

Climbing the Peak: Understanding Contemporary Trends of Foreign Labor Migration in Nepal

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of labor migration trends in Nepal, focusing on the significant increase in the number of laborers migrating and the government's role in facilitating migration to new destinations. It also explores the long-term consequences of labor migration, particularly the brain drain resulting from the outflow of skilled and educated workers, and its negative impact on Nepal's holistic development, innovation, productivity, and economic growth. This study is based on existing secondary data and used published research articles, books, and report. The article emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive actions to safeguard the rights of migrant workers, mitigate the negative effects of labor migration, and harness its potential for sustainable development. It is found that labor migration from Nepal is a complex issue with far-reaching impacts, and it is crucial for the government, civil society, and the international community to address the challenges and risks faced by Nepali migrant workers and ensure their rights and well-being.

Key Words: Migration; destination; labor migration; trends; Nepal

1. Introduction

Labor migration is a global phenomenon, with people from low-income countries seeking better job opportunities and a better life in high-income countries. Labor migration is a common issue in the world. In 2019, more than 169 million people across national borders for working purposes, which covers around 5% of global labor human resources in the destination countries (Habti & Elo, 2019). The world's latest trend is that people from low-income countries are migrating to high-income countries. Economic inequalities, job opportunities, attraction to better life are major reasons behind labor migration. Similarly unstable government and politics, natural disasters, poverty, decreasing agricultural productivity, and social networks contribute to labor migration.

In 2019, labor migrants from all over the world, 24.2% of people shifted to Europe, and 22.1% shifted to North America (Lichter et al., 2020). International labor migration

mainly occurs in low-income countries, where they cross national borders for a better life and opportunity (Balbo & Marconi, 2006; SvHelgason, 2015). Economic inequalities, job opportunities, and a better life are the driving force for labor migration. Male and female equally migrate for work; according to the International labor organization (ILO), 58.5% of male and 41.5% of female was migrant for operational purpose in 2019 (ILO, 2020). Migration, unlike fertility and mortality, is the least researched and understood component of demographic dynamics in Nepal, although many of Nepal's social and political problems are interwoven with the process of both internal and international migration (Gartaula, 2009; KC, 1998; Magar, 2016).

This study aims to identify the recent trend of labor migration from Nepal. Nepalese workers generally go abroad for labor through private recruitment agencies. The government of Nepal has also established several institutions to facilitate labor migration, including the Foreign Employment Promotion Board (FEPB) and the Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE). Social networks, such as family and friends who have migrated, can also motivate workers to seek employment abroad. People utilize various channels for labor migration from Nepal, including government programs, private recruitment agencies, and informal networks.

In the past, international migration from Nepal was mainly to India and Tibet. Migration is a complex phenomenon marked by socio-economic, political, cultural, demographic, environmental, and psychological causes in which push and pull factors work in the place of origin and the place of destination, respectively (Bijak, 2006; Dako-Gyeke, 2016; Gautam, 2005). People migrate to a new destination for fertile land, infrastructure development, employment opportunities, new technologies, better education, health housing, transportation, and communication facilities (Haggblade et al., 2010; Von Braun, 2007). They seek a highly payable job, a modern society, agglomeration of government, development of industries, business, trade, probity of constrictive works, and high security of urban areas.

2. Pilgrim to Lahure - A history of labor migration from Nepal

Nepal has been a melting pot of various ethnic groups and cultures since ancient times, and migration has significantly shaped the country's demographic and social landscape. The Licchavi period (300-879 CE) saw the migration of Newar people from the Kathmandu Valley to other parts of Nepal (Müller-Böker, 1988), as well as the immigration of Tibet to Burman and Indo-Aryan groups from the north and south. During the Malla period (1200-1769 CE), the Kathmandu Valley was a major center of trade and commerce, attracting traders and merchants from India, Tibet, and other parts of Asia (Rahul, 1997). This period also saw the arrival of the Kirati people from the east, who are believed to be the indigenous inhabitants of Nepal.

Nepalese people migrated for various reasons, such as trade, pilgrimage, and military service. Similarly, Nepalese traders have been documented to have traveled to Tibet,

India, and Southeast Asia for centuries. One of the earliest examples of Nepalese trade with Tibet is documented in the 7th century (Manandhar, 1981), "The Guru Rinpoche" visited Nepal and went to China with a Nepalese trader named Baladeva, who traveled to Tibet and introduced Buddhism there.

During the Mughal period (1526-1857) in India, Nepalese soldiers were known for their bravery and were recruited in large numbers by Mughal emperors (Roy, 2005). Similarly, Nepalese traders traveled to Tibet, India, and Southeast Asia to engage in business. The Nepal Gorkha soldiers have served in the British and Indian armies since the early 19th century (Caplan, 1991; English, 1985).

Labor migration from Nepal has a long history dating back to the mid-19th century when Nepali men were recruited to serve in the British Indian Army. However, large-scale labor migration from Nepal began in the 1990s, when factors such as economic hardship, political instability, and lack of employment opportunities in Nepal led to a surge in the number of Nepali workers seeking work abroad (Fox, 2018; Thieme & Wyss, 2005a).

Initially, labor migrants from Nepal were mainly employed in India and other neighboring countries, such as Bhutan and Myanmar. However, as the demand for foreign workers in the Gulf countries, Malaysia, and other parts of Southeast Asia increased, Nepali workers also started seeking employment opportunities in these regions (Paudel, n.d.).

Nepalese traders have traveled to India for centuries to trade in salt, sugar, and tea. Labor migration from Nepal to India increased significantly during the early 20th century, especially after the construction of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, which connected Darjeeling in India with Nepal (Bennike, 2017). Labor migration from Nepal to the Middle East and other countries increased significantly after the 1970s, especially after the oil boom in the Middle East (Martin, 2009).

In recent times, labor migration from Nepal increased significantly after the 1950s, especially to India and other countries in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Europe. In the early 19th century, many Nepali youth were recruited to serve in the British Indian Army. This led to the migration of Nepali soldiers to various parts of India and other British colonies, such as Singapore and Malaysia.

In the mid-20th century, Nepal began to open up to the world, and many Nepalese started migrating to other countries for education and work opportunities. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia were popular destinations for Nepali students, while India, Bhutan, and other neighboring countries continued to attract Nepali labor migrants. In recent decades, as mentioned earlier, labor migration from Nepal has increased significantly, with millions of Nepali workers seeking employment opportunities in the Gulf countries, Malaysia, and other parts of Southeast Asia.

2.1. Lahure and Tori-lahure - A symbolic word for migrant Nepalese

The word *Lahure and Tori-lahure* are symbolic words for migrant Nepalese people and is famous all over the country (Rai et al., 2021). Over the decades, labor migration for

seasonal work has been a vital livelihood for Nepali people. People from Nepal usually went to Panjab and Uttar Pradesh after finishing agricultural work on their land. They work on a mustard farm as a seasonal worker. Mustard is massively produced in Panjab and Uttar Pradesh, and Nepalese people reached there to work at the mustard firm as seasonal workers. The people who worked on the mustard farm and returned to Nepal started to be called *Tori-lahure*. Gradually, it started to be known as a word referring to the immigrants.

Similarly, the other word *Lahure* also refers to an immigrant word in Nepal. The labor migration from Nepal has a long history of about 200 years (Seddon et al., 2002; Singh, 2015). We have a history of youth crossing the borders for war as soldiers. Many Nepalese youths started to join the army at Lahore as soldiers of the Sikh emperor. They became a symbol of bravery and became famous worldwide. Nepalese youth started to join the armed forces of India, Hongkong, Malaya, and the UK (Kharel, 2016; Thieme & Wyss, 2005b). They were recognized as *Lahure*, and people started to call *lahure*, migrants in other countries from Nepal.

3. Methods and materials

3.1 Study area

Nepal is located in the central part of the HindukushHimalayas region occupying an area of 147,516 km² areas, which extends from 26°22' to 30°27' N in latitude and 80°04' to 88°12' E in longitude (Figure 1). Administratively, the country is divided into 7 provinces and 77 districts, and three ecological regions; Mountain, Hill, and Tarai. Hill and Mountain regions cover 86% and 14% of the Tarai region's land (east-west southern lowland). The elevation range of the study area starts from the Indian Gangetic plain of less than 50m to the high Himalayan region of more than 8,848.86 m. Due to diverse topography, it has a large climate and social diversity variation. Many people belong to different castes, ethnicity, religion, culture, and language. Based on the 2011 census, 6.73%, 43.0% and 50.27% of people live in the Mountain, Hill, and Tarai regions, respectively.

The elevation range of Nepal starts from the Indian Gangetic plain of less than 60 m to the high Himalayan region of more than 8,848.86m. Based on the topography, social diversity is one of the important features in the country. Many people belong to different caste, ethnicity, religion, culture, and language. Moreover, due to the cross-country border, all of the social phenomena are different to each other. However, the religion, language, culture, and some festivals of the northern (Tibet) and southern (India) transboundary regions are similar to Nepalese communities.

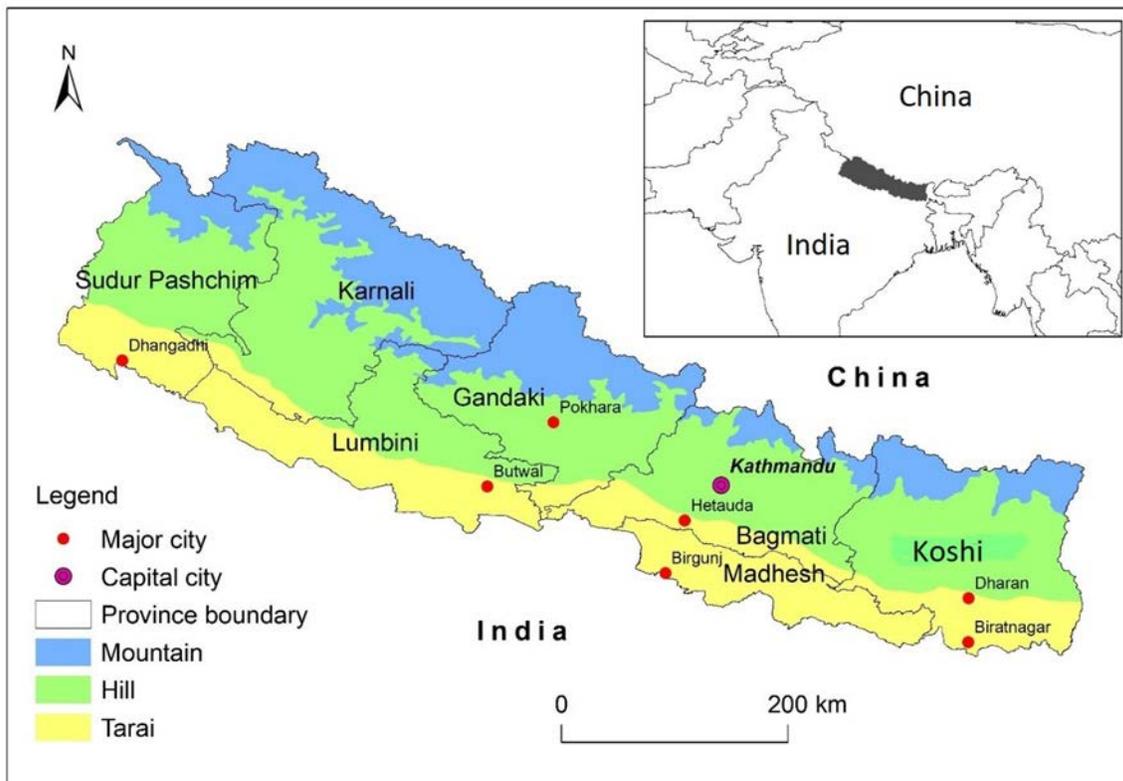


Figure 1. Location of Nepal with ecological and province boundary. Data source: Survey Department of Nepal.

In the northern region, Indo- Aryan migrants and communities of Tibeto-Burman origin, Tamang, Sherpa, and Gurung, dominate the hills. The downstream is home to indigenous communities like Tharus and migrants of different ethnic groups. They speak mostly Bhojpuri, Maithili, as well Hindi language. Similarly, in the upstream area up to the China-Nepal border, people speak mainly Tibetan local language, similar to the Tibetan language. In the middle parts (hilly regions), there are many local language speakers based on their caste and ethnicity.

3.2 Data sources

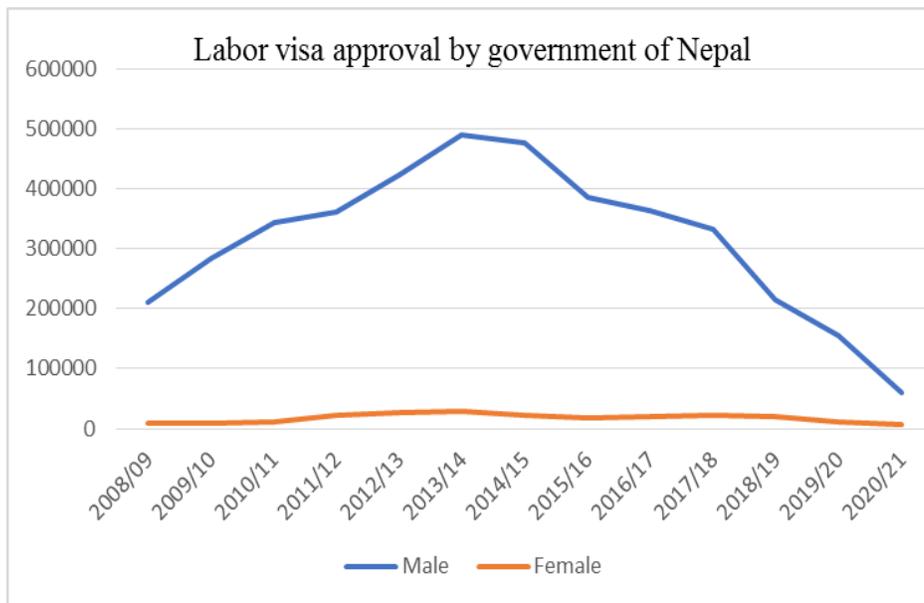
This study was largely based on existing data and used published research articles, books, and reports. The reports published by the Government of Nepal, the International Labor Organization, the Center Bureau of Statistics, the International Organization for Migration, and The Asia Foundation report were used in the study. Similarly, the government and various organizations’ official websites were also visited to find related reports. Moreover, a few family members of migrant labor were also interviewed.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Labor migration trends in Nepal

Since historical times, Nepalese workers have been migrated all over the world. At present, the government of Nepal approves 110 countries as host countries. Nepalese people can migrate all over the world except in some prohibited countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sudan where the government of Nepal does not issue visa approval for working purposes. From 2008 to 2010, the government of Nepal Department of foreign employment received over five hundred thousand labor visa approvals for Nepalese workers (Sharma et al., 2014). The trend of labor migration has rapidly increased since 2014. More than five hundred thousand applications for labor migration were approved in 2014. Nepal experienced a great earthquake in 2015 which affected livelihoods and economic status during these periods. Mainly, the Gorkha earthquake and the Covid-19 pandemic is the major reason for to decline in labor migration. After the Gorkha earthquake, 8964 people died and 21952 people were injured. People are getting opportunities in construction work in Nepal, so the trend of labor migration was slow down. Then, people started to seek opportunities around their hometowns and elsewhere in the country. Likewise, the effect of COVID-19 was also a remarkable cause of decreasing international labor migration from the country (Kikkawa et al., 2020).

Figure 2. Labor visa approval by the Government of Nepal during 2008/09-2020/21



Source: International Labor Organization, 2021

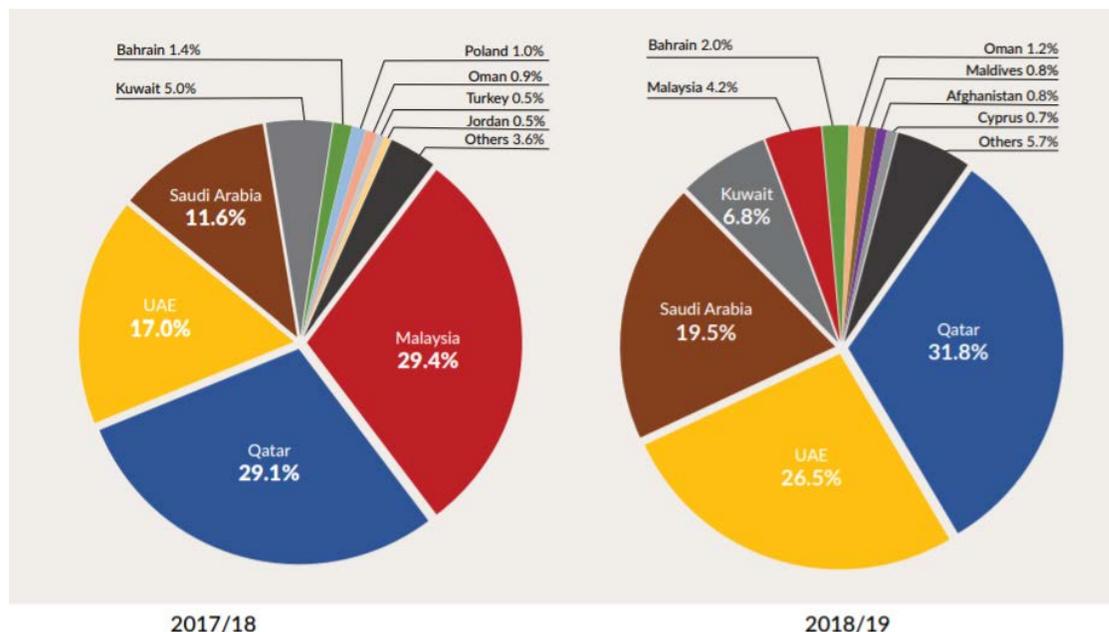
Nepalese labor migrants have been decreased in this period, but Nepal's government opened new working destinations. There was limited working destination before 2017/18. The government of Nepal assigned the agreement for 132 countries for working permits after 2018. Nepalese people can seek jobs and work opportunities in those countries listed by the government.

Comparatively, male migrants are found to be higher than females. Only 5% of Nepalese women have been working in foreign countries. However, in recent years, Nepalese women have been going to different countries for work purposes. The Middle East is the main destination for women workers involved in householdwork. It has been reported that household work is comparatively long working hours, with physical abuse and economic exploitation, which could be one of the factors behind the low volume of female

4.2 Destinations of Nepali Migrants

Nepalese labors have been made some specific working destinations across the world. The Middle East and Malaysia are the major working destination for Nepalese laborers. However, Nepalese labor migration trends fluctuate due to changes in working policies and labor demands in foreign/destination countries (MoLESS, 2020). Since 2008/09, most Nepalese laborers have worked in Malaysia, but the government of Malaysia changed its policy and the number of Nepalese working migrants started to decrease in Malaysia. In 2017/18, 9.4% of Nepalese labors were working in Malaysia, but after a year, only 4.2% migrated for work. Here is a noticeable fluctuation in labor migration. In 2018/19, Malaysia rings out from the top-five destination countries that provide job opportunities to Nepalese people as international labor. The changing policy on foreign workers was mainly the main reason for the decrease in Nepalese labor in Malaysia. In 2017/18, predominantly four countries (Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) were made the highest destination by Nepalese labor, where more than 87.1% of Nepalese laborers migrated to those countries (Figure 3). Federation International de Football Association (FIFA) decided to world cup 2022 in Qatar, and the flow of workers increased in Qatar. More than one million Nepalese worker works in Qatar. International labor migration from Nepal is highly concentrated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia.

Figure3. Destination country and visited Nepalese labor



Source: Nepal Labor Migration Report, 2020

Nepal has long labor migration history, but due to the lack of technical skills, and diversification, it concentrates in only some destination countries. Mainly, they are working as physical workers. In recent years the government of Nepal directly talks and has started to send semiskilled human resources to some countries like South Korea, United Kingdom, Mauritius, and Maldives are in the process of sending skilled workers through G2G contracts. Nepalese people started to go to other countries as skillful workers nowadays as Europe, North and South America, developed Asian countries and Africa are the new working destination for Nepalese workers.

4.3 Major destination countries for female labor migration

Nepalese women are migrated almost all over the world as migrant labor. Most of them are non-skilled workers. Nepali manpower companies send many women workers in GCC and Malaysia as domestic workers. Cyprus, South Korea, and Israel are the most demanding country for Nepalese working women. The GCC and Malaysia cover more than 85% of women workers from Nepal. The recent trend is a slight difference in the case of Nepalese women’s labor. There is noticeable diversity among the destination countries as Nepalese women workers started to go to other developed countries. However, there are very few shares compared to male labor migration as males primarily drive the overall migration pattern from Nepal.

Table1.Major destination countries for females.

Major destination countries, Year 2017/18	Percentage	Major destination countries, Year 2018/19	Percentage
Cyprus	6.30%	Cyprus	7.50%
Jordan	6.70%	Jordan	6.70%
Kuwait	7.30%	Malta	3.20%
Malaysia	13.50%	Maldives	2.40%
Qatar	17.20%	Qatar	18%
UAE	29.30%	UAE	36%
Saudi Arabia	4.60%	Saudi Arabia	7.70%
Others	15.10%	Kuwait	7.50%
		Others	11.40%

Source: International Labor Organization, 2021

There was a slight increase in female labor migrants from Nepal going to Cyprus, from 6.30% in 2017/18 to 7.50% in 2018/19. While this may indicate a growing preference for Cyprus, the change is small but represents a significant shift in migration patterns. The percentage remained the same at 6.70% in both years, suggesting a consistent level of migration to Jordan among female labor migrants from Nepal. The percentage of female labor migrants going to Kuwait decreased significantly from 7.30% in 2017/18 to 3.20% in 2018/19. This decline may be due to various factors, including changes in labor demands, policies, and negative experiences reported by migrants in Kuwait during that period.

The data shows a significant decrease in female labor migrants choosing Malaysia as their major destination, dropping from 13.50% in 2017/18 to 2.40% in 2018/19. There was a slight increase in female labor migrants going to Qatar, from 17.20% in 2017/18 to 18% in 2018/19. The data shows a significant increase in female labor migrants choosing the UAE as their major destination, rising from 29.30% in 2017/18 to 36% in 2018/19. This substantial increase indicates a clear trend of Nepali women favoring the UAE as a destination for employment opportunities.

The data reveals an increase in female labor migrants going to Saudi Arabia, from 4.60% in 2017/18 to 7.70% in 2018/19. The reasons behind this trend can be observed as labor demands, recruitment practices, and policy changes. The data shows that the percentage of female labor migrants choosing new destinations continuously increases. The new trends of female labor migration shift towards more specific and developed countries. This change could be due to increased awareness of opportunities in known destinations.

Some decades ago, Nepalese labor was oriented mainly to GCC countries and Malaysia, but in recent years Nepalese labor has been distributed almost all over the world. In 2019, Nepal received more than 50,000 labor approvals from different countries. The government of Nepal makes consensual efforts to gear up towards developing bilateral cooperation with these countries that benefited Nepalese workers who are searching for job opportunities in a new destination. The search for a new destination for worker has been increasing in recent year as it continues to increase in those countries which are new destinations for Nepalese migrant labors. Nepal received labor approval from prominent countries but due to the impact of COVID-19, the migration flow is very limited.

4.4 Spatial Distribution of Origins of Migrants in Nepal

Several studies (Khanal et al., 2015; Poertner et al., 2011; Singh, 2015) have been conducted by different research institutions and scholars in this field. However, most of these were focused on internal hill-to-tarai and rural-to-urban migration. There is no equal ratio of labor migration. Koshi and Madhesh provinces have the highest share of labor migration. In 2018/19, Koshi and Madhesh hprovince represents more than 50% of migrants to various countries for work. Karnali and Sudurpashchim provinces had very few people recorded for labor migration. Largely, seasonal or long-term migrants from Karnali and Sudurpashim provinces used to go to India. Likewise, in 2017/18, about 29% of people from Madhesh province got visa approval, while 24% share had from Koshi province, Bagmati, Gandaki, and Lumbini provinces comprising 12 to 17 percent of the total. Few women from Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces applied for and got working visas.

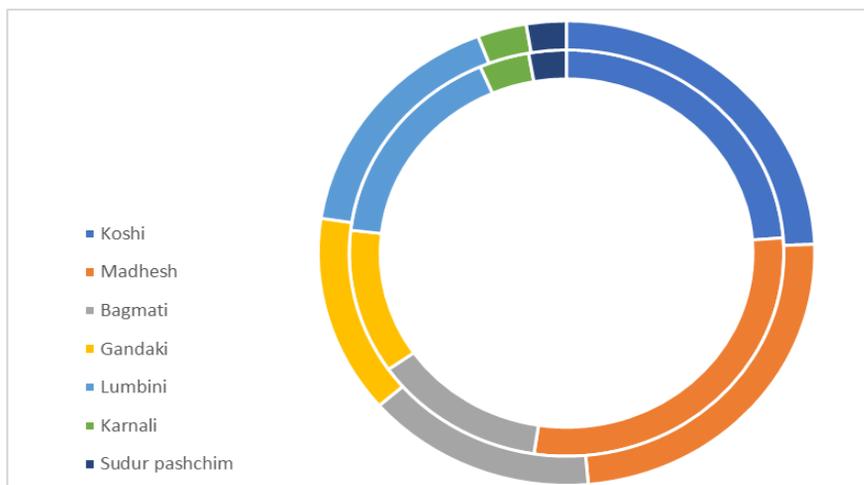


Figure 4. Distribution of migrants from the provincial level, Nepal

Source: FEWIMS, 2022

More than 90% of immigrants are from Nepal's Hills and Mountain regions (Sharma, 2009; Subedi, 1991). The eastern hills have experienced the highest number of out-migrants in the country (Khanal et al., 2015; Pandey, 2021).

4.5 Impact of labor migration in Nepal

There has been a significant increase in Nepalese migrating abroad for employment. It has both (positively and negatively) impacted the country's economy and society. However, the reasons why our community is not much benefited from Nepalese migrants are not fully understood. Previous studies have identified several factors that motivate Nepali workers to migrate, including economic conditions, political instability, social networks, and individual motivations. Additionally, political instability and conflict in the country can make it difficult for workers to find secure and stable employment.

Sarita and one of her 7-year daughters lived in Kapan, a previous resident of Thaha municipality-5 in Makawanpur has lived here for five years. Her husband is working in Malaysia. She migrated to Kathmandu Valley for better education opportunities for her children. Ramkrishna, 72 years old, lived in Bhaktapur for three years, a previous resident of Dudhauri municipality-12, Sindhuli. His son is working in Dubai. He and his 69 years old wife migrated to Bhaktapur for better health opportunities.

These two examples are just representative examples of Nepalese society and how our society is being transformed. Migration has positive and negative impacts on utilizing natural resources (Guan et al., 2020). Due to migration, there are different economic consequences in both places of origin and destination (Hugo, 1995; Zachariah et al., 2001). When active populations migrate, they create a lack of labor force. Different types of social changes occur due to migration. In city areas, the population density and environmental degradation are rising. The percentage of barren lands is increasing in the rural areas of the Hill and Mountain regions (Paudel et al., 2020). The occupation of people also changed as the number of people working in agriculture sector has decreased.

Labor migration from Nepal has been increasing continuously, significantly impacting the country's economic landscape development. Remittances sent back by Nepali migrants working abroad had contributed a large portion to the GDP. Foreign currency inflow is high due to the remittance. It helps to boost Nepal's economy, which is a supporting pillar for increasing foreign exchange reserves and economic growth in Nepal. One research (Rijal, 2022) shows that, in Nepal, one family among the three households receives remittances from migrant workers, which contribute significantly to the economic activities of a household. The portion of remittances, which was calculated for 10% of GDP in 1999/00, has grown steadily over the last twenty years. In the fiscal year 2019/20, Nepal received a total NPR of 875 billion, contributing to 23.3% of the country's GDP. Nepal has almost depended on remittance for country's foreign currency reserve. It contributes to reducing poverty, helping to alleviate poverty, reducing income inequality among other people, and improving living standards for Nepalese people.

Labor migration allows Nepali workers to gain new skills and knowledge abroad. They often acquire technical expertise, language proficiency, and professional experience, which they can later apply to Nepal upon their return. This knowledge transfer can contribute to developing various sectors in the country, such as infrastructure, tourism, and service industries. The financial resources brought in through remittances have enabled many families in Nepal to invest in education. Migrants often prioritize education for their children and provide them with better schooling opportunities, including private schools and higher education. This contributes to improved literacy rates, increased access to quality education, and the potential for a skilled workforce in the future.

Labor migration from Nepal has not had a positive impact and often leads to a brain drain as skilled youth leave the country for better financial opportunities. This can result in a shortage of skilled human resources in crucial sectors, hindering the country's development. The absence of family members due to labor migration can have adverse social impacts. Separation from loved ones can lead to emotional strain, disrupted family dynamics, and challenges in childcare and family support systems. Moreover, if Nepal becomes overly dependent on remittances, it may create a sense of complacency, discouraging domestic innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable economic growth.

Land and house abandonment have greatly increased in Nepal's hilly-rural regions, and labor migration can lead to land and house abandonment in this rural areas. When individuals and families migrate for work, they may leave their agricultural land uncultivated or houses unoccupied. This can result in reduced agricultural productivity, decreased food security, and the deterioration of infrastructure in rural communities. It can also contribute to social degradation, particularly in cases where individuals face exploitation, discrimination, or abusive working conditions abroad. Migrants may experience physical and psychological problems, labor rights violations, and social isolation. Furthermore, the absence of parents due to migration can impact the upbringing of children, leading to social and psychological challenges within the family.

5. Finding and Conclusion

The trends and patterns of labor migration are increasing in Nepal. In addition, the labor migrants are starting to go to new destinations for labor work as government of Nepal has assigned to new countries for labor migration which shows the new trend is developing for international migration. There is both positive and negative impact of migration in Nepal. Nepal is highly dependent on remittance in fiscal year 2019/20, Nepal recorded NPR 875 billion remittances (NRB, 2020) constituting 23.3 percent of GDP which is significantly larger than the collective amounts of gross exports, official development assistance, and foreign direct investment of the country. Nepal has observed the largely growing phenomenon of an absent population over the census periods. At the same time, the 2001 census recorded an absent population of 762,181, which increased to 1,921,494 absent people in 2011. Lack of employment in the country and poverty is the main reason for international labor migration.

It is found that Koshi and Madhesh provinces have the highest share of labor migration. In 2018/19, Koshi and Madhesh province represents more than 50% of migrants to various countries for work where as Karnali and Sudurpashchim provinces had very few people recorded for labor migration. Similarly it is also found that Qatar, Dubai, Saudi and Malaysia are top destination countries of Nepali migrants.

However labor migration from Nepal is a serious issue. More than 2.1 million Nepalese left their home for different purposes. It has a significant impact on the social, economic, and cultural environment of the country. Nepal is one of the poorest countries in South Asia, with limited job opportunities and low wages, contributing to people seeking opportunities in other developed countries. However, migrating for work can be difficult and complex, and many migrant workers face various challenges and risks.

In conclusion, the outflow of skilled and educated workers from Nepal to foreign countries can lead to a brain drain, negatively affecting the country's holistic development. The loss of skilled labor and talent can have long-term consequences, limiting the potential for innovation, productivity, and economic growth in Nepal. Therefore, labor migration from Nepal is a complex issue that requires attention and action from the government, civil society, and the international community to address the challenges and risks faced by Nepali migrant workers and to ensure their rights and well-being.

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