

The Voluntary-Forced Dichotomy in Migration: A Scoping Review

Kul Bahadur Bohara ^{1*}

Umesh Timalisina ²

Arun Bhandari ³

Herina Joshi ⁴

Deepak Adhikari ⁵

¹Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Education, Mid-West University, Surkhet, Nepal
ORCID ID: 0009-0004-7651-9949

²Associate Professor,
Janajyoti Multiple Campus Sarlahi
utimalisina123@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-4149-8920

³aroonsir8@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0009-0001-7001-2977

⁴uems.herina@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0009-0008-8764-7689

⁵Central Department of Population Studies,
TU, Kathmandu, Nepal
deepakad@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0009-0009-2454-2908

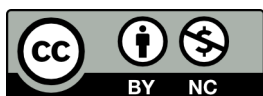
*Corresponding author@: Kul Bahadur Bohara,
Email: kul.bohara@mu.edu.np

Received: 23 April 2026

Revised: 17 May 2026

Accepted: 21 June 2026

Published: 28 July 2026



This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY NC)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

JANA JYOTI JOURNAL
(जनज्योति जर्नल)

ISSN : 2961-1563

eISSN : 3102-0275

<https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/jj>

Printed at : July, 2026

Published by :

RMC

JANA JYOTI MULTIPLE CAMPUS
Lalbandi, Sarlahi, Nepal
www.jjmc.edu.np

Abstract

The paper argues that the voluntary–forced migration dichotomy dominates migration scholarship and policy discussions in Nepal, but oversimplifies human mobility, particularly Nepal’s labour outflows, where economic “choice” often masks structural compulsion. Recent evidence challenges this binary, revealing continua of constrained agency amid overlapping drivers. This scoping review maps contemporary literature (2021–2026), critiques the dichotomy, and synthesizes empirical evidence on migration drivers, agency erosion, and shared vulnerabilities to advance continuum frameworks and policy-relevant insights. Following the PRISMA-ScR guidelines, three authors searched PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and DOAJ using terms like “voluntary migration,” “forced migration,” and “dichotomy” (2021–2026). The PRISMA numbers are inconsistent throughout the manuscript. 213 abstracts screened; 49 full-texts assessed, excluding 36 (weak focus/

Preferred Citation:

Bohara, K. B., Timalisina, U., Bhandari, A., Joshi, H., & Adhikari, D. (2026). The Voluntary-Forced Dichotomy in Migration: A Scoping Review. *Janajyoti Journal*, 4(1), 12-30. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jj.v4i1.98891>

non-empirical), yielding 13 studies (6 Nepal-focused, 5 quantitative, seven qualitative, and one mixed). The Nepali studies demonstrate “voluntary” migration as an economic necessity driven by unemployment, job scarcity, household coping (contributing 25% GDP remittances), plus recruitment coercion via debt bondage and exploitative contracts. The climate-conflict overlaps compound pressures; identical health risks and well-being deficits transcend categories, validating spectrum models over rigid binaries. Rigid binaries fail; continuum approaches better capture hybrid realities. Recommendations include longitudinal mixed-methods research, reforms to recruitment that ban fees, universal protections for all migrants, and climate-adaptive policies that harness remittances for equitable governance beyond labels.

Keywords: constrained agency, dichotomy, labour migration, scoping, voluntary and forced

Introduction

The classification of human mobility into categories of “voluntary” and “forced” migration has long been a foundational concept in academic discourse, policymaking, and public understanding of migration phenomena (Huot et al., 2016). This dichotomy, while seemingly straightforward, obscures the profound complexity that research increasingly endeavors to unravel (Ali, 2022). The conventional analytical separation distinguishes between individuals who choose to move for reasons such as economic betterment or personal aspirations, labelled as voluntary migrants, and those compelled to leave their homes due to existential threats, persecution, or environmental disasters, termed forced migrants or refugees (Ali, 2022; Brunarska & Ivlevs, 2023). However, this binary framework has been critiqued for oversimplifying human mobility, often failing to capture the nuanced realities and overlapping motivations that drive individuals and communities to migrate (Brunarska & Ivlevs, 2023). Scholars argue that voluntariness and coercion frequently exist along a continuum rather than as discrete, mutually exclusive states, necessitating a more sophisticated approach to understanding migration decisions (Brunarska & Ivlevs, 2023; Transiskus & Gholamzadeh Bazarbash, 2024).

Historically, the voluntary-forced dichotomy gained prominence in international law and humanitarian frameworks, particularly in defining the legal status and protection entitlements of refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention (Kraly et al., 2023; Thiollet et al., 2024). A refugee, by this definition, is a person

outside their country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (Kraly et al., 2023). This legal distinction grants specific rights and protections, such as protection against forced return, that are not typically afforded to voluntary economic migrants (Kraly et al., 2023). This legal and political construction has had significant implications for migration governance, influencing how states formulate policies, allocate resources, and interact with different migrant populations (Thiollet et al., 2024; Müller-Funk & Natter, 2023). However, the very act of defining and categorizing individuals into these two groups has generated substantial scholarly debate regarding its analytical utility and practical consequences (Erdal & Oeppen, 2017; Thiollet et al., 2024).

The critics of the strict voluntary-forced dichotomy contend that it often overlooks the structural factors that limit agency even in seemingly “voluntary” moves, and, conversely, the elements of choice and strategy that can exist within situations of “forced” displacement (Ali, 2022; Erdal & Oeppen, 2017). For example, individuals fleeing conflict may strategically choose their destination based on existing social networks or economic opportunities, thereby exercising agency within a coerced context (Bartram, 2015; Scharrer & Suerbaum, 2022). Similarly, economic migrants might face severe vulnerability and in their home countries that leave them with few genuine alternatives to migration, blurring the lines of true voluntariness (Bartram, 2015). The concept of “coerced migration” offers a valuable lens for understanding displacement as a process of “coercive disruption to valued ways of living and functioning,” acknowledging that various forms of pressure, from violence to severe economic hardship, can compel movement (Ali, 2022; Procter, 2024).

Expand discussion with stronger theoretical integration rather than repeating literature. From a policy perspective, rigid categorization can lead to differential treatment, with forced migrants often receiving humanitarian assistance and legal protection, whereas voluntary migrants may face stricter immigration controls and fewer support mechanisms (Jubilut & Casagrande, 2019; Thiollet et al., 2024). This can create vulnerabilities for those whose experiences fall into a “grey area” or whose narratives do not precisely fit established legal definitions (Wolf, 2020). Furthermore, research on migration intentions often relies on the assumption that individuals either migrate voluntarily or are forced, which may obscure the interplay of factors such as family migration capital, where prior migration experiences within

a family can increase the propensity for subsequent generations to move, irrespective of the initial impetus being forced or voluntary. This intergenerational transmission of migration capital highlights the complex and enduring legacies of different types of migration (Brunarska & Ivlevs, 2023).

Recent scholarship has increasingly advocated for a “mobility continuum” framework, which posits that migration decisions are shaped by a gradient of influences ranging from complete voluntariness to absolute coercion (Cantor & Apollo, 2020). This perspective acknowledges that environmental factors, such as climate change, can act as veiled drivers of migration, compelling populations to move as an adaptation strategy without neatly fitting into traditional categories of forced or voluntary displacement (Fernández et al., 2024; Makulilo, 2023). For instance, repeated flooding in coastal zones, as observed in Tanzania, can lead to forced migration due to environmental degradation, a factor that might not be immediately classified under conventional forced migration definitions (Makulilo, 2023). Similarly, discussions around immobility, the decision not to migrate, also reveal the inadequacy of the binary, as immobility can be voluntary, involuntary, or motivated by complex social duties and loyalties that defy simple categorization (Robins (2022)).

The social consequences of forced and refugee migration are profound, affecting both migrants and communities of settlement (Kraly et al., 2023). These consequences include challenges to social cohesion in host countries, as evidenced by public opinion shifts following large inflows of asylum seekers (Albarosa & Elsner, 2023). The destruction of social networks and the loss of social support are common experiences for forcibly displaced individuals, underscoring the need for interventions that promote social support in resettlement contexts (Wachter et al., 2020). Moreover, forced migration significantly impacts mental health, with displaced populations often facing profound trauma during pre-migration, transit, and post-migration phases. These experiences can lead to complex mental health conditions, and effective care requires a nuanced understanding of trauma, cultural humility, and the socio-political determinants of health.

The scholarly interest in forced migration has received continuous attention since the 1980s, focusing on the structural links between conflict and displacement and the subsequent impacts on peace and societal integration (Krause & Segadlo, 2021). Scoping reviews have been instrumental in mapping existing literature and

identifying research gaps in areas such as self-determination among forced migrants, reproductive decision-making among forcibly displaced women, and occupational experiences of forced migrants (Donnelly et al., 2023; Huot et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2024). These reviews highlight the need for comprehensive research that acknowledges the diverse experiences and specific needs of these populations.

This scoping review aims to systematically map, analyze, and synthesize the contemporary academic literature on the voluntary-forced dichotomy in migration. By examining how this dichotomy is conceptualized, applied, and critiqued across various disciplinary fields, we seek to identify prevailing trends, theoretical advancements, and persistent gaps in understanding. The review will explore the analytical, political, and social implications of this classification, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of human mobility that moves beyond simplistic binaries toward a comprehensive appreciation of the migration continuum. Through this analysis, we intend to provide a robust foundation for future research and policy development that better reflects the complex realities of 21st-century migration.

The objective of this scoping review is to systematically map and synthesize the existing literature on the voluntary forced migration dichotomy. The review examines how contemporary migration scholarship conceptualizes the relationship between voluntary and forced migration, identifies the social, economic, political, environmental, and structural factors that influence migration decisions, and assesses whether migration experiences can be understood along a continuum rather than as a strict binary. The review also highlights key theoretical debates, policy implications, and future research directions for a more nuanced understanding of human mobility across diverse migration contexts.

Materials and Methods

Three online databases (Google Scholar/Scopus, PubMed, and direct journal search and cross-reference) were searched to conduct a systematic assessment of papers published between January 1, 2021, and January 1, 2026. In this review, 1569 articles were identified from these databases. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts of articles, 49 full texts were selected for full-text reading. After a comprehensive reading, 13 papers were appraised for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed synthesis. This scoping review was conducted following the PRISMA-ScR guideline (Tricco et al., 2018) and the JBI Manual for Evidence Synthesis.(PRISMA)

guidelines (Peters et al., 2020) to ensure a high level of evidence. The PRISMA flow diagram (Tricco et al., 2016) highlights the method of finding and incorporates the relevant articles (Blake, 2023).

Data Source

This study was conducted using three online databases (PubMed/Scopus, Google Scholar, and Directory of Open Access Journals) that published articles between January 1, 2021, and January 1, 2026. Boolean operators (AND/ OR) were applied to combine search terms around the voluntary-forced dichotomy in migration (including migration, voluntary migration, forced migration, refugees, and displacement), voluntary/forced, and relationship/association. Searches in Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus used combinations of key terms related to migration AND voluntary migration OR forced migration, supplemented by direct phrase searches to broaden coverage. The searched term was “migration” AND (“voluntary migration” OR “labour migration”) AND (“forced migration” OR “refugees” OR “displacement”), “migration” AND “voluntary migration”, “migration” AND “forced migration”. (“migration” OR “human mobility” OR “international migration”) AND (“voluntary migration” OR “labour migration” OR “economic migration” OR “skilled migration” AND “forced migration” OR displacement OR refugees OR “asylum seekers” OR “internal displacement”).

Three databases used the following algorithm: Title Combined: (voluntary migration) OR (forced migration) OR (migration dichotomy) AND (relationship OR Correlation OR Association with voluntary-forced dichotomy).

Eligibility Criteria

First, all authors contributed to the formulation of the eligibility criteria. The applied eligibility criteria are provided.

Table 1

Eligible Criteria

<i>Category</i>	<i>Eligible</i>	<i>Not Eligible</i>
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Grey literature, editorials, opinion pieces, conference abstracts
Language	English	Non-English

Publication period	2021–2026	Published before 2021
Focus/topic	Studies addressing the voluntary–forced migration dichotomy	Studies not addressing the voluntary–forced migration distinction
Study design/ methodology	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, reviews	Commentaries, conceptual papers without empirical or theoretical analysis
Geographic scope	International or internal migration studies	Studies unrelated to migration

Screening, Data Extraction, and Analysis

Two separate authors (KBB and UT) performed the search. Moreover, KBB and AB scanned the titles and abstracts for relevance. Further, KBB, UT, and AB performed the full-text analysis. In addition, KBB and UT independently checked the results, while DA and AB assessed them to reach consensus on the included studies. References were imported into the electronic database software tool (EndNote X9). Information identified in the relevant publications related to the measures of the Voluntary-Forced Dichotomy in Migration was independently extracted by KBB, UT, and HJ. The data were extracted from papers based on the characteristics of the included studies (e.g., the first author, publication year, and country, general characteristics of the instruments, and synthesizing recent literature on the voluntary–forced migration dichotomy). Each author evaluated papers independently, in accordance with the criteria, to reduce selection bias. To compare their findings, resolve any disagreements, and determine whether each article should be incorporated, we convened a group meeting. The study team considered contrary views and then divided the topic-wise functions, which were concluded by consensus. The data were collected and summarized for each paper, and the summaries were then tabulated by theme, including the author(s) ‘names, year of publication, type, components, items, voluntary-forced, and sample size.

The review of the literature yielded 1569 articles (Figure 1). A total of 1182 articles were removed after duplicates were identified, and 213 articles were screened and reviewed for their abstracts. Additionally, 49 articles were retrieved for full-text reviews. Next, 26 articles were excluded after reviewing the full text. Finally, 13 full-text articles were reviewed from 1569 database searches.

Figure 1

PRISMA Chart for a Scoping Review. Note PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items

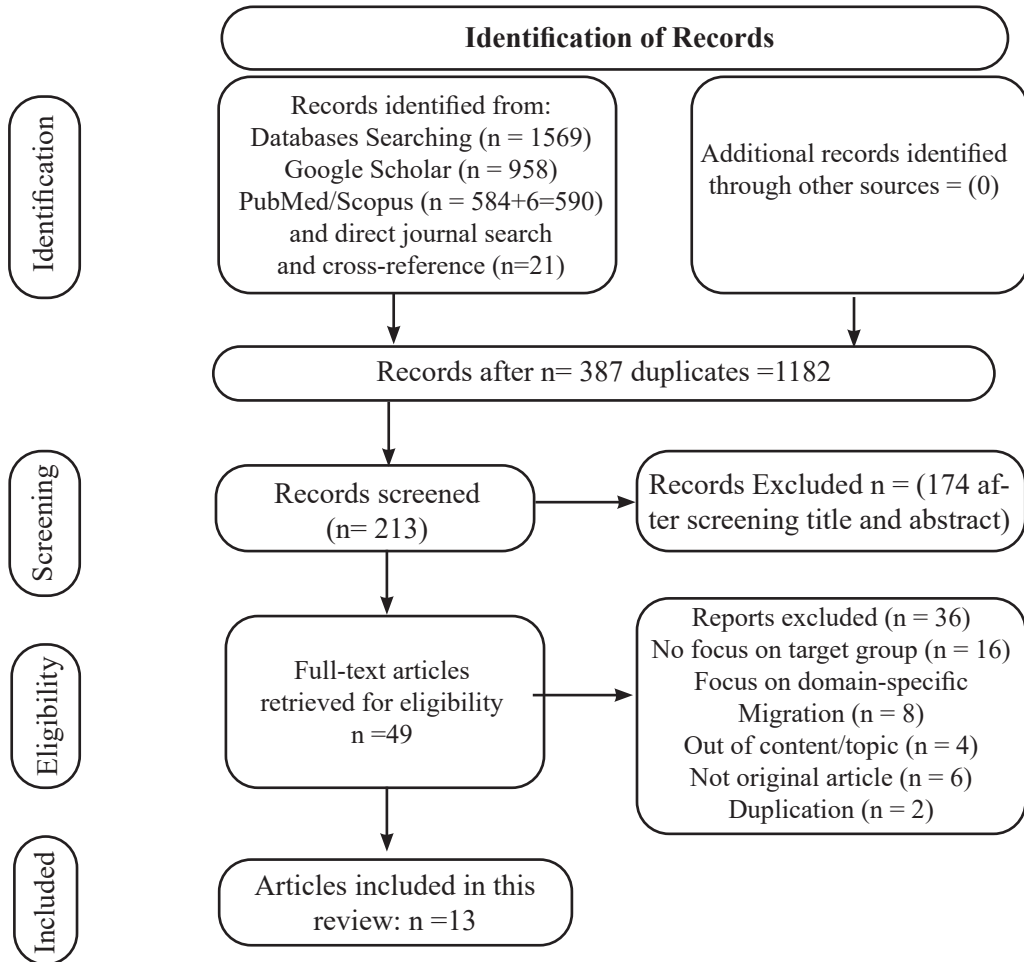


Figure 1. *PRISMA Chart for a Scoping Review. Note. PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses.*

Results

The paper, based on a review of the literature, yielded 1569 articles ([Figure 1](#)). Overall, 1182 articles were removed after identifying duplicates, and a total of 213 articles were screened and reviewed for abstracts, and 49 articles were retrieved for full-text reviews. After reviewing the full text, 36 articles were excluded, and 13 full-text articles were selected from 1569 database searches.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Eligible</i>	<i>Not Eligible</i>
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Grey literature, editorials, opinion pieces, conference abstracts, theses
Language	English	Non-English publications
Publication period	Studies published between 2021 and 2026	Studies published before 2021
Topical focus	Studies examining voluntary migration, forced migration, or their intersection/dichotomy	Studies unrelated to migration or not addressing voluntary–forced distinctions
Geographical scope	International and internal migration studies, including Nepal-focused research	Studies without a migration context
Study design	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods studies, and systematic/scoping reviews	Purely descriptive reports or conceptual papers lacking empirical or analytical depth
Population	Migrants, refugees, displaced populations, labour migrants	Non-migrant populations
Outcome focus	Migration drivers, agency/coercion, structural constraints, health, or socio-economic impacts	Studies not addressing migration motivations or consequences

The reviewed studies consistently show that the boundary between voluntary and forced migration is far less clear than conventional classifications suggest. Recent empirical and review-based research highlights how migration decisions, particularly from Nepal and comparable contexts, often emerge from constrained circumstances rather than from unrestricted personal choice. What appears to be voluntary movement often reflects limited livelihood options, structural inequality, and economic insecurity.

Research focused on Nepal supports this view. Ghimire and Hillman (2022) show that migration from Nepal between 1990 and 2016 was influenced by unemployment, political instability, and uneven development. These factors reduced local opportunities and led to more people leaving the country. Similarly, Giri (2025) links increased emigration to ongoing economic pressures and a lack of jobs at home. This suggests that economic migration is often a response to necessity rather than personal choice (Burlakoti et al., 2025).

Several studies also point to coercive features embedded within labour migration processes. Kopytko et al. (2024) emphasize that debt-financed migration, restrictive contracts, and exploitative recruitment practices introduce elements of

compulsion into labour mobility, blurring distinctions between voluntary migration and forced labour. These dynamics are especially relevant for migrant workers from low-income settings, where unequal power relations limit bargaining capacity and increase vulnerability.

At the same time, research on displacement and crisis-related mobility demonstrates that affected populations retain decision-making capacity, even under severe constraints (Lasater et al., 2025). Their scoping review on climate change, conflict, and displacement shows that environmental stressors and violence interact with economic pressures to shape migration outcomes. Rather than moving randomly, displaced populations often make calculated choices about destinations and livelihood options based on safety, access to work, and social networks (Becker, 2022). Similarly, it illustrates, through historical analyses of forced displacement, that displaced populations have long exercised agency within restrictive political and economic environments. Health- and well-being-focused studies also reinforce the overlap between migration categories. Mahato et al. (2024) find that Nepali migrants, regardless of whether they migrate due to economic hardship or broader structural disruptions, face similar vulnerabilities related to health access, labour conditions, and social protection. These shared outcomes suggest that distinctions between forced and voluntary migration may be less meaningful in practice than in policy design.

These findings support viewing migration motivations along a range shaped by economic pressure, institutional constraints, environmental stress, and unequal access to resources. The reviewed literature indicates that rigid classifications fail to reflect lived migration experiences and may obscure shared risks faced by different migrant groups. For analytical and policy purposes, recent Nepal-focused evidence underscores the need for frameworks that move beyond binary categories and better capture the intersecting drivers of contemporary migration.

Methodological Characteristics

The article included in this review used a wide range of methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and conceptual designs. Qualitative research commonly relies on interviews, focus group discussions, and narrative analysis to explore migrants' motivations and lived experiences in depth. Quantitative studies mainly used survey data, regression analyses, and descriptive statistics to identify factors associated with voluntary and forced migration. Review

and conceptual papers drew on existing literature to develop theoretical frameworks or critically examine the voluntary–forced migration dichotomy. Most studies used cross-sectional designs, with relatively few employing longitudinal designs. Collectively, the research covered both international and internal migration across diverse geographical contexts.

Situation of the Voluntary-Forced Dichotomy in Migration

The voluntary–forced dichotomy remains a dominant framework in migration studies, policy, and law, but recent evidence shows it inadequately reflects the complexities of human mobility. Migration decisions often exist along a continuum shaped by economic pressures, political instability, environmental stress, and social constraints. Economic migration can reflect necessity rather than free choice, while forced displacement often involves strategic decision-making and agency. This overlap challenges rigid classifications, highlighting the need for frameworks that capture the intersecting drivers of migration and the shared vulnerabilities of different migrant groups.

Discussion

The thirteen (13) verified studies robustly challenge the traditional voluntary–forced migration dichotomy, revealing a continuum of constrained agency shaped by overlapping economic, coercive, environmental, and structural drivers, particularly evident in Nepal’s labour outflows and analogous global contexts. Early Nepal-focused works like Ghimire & Hillman (2022), Giri (2025), and Burlakoti et al. (2025) demonstrate through regressions and correlations how unemployment, household vulnerability, and regional disparities transform “voluntary” migration into economic necessity while Mak et al. (2021) and Kopytko et al. (2024) expose recruitment debt, exploitative contracts, and returnee stressors as de facto compulsions eroding autonomy. Complementary analyses, such as Schutte et al.’s (2021) machine learning, show politics eclipsing climate in EU asylum. Thalheimer et al.’s (2022) drought-vulnerability models in Nepal, and Ajlan’s (2026) neoliberal policy critique of Syria’s refugee crisis consistently highlight compounded pressures over isolated motives, with health vulnerabilities (Mahato et al., 2024) and well-being contrasts (Lilier et al., 2025) uniform across categories.

Despite the methodological diversity of the included studies, which combined quantitative predictive approaches with qualitative insights, several limitations

constrain the generalizability of the findings. Cross-sectional designs (e.g., Burlakoti et al., 2025; Thalheimer et al., 2022) limit the ability to establish causal relationships. Furthermore, the predominance of Nepal-focused studies (6 of 13 studies) may introduce contextual bias, thereby reducing the generalizability of the findings. In addition, studies relying on qualitative self-reported data (e.g., Mak et al., 2021; Sengupta, 2025) are susceptible to recall bias and subjective interpretation.

Ajlan (2026) relies on secondary historical data without primary voices. These gaps, while not invalidating the spectrum critique, underscore the need for longitudinal, multi-site studies that integrate the experiences of female/urban migrants and Global South gray literature to enhance policy translation, such as Nepal's recruitment reforms and universal protections amid 25% GDP remittances that mask risks.

Table 2

Summary of Included Studies on the Voluntary–Forced Dichotomy in Migration

Study Reference	Objectives / Hypothesis	Variables Used	Results	Measures of Association
Mak et al. (2021)	Explores types and experiences of migration-related stressors among returnee male Nepali international labour migrants	Workplace/employer, family, recruitment, environment, and legal stressors; migration experiences (destinations, job types)	Workplace stressors (exploitative practices, contract issues, poor conditions) most common, alongside family, recruitment, environmental, and legal stressors	Qualitative thematic analysis categorizing stressors and patterns
Schutte et al. (2021)	Tests if climatic factors are weaker predictors of asylum migration to the EU than political/economic drivers	Climatic indicators (temperature, droughts), economic factors (GDP, education), violence (conflict deaths, repression), baseline controls (distance, population)	Political violence and repression strongest predictors; climate is minimal	Machine learning (Random Forest) with out-of-sample validation and Accumulated Local Effect plots
Ghimire & Hillman (2022)	Examines long-term migration trends and drivers in Nepal	Employment status, political instability, and regional development	Migration is strongly associated with unemployment and structural inequality, indicating constrained voluntariness	Statistical associations between economic indicators and migration flows
Becker (2022)	Examines agency in historical forced displacement	Political constraints, destination choice, survival strategies	Displaced populations retained decision-making despite coercion	Historical comparative analysis

Thalheimer et al. (2022)	Examines how compound droughts and structural vulnerabilities shape mobility in drought-prone countries (Madagascar, Nepal, Mexico)	Climatic data, socio-economic factors, infrastructure, social networks	Droughts increase internal migration in low-resource areas but reduce/divert it with vulnerabilities	Statistical and agent-based models on migration probability
Kopytko et al. (2024)	Investigates coercive elements in labour migration systems	Recruitment debt, contract restrictions, and workplace conditions	Debt-financed migration and exploitative recruitment reduced autonomy	Qualitative thematic analysis linking practices to vulnerability
Mahato et al. (2024)	Assesses health and well-being outcomes among Nepali migrants	Health access, labor conditions, and social protection	Similar vulnerabilities across economic and displaced migrants	Mixed-methods assessment of health/social indicators
Burlakoti et al. (2025)	Analyzes household-level labour migration patterns	Household income, regional economic capacity, and international migration status	Labour migration as a household coping strategy in weak regions	Regression analysis using census data
Giri (2025)	Assesses economic determinants of emigration from Nepal	Domestic employment availability, income levels, and emigration rates	Rising emigration is linked to limited jobs, suggesting the necessity	Correlation analysis between labour market indicators and migration
Lasater et al. (2025)	Explores links between climate change, conflict, and displacement	Environmental stress, conflict exposure, livelihood security	Migration is shaped by combined environmental/economic pressures	Scoping synthesis of multi-study evidence
Lilier et al. (2025)	Explores relational well-being shaped by climate vulnerability and stressors in Bhola Island, Bangladesh	Relational well-being (dependent); financial status, migration (forced/voluntary), social support, place attachment, disasters, politics, culture (independent)	Well-being boosted by voluntary migration/support; harmed by forced migration/disasters	Qualitative thematic analysis in relational framework
Sengupta (2025)	Reviews empirical studies on environmental immobility to map the choice-constraint continuum	Environmental drivers (cyclones, drought), social factors (gender, poverty, attachment), and immobility types	Geographically concentrated (e.g., Bangladesh); immobility from interacting vulnerabilities beyond binary	Thematic/content analysis synthesizing findings

Ajlan (2026)	Examines how neoliberal IMF/ World Bank policies destabilized Syria, leading to war and migration	Neoliberal policies (subsidy cuts, privatization), state destabilization, rural marginalization, youth unemployment, poverty, forced migration	Reforms increased inequality, weakened services, and fueled uprising/war/refugees	Qualitative case study via historical/ institutional analysis
-----------------	--	---	--	---

Limitations and Strengths

The 13 included studies robustly challenge the voluntary-forced migration dichotomy through diverse methods, regressions, machine learning (Schutte et al., 2021), and thematic analyses offering predictive power on economic/climate drivers and nuanced agency insights, particularly in Nepal’s labour migration (25% GDP contribution) alongside global cases like Syria and Bangladesh. This PRISMA-guided scoping review strengthens transparency and policy relevance by mapping drivers/frameworks across heterogeneous designs and contexts, aiding researchers/practitioners. However, limitations include cross-sectional dominance precluding causality (e.g., Thalheimer et al., 2022), Nepal-centric sampling overlooking diverse migrants, qualitative recall bias risks (Mak et al., 2021), English-only currency (2021–2026), missing non-English/earlier works and grey literature beyond PubMed/Scopus/Google Scholar, plus absent quality appraisal preventing meta-analysis or firm causal claims.

Recommendations

This article suggests that future migration research should move beyond rigid categories and recognize that many people migrate for mixed reasons. Prioritize longitudinal mixed-methods research on Nepal’s migrants (female and urban cohorts, Nepali sources), PRISMA meta-analyses of compounded drivers, and immobility studies to address gaps in the 13 studies. Policymakers should ban recruitment fees, extend universal protections, adopt climate strategies that recognize migration continua, and standardize metrics through Global South collaborations for UNHCR/IOM reforms, harnessing Nepal’s 25% of GDP in remittances.

Conclusion

This scoping review synthesizes 13 rigorously selected studies (2021–2026) from 1,569 initial records, revealing that the voluntary-forced migration dichotomy

fundamentally misrepresents human mobility as a spectrum of constrained agency rather than discrete categories. Nepal's dominant evidence (Ghimire & Hillman 2022; Giri 2025; Burlakoti et al. 2025) demonstrates "voluntary" labour outflows as economic necessities amid unemployment and household Vulnerability, contributing 25% to GDP while coercive recruitment (Kopytko et al. 2024; Mak et al. 2021) and compounded climate-conflict pressures (Schutte et al. 2021; Thalheimer et al. 2022; Lasater et al. 2025) erode autonomy across contexts, with uniform health vulnerabilities (Mahato et al. 2024) and well-being contrasts (Lilier et al. 2025) transcending labels.

These multi-method findings from Random Forest predictions and regressions to thematic analyses align with Richmond (1993) and de Haas (2010) continuum models, challenging policy binaries that deny protections to "economic" migrants despite shared risks. This review advances migration scholarship by mapping PRISMA-guided gaps and urging longitudinal mixed-methods research incorporating female/urban/Global South voices, alongside reforms such as recruitment fee bans, universal safeguards, and climate-adaptive frameworks to harness remittances for sustainable development.

Theoretical Implications

The 13 studies advance migration theory by empirically validating continuum models-Richmond's (1993) "proactive-reactive-volition less" spectrum and de Haas's (2010) constrained agency framework over rigid voluntary-forced binaries, demonstrating how economic Vulnerability (Giri, 2025), recruitment coercion (Kopytko, 2024), and climate-policy overlaps (Thalheimer, 2022; Ajlan, 2026) create hybrid mobilities defying categorization. This evidence refines push-pull models (Lee, 1966) to incorporate structural traps, challenging UNHCR/IOM classifications that withhold protections from "voluntary" flows despite shared vulnerabilities (Mahato 2024). Nepal cases illustrate how remittances (25% of GDP) mask compulsion, urging relational theories integrating immobility (Sengupta 2025) for holistic Global South scholarship.

Policy Recommendations

Nepal and similar labour-sending nations should ban recruitment fees and enforce transparent contracts to curb debt bondage, as highlighted in Kopytko et al. (2024). They should also extend universal health, social security, and repatriation

protections to all migrants, regardless of voluntary-forced labels, as vulnerabilities converge per Mahato et al. (2024). Governments must integrate climate adaptation into migration planning (Lasater et al. 2025; Thalheimer et al. 2022), channel remittances (25% of Nepal's GDP) into rural resilience funds, and collaborate with UNHCR/IOM to develop continuum-based frameworks that blend asylum rights with regulated labour pathways, transcending binaries for equitable governance.

Research Avenues

Future research requires longitudinal mixed-methods tracking agency in diverse Nepali migrants (female/urban/youth), Nepali sources, PRISMA meta-analyses of compounded drivers, standardized voluntariness metrics, and immobility studies (Sengupta 2025) to advance beyond current limitations.

References

- Ajlan, A. A. (2026). Neoliberal economic policies as a root cause of forced migration from Arab Spring countries: The case of Syria. *Disasters*, 50(1), 1-21.
- Albarosa, E., & Elsner, B. (2023). Forced migration and social cohesion: Evidence from the 2015/16 mass inflow in Germany. *World Development*, 167 (10622), 1-25.
- Ali, A. (2022). Conceptualizing displacement: The importance of coercion. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(5), 1083–1102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2101440>
- Bartram, D. (2015). Forced migration and “rejected alternatives”: A conceptual refinement. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 13(4), 439–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2015.1030489>
- Becker, S. O. (2022). Forced displacement in history: Some recent research. *Australian Economic History Review*, 62(1), 2–25.
- Blake, M. (2023). Voluntary and involuntary migrants: On migration, safe third countries, and the collective unfreedom of the proletariat. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 37(4), 427–451.
- Brunarska, Z., & Ivlevs, A. (2023). Forced displacement and subsequent generations' migration intentions: Intergenerational transmission of family migration capital. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(10), 2423–2443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2290443>
- Burlakoti, M. S., Regmi, H. R., & Khatiwada, P. P. (2025). *International migration in Nepal (National Population and Housing Census 2021)*. National Statistics Office.

- Cantor, D. J., & Apollo, J. O. (2020). Internal displacement, internal migration, and refugee flows: Connecting the dots. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 39(4), 647–664. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdaa016>
- Donnelly, A., Haintz, G. L., McKenzie, H., & Graham, M. (2023). Influences on reproductive decision-making among forcibly displaced women resettling in high-income countries: A scoping review and thematic analysis. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 22(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-023-01993-5>
- Erdal, M. B., & Oeppen, C. (2017). Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 44(6), 981-998. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384149>
- Fernández, S., Arce, G., García-Alaminos, Á., Cazcarro, I., & Arto, I. (2024). Climate change is a veiled driver of migration in Bangladesh and Ghana. *Science of the Total Environment*, 922(171210), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2024.171210>
- Ghimire, N., & Hillman, W. (2022). Characteristics of circumstances and influential forces of migration in Nepal (1990-2016): An integrative literature review. *Journal of Development and Social Engineering*, 8(01), 16–23. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jdse.v8i01.54260>
- Giri, M. (2025). *Emigration from Nepal and its impact on the economy*. Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) South Asia.
- Huot, S., Kelly, E., & Park, S. J. (2016). Occupational experiences of forced migrants: A scoping review. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 63(3), 186-205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12261>
- Jubilut, L. L., & Casagrande, M. M. (2019). Shortcomings and/or missed opportunities of the Global Compacts for the protection of forced migrants. *International Migration*, 57(6), 139-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12663>
- Kopytko, M., Panchenko, V., Levchenko, A., Kapinos, H., & Hrytsan, V. (2024). Forced labour migration as a threat to social and economic human rights and a factor of influence on the national labour market and business entities. *Social and Legal Studies*, 2(7), 140–148.
- Kraly, E. P., Abbasi-Shavazi, M. J., Torres Colón, L. L., & Reed, H. E. (2023). Social consequences of forced and refugee migration. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 49(1), 129–153. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-090221-040023>
- Krause, U., & Segadlo, N. (2021). Conflict, displacement ... and peace? A critical review of research debates. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 40(3), 271–292. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdab004>

- Lasater, M. E., Prager, G., Choi, Y. A., Groteclaes, T., Rao, D., Kamps, S. P., & Altare, C. B. (2025). Understanding relationships among climate change, conflict, migration/displacement and health in humanitarian settings: A scoping review. *Conflict and Health*, 19(1), 1-21.
- Lilier, K., et al. (2025). The “most beautiful place” where “it’s not possible to live”: A qualitative study of relational well-being in an area of climate vulnerability, Bangladesh. *PLoS One*, 20(9).
- Mahato, P., Bhusal, S., Regmi, P., & van Teijlingen, E. (2024). Health and wellbeing among Nepali migrants: A scoping review. *Journal of Health Promotion*, 12(1), 79–90. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jhp.v12i1.72699>
- Mak, J., et al. (2021). “I had tears in my eyes but I just left without looking back”. A qualitative study of migration-related stressors amongst Nepali male labour migrants. *Journal of Migration and Health*.
- Makulilo, V. B. (2023). Gender dimension and forced migration in Tanzania. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 19(2), 117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2244400>
- Müller-Funk, L., & Natter, K. (2023). Forced migration governance in Tunisia: Balancing risks and assets for state-making during independence and democratization. *Mediterranean Politics*, 29(5), 617–641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2191523>
- Peters, M. D., Godfrey, C., McInerney, P., Munn, Z., Tricco, A. C., & Khalil, H. (2020). Scoping reviews. In E. Aromataris & Z. Munn (Eds.), *JBIM manual for evidence synthesis* (Chapter 11). JBI. <https://doi.org/10.46658/JBIMES-20-12>
- Procter, C. (2024). Coerced migration: Mobility under siege in Gaza. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(10), 2359–2383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2024.2312229>
- Robins, D. (2022). Immobility as loyalty: ‘Voluntariness’ and narratives of a duty to stay in the context of (non)migration decision making. *Geoforum*, 134, 22–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.05.017>
- Romadhona, M. K., Kinasih, S. E., Sugiarti, E., Oktafenanda, R. D., & Kim, S. (2026). Time to travel: climate migration in the course of history. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 12(1), 2656564.
- Schutte, S., Vestby, J., Carling, J., & Buhaug, H. (2021). Climatic conditions are weak predictors of asylum migration. *Nature communications*, 12(1), 2067.
- Romadhona, M. K., Kinasih, S. E., Sugiarti, E., Oktafenanda, R. D., & Kim, S. (2026). Time to travel: climate migration in the course of history. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 12(1), 2656564.

- Scharrer, T., & Suerbaum, M. (2022). Negotiating class positions in proximate places of refuge: Syrians in Egypt and Somalians in Kenya. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(20), 4847–4864. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2123432>
- Sengupta, M. (2025). Environmental immobility: A systematic review of empirical research. *Ambio*, 54(11), 1729–1756.
- Thalheimer, L., et al. (2022). Compound impacts from droughts and structural vulnerability on human mobility. *iScience*, 25(12), 105491.
- Thiollet, H., Pastore, F., & Schmoll, C. (2024). Does the forced-voluntary dichotomy really influence migration governance? In *Handbook of human mobility and migration* (pp. 221–241). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839105784.00021>
- Transiskus, S. F., & Gholamzadeh Bazarbash, M. (2024). Beyond the binary of trapped populations and voluntary immobility: A people-centered perspective on environmental change and human immobility at Lake Urmia, Iran. *Global Environmental Change*, 84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2024.102803>
- Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K., Colquhoun, H., Kastner, M., Levac, D., Ng, C., Sharpe, J. P., & Wilson, K. (2016). A scoping review on the conduct and reporting of scoping reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 16(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-016-0118-4>
- Wachter, K., Dalpe, J., Bonz, A., Drozdowski, H., & Hermer, J. (2020). A scoping review of social support interventions with refugees in resettlement contexts: Implications for practice and applied research. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 19(4), 557–572. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2020.1854917>
- Williams, A., Taylor, M. M., Lund, M., Rohwer, E., & Crea, T. M. (2024). Self-determination in involuntarily displaced people: Scoping review. *SearchRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1079/searchrxiv.2024.00580>
- Wolf, S. (2020). Talking to migrants: Invisibility, vulnerability, and protection. *Geopolitics*, 26(1), 193-214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1764540>