent), Asian Development Bank (from 6.3 to 5.3 per cent) and International Monetary Fund (from 6 per cent to 2.5 per cent). However, comparatively, this projection is better than the forecast by these agencies for neighbouring



India, where the growth rate is expected to go down to 1.8- 4 per cent for this year. With Nepali citizens losing or having lost their jobs in Nepal and with thousands of migrants already repatriated and thousands estimated to return in the coming months, there will be a bigger challenge for the government to accommodate the unemployed returnees into the Nepali labour market. The matter is further complicated by the lack of concrete and updated data on the number of labour migrants overseas. This issue is more pertinent in the case of Nepalis migrating to India as the free movement between India and Nepal means there is no systematic method to record the number of Nepalis in India (Baniya, Bhattarai, Thapa & Pradhan, 2020; Nepal, Baniya & Kshetri, 2020).

Psychosocial Issues

Psychosocial reintegration of migrant workers especially that of the female migrant workers needs greater focus. Women migrant workers are one of the most vulnerable groups and at higher risk of being abused and ill-treated because of the temporary and informal nature of their work, primarily in the domestic and care work sector that lacks social protection. Especially in case of Nepali women migrants, the ban on migration of women to GCC countries for domestic work forces them to choose irregular channel to migrate to these countries and make them more susceptible to trafficking as well as abuse and discrimination by their employers. With pregnant women and women with children being repatriated, there is the issue of their reintegration in the society and into their families as well as their psychological well-being. Another issue that needs to be focused on is the citizenship of these children. There are Nepali women migrant returnees who have returned to Nepal with babies born after violence and/or assault related pregnancies in countries of destination. While many of the mothers have been unable to return, and integrated into those families and community due to negative stigma attached to such pregnancy and birth and hence are living in shelters arranged by organizations and individuals (Nepal, Baniya & Kshetri, 2020), the future and citizenship rights of the new born are uncertain as the Constitution of Nepal 2015 does provide rights to the mothers to confer the citizenship to the children born from unidentified father, and more so from foreign nationals.

Similarly, suicide has also been a major problem as a major effect of the COVID-19 crisis. During the lockdown period starting from March, Nepal Police data by the end of July showed that 20 people committed suicide daily, accounting to over 2,200 people over the lockdown period. The primary reasons for the spike in the suicide consisted of a combination of depression, domestic violence, economic and financial worries, reduced access to healthcare, and the anxiety related to COVID-19 (Neupane, 2020). Analysts have suggested that mental health issues should be a key concern for policy makers in dealing with the reintegration of Nepali returnees as socio-economic anxieties caused by prolonged lockdown, loss of job and other financial burdens have heightened mental health risks. Doctors have called for local authorities to monitor the sale of ropes and pesticides, and to consider mental health as a critical factor in bringing about policies and plans aimed at the returnees (Ibid.)



Issues of Social Stigma and Discrimination

Migrants returning from overseas, especially India have been the primary cause of transfer of the virus in the community and family in Nepal. As a result, migrant workers are being seen negatively by society as the carrier of the coronavirus. Hence it calls for a need to ensure that these migrants are not facing any stigma and discriminations. In the case of women migrant workers, stigmatisation and discrimination has always been the norm in the Nepali society. Regardless of their status in the Countries of Destination (CODs), their return is often surrounded by conjectures questioning their character (Dhaubhadel, 2018). They are also blamed for upsetting the social construct by leaving their families behind. Women are also at higher risk of being the victims of human trafficking. Historically, women have been exploited. They are also more prone to face oppression, xenophobia and stigma at their workplaces as well as back home (UN Women, 2020). Furthermore, pregnant migrant women are at a higher risk due to inadequate care at the healthcare centres. In such a situation, there is a higher possibility of migrant returnee women facing much difficulty during the process of reintegration and rehabilitation. There even are cases of sexual misconduct against women in the quarantine facilities in Nepal, which only substantiates the fact that women need more support in the reintegration process (Baniya, Bhattarai, Thapa & Pradhan, 2020).

Conclusion

GoN's efforts of repatriation and reintegration of Nepali migrants has been mired with criticisms. Among them, there has been calls for the need of a consolidated database system that identifies Nepali migrants and keeps all the required data. In the initial efforts to formulate a repatriation plan, the number of possible Nepalis estimated by various GoN entities like the FEB, Nepal Police, DoFE, among others, either were underestimated or they lacked coherence due to the lack of unified data on migrant workers in destination countries. As seen in the initial lockdown period, the number of Nepalis returning from India were far more than the expected, thus creating challenges in the management and quarantine of the returnees. Effective reintegration process requires a strengthened mechanism that encompasses all levels of the GoN so that there is effective and efficient management of the returnees. Similarly, a pertinent issue in the repatriation process was the payment of return flights by the returnees, most having to pay an exorbitant amount of air fares to return to Nepal. This raised question of whether those in real need of repatriation would afford to come back. This resulted in an interim order from the Supreme Court to utilise the Foreign Employment Fund to facilitate the financial burden of repatriating needy migrant workers. Under the current circumstances the main focus of the state and non-state bodies has been towards the repatriation of Nepalis stranded overseas.

Although PMEP is a good starting point, it hardly covers the tremendous number of returnee migrants and also does not cover other psycho social aspects of the reintegration process. Including these aspects into the long-term plans for reintegration of the returnee migrants could



be vital for the success of the programs implemented but also the wellbeing of the returnee migrants. In the case of psychosocial support, different activities ought to be implemented at different levels. Some examples include provision of information about services available to them, family mediation and community-based group support, counselling sessions when emotional distress is apparent and referrals to specialized mental health care when needed; strengthening the technical capacity of identified governmental, non-governmental and civil society partners at a structural level is also relevant to ensure that returning migrants have easy access to health and social services that will facilitate their reintegration.

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