



Understanding the Multifaceted Challenges of Immigrant Women Workers in Nepal

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Abstract

Background: Labour migration is a cornerstone of Nepal's economy, yet policy and research have predominantly focused on the outbound migration of Nepali citizens. This focus has rendered a significant population nearly invisible: immigrant women workers who migrate to Nepal from other countries, primarily India and Bangladesh. Concentrated in informal, unregulated sectors like domestic work, caregiving, and hospitality within urban centers, these women face unique and severe vulnerabilities. While global scholarship highlights the precarious position of migrant women, and Nepal has recently adopted progressive human rights frameworks like the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (2024–2028), the specific realities of immigrant women workers within Nepal remain critically under-examined.

Objective: This study aims to analyze the multifaceted challenges faced by immigrant women workers in Nepal. It seeks to understand how intersecting structures of gender, class, nationality, and legal status shape their labour conditions and lived experiences. Furthermore, it critically examines the effectiveness of Nepal's migration governance and human rights frameworks in addressing the protection, rights, and access to justice for this marginalized workforce.



Methods: The study employs a qualitative methodology, combining critical policy analysis with an integrative literature review. It draws on three main sources: (1) academic literature from feminist sociology and intersectionality scholarship; (2) grey literature and policy documents, including national labour laws, migration policies, and the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights; and (3) secondary data from national statistics and migration databases. This data is analyzed through a gender-responsive and intersectional lens to identify gaps between policy commitments and the lived realities of immigrant women workers.

Findings: The analysis reveals that immigrant women workers in Nepal experience profound marginalization due to the convergence of multiple factors. Their employment in the informal economy places them outside the purview of standard labour protections, leading to wage exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and harassment. This vulnerability is compounded by their immigration status, which may be irregular or undocumented, creating barriers to reporting abuse and accessing justice. Nepal's migration governance frameworks are found to be structurally biased towards outbound migration, with existing policies and human rights commitments failing to extend meaningful protection to inbound workers. This policy gap, combined with social isolation, language barriers, and gendered assumptions about their work, leaves immigrant women in a legally precarious and highly exploitable position.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the vulnerabilities of immigrant women workers in Nepal are not incidental but are systematically produced and reinforced by intersecting structural inequalities and significant gaps in the national governance framework. The protections promised by policies like the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights remain largely inaccessible to this group. Bridging this protection gap requires a paradigm shift towards a gender-responsive and intersectional approach that extends labour rights, monitoring, and grievance mechanisms to all workers within Nepal's borders, regardless of their origin or documentation status.

Novelty: This research addresses a critical lacuna in migration studies by shifting the analytical lens from Nepal as a source country to Nepal as a destination country for women labour migrants. It is among the first studies to systematically apply an intersectional framework to the specific context of immigrant women workers in Nepal, foregrounding their invisibility within both policy and scholarship. By connecting their lived experiences to a critical analysis of national and international human rights frameworks, the study provides a foundational evidence base for developing more inclusive and rights-based migration governance.

Keywords: Gender, Immigration, Intersectionality, Labour Migration, Nepal.

Introduction

Labour migration has long been embedded in Nepal's socio-economic history, traditionally dominated by male migration particularly through military service in the British Gurkhas and Indian armies. In contrast, the international migration of Nepali women is a relatively recent phenomenon. As noted by Dhungel (1999), women's migration emerged prominently only in the late twentieth century, and the Nepali migrant community remains comparatively smaller than other South Asian diasporas. However, since the 1990s Nepal has witnessed a significant



increase in labour migration, driven by intersecting economic, political, and social transformations. The democratic revolution of 1990 marked a critical turning point in Nepal's political economy. The transition from an absolute monarchy to a republican state, alongside economic liberalisation policies such as privatisation, labour market deregulation, and the introduction of free trade, reshaped migration dynamics. Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of globalisation—through information, technology, and communication—altered livelihood strategies and aspirations across Nepali society. These changes produced both opportunities and contradictions, influencing patterns of internal and international migration. As scholars observe, democratic movements and globalisation have contributed to increasingly diversified migration destinations since the 1990s (Thieme & Wyss, 2005).

Social transformations accompanying these shifts have been equally significant. Movements advocating ethnic rights, women's rights, religious freedom, human rights, and environmental justice have challenged traditional hierarchies, albeit unevenly. Within this context of global economic restructuring, the gendered nature of labour migration has become increasingly pronounced. Women particularly migrant and immigrant women have emerged as a preferred labour force in global manufacturing, informal service sectors, and domestic work (Chang, 2000; Louie, 2001). Each year, growing numbers of women from underdeveloped nations migrate into precarious and often exploitative forms of employment, and Nepali women are no exception. The rise of Nepali women's migration coincided with the political instability, economic hardship, and social disruptions of the 1990s, situating their mobility within broader structural inequalities. Feminist sociological and intersectionality scholars provide critical insights into these dynamics by examining how women's labour experiences are shaped by the intersections of race, class, gender, nationality, and legal or citizenship status (Collins, 1990; Glenn, 2002; Zinn & Dill, 1993). Intersectionality conceptualises these categories as interlocking systems of power and oppression, rather than isolated factors. Migrant women's vulnerability, therefore, cannot be understood through gender alone but must be analysed through the simultaneous effects of multiple identities and structural positions that create layered forms of marginalisation and exploitation.

In response to the growing scale and complexity of labour migration, the Government of Nepal has developed policies and regulatory frameworks, supported by legally mandated institutions, to govern foreign employment. The adoption of the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (NAP-BHR) 2024–2028 represents a significant policy milestone, aligning Nepal with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Launched in January 2024, the NAP emphasises the “protect, respect, and remedy” pillars, prioritising labour rights monitoring, fair recruitment practices, and improved access to justice. At the same time Nepal's female mobility policies based on age, employment sector, and destination country have imposed migration restrictions intended to protect women but which, paradoxically, may increase their exposure to vulnerability and exploitation through irregular migration channels. Labour migration remains central to Nepal's economy. According to the 2021 census, over 2.1 million Nepali citizens were absent from the country, with 77 per cent migrating for work-related reasons. Between 2014/15 and 2023/24, the Department of Foreign



Employment issued 3.4 million labour approvals for overseas employment. Although official data recorded 587,510 Nepalis working in India in 2022/23, the actual number is estimated to exceed one million. In 2024 alone, Nepal received USD 14.2 billion in remittances, ranking fourth globally in terms of remittance-to-GDP ratio at 33.1 per cent. These figures underscore the critical role of labour migration in sustaining the national economy while simultaneously raising urgent questions about rights, protection, and gendered inequalities within migration regimes.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses specifically on women who have migrated to Nepal from other countries for work examining their labour conditions, vulnerabilities and access to justice within the Nepali context. These workers include women from neighbouring regions of India, Bangladesh and other countries employed primarily in domestic work, caregiving, hospitality, informal services and entertainment sectors in urban centres such as Kathmandu and Pokhara. Where relevant parallels are drawn with Nepali women migrant workers abroad to illustrate broader structural patterns of gendered migration vulnerability however, the primary analytical focus remains on immigrant women workers within Nepal.

Objectives of the study

1. To analyse the intersecting social, economic and legal factors that shape the labor conditions and vulnerabilities and lived experiences of immigrant women workers in Nepal.
2. To critically examine Nepal's labor migration and human rights governance frameworks in addressing the protection, rights and access to justice of immigrant women workers.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative critical policy analysis and integrative literature review approach. The analysis is based on three sources that is review of academic literature on gender, migration and labour governance particularly feminist sociological and intersectionality scholarship, grey literature and policy documents including reports from government agencies, international organisations and civil society groups addressing migration, labour rights and human rights in Nepal and lastly secondary data analysis from national statistics, census reports and international migration databases to contextualise labour migration trends. Policy frameworks including labour laws, migration governance mechanisms and the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (2024–2028) were examined through a gender-responsive and intersectional lens to assess their effectiveness in protecting immigrant women workers in Nepal. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of structural gaps between policy commitments and lived realities.

Literature Review

Global scholarship on labour migration demonstrates that immigrant women workers are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage, informal, and precarious forms of employment, including domestic work, caregiving, hospitality, and informal services. Feminist economists and sociologists argue that the global labour market is structured along gendered and racialised



lines, where women particularly immigrant women are positioned as flexible, expendable, and undervalued labour (Chang, 2000; Glenn, 2002). These structural dynamics result in limited labour protections, wage exploitation, long working hours, and exposure to abuse, especially in sectors that operate outside formal regulatory mechanisms. Immigrant women workers frequently experience invisibility within labour governance systems, as their work is often located in private households or informal enterprises. This invisibility not only normalises exploitation but also restricts access to legal remedies, social protection, and collective bargaining. Existing studies emphasise that gendered assumptions about women's "natural" suitability for care and service work reinforce exploitative labour arrangements and perpetuate occupational segregation.

Intersectionality theory provides a critical analytical framework for understanding the complex and overlapping challenges faced by immigrant women workers. According to Collins (1990) and Zinn and Dill (1993), systems of oppression operate simultaneously through gender, class, race or ethnicity, nationality, and legal or citizenship status, producing a matrix of domination. For immigrant women workers, vulnerability emerges not from a single identity marker but from the convergence of multiple structural inequalities. Scholars argue that immigration status plays a particularly significant role in shaping labour experiences, as irregular or temporary legal status limits workers' ability to claim rights, report abuse, or access justice. Glenn (2002) highlights that immigrant women often occupy structurally subordinate positions where legal exclusion and social marginalisation reinforce labour exploitation. This intersectional lens is essential for analysing immigrant women workers in Nepal, whose experiences are shaped by gender norms, national origin, documentation status, and employment in informal sectors. The informal economy has been widely recognised as a primary site of employment for immigrant women workers. Research indicates that informality intensifies vulnerability by excluding workers from labour laws, minimum wage protections, occupational safety standards, and social security systems. Women employed in informal and domestic work are particularly exposed to harassment, abuse, and arbitrary dismissal with limited avenues for redress.

Feminist scholars argue that informality is not accidental but structurally produced through policy gaps, weak enforcement, and social norms that devalue women's work. For immigrant women informality is further compounded by linguistic barriers, social isolation, and limited awareness of rights. Studies from South Asia suggest that immigrant women workers often rely on informal networks for employment which can increase dependency on employers and intermediaries thereby heightening the risk of exploitation. Existing literature on migration governance highlights that state policies play a critical role in shaping immigrant women workers' vulnerability. Gender-differentiated migration policies often framed as protective measures can restrict women's mobility and employment choices. Feminist critiques suggest that such policies may reinforce patriarchal control over women's labour while failing to address structural drivers of exploitation.

Despite growing attention to labour migration immigrant women workers within Nepal remain largely invisible in research and policy discourse. Available evidence suggests that these women primarily originate from neighbouring Indian states and to a lesser extent Bangladesh



and other South Asian countries. Many are employed in informal sectors such as domestic work, caregiving, hospitality, beauty services and entertainment industries in urban centres including Kathmandu Valley and Pokhara.

Several factors contribute to their vulnerability that are employment in private households and informal businesses beyond effective labour regulation, lack of formal work permits or documentation, limited access to healthcare, legal protection, and social security, language barriers and social isolation and exposure to harassment, wage exploitation, and arbitrary dismissal. Nepal's migration governance frameworks are primarily designed for outbound labour migration of Nepali citizens. Consequently, institutional mechanisms for monitoring working conditions, addressing grievances, or ensuring labour protections for inbound immigrant workers remain weak or absent. This policy gap leaves immigrant women workers in a precarious position, where legal invisibility intersects with gender discrimination and socioeconomic marginalisation.

In Nepal, migration governance has primarily focused on regulating outbound labour migration with limited attention to immigrant workers within the country. While Nepal has introduced labour laws and regulatory frameworks enforcement in informal sectors remains weak. Scholars note that gaps between policy commitments and implementation disproportionately affect immigrant women workers particularly those lacking legal documentation or employed in private households. The emergence of business and human rights frameworks has brought renewed attention to corporate accountability and labour rights. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights emphasise the state duty to protect the corporate responsibility to respect human rights and access to remedy for affected individuals. However, studies on the implementation of these principles reveal significant challenges in translating normative commitments into practice, especially for informal and migrant workers. Nepal's adoption of the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (2024–2028) represents a critical policy development. Yet existing scholarship suggests that without gender-responsive implementation, robust monitoring, and inclusion of immigrant women workers such frameworks risk remaining symbolic. There is limited empirical research examining how business and human rights commitments address the specific realities of immigrant women workers in Nepal. Despite growing global scholarship on migrant women's labour there remains a significant gap in research focusing on immigrant women workers in Nepal. Existing studies largely prioritise outbound migration, remittances, and trafficking narratives leaving the lived experiences of immigrant women workers within Nepal under examined. Moreover, there is a lack of intersectional analysis linking women's labour experiences with migration governance, informality, and human rights frameworks. This study addresses these gaps by centring immigrant women workers in Nepal and analysing how intersecting social, legal, and economic factors shape their labour conditions, vulnerability, and access to justice. Nepali migration has grown substantially shaped by factors such as region, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education. India and the Gulf remain the primary destinations with men dominating labour migration to these regions while women often migrate to countries like Jordan, Cyprus, and Australia. Remittances largely from the Gulf countries form a significant part of household



incomes but are primarily used for daily needs and debt repayment. Return patterns reveal gendered disparities in earnings and reasons for return with males mostly completing contracts and females often returning due to health issues. Despite the rise in international migration internal migration continues to dominate within Nepal. The evolving nature of migration underscores the need for structured, consistent, and coordinated research to better understand its social, economic, and developmental impacts. A Research done in Pokhara states that women's labour migration not only transforms household power dynamics but also contributes to self-reliance and confidence in the public sphere. This shift coexists with persistent patriarchal norms that continue to shape women's experiences both at home and abroad. Qualitative research done in 2024 suggest that many women return with inadequate support for economic reintegration, social acceptance or psychological recovery especially when they migrated through irregular routes or faced exploitation abroad.

Structural and Socio-Economic Drivers of Female Migration

Nepali women migrate for multiple reasons, often driven by economic necessity limited local employment and household pressures. National data indicate that the share of Nepali women among foreign employment approvals increased significantly over recent decades from about 3.9 % in 2008/09 to around 12.9 % by 2023/24. This trend reflects both the "feminization of migration" which civil organisation calls it and a shifting socio-economic landscape. However irregular migration remains widespread Government officials' approvals underrepresent women because many travel through unregistered channels especially to India due to the open border where they are excluded from formal protections and welfare schemes.

Empirical research documents states that workplace risks experienced by female migrant workers. A study of Nepali women who worked abroad found that more than one-third reported workplace harassment including physical abuse, verbal mistreatment, and even sexual exploitation. These risks were higher among illiterate women those without fixed salaries and domestic workers. Beyond abuse migrant women often work long hours under strenuous conditions with limited access to legal support, healthcare, or social security, leaving them highly vulnerable in destination countries where enforcement of labour rights may be weak or absent. Gendered discrimination in host countries exacerbates women's socio-economic vulnerabilities. A study of Nepali women migrant workers in India highlights how economic instability, insecure jobs and lack of access to public services intersect with class and gender marginalization, hindering access to basic rights.

Policy Frameworks - Progress and Gaps

Nepal's policy approach to female migration has historically been protectionist including bans on women migrating for certain types of work such as domestic work in West Asia. While intended to shield women from exploitation these bans instead pushed many into irregular migration increasing their vulnerability to trafficking and abuse. In August 2025, Nepal introduced the National Labour Migration Policy 2082 a landmark reform that for the first time legally includes India-bound migrant workers under the labour migration framework. This expanded scope aims to ensure social security, data registration and inclusion in welfare programs for previously unregulated workers which is crucial for women migrating to India



through informal channels. The policy also emphasized safe, regular migration and enhanced governance mechanisms reflecting commitments to improved worker protection. However, implementation challenges remain especially in reaching and protecting women who have historically used irregular routes. Simultaneously, Nepal is working with international partners like the ILO to develop gender-sensitive bilateral labor agreements and strengthen negotiation capacities for safer and more equitable labor migration frameworks. These efforts aim to improve recruitment practices, enforce decent work conditions, and extend social protections across the migration cycle.

The lived experience of Hira Bhujel offers a poignant illustration of the human cost of policy gaps, Hira legally migrated abroad worked as a domestic worker and significantly improved her family's economic situation by buying land and funding education. When a policy ban was in place preventing her from returning for a second contract Hira turned to irregular pathways to continue working. she became ill and was abandoned by her employer. Due to her undocumented status, she lacked access to medical care, legal protection or state assistance. Her death and the limited support given to her family highlights the grave consequences of restrictive migration policies.

Like Hira there are many cases reported or unreported with the government officials, this underscores the pressing need for rights-based migration policies that protect women irrespective of their migration route.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

Migrant women workers in Nepal remain largely invisible within migration governance frameworks that primarily focus on outbound labour migration leaving significant gaps in protection, labour rights enforcement and access to justice for foreign women employed in informal sectors such as domestic work, caregiving, hospitality, and entertainment. Their vulnerabilities are shaped by intersecting inequalities related to gender, nationality, legal status, and socioeconomic marginalisation, which existing policies only partially address despite commitments under frameworks such as the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (2024–2028) and the National Labour Migration Policy 2082. To bridge these gaps Nepal must adopt a gender-responsive and intersectional approach that extends labour monitoring and human rights protections to sectors employing immigrant women workers establishes accessible grievance and support mechanisms regardless of documentation status strengthens labour inspection in informal workplaces and develops bilateral cooperation with neighbouring countries particularly India to ensure safe, regulated and rights-based cross-border labour mobility. Addressing these structural shortcomings is essential not only for safeguarding immigrant women workers but also for advancing Nepal's commitments to equitable development, human rights and inclusive labour governance.

Transparency Statement: The authors confirm that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

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Authors' Contributions: The authors jointly conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.



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