

RETURNING HOME :

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN
MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE NEPALI LABOUR MARKET



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Report on **Returnee Women Migrant Workers (RMMWs) 2018**



With support from
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This report on returnee women migrant workers (RWMWs) draws from insights shared by 1,210 women to understand the influences, conditions, and challenges that characterize women's migration from and reintegration to Nepal.

This is a summarised and edited version of the report 'Returning Home Challenges and Opportunities for Women Migrant Workers in the Nepali Labour Market' prepared by a team at the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility, Social Science Baha, Kathmandu, consisting of: Dr. Bandita Sijapati, Ang Sanu Lama, Dr Jeevan Baniya, Pawan Sen, Dr Sambriddhi Kharel, Suvekshya Gautam, Mohd Ayub, Rajita Dhungana, Anisha Bhattarai, Nilima Rai, Manoj Suji, Swarna Jha and Kishor Bikram Shah.

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PREFACE

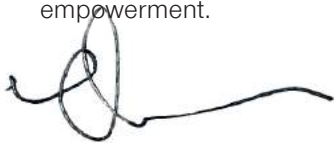
The current pattern of Nepali women's migration abroad is altering the traditional social and familial perceptions of women's capabilities. Yet, despite increasing economic contributions of migrant women workers through remittances, the unequal gender roles and relations in families remain unchanged. The UN Women Nepal Country Office, with support from the Government of Finland, has sought to study the situation and produce evidence-based knowledge and recommendations to address these challenges.

The present study shows that while women largely migrate for economic reasons, they remain unable to improve their economic status upon return to Nepal due to traditional restrictions to their mobility and their disproportional share of household responsibilities. Furthermore, the participation of returnee migrant women workers in Nepal's labour market is constrained by multiple work burdens created by the gendered division of household labour and care responsibilities.

The findings from this study and other global literature suggest that there are other less visible social and structural factors in the form of dominant discriminatory social norms that are persistent and that underlie the migration of Nepali women. These include the lack of substantive equality for girls during their formative ages, which limits their life chances, access to employment opportunities and ability to meaningfully compete in the labour market in later years. Likewise, experiences of women worldwide reflect the universal mindset that regards domestic work as essentially women's duty, thereby adding work burden to women who seek options outside the home. Thus, for women and girls who long endure patriarchal discrimination, foreign labour migration comes as an opportunity to make a living without constraints of social norms, including risk to reputation, which is particularly true for single, widowed and divorced women. Thus, migration offers a chance for women to experience individual freedom and achievement as they are exposed to new places, cultures, societies and languages.

Unfortunately, neither the economic gain nor the enhanced confidence and experience of women migrant workers are helping them to reintegrate into Nepal's labour market or change their status within their families. It has become very challenging for women to balance their newfound financial independence and autonomy through migration with the continuing patriarchal social order that compels women to remain in traditional gendered roles. Thus, the pressing need is to address the underlying discriminatory social norms that limit women's lives. Therefore, we need to think primarily of how to work with families, communities, and especially men, to change social norms and tap into the benefits of returnee women's new skills, knowledge and attitudes learned abroad.

The challenges faced by Nepali women are reflective of the experiences of drudgeries and work burdens of working women worldwide. Addressing these challenges requires a stronger coordinated effort globally, among partners, practitioners, academia and governments, to go beyond policy change to enable communities and families to address deep-seated discriminatory social norms that stand in the way of women's economic empowerment.



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ABSTRACT

This report on returnee women migrant workers (RMMWs) draws from insights shared by 1,210 women to understand the influences, conditions, and challenges that characterize women's migration from and reintegration to Nepal.

As gender roles are still firmly entrenched in many Nepali families, the competing economic need that compels migration disturbs these roles while, at the same time, presents opportunity for families to ease financial burdens. In many cases, women migrate from their homes for work and return to a changing social situation wherein they are forced to meet numerous familial demands while also continuing to earn for the household. This is no easy task and little is known about how these women navigate this process.

Following a mixed-method approach to this topic, the study draws the following conclusions that have significant implications:

1. RMMWs exhibit increased levels of entrepreneurship after migration, creating new enterprises;
2. Many RMMWs acquire impressive human capital while abroad in terms of skills, confidence, and experiential learning. However, it does not provide sufficient advantage for RMMWs to secure a job in the current domestic labour market;
3. The current Nepali domestic labour market does not offer sufficient quality of opportunities to RMMWs who had acquired skills as a domestic worker abroad; and
4. RMMWs' migration experience abroad does not easily translate into positive changes in terms of their gendered roles and responsibilities at home and access to productive resources after their return. Overall, the study finds that RMMWs' potentials cannot be realised without addressing the enduring gendered division of household responsibilities, gendered access to productive inputs (e.g., land and credit), and gender discrimination in the labour markets.

Of greatest significance is the need for more effective policy to provide improved support and resources for RMMWs and their reintegration into the local labour market. This study offers a set of recommendations to help fulfil that goal.



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MoLESS	Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security
NMW	Non-migrant Woman
NPR	Nepali Rupee
RWMW	Returnee Woman Migrant Worker
UN	United Nations
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
USD	United States Dollar
VAW	Violence against Women

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration abroad has provided a much-needed boost to Nepal's economy: according to the World Bank, 31.8 per cent of the country's gross domestic product in 2015 came from personal remittances. This rise in capital has contributed significantly to poverty reduction while enabling families to increase their access to education and health care. At the same time, however, concerns about safety – particularly for women migrants – have inspired policy that restricts mobility to guard against potential exploitation and trafficking.

Women's migration from Nepal is not a new phenomenon, but the rapid increase of this mobility in recent decades warrants closer examination. Between 2010/2011-2014/2015, the number of permits issued to women labour migrants increased by 106 per cent, compared to an increase of only 39 per cent for men.¹ This can allow an assumption that the population of returnee women migrant workers (RWMWs) in Nepal has also increased over the same period. An analysis of this group, therefore, can provide rich details about two important aspects. First, RWMWs offer sharp insight into the process and experience of migration for women. Secondly, examining their experience, the opportunities and challenges of reintegrating these women into Nepal's domestic labour markets become clearer. Addressing these points can yield key insights for devising more effective and policy regarding Nepali women's migration.

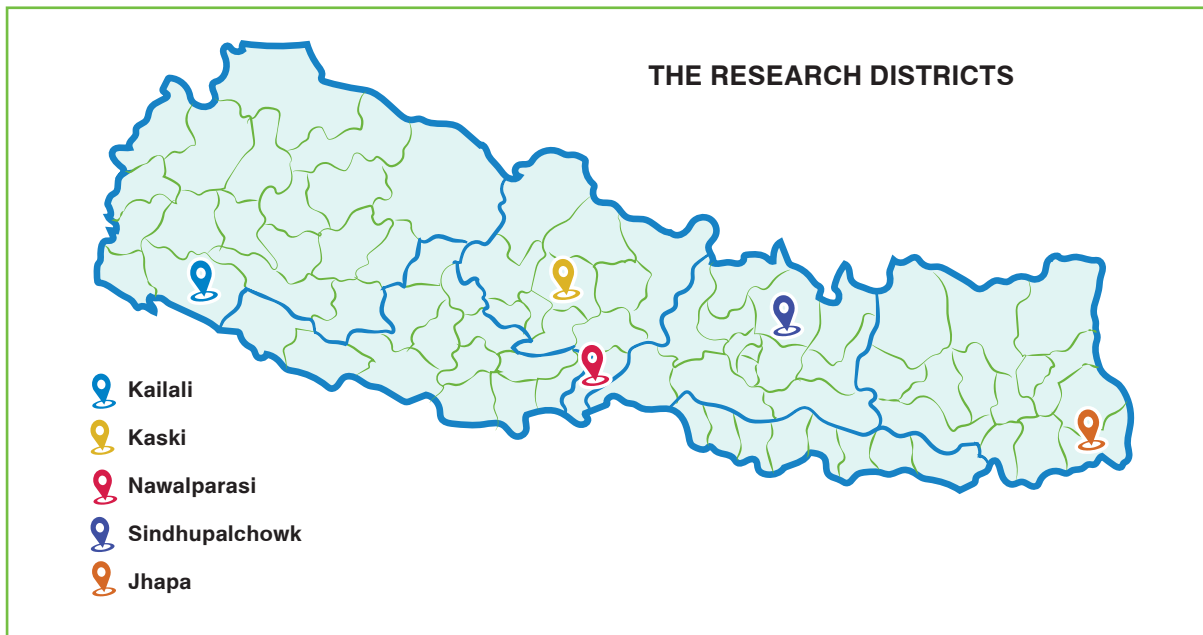
In the foreseeable future, migration will continue to be an important socio-economic process for Nepal. However, little is known about the experiences and consequences of return migration, and how certain factors in the migration cycle might affect a woman's reintegration into her home and domestic labour markets. Accordingly, this study sought to detail, examine, and analyse the experience of return migration for RWMWs, guided by the following objectives:



- To identify the specific pressures and influences that inspire and/or complicate women's migration and return migration;
- To understand the challenges that women face throughout migration – in the home, while abroad, and throughout the recruiting process;
- To document women's impressions of migration in terms of remuneration and experience;

¹ Government of Nepal, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security 2016. It is believed that the above data do not accurately represent the entire population of women migrant workers because a significant population of them are known to use informal routes to go abroad and are not captured by official statistics and documentation.

- To assess the obstacles and challenges that RWMWs face after migration as they return home and into the Nepali labour market; and
- To provide policy recommendations to facilitate more effective reintegration of RWMWs into the national labour market.

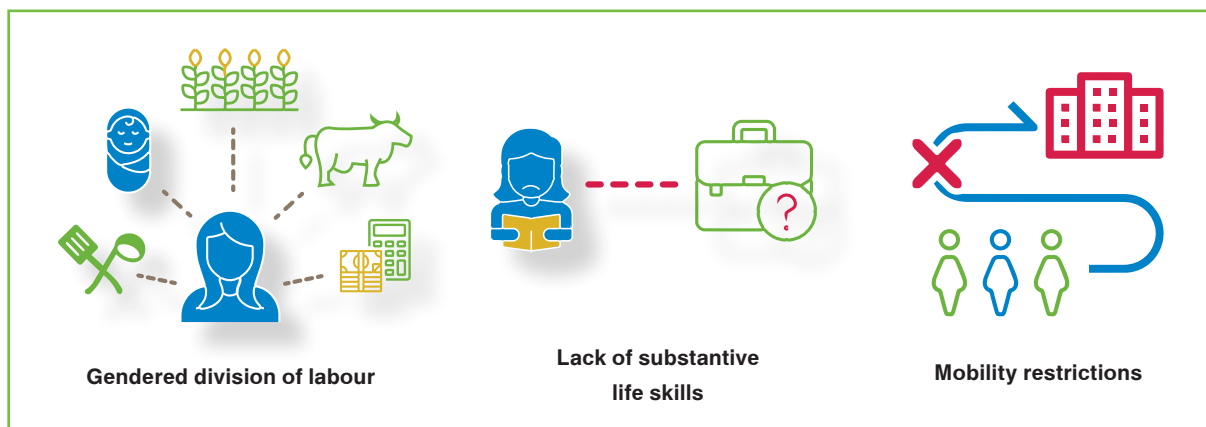


This report drew from a geographically and demographically representative sample of 605 RWMWs whose personal and household details were compared against responses from a sample of 605 non-migrant women (NMWs). Contrasting and comparing these groups helped to isolate and inform how the experience of migration (pre-migration, working abroad, and post-migration) influences a woman migrant's prospects for successful employment at home. Moreover, these findings provide an illuminating insight into the migration experience of Nepali women and how everyday politics in the home, community, and nation affect their ability to prosper as individuals and citizens.

This five-month research was funded by the Government of Finland under the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) Nepal's Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment Programme. The research was undertaken by a research institute, Social Science Baha. In the preparation and finalization of the research, a wide range of migration-related stakeholders, including Government counterparts, UN agencies, development partners, civil society organisations, and academics were consulted to inform the findings and analysis.

2. GOING ABROAD

PRE-MIGRATION CONTEXT



The decision to migrate is a response to numerous household factors, primarily economic, that motivate a woman to leave her home and travel to a foreign country for employment. And yet, not all women who face economic pressure choose to migrate. Generally speaking, little is known about who migrating women are and why they migrate. What might be the characteristics that RMMWs share? How do these characteristics compare with those of women who do not migrate (NMWs)? And what reasons do RMMWs give for migration?

Prevailing gender norms mean that women shoulder a disproportionate burden of the domestic work for their families. As many men also migrate for work, either seasonally or full-time, those burdens have grown even larger for women: they are forced to balance domestic duties with other responsibilities such as farming and financial management. Many women do not possess the skills and experience to do this adequately, and the family suffers more.

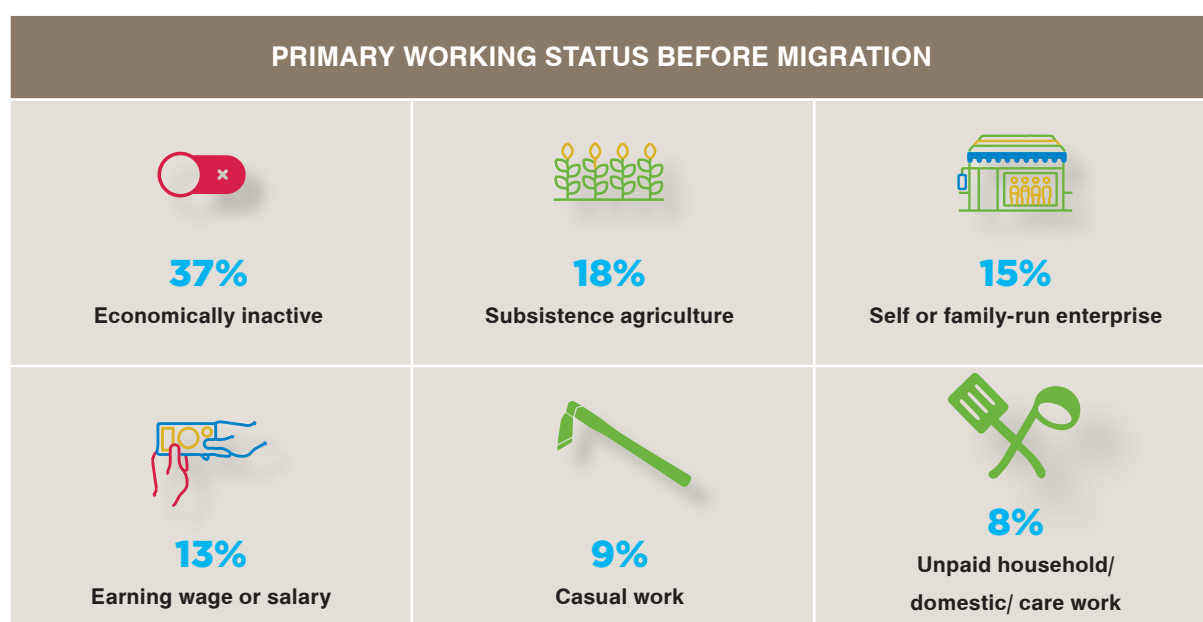
Generally speaking, many Nepali families privilege formal education and skills training for boys. Thus, many women are prevented from securing better paying jobs that higher education may enable them to obtain. In other cases, some women are forbidden by family from entering the job market because the low-status jobs available to them would have implications on the family's reputation.²

When looking at women's decision-making roles in the household, the study finds that RMMWs and NMWs share similarly low-levels of authority regarding daily expenses and the buying and selling of assets. In the study, women find their authority to be lower, as major financial decisions are concentrated amongst the men and senior women of the family. Furthermore, women in joint households (as opposed to nuclear ones) have even less authority because the decision-making is shared among a larger group.



² Belanger and Rahman 2013; Guarnizo 1997.

However, on the topic of mobility, the study finds that RMMWs already had a higher level of mobility outside the home prior to migration, usually for work, than NMWs. This finding suggests that the greater mobility of RMMWs prior to migration for economic reasons may inspire or give them confidence to migrate abroad later. Furthermore, 63 per cent of RMMWs were employed prior to their migration, but only 20 per cent claimed membership with a community organization, suggesting weak social ties and/or networks that may have presented them with better domestic employment opportunities or stronger obligations to remain at home.



REASONS FOR MIGRATION

Because women often lack the education and/or skills for more “respectable” or well-paid work, they are often confined to agriculture and domestic labour. It is perhaps unsurprising then to find that economic necessity drives migration abroad for women. In the study, 55 per cent of RMMWs migrated to improve their family’s economic condition, 24 per cent sought to improve their children’s futures through migration work, and 24 per cent went abroad to service debts at home.³



³ The total percentage here equals more than 100 per cent because respondents were allowed to offer multiple reasons.

“I had to leave my 14-month old son and two-year-old daughter... I felt so helpless because [they] were suffering from hunger. I decided to go abroad. I told myself, I don't care if I die, but I had to do something to fill my children's stomachs.”

- RMMW from Nawalparasi

“I got married at 14... My husband migrated to Malaysia. He's stayed there for about nine years now. But he would not send me any money. He would not take care of either his parents or us... I stayed because I needed to secure the future of my son... As I [had no other means of support], I thought of going abroad myself.”

- RMMW from Jhapa

Beyond meeting economic demands, migration also offers women an opportunity to escape social norms and stigmas they find repressive and demeaning. Women who are either divorced, widowed, or separated, feel the pull to migrate even more acutely. Single women in the study reported feeling unsafe working outside the home in restaurants and hotels in Nepal. By migrating abroad, women can do this work away from judgmental eyes, and, moreover, elevate their social status by sending money home to help the family.

Five per cent of women cited lack or absence of support from male providers as a prime motivation to migrate, particularly for divorced, separated, and/or widowed women. Included in this category were several examples of domestic violence suffered at the hands of husbands or in-laws.

But perhaps the greatest motivating factor to migrate today is the rise of migration culture, wherein stories of successful Nepali migration experiences abroad are inspiring other Nepali women to seek better income and opportunities overseas. This “neighbourhood effect” of successful migration has overcome the fears raised by stories of abuse and trafficking often portrayed in the media. In Jhapa and Sindhupalchowk, the study found that many families now encourage female members to migrate.

“They see returnees coming back and building big houses. Women with dark complexions becoming fair, and the fair ones becoming dark. They only hear good stories.”

- Husband of an RMMW from Jhapa

“I was a widow... [and] I tried running a small grocery shop, but the stigma faced by single women made it difficult to run the shop. The way society looks at widows is wrong... Many people from the community blamed it on my fate. It was difficult to stay in the village.”

- RMMW from Kailali

Underneath this rising migration culture is an expanding network of facilitation agents who arrange and negotiate foreign work for Nepalis. Faith in these agents has also increased, as returning migrants remit money that improve households' financial standings.

After a successful migration, the urge to migrate again is strong: 35 per cent of the RWMWs in the study had migrated more than once. However, **the reasons for migration change with each subsequent migration. While initial work abroad may have been to service debts and improve economic condition of the household, later migrations focus more on investment, accumulating wealth, and securing children's future.** In the study, improving household finances is the top reason for women's initial and subsequent migrations. However, while 32 per cent of RWMWs reported going abroad the first time to earn money to repay debts, that number falls to 20 per cent on the subsequent migration. Conversely, only 14 per cent of RWMWs said they went abroad initially to secure money for their children's futures, whereas 28 per cent said they earned money for that purpose on their most recent migration. These changing motivations for RWMWs indicate that women address urgent and short-term economic needs (e.g., debt servicing) on initial migration and shift to a mid- and long-term view of investment on subsequent migrations.

"Before migration, my husband beat me innumerable times, which I could not tolerate, and I consumed Metacid⁴ but I did not die. I even took poison that is used to kill mice three times. My husband, in-laws, no one was supporting me...Even my own children took my in-laws' side. In such a situation, my elder sister suggested that I migrate to be free from the pain and that is why I left."

- RWMW from Pokhara



35 % of the RWMWs in the study sample had migrated more than once



Success stories
"Neighbourhood effect"



Rise in culture of migration and facilitating networks



Escaping norms regarding respectable jobs



Vulnerability of widowed, divorced and single women

⁴ Also known as methyl parathion, a pesticide commonly ingested to self-poison.

3. WORKING ABROAD

MIGRATION PROCESS AND WORKING CONDITIONS

The migration process and conditions while working abroad can have significant influence on women's decisions to return home or embark on subsequent migration trips. But what are the barriers they face in the recruitment and migration process? To where do women migrate for work and what do they say about their working conditions while abroad?

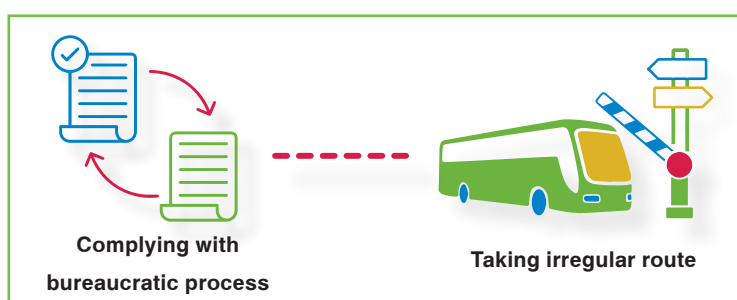
Before women migrate, they must overcome opposition to their decision. Nearly a third of RMMWs said they had encountered objections from family before and during their migration, primarily around the topics of domestic labour, reputational concerns, and fears of exploitation abroad. These forms of opposition from family were even stronger if the migrating woman was unmarried.



However, it is more notable that two-thirds of the women said they faced no opposition to migrating abroad, which attests to the changing cultural attitudes regarding this phenomenon. In the study, 62 per cent of RMMWs said they had not faced any challenge in the recruitment process, but did, in some cases, run into problems with government regulations, unreliable manpower agents, and complications in obtaining the required papers. This is not to say that women's migration is absolutely safe, but that migration processes are becoming clearer and women migrants are learning from other women's experiences to avoid common pitfalls.

Overall, women migrants faced more obstacles in the form of government policy than social and administrative hurdles. Current government regulations on women's migration forbid women from accepting domestic work in Gulf countries (the most common destination for Nepali migrants and among the most lucrative).⁵ The majority of RMMWs (79 per cent) in the study had been engaged in domestic work. Restrictions such as these have created barriers that force women to seek informal back channels through India to reach the Middle East. These informal channels are less reliable and regulated, and place women migrants at greater risk of trafficking and other forms of abuse.

Curiously, RMMWs in this study perceived their recruitment process to be transparent and appropriate regardless of whether it was undertaken through regular or irregular channels, thus exhibiting little awareness of the potential risks and dangers present in using informal modes of migration. This finding suggests that many women may possess a false confidence about their safety and well-being in using informal channels, making them more vulnerable to potential exploitation.



⁵ In early 2017, the parliamentary International Relations and Labour Committee instructed the Government to temporarily stop Nepali female migrants from going to the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council for domestic work, as a result of their visit to those countries and observation of the conditions they saw there.

MANY RMMWS REPORTED PROBLEMS WITH THEIR EMPLOYMENT WHILE ABROAD:



25 %

RMMWs changed jobs during migration, often to escape abusive situations.



62 %

RMMWs said they were forced to work without days-off

58 %

Denied that had been promised



47 %

Cited long working hours



45 %

Confiscation of passports



32 %

Physical and verbal abuse from their employers

2 %

Reported having suffered sexual abuse

Many RMMWs reported problems with their employment while abroad: 25 per cent of RMMWs changed jobs during migration, often to escape abusive situations. Most commonly, women said they were forced to work without days-off (62 per cent) and denied leave that had been promised (58 per cent). Others cited long working hours (47 per cent), confiscation of passports (45 per cent), and physical and verbal abuse from their employers (32 per cent). Less than two per cent reported having suffered sexual abuse.

These incidents of abuse are often compounded and exacerbated by women's lack of resources for reporting of the crimes while abroad. Criminal justice procedures for RMMWs are often beset by linguistic and cultural challenges, and migrant workers do not have access to legal aid and other support that would assist their cases.

It should be noted that some RMMWs reported positive experiences while working abroad, either in terms of the money earned, new cultural experiences, or feelings of independence. An overwhelming majority (97 per cent) of the women remitted money during their most recent migration.⁶

Seventy-six per cent of RMMWs in the study said migration is a good option for women but cautioned that women need to be better prepared in terms of skills and safe migration channels.

Despite the great physical distance between RMMWs and home, nearly all women in the study (99.7 per cent) reported regular and consistent communication with home and that they were sufficiently up-to-date on family and community matters.



99.7 % reported

regular and consistent communication with home

⁶ The remittances were mostly used to meet the basic requirements of the household, such as to pay debts, finance educations, and support household expenses. Only 3.4 per cent of RMMWs said that their remittances were used for investments in businesses.

MOST COMMON DESTINATIONS FOR WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS FROM NEPAL



CIRCUMSTANCES OF RETURN

Most migration studies from around the world have found that the circumstances for return – voluntary or involuntary – can have strong influence on a person’s reintegration and employability in the domestic labour market. However, in this study, no such relationship was found for Nepali RMMWs.

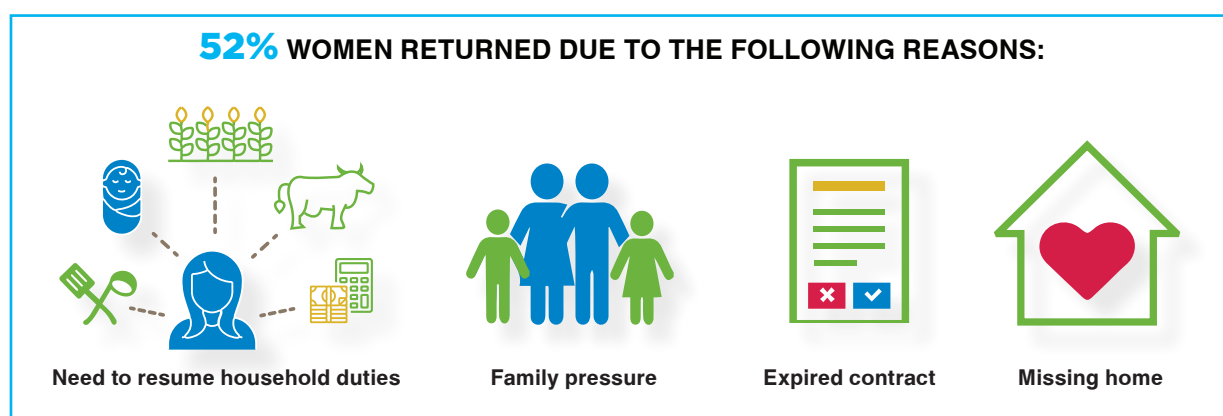
The need to resume household work and feeling of pressure from family to return suggest that norms about gendered divisions of labour endure even while women are away: 52 per cent of RMMWs said they returned from migration due to these tensions. This finding suggests that once the family’s economic condition improves or there is a growing need for domestic and care work in the family, many RMMWs are expected to resume their pre-migration roles. Men and other family members may be willing to modify their work roles at home when women migrate abroad, but they expect traditional gendered division of labour to be reinstated after women return home. In some cases, male members of households simply became derelict in fulfilling necessary household responsibilities.

Most RMMWs return from migration because they reach their end of contract (48 per cent). But 21 per cent of RMMWs return to address family issues and household responsibilities, while another 20 per cent return because they did not or could not stay away from family. Another 11 per cent said they came home due to pressures from family members to discontinue working abroad.

The remainder of RMMWs returned from migration because they reached their end of contract (48 per cent). Although reported cases were few in the study, some women did report instances of abuse, physical and sexual, which forced them to leave their jobs. Others said they were forced to return due to poor health (8 per cent), poor working conditions (7 per cent), or because they had been deported and/or rescued (2 per cent).⁷

“I returned because my husband did not take responsibility for the family and did not pay attention to my son’s education. [Because of this] my son left his engineering studies without completing [the program]. I felt I had to return home.”
- RMMW from Nawalparasi

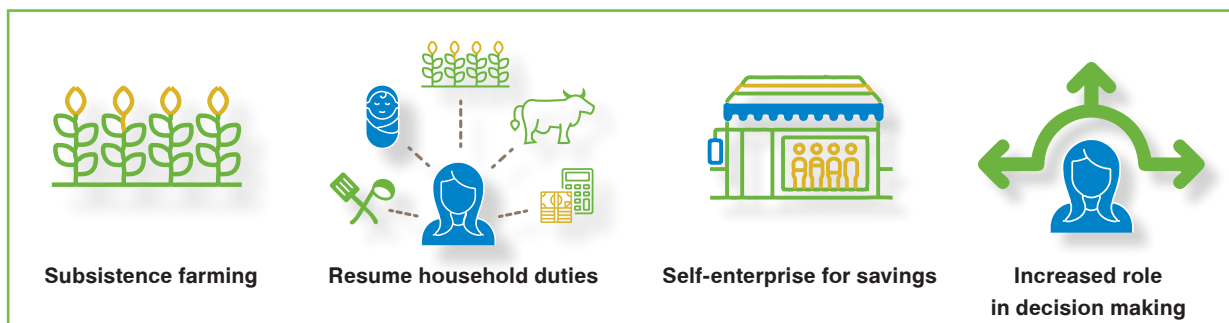
“... [M]y daughter cried a lot, probably because she was expecting me to return as well. She used to cry when we talked on the phone. She asked me to come back and she even threatened to commit suicide if I didn’t.”
- RMMW from Dhangadi



⁷ The percentages for reasons given under “circumstances for return” add up to more than 100 because RMMWs respondents were asked to give three reasons for their decision.

4. RETURNING HOME

REINTEGRATION TO LABOUR MARKETS AND HOUSEHOLDS



For this study, questions about reintegration are the central questions. How do RMMWs fare when returning to home and domestic labour markets in Nepal? How does working abroad influence their employment prospects back home? How does the experience of living in another culture, away from family, influence household dynamics after the women's return?

Looking at the national labour market, nearly 34 per cent of RMMWs have found employment in the country, a statistically insignificant difference when compared to NMWs (35 per cent).⁸ Comparing monthly salaries, NMWs still outpace RMMWs, earning 10,105 NPR (or 87 USD) and 9,537 NPR (or 82 USD), respectively. **This finding suggests that working abroad does not necessarily present a comparative advantage to migrating women in attaining employment back home.**

Other RMMWs in the study had either returned to subsistence farming (38 per cent) or became economically inactive, working in the home without pay (29 per cent). Perhaps of interest is that fewer RMMWs (38 per cent) work in agriculture than NMWs (41 per cent), suggesting that returning migrant women may choose to avoid or dissociate from agriculture after working abroad.

Also of note is the 21 per cent of RMMWs who engage in self-employment after return. Most of these women start enterprises in retail and trade (48 per cent), while the rest work across a range of sectors, including hotels, tailoring, handicrafts, and commercial agriculture. These women often draw on their remittances as seed capital for their ventures.

At home, the experiences gained by RMMWs abroad do not translate into reorganized work roles in the domestic sphere. Comparing RMMWs and NMWs, there is little to no difference in terms of household responsibilities, suggesting that while men may assume non-traditional work roles (e.g., cooking and cleaning) during women's migration, these arrangements are only temporary. Thus, when RMMWs re-join the household, traditional work roles are resumed.

⁸ These include employment in salary or wage-based work, casual work, self-employment and commercial agriculture.

However, while household work roles do not change post-migration, RMMWs do see a significant increase in authority regarding household finances, children's education, extra-household affairs, and buying/selling household assets. It is important to note that over the same period (5-10 years) NMWs have also seen their authority increase on these same topics, but their rate of increase lags behind RMMWs (a 23 per cent and 55 per cent increase, respectively). This finding may suggest two interesting ideas: 1) RMMWs' experience abroad does improve their decision-making roles in the household post-migration, and 2) this increase reflects not only the migration experience, but also a general trend in Nepal toward giving women stronger say in household decisions.

"We [in Nepal] ... we thought this was our world, but after going abroad, we see there is more to the world and we start to care less about what people say. Our thinking has become... free and independent."

- RMMW from Jhapa

The average amount of total remittance saved or brought back by RMMWs in this study, at the end of their most recent migration, was 249,577 NPR (or 2,265 USD). **But perhaps more significant than the money was the change in human capital among RMMWs.** Eighty-four per cent said migration had improved their skills and changed their attitudes about life and work, and 68 per cent reported having greater confidence. Forty per cent said living in a different culture changed their worldview, while 52 per cent said they had become proficient in another language.

Ironically, many of the skills that RMMWs claim to have gained through migration may not serve them so well in Nepal's labour market. For example, 79 per cent of RMMWs in the study engaged in domestic work while abroad and improved their skills as a domestic worker. In the current economic and social context of Nepal, the labour market for domestic workers is quite limited and under developed, since domestic work is customarily seen as part of women's unpaid responsibilities at home. However, it is also important to note that RMMWs were aware of improvement of their skills, and this positive reflection, perhaps, might contribute to their greater confidence and awareness after the return. Taking these ideas with the previous findings about women's growing authority in household decision-making, we might suggest that migration equips women with skills and self-esteem to more proactively engage with their family members and the wider community, which is one of the first steps to challenge the social norms that restrict their opportunity. However, it is hard to translate most of the skills they learned abroad into economic opportunities in Nepal.

"When a woman migrates for foreign employment, she earns money [that she can invest and lend]. On the other hand, she can also observe the outer world through which she gains confidence. She is full of enthusiasm to do some productive work... Foreign employment enables a woman to be conscious that she should also own some assets as she has earned the money. She will start raising a voice for her rights."

- Social worker from Nawalparasi

CHALLENGES TO REINTEGRATION

In part, this study sought to determine which factors would indicate stronger prospects for successful reintegration into Nepal's domestic labour market, as defined by employment in agriculture, wage-based labour, or self-employment. Using regression analysis across 16 variables⁹ (ranging from mobility to circumstances of return), we found two statistically significant correlations with implications for reintegration policy.

First, successful reintegration correlated highly with RMMWs who switched employers while abroad. These women were found to be more often employed after returning home. This willingness to leave jobs and switch employers may indicate a stronger commitment to finding better work, which may also serve women well in the domestic market. **Secondly, we found that women who believed employment opportunities at home had improved after migration were also more likely to find employment.** This finding suggests that the confidence RMMWs gain while working abroad, and having positive perceptions about opportunity, may go a long way toward establishing successful employment for women in Nepal's labour market. In other words, if women have a successful experience in migration, this may imbue them with the drive to network, discover, and create new opportunities for employment.

Despite these two positive correlations, domestic employment rates for RMMWs in the study are still low (34 per cent). Of the 66 per cent of RMMWs not in paid or self-employment,¹⁰ nearly half said that household responsibilities did not allow them to work, which suggests that prevailing gender norm is still a primary obstacle for women seeking employment.

Wrapped within these gender norms are the issues of prestige and fear of social stigma that add layers of complexity to women's employment, as expressed by RMMWs in related focus group discussions.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the effect of these norms that inhibit women's employment represent a missed opportunity, especially for RMMWs. Rather than capitalizing on the initiative and potential economic gains of these women, their potentials are not realized.

Looking at the barriers for employment to RMMWs, 32 per cent said they did not have the necessary skills to find employment in the domestic labour market, while 24 per cent cited an overall lack of employment opportunities. Only 4.2 per cent of RMMWs said the skills acquired from migration work had enabled them to find work in the country. When surveying RMMWs as to what factors matter most for finding employment, family connections and personal drive were the two most commonly cited.

"... I should not feel embarrassed to engage in any kind of work, but if I open a [street vending] stall on the roadside, my husband will feel embarrassed while crossing it, and others will also look down upon us."

- (Informal talk with a RMMW)

"We cannot use our skills here because if we start a hotel, it is mostly drunkards who frequent these places and people accuse us of being promiscuous. And, gradually, family members also start believing the same."

- (Informal talk with a RMMW)

⁹ Please see the methodology section (p. 20-22) for the complete list of variables.

¹⁰ 37.5 per cent of RMMWs were engaged in subsistence agriculture and 28.6 per cent answered that they were primarily engaged in unpaid domestic work or were economically inactive.

These findings, taken together with the correlation between positive perceptions of improved domestic employment, suggest that **while migration work does not necessarily prepare women for Nepal’s labour market in terms of skills, it does produce advantages in terms of cultivating drive and determination – and possibly the willingness to transgress certain norms to find satisfactory employment.**

RWMWs who engage in entrepreneurial activities after migration (21.3 per cent) present an important group who warrant closer examination. Forty per cent of this group said they did so to avoid remaining idle, while others said family encouragement (11 per cent) and lack of alternative options (23 per cent) motivated their work. Small businesses like these can drive growth and improve market functions by adding competition (in some sectors).

Despite the money earned abroad, many RWMWs still lack enough capital and credit to open and/or support a business. Among the women unemployed after migration, 32 per cent reported lack of capital as the major obstacle. In some cases, RWMWs acquire skills abroad, but find they do not translate well to the Nepali market.

Employment prospects for RWMWs might be improved in Nepal through policy, but policy awareness and enforcement are low, negating the potential effects of legislation to help women find employment. For example, the Industrial Policy 2011 offers a 35 per cent discounted registration fee for businesses registered in women’s names, but only 11 per cent of RWMWs knew about this offer.

RWMWs also said that long bureaucratic procedures were another impediment to registering their business enterprises. As most of these women maintain domestic responsibilities, it can be difficult, if not impossible, for them to spare hours at a time in government offices.

External training programmes (state and non-state) might offer some advantages to RWMWs for improving their employment prospects, but many women are not aware of these programmes, while others say the short-term nature of such programmes mean the same women attend repeated trainings. The difference tends to be the lack of social networks for RWMWs.

“I didn’t know how to use a measuring tape earlier, but I learned while abroad. My madam had also taught me calculations for cutting cloth. This knowledge was quite useful... I even learned how to sew new clothes. Here, in the village, it is not that useful. But if I open a shop in the market, I’m sure those skills could be useful.”

- RWMW from Unidentified Location



Need for simplified business registration process



Lack of awareness of economic entitlements



Silo approach of government and non-government

“People with access and networks receive training... whereas we are not even informed about it. When we get information about job vacancies, [they] are already taken by someone else. If a job is available, it is given based on networks and connections. Cooperatives, finance, private organisations... all need social networks.”

- Dalit woman from Patharaiya

“We organise trainings for women to provide skills for income-generating work. But the problem is the same training keeps being offered and the same women get opportunities again and again. Plus, the training is limited to training only. We do not help [women] start up enterprises or find employment.”

- Senior officer in regional labour office

At the institutional level, the study finds that the “silos” of various government offices and non-government organisations prevent a larger contextual analysis of the challenges facing RWMWs in the domestic markets. Rather than sharing and combining data and resources, organisations tend to focus narrowly along their stated missions. Furthermore, RWMWs remain a population without formal recognition in government and non-government channels. Only a few non-governmental organisations, such as Pourakhi and Shakti Samuha, target RWMWs for interventions.



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5. CONCLUSION

This study of RWMWs attempted to bring into focus the circumstances and factors that influence women's motivations to go abroad and the conditions for successful reintegration after migration. The study found that women in the household with relatively relaxed gender norms are more likely to migrate. RWMWs in the study generally enjoyed more autonomy and authority regarding household expenses and mobility even prior to migration, perhaps due to economic necessity, as compared to non-migrant women. A majority of RWMWs migrate for work to service economic needs at home. Women who had been separated, widowed or divorced from their husbands tended to be more severely excluded and marginalized both economically and socially, and more acutely pushed to migration for support to their households. Urgent economic needs, such as servicing debts, were the strongest motivation for working abroad, while subsequent migrations focused on mid- and long-term investments, such as children's education and seed capital for entrepreneurial activities.

Despite the stigma associated with women's migration and fears of abuse and trafficking, more than two-thirds of Nepali RWMWs said they did not experience any objections from their families to go abroad for work, and that **they perceived the recruitment process to be transparent and appropriate**. However, it should be noted, as above, that many RWMWs in the study didn't seem to be concerned whether they were using informal channels in going abroad for work, and they did not express understanding of the risks and dangers inherent in using these modes of migration.

Seventy-eight per cent of RWMWs in the study went to Gulf countries and 79 per cent were employed as domestic workers. They earned NPR 24,311 (or 240 USD) on average per month, and 97 per cent of them remitted home to pay debts, finance educations, and support household expenses.

Upon returning home, RWMWs were more likely than NMWs to experience a rise in household authority as well as increased mobility. And many RWMWs reported experiencing a rise in confidence and self-esteem by working abroad. Despite these gains, the study found that the experience and money earned by RWMWs do not necessarily provide them with sufficient advantages for finding employment upon return. While most RWMWs worked in domestic labour abroad, the current domestic labour market in Nepal for that type of work is not sufficient, and thus RWMWs cannot leverage these skills to secure paid work in the country. Furthermore, the study indicates that many of the challenges for RWMWs' reintegration into the domestic labour market relate to the gendered division of roles and responsibilities in the household and communities; gendered access to productive inputs, particularly land and credits; and gender discrimination in the labour markets.

All told, there are noteworthy gains, and, at the same time, considerable gaps and challenges that emerge from women's migration that require more attention and consideration.

1. The rise of migration culture, aided by success stories, has become the strong motivation factor for women to migrate, suppressing fears and family objections. However, such “neighbourhood effect” does not necessarily convey the correct information on the full migration cycle and experiences to migrating women, thus resulting in the increased risk and vulnerability in migration processes;
2. Many RMMWs acquired impressive human capital while abroad in terms of skills, confidence, and experiential learning. However, these gains do not provide sufficient advantage for RMMWs to secure a job in the current domestic labour market;
3. The current Nepali domestic labour market does not offer sufficient quality of opportunities to RMMWs who had acquired skills as a domestic worker abroad; and
4. RMMWs’ migration experience abroad does not easily translate into positive changes in terms of their gendered roles and responsibilities at home and access to productive resources after return.

Given these findings, failure to recognize and cultivate these gains in order to overcome existing gaps and challenges that RMMWs face, may represent a missed opportunity for Nepal. Protectionist policies that attempt to restrict and/or regulate women’s participation in foreign employment not only forego these potentials but may have the added negative effect of forcing women into migration backchannels that are less safe.



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6. RECOMMENDATIONS

With the findings presented in the Conclusion section, the following key recommendations are offered. Building on findings by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants,¹¹ the recommendations are to contribute to Nepal's efforts to adopt and implement the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration¹² and set specific country priorities for action, in support of the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Nepal.

Recommendations to all stakeholders, including families and communities, for social norm change:

1. Minimize the adverse drivers that compel women to leave the country, by addressing social norms and structural barriers, and investing in human capital development. More than a half of RWMWs in the study migrated as they could not secure “respectable” well-paid work in the country to serve their family's economic needs. Adverse social norms such as the gendered division of roles and responsibilities at home and in the community, as well as structural barriers and gender discrimination, have made women's entry in the domestic labour market challenging regardless of their migration experience. Several women in the study also answered that they used migration as a means to escape social stigma or domestic violence. It is essential to invest in policies and programmes to tackle such adverse drivers and structural barriers, and to mobilize families and communities to question and challenge the prevailing social norms. This will also increase the effectiveness of human capital development such as entrepreneurship, vocational skills development and education, for the creation of productive domestic employment with women.
2. Recognize and support unpaid domestic and care work. The study finds that domestic care work prevents many RWMWs from working outside the home after they return. This restriction strongly affects women's ability to find and access better working opportunities that may be suited to their newly-acquired skill sets and experience. Decreasing and re-distributing the burdens of domestic work can be accomplished by establishing and promoting child care and making elderly care available, investing in time-saving technologies and infrastructure, and introducing more family-friendly labour policies both for women and men. The most crucial need is the implementation of programmes, which challenge gender norms and stereotypes, and promote sharing of household responsibilities among family members.

Recommendations to the federal government and line ministries for laws, policies and regulations:

3. Improve laws, policies, and programmes for safe and gender-responsive migration. This recommendation calls for increased policy harmonization to avoid gaps and inconsistent vision regarding migrating women and RWMWs. A special attention must be given to enhance the availability and flexibility of options, pathways and procedures for regular and documented migration. For this purpose, development of flexible, rights-based and gender-responsive labour mobility schemes is essential. Existing policy, regulatory and legal frameworks require reviews and revisions in order to effectively prevent, combat and eradicate human trafficking in the context of unsafe migration. Gender-responsive policies and a holistic approach to migration will also help reduce the social stigmas and practical dangers associated with working abroad. Nepal's ratification of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, is highly encouraged.

¹¹ United Nations Human Rights Council 2018.

¹² https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180713_agreed_outcome_global_compact_for_migration.pdf

4. Support women workers while abroad by providing financial training to optimize their savings and utilization of money earned. Because support from diplomatic missions in destination countries tends to be minimal, there is a need for institutions to liaise more strongly with migrant communities and civil society organisations working on behalf of migrants to monitor their condition and protections.

Recommendations to the federal, provincial and local governments for the policy implementation and service delivery:

5. Empower migrating women and RWMWs through access to information to mitigate risks created by false or inaccurate information on migration processes, and support their economic reintegration. Functions of the Employment Services Centre of the Department of Labour can be decentralized to the local level, in partnership with other relevant public authorities. This will help the Government provide, make available and disseminate accurate, timely and transparent information on migration-related aspects for migrant women, RWMWs and communities at all stages of migration, including reintegration.
6. Strengthen mechanisms for effective policy implementation. As the study found low enforcement and awareness of existing migration-related policies, an institution with dedicated mandates on women's migration and RWMWs could serve to better define government roles and responsibility for migrating workers and improve governance of the domestic labour market so as to provide equal employment opportunity to RWMWs coming home.
7. Enhance the support for return and economic reintegration by providing training for RWMWs to acquire new or advanced skills that will be more attractive to current market needs. Skill trainings should be accompanied by business development support that educates and cultivates RWMWs who wish to start enterprises, in order to fully build on their entrepreneurship, skills and enhanced human capital as active members of society and contributors to sustainable development in Nepal. The development of a professional job market for domestic and care work should be explored, recognizing skills which many RWMWs acquired abroad. Special attention should be paid to vulnerable RWMWs, such as the divorced, separated and/or widowed, as well as those who may have suffered abuse and/or exploitation while abroad by providing a combination of appropriate counselling and economic reintegration support.
8. Support social reintegration by promoting gender-responsive and child-sensitive return and reintegration programmes, and raising awareness about the contributions made by women migrant workers to their households and the community. It may include legal, social and financial support, such as social protection and services, justice and psycho-social assistance, ensuring that returning women are assisted in their reintegration into community life, through effective partnership among all relevant parties at all levels. The support should also attempt to mobilize families and communities to change attitudes and perceptions about existing gender social norms, including the negative perceptions about widows, divorced and separated women. In this way, working with policy makers, the media, and social and religious leaders will be crucial. Psycho-social support for RWMWs and their families would also be useful to facilitate dialogue and resolve conflicts related to changing gender dynamics at home and in the community. Again, a special focus must be applied on more vulnerable RWMWs including the divorced, separated and/or widowed.
9. Consider each of the previous recommendations within the changing governance context of Nepal: the ongoing switch to a federal structure. As this constitutionally-mandated change evolves, offices and responsibilities will also change, and this means that migration-related organisations need to observe how these changes will affect women migrant workers and supporting institutions. Perhaps a national summit focusing on RWMWs and the federal structure is warranted.

LITERATURE, POLICY AND METHODOLOGY

This report sought to add depth and richness to a growing, yet still underdeveloped, body of literature regarding Nepali women, remittances, and labour migration. Existing literature on these topics has addressed the reasons for migration¹³ and the experience of working in the Gulf States,¹⁴ but none has focused on the effects of gender norms and relations, which many feminist economists believe to be central to understanding women's participation in labour markets.¹⁵

A survey of the literature on women's labour migration around the world yields many interesting studies, but few discernible patterns in the relationship between women's migration and gender relations. Until recently, international migration scholarship had focused on migrants' integration into host countries but overlooked the reintegration of migrants back into their home communities. In addition, most of this literature focuses on men or issues related to the reintegration of refugees or victims of trafficking, which generally tend to be women. Gender differences in terms of return experiences are largely unaddressed, despite some evidence that these experiences may differ greatly.¹⁶

Regarding reintegration, available evidence suggests that whatever the circumstances of return, women migrants typically face greater difficulties while attempting to integrate back into their families and communities, especially after prolonged stays abroad.¹⁷ In this light, several factors have been noted as influencing successful reintegration, including psychosocial health, access to social networks, and opportunities to become self-sufficient.¹⁸ However, a review of integration programmes designed by various development organisations have been found to be insufficient to meeting returning women migrants' needs.¹⁹

POLICY CONTEXT IN NEPAL

Responsibility for managing safe and secure working conditions abroad is overseen by Nepal's Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS).²⁰ This ministry has developed and implemented numerous policies and provisions to insure worker security in foreign countries by providing skill enhancement and pre-migration preparedness for diverse global job market opportunities while also facilitating more informed decision-making for successful reintegration. Some notable pieces of legislation include:

¹³ Bhadra 2008

¹⁴ Gurung 2013

¹⁵ Pearse and Connell 2016; Hewitson 2003; Nelson 1995

¹⁶ Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Reagan and Olsen 2000; Ravuri 2014; Nyberg-Sorensen, van Hear and Engberg-Pedersen 2002; Parrenas 2005

¹⁷ Constable 1999; Long and Oxfeld 2004; Martin and Radu 2012

¹⁸ IOM 2015

¹⁹ IOM 2009

²⁰ Note: This study was conducted prior to the recent federal restructuring of government. During the study, MoLESS was known as the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE)

- The National Strategic Plan for Safe Foreign Employment (2015) includes measures for proper utilisation of economic and social remittances and skill enhancement and development.
- The Directives for Sending Domestic Workers for Foreign Employment (2015) specifies detailed and standardized requirements for securing work abroad, such as permits, age limits, and contracts with approved recruitment agencies.
- The Technical and Vocational Education and Training Policy (2012) identifies specific areas in which migrant workers could benefit from training and skill enhancement.
- The Foreign Employment Policy (2012) suggests potential economic reintegration packages for returning migrant workers.

It should be noted that beyond MoLESS, concerns about migrant workers' safety, successful reintegration, and optimal use of remittances appear in numerous pieces of legislation throughout the Nepali Government. For example, the 13th Periodic Plan (2014-2016) includes explicit reference to providing sufficient agricultural training to returning migrants so they can successfully resume agricultural and livestock work. The Industrial Policy 2011 provides a 35 per cent rebate on the registration fee for companies registered in the names of women, and grants tax concessions up to 40 per cent to companies in which at least 50 per cent of the work force consists of women. These provisions seek to create, in theory, a more welcoming landing place for RMMWs.

METHODOLOGY

Addressing a complex and multi-factorial subject, such as women's migration, and reintegration required a mixed-method approach combining surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, literature review, and policy analysis.

Research sites were purposively selected in five districts based on the volume of labour permits issued to women, while also seeking to ensure proper regional and ethnic representation across the country.

In the second stage, rural and urban sites were selected (presented in Table 1) with relatively high numbers of RMMWs. With assistance from two migration-related organisations,²¹ identified potential research participants were identified (Table 1).

²¹ Pourakhi (a network of RMMWs) and the Safe Migration Project (SaMi) of Helvetas provided invaluable help in identifying qualified research participants.

TABLE 1: RESEARCH SITES AND DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

	Eco-development region	Rural			Urban		
		Location	No. of RWMWs	No. of non-migrants	Location	No. of RWMWs	No. of non-migrants
Kailali	Far-Western Terai	Dododhara, Godawari, Masuriya, Pahalmanpur, Pathariya	22	22	Dhangadi	25	25
Kaski	Western Hill	Ghandruk, Dangsing	19	19	Pokhara	27	27
Nawal-parasi	Western Terai	Daunne Devi	36	36	Sunwal	30	30
Sindhupalchowk	Central Mountain	Ichowk, Mahankal, Palchok, Helambu	108	107	Chautara, Melamchi	111	110

Sampling among the populations was designed to reflect, proportionately, the number of labour permits issued to women. In total, 605 surveys were administered to RWMWs and 605 to non-migrant women. RWMW households were identified using a snowball sampling method. The comparison group of non-migrant women were selected from households geographically adjacent to RWMW households to ensure relative comparability in socio-economic backgrounds. A full description of survey participants is provided in Table 2.

TABLE 2: DISTRICT, PLACE OF RESIDENCE AND MARITAL STATUS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

	No of Participants	Percentage
Types of Respondents		
RWMWs	605	50
NMWs	605	50
Location		
Rural	602	49.8
Urban	608	50.2
Districts		
Jhapa	456	37.7
Sindhupalchok	436	36.0
Nawalparasi	132	10.9
Kaski	92	7.6
Kailali	94	7.8

Research instruments included:

Quantitative surveys that assessed

1. Causes of women's migration;
2. Experiences during recruitment and while working abroad, especially regarding transferring remittances; and
3. RWMWs' participation in labour markets and associated barriers to these. A comparative dimension between RWMWs and NMW was built into the survey to control for exogenous factors that could impact women's reintegration to home and the labour market.

And qualitative interviews took four forms:

1. Key informant interviews (n=55) with relevant stakeholders from community and district levels, including local government, entrepreneurs, associations of RWMWs, and relevant local leadership on migration-related issues.
2. Focus group discussions (20) divided evenly between groups of RWMWs and non-migrant women to explore reasons behind migration and the dynamics of the Nepali labour market.
3. In-depth interviews (n=45) with RWMWs and male family members (usually husbands).
4. A pre-research consultation workshop (22 Feb 2017) with relevant stakeholders and migration experts to confirm the conceptual framework, sample size, and study design. Once preliminary data were collected, five additional consultation meetings were held to inspect and validate that information.

The survey was pre-tested in Kathmandu following a detailed training to the survey takers. Participation in the study was voluntary, and each participant was informed of the purpose of the study, along with any possible risks. Data were collected only after consent was given by the participant.

Quantitative data were cleaned and analysed using SPSS and Stata programs. Qualitative data – interviews and focus group transcripts – were transcribed by field researchers and coded by team members.

The regression analysis conducted for chapter 4 (Returning home) tested 16 variables represented by the list of questions in Table 3:

TABLE 3: CATEGORIES AND QUESTIONS USED FOR REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING SUCCESSFUL REINTEGRATION

Category	Independent variable with dichotomous responses	Question asked
Reasons for migration	1 = Non-economic 2 = Economic	What were the reasons for migration during most recent migration?
Pre-migration context	1 = Women without authority 2 = Women with authority	Decisions related to buying/selling/lending/borrowing of productive assets like land, real-estate, farm equipment, etc. before migration
	1 = Women without authority 2 = Women with authority	Engage in income generating work in the house before migration
	1 = Women without authority 2 = Women with authority	Take up work/ be engaged in business outside the household in residential locality before migration
	1 = Women without authority 2 = Women with authority	Take up work/be engage in business outside household, away from residential locality before migration
	0 = No 1 = Yes	Before migration, were you involved in any community organization?
Migration condition	0 = No 1 = Yes	In general, have you experienced any challenges/barriers from your household/family members while seeking to work abroad?
	0 = No 1 = Yes	While you were working abroad, did you have to switch employers for any reason?
	1 = Care related 2 = Non-care related	What was the nature of your work abroad?
	Monthly salary/wages E58 [Scale values]	Approximately what was your monthly salary/wages while you were abroad?
Circumstances of return	1 = Involuntarily 2 = Voluntarily	Can you tell us why you returned to Nepal when you did?
Post-return context	1 = Women without authority 2 = Women with authority	Decisions related to buying/selling/lending/ borrowing of productive assets like land, real-estate, farm equipment, etc. now.
	1 = Worsened 2 = Improved	In general, how much do you think your personal circumstances have changed since you returned (in family and community)?
	1 = Worsened 2 = Improved	How do you feel about investment opportunities for you in your locality after return?
	1 = Worsened 2 = Improved	What are your perceptions about employment opportunities for you after your return?
	Savings from abroad E63 [Scale values]	At the time of your return, how much money in total were you able to save from your migration abroad?

Note: ‘Do not know/ cannot say’, ‘Not sure’, ‘Not applicable’ are treated as missing and excluded from the regression analyses.

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