

International Migration from Nepal in the Evolving Covid-19 Situation

(Final report)

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Executive Summary

This study was conducted by Building and Wood Workers International (BWI), a Global Union Federation grouping 350 free and democratic trade unions with about 12 million members in 135 countries in the building, building materials, wood, forestry and allied sectors, to understand state of international migration from Nepal in the context of evolving COVID-19 situation. The goal of the study was to enrich and update data and documentation base on international migration, including the impact of COVID-19 on migration streams, for easy use and understanding of trade unions. The study was conducted on 715 migrant workers, potential, current and returnee, with a minimum of 100 workers from each of the seven provinces in Nepal.

The study finds that Nepali workers still work under poor conditions where they were not provided with protective equipment and day off. Many workers in GCC countries and Malaysia were forced to do more than 8 hours of regular work and even without overtime payment. The non-payment of wages and withholding of passport still prevailed.

Recruitment cost has gained a lot of attention among policy makers and other stakeholders lately. Nepal government has also adopted 'free visa, free ticket' policy since 2015 to curb the recruitment costs. However, the study finds that the migrant workers paid over NPR 100,000 for labour migration to GCC and Malaysia and most of the migrant workers took loans often at a high interest rate to finance their migration.

Despite the provisions of labour permit renewal from provincial headquarters (except for Bagmati) this service has been still minimally used. A major reason was the necessity to travel to Kathmandu anyway for return to the destination since only the capital city has an international airport. The government of Nepal is trying to eliminate informal labour intermediaries (agents) from labour migration sector but they still play important roles. Many migrant workers took their services even for the renewal of labour permit as it would be difficult for the migrant workers to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles without their support. The agents also collected recruitment fees from the migrant workers although such an act was prohibited by the law.

A large number of migrant workers have returned to Nepal with the pandemic and there has been calls for the reintegration of returnee migrant workers. However, the findings of the study suggest that the labour market reintegration of returnee migrants will remain a challenge as there are very limited job opportunities available in the country. Most returnees were either engaged in subsistence agriculture, looking for a job, doing nothing or trying to re-migrate. The popular programs, such as the subsidized loans for entrepreneurship development were hardly accessible to the returnee migrant workers.

Nepali migrant workers will likely to continue migrating to the existing major destination countries. Most of the aspirant migrants surveyed for the study were planning to migrate to the conventional destinations, such as the GCC and Malaysia, while a few were trying to go to South Korea or Israel. The aspirant migrants had spent substantial amount of money and time for their migration. Many were trying for over a year for labour migration. The aspirant migrants also found the migration process difficult and most of them thought that the process of labour migration had become more difficult post-COVID-19. Most of the aspirant migrants also did not have skill training just like the current and returnee migrants.

Only a small percentage of migrant workers were associated with trade unions in Nepal and many were not aware of the existence of trade unions at all. A majority of the migrant workers were not provided information on safe migration prior to departure and many still did not leave copies of important documents with their family. These documents could become handy at the time of emergency, such as workers' deaths, injuries, illness, passport loss or passport withholding by employer. These documents are also essential to obtain necessary support from the government bodies by the migrants' families.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|------|---|
| BWI | Building and Wood Workers International |
| DoFE | Department of Foreign Employment |
| FY | Financial Year |
| GCC | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| NHRC | National Human Rights Commission of Nepal |
| NPR | Nepali Rupee |
| NRN | Non-Resident Nepali Association |
| PDOT | Pre-Departure Orientation Training |
| PPE | Personal Protective Equipment |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| USD | United States Dollar |

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Nepal is an important labour source country for Malaysia and the countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council - Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) issued over 4 million 'new entry'¹ labour permits to Nepali workers for employment overseas, excluding India, in a decade from financial year (FY) 2009/10 to 2018/19, and around 90 per cent of Nepali migrant workers travel to Malaysia and four GCC countries - Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.² Nearly 400,000 Nepali workers were estimated to be working in Malaysia in 2018 with Nepali workers making the second largest migrant population in the country after Indonesia.³ and about a similar number of Nepali workers are estimated to be working in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE. Most workers from Nepal are employed in jobs considered 'lower-skilled', such as laborers, assembly-line workers, helpers etc. They account for over 85 per cent of total labour migrants from Nepal.⁴

Nepal's economy heavily relies on the remittances sent by the migrant workers. It has consistently received remittances equivalent to over a quarter of its gross domestic product since 2012 and it still received USD 8.1 billion in 2020 alone despite the decline in the last two years from USD 8.3 billion of 2018.⁵ The remittances have been the major source of foreign currency for the country which needs a reliable source of foreign exchange to pay for the import of goods from India and other countries.

Labour migration sector in Nepal is fraught with several problems despite the growing significance of labour migration in Nepal's macro economy as well as the livelihood of a large number of households. The migrant workers from Nepal are reported to experience various problems in the migration process and during their employment abroad. While wage deception, exorbitant recruitment fees and non-payment of wages are commonly experienced by Nepali workers even during the normal time their conditions are expected to be even worse during the Covid-19 pandemic as it has affected the workers in different economic sectors at an unprecedented level, with many of them experiencing massive layoffs and nonpayment of wages. Migrant workers were found to be even more vulnerable and their conditions were reported to have further declined during the pandemic. The migrant workers were reported to have experienced higher levels of discrimination, food insecurity, and reduction and non-payment of wages during the pandemic.⁶ The conditions of Nepali migrant workers have not

¹ DoFE data classifies the labour permits into 'new entry' and 're-entry' categories. 'New entry' permits are issued to those workers travelling to work for the given employer company for the first time while 're-entry' permits are issued to those migrant workers returning to the same job on a renewed contract after they are in Nepal on home holiday.

² Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2020, *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2020*, Kathmandu.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ World Bank, 'Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP) - Nepal', accessed on 8 February 2022 from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=NP>;

World Bank, 'Personal Remittances, Received (current US\$) - Nepal', accessed on 8 February 2022 from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?locations=NP>

⁶ International Labour Organisation, *Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Recommendations for Policy-makers and Constituents* (Geneva, 2020), available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_743268.pdf.

been found to be any better. Limited available studies and news reports point to a high rate of layoffs, forced return and the non-payment of wages among Nepali migrant workers abroad.⁷ Nepali migrant workers were also reported to have been at a higher risk of infection due to crowded labour camps and a lack of personal protective equipment such as gloves, masks and hand sanitizer at the workplace while they were deprived of health services in the major destination countries.⁸

Labour migration from Nepal was suspended in March of 2020 amidst fear of COVID-19 and the shutting down of the economic sectors in destination countries. Nepal government started issuing labour permits for overseas employment only in the latter part of 2020 after the decline in COVID cases in Nepal and when the major destination countries began to request workers from labour-source countries including Nepal after the opening of different economic sectors. In the financial year 2020/2021, 166,698 labour permits were still issued to Nepali workers and new entry permits contributed over two-fifths (43.2 per cent) of total labour permits.⁹ This number was as high as over half a million in a normal, pre-pandemic year of 2018/19 and the new entry labour permits made a little less than half (46.4 per cent) of the total labour permits.¹⁰

The labour permits for 'new entry' are issued only from the labour office in Kathmandu while the workers can renew their labour permits from provincial headquarters since 2018. The government of Nepal decided to renew the labour permits for migrant workers (who are returning to work for the same employer) from provincial headquarters and Nepali diplomatic agencies in the destination countries in 2018.¹¹ As of 7th of February 2022, the labour permits renewal services are offered from all the provincial headquarters except for Bagmati province.¹² Nepal's capital city, Kathmandu, also falls within Bagmati province, and the workers from this province can get the labour permit renewal services only from the labour office in Kathmandu.

Thus, within this context, this study was conducted to understand impact of the pandemic on aspirant, current and returnee migrant workers from different provinces in Nepal. There is lack of province-level data on migrant workers' experience in the context of COVID-19 and this contributes to fulfill the research gap by capturing the experiences of different categories of migrants from each of the seven provinces in Nepal.

1.2 Research objectives

This study was conducted by Building and Wood Workers International (BWI), a Global Union Federation grouping 350 free and democratic trade unions with about 12 million members in 135 countries in the building, building materials, wood, forestry and allied sectors, to understand state of international migration from Nepal in the context of evolving COVID-19

⁷ National Human Rights Commission of Nepal, *Nepali migrant workers' rights during the COVID-19 pandemic: A research report*, 2020

⁸ National Human Rights Commission of Nepal, *Nepali migrant workers' rights during the COVID-19 pandemic: A research report*, 2020

⁹ Department of Foreign Employment (2021) Countrywise Labour Approval for FY 2077/78 (2020-07-16 to 2021-07-15) (accessed 3 January 2022)

¹⁰ Department of Foreign Employment (2021) Report on Final Approved List New RA Wise from 2018-07-17 to 2019-07-16 (accessed 3 January 2022)

¹¹ The Himalayan, 'Renewal of labour permit from provinces', <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/renewal-of-labour-permit-from-provinces>; Chandan Kumar Mandal, 'Workers can now renew their labour permits in destination countries', <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/12/20/workers-can-now-renew-their-labour-permits-in-destination-countries>

¹² Interview with information officer, Labour Office, Hetauda, Bagmati Province

situation. The goal of the study was to enrich and update data and documentation base on international migration, including the impact of COVID-19 on migration streams, for easy use and understanding of trade unions.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Map out-migration from Nepal in the current COVID-19 situation.
- Analyse the policy framework at the central and provincial levels, including role and scope of labour permit issuing offices, for regulating labour migration from Nepal.
- Identify issues and challenges faced by potential, current and returnee migrants across seven provinces in Nepal.
- Assess the impact of COVID-19 on the current, potential and returnee migrant workers from Nepal.
- Understand the migration process, cost and debt burden among migrant workers from Nepal.
- Understand the support systems, including financial support health insurance, and social security, available to migrant workers at home as well as transit and destination countries.
- Make recommendations/ action-points for the engagement of trade unions to improve migration experiences of Nepali workers.

1.3 Research methods

A mixed-method approach was used for the study, which involved a review of relevant publications, surveys, interviews and discussions.

- Desk review:* The study began with a review of relevant publications on labour migration from Nepal and the experiences of workers from Nepal in the migration process before and during the pandemic. The reviewed documents included the legal instruments governing labour migration from Nepal, policy announcements and court judgments on the issue of international labour migration from Nepal, the labour agreements signed between Nepal and different countries of labour destination, academic and grey literature, and news reports. The review of literature was helpful to achieve objectives 1 and 2 as well as in the development of survey questionnaire and interview questions.
- Surveys:* The study was primarily based on the survey data collected from 715 migrant workers - potential, current and returnee - with a minimum of 100 workers from each of the seven provinces in Nepal. Potential, current and returnee migrants each made about one-third of the total respondents in the study (See Table 1).

Eligibility criteria

In the case of **potential migrants**, anyone aspiring to go abroad for work was considered eligible for the study. For **current migrants**, any worker based in GCC countries or Malaysia was considered eligible for the study as the workers from these countries were likely to engage in the BWI sectors. The workers had migrated abroad before or after the pandemic but were employed abroad at the time of the study. In the case of **returnee migrants**, only those workers who had returned after March 2020, when Nepal enforced the first nation-wide lockdown due to the fear of COVID-19, were

considered eligible for the study. The interviews were conducted with potential and returnee migrants themselves while the data for current migrants was mostly collected from a household member knowledgeable of the migrant's conditions since establishing direct contact with current migrants was extremely difficult.

Table 1: Survey participants by province and migrant type

| | Returnee Migrants | Potential Migrants | Current Migrants | Total respondents |
|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Province-1 | 33 | 34 | 37 | 104 |
| Madhesh | 33 | 35 | 34 | 102 |
| Bagmati | 33 | 34 | 33 | 100 |
| Gandaki | 33 | 33 | 34 | 100 |
| Lumbini | 33 | 35 | 36 | 104 |
| Karnali | 34 | 33 | 33 | 100 |
| Sudurpaschim | 33 | 37 | 35 | 105 |
| Total | 232 | 241 | 242 | 715 |

Most of the respondents in the sample were male. The female migrant workers made only 3.4 per cent of the total respondents.

Table 2: Education level of the migrant workers

| | No formal education | 5th grade or less | 6th-10th grade | SLC passed | 11th grade | 12th grade | Bachelor's degree or above |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------|------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| Province-1 | 0.0 | 4.8 | 52.9 | 26.9 | 4.8 | 9.6 | 1.0 |
| Madhesh | 15.7 | 10.8 | 43.1 | 23.5 | 0.0 | 5.9 | 1.0 |
| Bagmati | 2.0 | 5.0 | 19.0 | 30.0 | 7.0 | 35.0 | 2.0 |
| Gandaki | 0.0 | 10.0 | 51.0 | 22.0 | 1.0 | 15.0 | 1.0 |
| Lumbini | 0.0 | 25.0 | 56.7 | 5.8 | 1.0 | 8.7 | 2.9 |
| Karnali | 1.0 | 5.0 | 46.0 | 15.0 | 4.0 | 24.0 | 5.0 |
| Sudurpaschim | 1.9 | 3.8 | 38.1 | 25.7 | 2.9 | 25.7 | 1.9 |
| Total | 2.9 | 9.2 | 43.9 | 21.3 | 2.9 | 17.6 | 2.1 |

(N=715)

Most of the respondents had low-level of formal education completing only 10th grade or less. About one-fifth of the respondents had completed higher secondary (12th grade) or higher level of education, and this rate was highest in Bagmati province and lowest in Madhesh province (Table 2).

- c) *Interviews:* The data from the survey was complemented with in-depth interviews conducted on additional 14 migrant workers, 2 migrants from each province. The interview data was mainly used to interpret and explain the survey data. Additional interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, such as government bodies (DoFE, FEB), recruitment agencies and their umbrella organisation, Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies, BWI affiliates, national centres, SARTUC and other non-government organizations working on labour migration in Nepal.

2 Working and Living Conditions in the Destination Country

This chapter discusses the working and living conditions of migrant workers (both current and returnee) while working in the foreign countries.

2.1 Destination countries

Most of the migrant workers were employed in Malaysia and the GCC countries of Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia. There was not significant difference among the destination choice of migrant workers in terms of their place of origin in Nepal (Table 3).

Table 3: Destinations of migrant workers

| | Malaysia | Qatar | Saudi Arabia | Kuwait | Bahrain /Oman | UAE | Others | Total respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|------------|---------------|-------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Province-1 | 12.9 | 30.0 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 1.4 | 31.4 | 4.3 | 70 |
| Madhesh | 25.4 | 40.3 | 20.9 | 3.0 | 1.5 | 9.0 | 0.0 | 67 |
| Bagmati | 22.7 | 15.2 | 13.6 | 0.0 | 3.0 | 42.4 | 3.0 | 66 |
| Gandaki | 6.0 | 17.9 | 23.9 | 3.0 | 7.5 | 41.8 | 0.0 | 67 |
| Lumbini | 26.1 | 58.0 | 11.6 | 1.4 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 0.0 | 69 |
| Karnali | 40.3 | 17.9 | 20.9 | 9.0 | 0.0 | 11.9 | 0.0 | 67 |
| Sudurpaschim | 36.8 | 7.4 | 26.5 | 7.4 | 1.5 | 20.6 | 0.0 | 68 |
| Total | 24.3 | 26.8 | 18.1 | 4.9 | 2.1 | 22.8 | 1.0 | 474 |

2.2 Employment duration in the last migration stint

A majority of both current and returnee migrant workers had worked or were working in the destination country for three or more years. This was consistent across the migrant workers from all provinces except Lumbini, which had a majority of both current and returnee migrants employed overseas for less than three years (Table 4).

Table 4: Employment duration of Current and returnee migrant workers

| | Less than a year (%) | About a year (%) | About 1.5 years (%) | About 2 years (%) | About 2.5 years (%) | 3 or more years (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|--------------------------|----------------------|------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Current migrants | | | | | | | |
| Province-1 | 18.9 | 2.7 | 0.0 | 5.4 | 10.8 | 62.2 | 37 |
| Madhesh | 23.5 | 2.9 | 2.9 | 11.8 | 14.7 | 44.1 | 34 |
| Bagmati | 21.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 6.1 | 6.1 | 66.7 | 33 |
| Gandaki | 2.9 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 2.9 | 91.2 | 34 |
| Lumbini | 16.7 | 19.4 | 5.6 | 16.7 | 11.1 | 30.6 | 36 |
| Karnali | 18.2 | 3.0 | 0.0 | 12.1 | 3.0 | 63.6 | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 20.0 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 14.3 | 2.9 | 60.0 | 35 |
| Total | 17.4 | 4.1 | 1.7 | 9.9 | 7.4 | 59.5 | 242 |
| Returnee migrants | | | | | | | |
| Province-1 | 0.0 | 3.0 | 6.1 | 6.1 | 15.2 | 69.7 | 33 |
| Madhesh | 6.1 | 0.0 | 3.0 | 6.1 | 12.1 | 72.8 | 33 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| Bagmati | 6.1 | 3.0 | 0.0 | 12.1 | 6.1 | 72.8 | 33 |
| Gandaki | 3.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 6.1 | 3.0 | 87.8 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 9.1 | 0.0 | 3.0 | 24.2 | 15.2 | 48.5 | 33 |
| Karnali | 17.6 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 17.6 | 8.8 | 52.9 | 34 |
| Sudurpaschim | 3.0 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 18.2 | 15.2 | 57.6 | 33 |
| Total | 6.5 | 1.3 | 2.6 | 12.9 | 10.8 | 66.0 | 232 |

It is concerning that about 10 per cent of the migrant workers had returned home in less than two years (although the labour contracts are usually provided for two years). Karnali province had the largest proportion (17.6 per cent) of workers to have returned home in less than six months of migration.

2.3 Job related experiences prior to migration

Most of the workers in the sample were engaged in construction work as labourers, mason or plumber, carpenter. A few of them were drivers and security guards.

Only about a quarter of the workers had prior work experience of the jobs they pursued while abroad. The Madhes (40.3 per cent) and Bagmati (37.9 per cent) provinces had higher share workers migrating with job related experiences while the rate was lowest for Karnali (20.9 per cent) (Table 5).

Table 5: Workers with prior experiences related to job

| | Number | Per cent | Number of respondents |
|---------------------|------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Province-1 | 15 | 21.4 | 70 |
| Madhesh | 27 | 40.3 | 67 |
| Bagmati | 25 | 37.9 | 66 |
| Gandaki | 17 | 25.4 | 67 |
| Lumbini | 15 | 21.7 | 69 |
| Karnali | 14 | 20.9 | 67 |
| Sudurpaschim | 22 | 32.4 | 68 |
| Total | 135 | 28.5 | 474 |

2.4 Work days and hours

Most of the workers worked across all the destination countries had one day-off in a week. However, 15 percent of the workers had to work for all seven days. The proportion of workers who had work with a day-off was high in all the GCC countries except Qatar (Table 6).

Table 6: Proportion of workers who worked all seven days in a week

| | per cent | Number of respondents |
|---|-------------|-----------------------|
| Malaysia | 11.3 | 115 |
| Qatar | 8.7 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 18.6 | 86 |
| UAE | 18.5 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 30.3 | 33 |
| Total | 14.9 | 469 |

2.5 Overtime work and payment

About half of the workers (49.7 per cent) worked for overtime. The average (mean) hours of overtime work in a week across all destinations was 21. The workers in Malaysia had as high as two-thirds of workers working overtime (Table 7).

Table 7: Migrant workers working overtime

| | Number | per cent | Number of respondents |
|---|------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Malaysia | 76 | 66.1 | 115 |
| Qatar | 58 | 45.7 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 44 | 51.2 | 86 |
| UAE | 40 | 37.0 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 15 | 45.5 | 33 |
| Total | 233 | 49.7 | 469 |

Among the workers who worked overtime, just less than half (48.1 per cent) reported that they were forced to work overtime. Qatar had the highest percentage (60.3 per cent) to have been forced to work overtime while UAE had only a quarter of the workers forced to work more than the regular hours of work (Table 8).

Table 8: Forced overtime work and non-payment of wages

| | Workers forced to work overtime (%) | Workers not paid for overtime work (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| Malaysia | 52.6 | 5.3 | 76 |
| Qatar | 60.3 | 6.9 | 58 |
| Saudi Arabia | 40.9 | 2.3 | 44 |
| UAE | 25.0 | 10.0 | 40 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 60.0 | 20.0 | 15 |
| Total | 48.1 | 6.9 | 233 |

Most workers (over 90 per cent) who were engaged in overtime work got paid for their work. However, there were significant differences across destination countries. The GCC countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and UAE had the highest percentage of workers not receiving payment for the overtime work.

2.6 Wages and payment modality

The workers earned nearly NPR 40,000 on average per month across all destination countries. The average monthly salary was lower in Malaysia than in the GCC countries. Among all countries, the Nepali workers in the UAE had the highest salary (Table 9).

Table 9: Average monthly salary according to destination countries

| | Average salary (NPR) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Malaysia | 32,261 | 115 |
| Qatar | 38,027 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 41,415 | 86 |
| UAE | 46,654 | 108 |

| | | |
|---|---------------|------------|
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 44,064 | 33 |
| Total | 39,646 | 469 |

While most of the workers (85.5 per cent) across all destination countries were paid through transfers to their bank account some workers were paid in cash (9.4 per cent) or were never paid. Some workers (8.3 per cent) did not have a bank account in the destination country (Table 10).

Table 10: Migrant workers paid in cash and without a bank account

| | Paid in cash (%) | Without a bank account (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Malaysia | 8.7 | 7.8 | 115 |
| Qatar | 10.2 | 10.2 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 9.3 | 4.7 | 86 |
| UAE | 5.6 | 6.5 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 21.2 | 18.2 | 33 |
| Total | 9.4 | 8.3 | 469 |

While most workers had bank account in the destination country, less than 10 per cent of workers did not have a personal bank account. The rate of workers not having a personal account was significantly higher in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar in comparison to UAE and Malaysia.

2.7 Non-payment of wages

A total of 29 workers (6.9 per cent) - 24 returnee migrant worker and 5 current migrant workers - reported that their wages were not settled by their employers. In terms of the destination country Malaysia had the lowest percentage of workers (3.5 per cent; 5 out of 115) who were not paid in full by their employers while this rate was twice in UAE and more than three times in GCC countries of Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman (Table 11).

Table 11: Returnee and current migrant workers whose wages were/are not settled

| | Returnee (N) | Current (N) | Workers who sought help (%) | Number of respondents |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Malaysia | 4 | 1 | 1 | 115 |
| Qatar | 8 | 2 | 1 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 5 | - | - | 86 |
| UAE | 8 | 2 | 1 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 4 | - | 1 | 33 |
| Total | 29 | 5 | 4 | 469 |

Only four workers sought for external help for the settlement of wages and these organizations were DoFE, Nepali embassy and Nepali diaspora organization (NRN) in the destination and they provided some help but the company has agreed to pay the remaining wages of only two workers.

2.8 Health insurance and safety equipment

Just over a majority of migrant workers had health insurance while working abroad. While nearly a quarter of the workers did not have health insurance coverage about one-fifth were not aware if they had health insurance coverage during their employment abroad. In terms of destination country, Qatar had the highest rate of workers (36.2 per cent) that did not have health insurance while Saudi Arabia had the lowest rate of workers (14 per cent) who did not have health insurance (Table 12).

Table 12: Workers receiving health insurance coverage from employers

| | Yes | No | Don't know | Number of respondents |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Malaysia | 58.3 | 25.2 | 16.5 | 115 |
| Qatar | 46.5 | 36.2 | 17.3 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 67.4 | 14.0 | 18.6 | 86 |
| UAE | 61.1 | 14.8 | 24.1 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 51.5 | 24.2 | 24.2 | 33 |
| Total | 56.9 | 23.7 | 19.4 | 469 |

Over four-fifths of the workers reported that they were provide with necessary safety equipment, such as boots, helmet, gloves, at the workplace. In terms of the destination country, workers employed in the GCC countries of Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and UAE had higher rates of workers reporting the lack of safety equipment compared to Saudi Arabia and Malaysia (Table 13).

Table 13: Workers provided with safety equipment at the workplace

| | Yes (%) | No (%) | Don't know (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---|-------------|-------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Malaysia | 84.3 | 7.8 | 7.8 | 115 |
| Qatar | 82.7 | 14.2 | 3.1 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 88.4 | 7.0 | 4.7 | 86 |
| UAE | 79.6 | 10.2 | 10.2 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 81.8 | 18.2 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Total | 83.4 | 10.7 | 6.0 | 469 |

2.9 Living conditions

Most of the workers (94.5 per cent) were provided accommodation by the employer company. While all the workers in Saudi Arabia lived in the housing provided by the employer some workers in other countries lived on their own (Table 14).

Table 14: Workers provided with accommodation by the employer company

| | Yes (%) | No (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|---------|--------|---------------------------|
| Malaysia | 92.2 | 7.8 | 115 |
| Qatar | 96.1 | 3.9 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 100.0 | 0.0 | 86 |

| | | | |
|---|-------------|------------|------------|
| UAE | 91.7 | 8.3 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 90.9 | 9.1 | 33 |
| Total | 94.5 | 5.5 | 469 |

Most of the workers reported that the quality of their accommodation was good (58.6 per cent) or just okay (36.9 per cent). A small rate of worker (3.4 per cent) across all destination countries had poor quality of accommodation. Workers employed in Saudi Arabia and Qatar were more likely to report their accommodation as poor while the workers employed in Malaysia were least likely to do so (Table 15).

Table 15: Workers' perception of the quality of accommodation

| | Good (%) | Just okay (%) | Poor (%) | No idea (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Malaysia | 60.0 | 37.4 | .9 | 1.7 | 115 |
| Qatar | 56.7 | 38.6 | 4.7 | 0.0 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 66.3 | 27.9 | 5.9 | 0.0 | 86 |
| UAE | 53.7 | 40.7 | 2.8 | 2.8 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 57.6 | 39.4 | 3.0 | - | 33 |
| Total | 58.6 | 36.9 | 3.4 | 1.1 | 469 |

2.10 Withholding of passport

A majority of the workers (62.7 per cent) reported that their passport was kept by the company during their employment. There was not significant variation between Malaysia and GCC countries in terms of the controlling of the workers' passport by the employers (Table 16).

Table 16: Workers whose passport was seized/withheld by the company

| | Percent (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---|--------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Malaysia | 63.5 | 115 |
| Qatar | 66.9 | 127 |
| Saudi Arabia | 59.3 | 86 |
| UAE | 57.4 | 108 |
| Other GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait & Oman) | 69.7 | 33 |
| Total | 62.7 | 469 |

3 Migration Cost and Sources of Fund

This chapter discusses the costs borne by the workers in the process of migration from Nepal. The chapter also provides an analysis on the magnitude of debt burden among the migrant workers. The analysis is based on the data collected from returnee and current migrant workers.

3.1 Recruitment fees

Most workers had paid a hefty amount of money as recruitment fees despite Nepal's adoption of 'free-visa, free-ticket' policy since 2015, which authorizes the recruitment agencies to collect maximum of NPR 10,000 from workers for processing their migration to Malaysia and the GCC countries. The workers on average paid 115,000 for migration to GCC countries and 120,000 for Malaysia (Table 17).

Table 17: Average (median) Recruitment Fees Paid for Labour Migration (in NPR)

| Province-1 | GCC | | |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Countries | Malaysia | Overall |
| Province-1 | 110000 | 110000 | 112,500 |
| Madhesh | 125000 | 172500 | 130,000 |
| Bagmati | 122500 | 125000 | 122,500 |
| Gandaki | 90000 | 122500 | 92,500 |
| Lumbini | 120000 | 127500 | 120,000 |
| Karnali | 100000 | 90000 | 92,500 |
| Sudurpaschim | 130000 | 150000 | 130,000 |
| Total | 115,000 | 120,000 | 120,000 |

On average, the workers from Madhesh and Sudurpaschim paid higher recruitment fees than the workers from Gandaki and Karnali provinces.

3.2 Financing of migration

Many migrant workers had used multiple sources, including family savings, to pay for their migration. However, taking loans from informal channels, such as friends, relatives or neighbours was the most common method used by migrant workers. Only ten per cent of the workers had taken loans from formal financial institutions, such as banks (Table 18).

Table 18: Sources of funds to pay for migration (in per cent)

| Province-1 | Borrowed from friends, relatives or neighbors | Personal or family savings | Took loans from financial institutions | Others |
|--------------|---|----------------------------|--|------------|
| Province-1 | 58.6 | 40.0 | 7.1 | 2.9 |
| Madhesh | 74.6 | 34.3 | 4.5 | - |
| Bagmati | 39.4 | 63.6 | 12.1 | 3.0 |
| Gandaki | 73.1 | 17.9 | 4.5 | - |
| Lumbini | 65.2 | 92.8 | 13.0 | - |
| Karnali | 52.2 | 82.1 | 14.9 | - |
| Sudurpaschim | 48.5 | 44.1 | 16.2 | 1.5 |
| Total | 58.9 | 53.6 | 10.3 | 1.1 |

Note: multiple responses

Lumbini, Karnali and Bagmati provinces had a higher percentage of workers using personal or family savings to pay for migration while Gandaki province had the lowest percentage of workers using personal funds and a high rate of workers, along with Madhesh province, borrowing from individuals, such as friends, relatives and villagers (Table 18).

Table 19: Average amount of loan

| | Workers who took loans (%) | Workers who paid back loan (%) | Average (median) loan amount (NPR) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Province-1 | 44.2 | 73.7 | 110,000 |
| Madhesh | 52.0 | 95.9 | 150,000 |
| Bagmati | 34.0 | 88.2 | 100,000 |
| Gandaki | 52.0 | 100.0 | 100,000 |
| Lumbini | 43.3 | 100.0 | 50,000 |
| Karnali | 42.0 | 95.1 | 100,000 |
| Sudurpaschim | 38.1 | 77.8 | 109,500 |
| Total | 43.6 | 91.0 | 100,000 |

The migrant workers had taken a loan of NPR 100,000 on average. This figure was as high as up to 150,000 in Madhesh province but as low as NPR 50,000 in Lumbini. Most of the migrants had repaid the loan but 9 per cent of workers were yet to clear their loans (Table 19).

4 Renewal of Labour Permit

This section is based on the analysis of data from the current and returnee migrant workers who had renewed their labour permit in Nepal at some point of their migration stint for their continued employment overseas.

4.1 Renewal of labour permits from provincial headquarters

In the sample, 198 workers (current and returnee migrants) or their family members were knowledgeable of the labour permits renewed by the migrant workers. While one worker had renewed from the destination country most (161) had renewed it from Kathmandu. Only 32 had renewed it from outside Kathmandu (Table 20).

Table 20: Place of renewal of labour permits by workers' place of origin in Nepal

| Workers' place of origin | Kathmandu (%) | Outside Kathmandu (%) | Nepali Embassy (%) | Total Number (N) |
|--------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Province-1 | 91.7 | 8.3 | - | 36 |
| Madhesh | 48.0 | 52.0 | - | 25 |
| Bagmati | 100.0 | - | - | 31 |
| Gandaki | 84.2 | 15.8 | - | 57 |
| Lumbini | 100.0 | - | - | 6 |
| Karnali | 100.0 | - | - | 15 |
| Sudurpaschim | 66.7 | 29.2 | 4.2 | 24 |
| Total | 83.0 | 16.5 | .5 | 194 |

4.2 Use of intermediaries in labour permit renewal

Many migrant workers took help of labour intermediaries, such as agents, for the renewal of labour permits. Across seven provinces, nearly a quarter (23.7 per cent) of migrant workers had taken help of agents in the renewal process (Table 21).

Table 21: Migrant workers using intermediaries for labour permit renewal

| | Percentage of workers (%) | Total Respondents (N) |
|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Province-1 | 47.2 | 36 |
| Madhesh | 56.0 | 25 |
| Bagmati | 9.7 | 31 |
| Gandaki | 1.8 | 57 |
| Lumbini | 50.0 | 6 |
| Karnali | 26.7 | 15 |
| Sudurpaschim | 16.7 | 24 |
| Total | 23.7 | 194 |

Madhesh province had the highest proportion (56 per cent) of workers taking help of intermediaries for labour permit renewal while this rate was lowest for Gandaki, where less than two per cent of workers had taken the services of labour intermediaries for the same purpose.

4.3 Labour permit renewal experience

Most of the workers had somewhat pleasant (good or just okay) experience of labour permit renewal while about two-fifths of the workers had unpleasant experience (Table 22).

Table 22: Labour permit renewal experience

| | Good (%) | Just okay (%) | Somewhat unpleasant (%) | Very unpleasant (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 17.6 | 17.6 | 58.8 | 5.9 | 17 |
| Madhesh | 50.0 | 42.9 | 7.1 | - | 14 |
| Bagmati | - | 100.0 | - | - | 3 |
| Gandaki | - | - | - | 100.0 | 1 |
| Lumbini | - | 100.0 | - | - | 3 |
| Karnali | - | 50.0 | 25.0 | 25.0 | 4 |
| Sudurpaschim | - | 25.0 | - | 75.0 | 4 |
| Total | 21.7 | 39.1 | 26.1 | 13.0 | 46 |

Over two-thirds of workers from Province 1 reported of unpleasant experience at renewing labour permit in Nepal (Table 22).

5 Experiences of Returnee Migrants

This chapter discusses the reasons of migrant workers' return from abroad and the repatriation process they underwent. It also highlights the debt burden among migrant workers as a result of unsuccessful labour migration.

5.1 Current employment status of the returnee migrant workers

Most of the returnee migrant workers were either engaged in subsistence agriculture (42.2 per cent) or not doing anything (18.1 per cent). The rate of returnees engaged in subsistence farming was about 80 per cent or above in Karnali and Lumbini provinces while this rate was lowest for Gandaki province. However, more than half the respondents were not doing anything in Gandaki (Table 23).

Table 23: Returnee migrants' employment status (in Per cent)

| | Province-1 | Madhesh | Bagmati | Gandaki | Lumbini | Karnali | Sudurpa schim | Total |
|--------------------------------------|------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------------|-------------|
| Farming (subsistence) | 51.5 | 21.2 | 12.1 | 9.1 | 87.9 | 79.4 | 33.3 | 42.2 |
| Not doing anything | 6.1 | 3.0 | 39.4 | 57.6 | 3.0 | 2.9 | 15.2 | 18.1 |
| Started a business | 6.1 | 24.2 | 21.2 | 12.1 | 3.0 | 17.6 | 18.2 | 14.7 |
| Searching for a job | 33.3 | 18.2 | 3.0 | 3.0 | - | 17.6 | 21.2 | 13.8 |
| Wage work | 6.1 | 21.2 | 9.1 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 35.3 | 3.0 | 11.6 |
| Trying to migrate to another country | 18.2 | 6.1 | 12.1 | - | - | 2.9 | 24.2 | 9.1 |
| Have a job (private/government) | 3.0 | - | 21.2 | 9.1 | - | 5.9 | 9.1 | 6.9 |
| Farming - sell | 6.1 | 3.0 | 6.1 | 9.1 | 3.0 | 5.9 | 12.1 | 6.5 |
| On a holiday | - | 3.0 | - | - | - | - | 12.1 | 2.2 |

Note: Multiple responses

The data indicates a challenge for returnee migrants in finding jobs or starting businesses in Nepal upon their return. This could also explain the fact that many returnee migrants plan on re-migrating after some time. In the sample, 9 per cent returnee migrants were already planning to re-migrate (Table 21).

5.2 Reason of return

Completion of the contract was the main reason for return among migrant workers followed by employment loss and personal reasons. A small number (4.3 per cent) of the returnee migrants had come home due to illness and this rate was as high as 12 per cent among the returnee migrants from Lumbini province (Table 24).

Table 24: Returnee migrants' reason for return

| | Completion of contract (%) | Employment loss (%) | Personal reasons (%) | Illness (%) | Others ¹³ (%) | Total Number (N) |
|-------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Province-1 | 39.4 | 24.2 | 24.2 | 9.1 | 3.0 | 33 |
| Madhesh | 51.5 | 24.2 | 21.2 | 0.0 | 3.0 | 33 |

¹³ Includes reasons such as COVID-19 risk, resignation, non-payment of wages and fraud.

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Bagmati | 33.3 | 24.2 | 30.3 | 3.0 | 9.1 | 33 |
| Gandaki | 45.5 | 33.3 | 18.2 | 3.0 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 66.7 | 21.2 | 0.0 | 12.1 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Karnali | 73.5 | 14.7 | 8.8 | 2.9 | 0.0 | 34 |
| Sudurpaschim | 63.6 | 3.0 | 21.2 | 0.0 | 12.1 | 33 |
| Total | 53.4 | 20.7 | 17.7 | 4.3 | 3.9 | 232 |

5.3 Arrangement of return ticket

The return ticket for over two-thirds (70.7 per cent) of the migrant workers were paid by the employer company while it was paid by the migrant workers themselves in the case of over a quarter of them (Table 25).

Table 25: Sponsor of return ticket for returnee migrants

| | Employer (%) | Self-financed (%) | Nepal embassy (%) | Host country government (%) | Total Number (N) |
|---------------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Province-1 | 63.6 | 30.3 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 33 |
| Madhesh | 81.8 | 15.2 | 3.0 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Bagmati | 69.7 | 30.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Gandaki | 72.7 | 27.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 48.5 | 51.5 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Karnali | 82.4 | 17.6 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 34 |
| Sudurpaschim | 75.8 | 24.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Total | 70.7 | 28.0 | .9 | .4 | 232 |

The return air ticket for a couple of the migrant workers were purchased by Nepal embassy while this cost was borne by the host country government in the case of one worker from Province 1.

5.4 Quarantine upon return

About one-fifth of the respondents lived in isolation centres in Nepal, as per the requirement of the government of Nepal, before heading home. Province 1 and Karnali had a higher percentage of workers who were quarantined in isolation centres (Table 26).

Table 26: The Migrant Workers Who Lived in Isolation Centres upon Return

| | Number | Per cent | Number of respondents |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Province-1 | 15 | 45.5 | 33 |
| Madhesh | 3 | 9.1 | 33 |
| Bagmati | 9 | 27.3 | 33 |
| Gandaki | 4 | 12.1 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 3 | 9.1 | 33 |
| Karnali | 10 | 29.4 | 34 |
| Sudurpaschim | 5 | 15.2 | 33 |
| Total | 49 | 21.1 | 232 |

Overall one third of the migrant workers (36.7 per cent), and none from Sudurpaschim, had to pay for their quarantine. Among those who paid for quarantine, most paid anywhere between NPR 5000 to 30,000. Some workers in Province 1 had paid above NPR30,000 for quarantine (Table 27).

Table 27: Quarantine costs in Nepal upon return (in NPR)

| | Did not pay | 5000 or less | 5000-10,000 | 10,000 -20,000 | 20,000 - 30,000 | More than 30,000 | Total Respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Province-1 | 26.7 | 20.0 | 6.7 | 13.3 | - | 33.4 | 15 |
| Madhesh | - | - | - | 33.3 | 66.7 | - | 3 |
| Bagmati | 77.8 | 11.1 | - | 11.1 | 7 | - | 9 |
| Gandaki | 50.0 | - | - | 25.0 | 25.0 | - | 4 |
| Lumbini | - | - | - | 33.3 | 66.7 | - | 3 |
| Karnali | - | 20.0 | 30.0 | 40.0 | 10.0 | - | 10 |
| Sudurpaschim | 100.0 | - | - | - | - | - | 5 |
| Total | 36.7 | 12.2 | 8.2 | 20.4 | 12.2 | 2.0 | 49 |

5.5 Discrimination in the family and community

Some workers had experienced discrimination in their family and community as they returned during the pandemic and there was widespread fear of COVID-19. A total of 15 migrant workers (6.5) per cent had experienced discrimination in the community while only three workers had experienced discrimination in the family upon their return. The discrimination against returnee migrant workers persisted for a short period of time.

5.6 Access to loan schemes

The federal and provincial governments of Nepal have announced different soft loan schemes to promote the engagement of returnee migrant workers in entrepreneurship. However, the survey finds that such programs are out of reach of most returnee migrants. Only four respondents (1.7 per cent) - two from Gandaki and one each from Province 1 and Madhesh - had obtained such loans.

6 Migration plan of potential migrants

With the exception of four workers, all the potential migrant workers interviewed for the study had obtained passport from the Government of Nepal. The four workers were in the process of obtaining passport.

6.1 Passport

While most migrants (64.1 per cent) had their passport with them, some (23.6 per cent) had them with recruitment agencies, agents despite it being illegal. Madhesh province had the highest rate (29.4 per cent) of informal agents holding migrant workers' passport although it was an illegal act in Nepal (Table 28).

Table 28: Who was holding aspirant migrants' passports?

| | Myself (%) | Recruitment agency (%) | Informal agents (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 58.8 | 38.2 | 2.9 | 34 |
| Madhesh | 64.7 | 5.9 | 29.4 | 35 |
| Bagmati | 90.9 | 9.1 | - | 34 |
| Gandaki | 66.7 | 24.2 | 9.1 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 68.6 | 17.1 | 14.3 | 35 |
| Karnali | 56.3 | 34.4 | 9.4 | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 44.4 | 36.1 | 19.4 | 37 |
| Total | 64.1 | 23.6 | 12.3 | 241 |

6.2 Duration of migration preparation

Most of the potential migrant workers were preparing for labour migration in the last six months. However, 15 per cent of the workers were trying for two years or more to go abroad, which indicates a significant investment of people for migration in terms of time (Table 29).

Table 29: Time spent for the preparation of labour migration

| | Up to 3 months (%) | 4-6 months (%) | 7 months to 1 year (%) | About 2 years (%) | 3 years or more (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 41.2 | 32.4 | 11.7 | 8.8 | 5.9 | 34 |
| Madhesh | 40.0 | 11.4 | 45.7 | 2.9 | 0.0 | 35 |
| Bagmati | 58.8 | 14.7 | 11.7 | 8.8 | 5.9 | 34 |
| Gandaki | 87.9 | 9.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 3.0 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 20.0 | 45.7 | 20.0 | 14.3 | 0.0 | 35 |
| Karnali | 12.1 | 12.1 | 39.4 | 30.3 | 3.0 | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 32.4 | 21.6 | 27.0 | 8.1 | 10.8 | 37 |
| Total | 41.5 | 21.2 | 22.4 | 10.4 | 4.6 | 241 |

6.3 Destination

Most of the aspirant migrants were planning to go to the GCC countries for employed, a trend similar to the migration destination of current and returnee migrants surveyed in the study. In

terms of the destination country, Qatar was the most popular destination choice with a total over a quarter (26.1 per cent) of workers choosing it for migration.

The other popular countries were Kuwait, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, with about 13 per cent of workers choosing each of these countries. The sample also had aspirant migrants planning to go to Israel, South Korea and other countries (Table 30).

Table 30: Destination selected by aspirant migrants (in per cent)

| | Malaysia | Qatar | Saudi Arabia | Kuwait | Oman/ Bahrain | UAE | Israel | Others | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 5.9 | 32.4 | 5.9 | 5.9 | | 41.2 | 0.0 | 8.8 | 34 |
| Madhesh | 5.7 | 77.1 | 8.6 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 8.6 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 35 |
| Bagmati | 2.9 | 5.9 | 2.9 | 5.9 | 14.7 | 50.0 | 11.8 | 5.9 | 34 |
| Gandaki | 3.0 | 12.1 | 27.3 | 9.1 | 0.0 | 48.5 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 20.0 | 25.7 | 8.6 | 28.6 | 8.6 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 8.6 | 35 |
| Karnali | 36.4 | 12.1 | 30.3 | 18.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 3.0* | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 18.9 | 16.2 | 10.8 | 27.0 | 2.7 | 13.5 | 0.0 | 10.8 | 37 |
| Total | 13.3 | 26.1 | 13.3 | 13.7 | 3.7 | 22.8 | 1.7 | 5.4 | 241 |

(*South Korea)

There was some variation in destination choice among aspirant migrants in terms of their origin province in Nepal. Those from Madhesh were very likely to choose Qatar (77.1 per cent) while UAE was the first choice of migrants from Province 1, Bagmati and Gandaki. The aspirant migrant workers from other provinces had similar kinds of preference for Malaysia and different countries of GCC.

6.4 Skill training

Just over a quarter (28.6 per cent) of the aspirant migrant workers had obtained skill training. While Bagmati Province had the highest rate of workers (44.1 per cent) who had received skill training Lumbini had the lowest (5.7 per cent) (Table 31).

Table 31: Potential migrants taking skill training

| | Number | Percent | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 11 | 32.4 | 34 |
| Madhesh | 12 | 34.3 | 35 |
| Bagmati | 15 | 44.1 | 34 |
| Gandaki | 11 | 33.3 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 2 | 5.7 | 35 |
| Karnali | 7 | 21.2 | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 11 | 29.7 | 37 |
| Total | 69 | 28.6 | 241 |

In most cases (72.5 per cent), the training providers were private companies. Ten per cent of the respondents had obtained skill training from Nepal government's vocational training providing institute, Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT). Some

had taken training under different skill development programs of Nepal government and non-government organisations (Table 32).

Table 32: Training providers (in per cent)

| | Private company | CTEVT | Nepal Government | NGO/INGO | Others |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|------------|------------|
| Province-1 | 72.7 | 0.0 | 9.1 | 9.1 | 9.1 |
| Madhesh | 83.3 | 0.0 | 16.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Bagmati | 73.3 | 20.0 | 6.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Gandaki | 100.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Lumbini | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 50.0 | 50.0 |
| Karnali | 85.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 14.3 |
| Sudurpaschim | 36.4 | 36.4 | 18.2 | 9.1 | 0.0 |
| Total | 72.5 | 10.1 | 8.7 | 4.3 | 4.3 |

Most of the aspirant migrants, however, were not confident whether they would find jobs related to their skills. Only 31.5 of the potential migrants believed that they would find jobs related to their skills.

6.5 Payment of recruitment fees

Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of the potential migrant workers had made payments to the recruitment agencies and agents in order to initiate their migration process although it was not sure when they could leave for overseas employment (Table 33).

Table 33: Aspirant migrant workers who had already paid for labour migration

| | Number | % | Total Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-----------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| Province-1 | 4 | 11.8 | 34 |
| Madhesh | 3 | 8.6 | 35 |
| Bagmati | 4 | 11.8 | 34 |
| Gandaki | 2 | 6.1 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 12 | 34.3 | 35 |
| Karnali | 25 | 75.8 | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 6 | 16.2 | 37 |
| Total | 56 | 23.2 | 241 |

Karnali had the highest rate of aspirant migrants (75.8 per cent) who had already made the payment while Gandaki had the lowest rate (6.1 per cent).

The aspirant migrant workers had paid NPR 69,000 on average for recruitment. However, some had paid as high as over half a million rupees (Table 34).

Table 34: Recruitment fees paid by potential migrant workers (in NPR)

| | Mean | Maximum | Total Number of respondents (N) |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------------------------------|
| Province-1 | 40,000 | 50,000 | 4 |
| Madhesh | 135,000 | 180,000 | 3 |
| Bagmati | 125,000 | 300,000 | 4 |

| | | | |
|---------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------|
| Gandaki | 110,000 | 110,000 | 2 |
| Lumbini | 85,000 | 155,000 | 12 |
| Karnali | 17,340 | 70,000 | 25 |
| Sudurpaschim | 188,333 | 550,000 | 6 |
| Total | 69,080 | 550,000 | 56 |

About half of the respondents (48.2 per cent) had paid the amount to individual agents across seven provinces. In Madhesh and Sudurpaschim all the respondents had given the amount to the agents, not the recruitment agencies (Table 35).

Table 35: Who did you pay the recruitment fees?

| | Individual agent (%) | Manpower company (recruitment agency) (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Province-1 | 75.0 | 25.0 |
| Madhesh | 100.0 | 0.0 |
| Bagmati | 50.0 | 50.0 |
| Gandaki | 50.0 | 50.0 |
| Lumbini | 83.3 | 16.7 |
| Karnali | 8.0 | 92.0 |
| Sudurpaschim | 100.0 | 0.0 |
| Total | 48.2 | 51.8 |

6.6 Perception of migration process in post-COVID-19 context

Nearly half of the aspirant migrants (48.5 per cent) found the migration process difficult while only a small number (7.1 per cent) found it easy. Lumbini, Madhesh and Karnali provinces had the highest percentages of migrants finding the migration process to be difficult (Table 36).

Table 36: Aspirant migrants' perception of migration process

| | Easy | Just okay | Difficult | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| Province-1 | 5.9 | 58.8 | 35.3 | 34 |
| Madhesh | 8.6 | 25.7 | 65.7 | 35 |
| Bagmati | 8.8 | 38.2 | 52.9 | 34 |
| Gandaki | 6.1 | 69.7 | 24.2 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 8.6 | 22.9 | 68.6 | 35 |
| Karnali | 0.0 | 45.5 | 54.5 | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 10.8 | 51.4 | 37.8 | 37 |
| Total | 7.1 | 44.4 | 48.5 | 241 |

Most migrants (63.5 per cent) think that the migration process and job opportunities in foreign countries have become more difficult now in comparison to the pre-pandemic period (Table 37).

Table 37: Aspirant migrants' perception of the difficulty in finding jobs and migrating now compared to pre-COVID-19 period

| | Easier now than before | About the same | More difficult now | No idea | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 0.0 | 8.8 | 70.6 | 20.6 | 34 |
| Madhesh | 0.0 | 5.7 | 94.3 | 0.0 | 35 |
| Bagmati | 5.9 | 8.8 | 47.1 | 38.2 | 34 |
| Gandaki | 3.0 | 57.6 | 33.3 | 6.1 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 0.0 | 25.7 | 74.3 | 0.0 | 35 |
| Karnali | 0.0 | 6.1 | 66.7 | 27.3 | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 16.2 | 13.5 | 56.8 | 13.5 | 37 |
| Total | 3.7 | 17.8 | 63.5 | 14.9 | 241 |

This perception was consistent across all provinces except for Gandaki, where a majority of the aspirant migrants reported that the difficulty in migration process is about the same pre- and post- pandemic.

A majority of the respondents also reported that it has become more expensive to migrate now in comparison to pre-COVID1-9 pandemic, while about one-fifth of the respondents did not have any idea about difference in the migration costs between the two periods (Table 38).

Table 38: Aspirant migrants' perception of the migration cost compared to pre-COVID-19

| | More expensive now (%) | About the same (%) | Less costly now (%) | No idea (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 67.6 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 29.4 | 34 |
| Madhesh | 94.3 | 5.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 35 |
| Bagmati | 38.2 | 11.8 | 8.8 | 41.2 | 34 |
| Gandaki | 27.3 | 45.5 | 0.0 | 27.3 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 77.1 | 17.1 | 0.0 | 5.7 | 35 |
| Karnali | 33.3 | 27.3 | 6.1 | 33.3 | 33 |
| Sudurpaschim | 62.2 | 10.8 | 13.5 | 13.5 | 37 |
| Total | 57.7 | 16.6 | 4.6 | 21.2 | 241 |

7 Trade Union Membership

7.1 Membership in trade union

Only 26 (or 5.5 per cent) migrant workers (out of 473) were ever members of a trade union in Nepal. Half of them (14 per cent) were from Karnali province, while no migrant workers from Lumbini and Gandaki province were members of trade union. Five workers from Bagmati and four workers from Madhesh were also members of trade union. Sudurpaschim had two workers and Province 1 had 1.

Only 9 migrant workers were members of trade union at the time of the survey. Five of them were from Karnali province, two from Bagmati and one each from Province 1 and Sudurpaschim. The major reasons for the nine workers to join trade union were: some co-workers were trade union members, recommendation of friends and relatives, and the awareness that trade unions help workers.

Most of the workers (80.2 per cent) did not know about the presence of trade unions in Nepal and this was the reason they were not a member. Some (10.7 per cent) were not interested in joining trade union (Table 39).

Table 39: Reasons for not associating with trade unions (in per cent)

| | Didn't know about trade union | Trade unions are not relevant to me | Not interested to join | Meaningless to become a TU member | TUs are associated with political | Others | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 84.4 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 1.6 | 1.6 | - | 64 |
| Madhesh | 53.6 | 3.6 | 32.1 | - | 10.7 | - | 56 |
| Bagmati | 79.7 | - | 7.8 | - | 3.1 | 9.4 | 64 |
| Gandaki | 95.7 | 2.1 | 2.1 | - | - | - | 47 |
| Lumbini | 100.0 | - | - | - | - | - | 68 |
| Karnali | 55.9 | 8.5 | 25.4 | 8.5 | 1.7 | - | 59 |
| Sudurpaschim | 90.2 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 1.6 | - | 1.6 | 61 |
| Total | 80.2 | 3.3 | 10.7 | 1.7 | 2.4 | 1.7 | 419 |

7.2 Workers' tendency to seek support from trade union

Only two migrant workers, one each from Province 1 and Karnali province, had approached trade unions seeking help for issues related to work in Nepal, but none of them had their issues resolved. These two workers further reported that they did not receive necessary support from the trade unions. None of the migrants and migrant households had ever sought support from trade unions in resolving migration related issues while in Nepal or abroad.

7.3 Awareness of trade union and their activities

Only a small proportion of respondents (15.2 per cent) had about trade unions in Nepal. Karnali had the highest percentage (35.8 per cent) of respondents who had heard about trade union while Gandaki had none and Lumbini had only two respondents aware of trade unions in Nepal (Table 40).

Table 40: Respondents who had heard about trade unions in Nepal

| | Number | % | Number of respondents (N) |
|--------------|-----------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 7 | 10.4 | 67 |
| Madhesh | 17 | 25.0 | 68 |
| Bagmati | 15 | 22.4 | 67 |
| Gandaki | - | - | 66 |
| Lumbini | 2 | 2.9 | 68 |
| Karnali | 24 | 35.8 | 67 |
| Sudurpaschim | 7 | 10.0 | 70 |
| Total | 72 | 15.2 | 473 |

The share of respondents aware about trade unions working with labour migrants was even small. Only 8.2 of the respondents were about it. Gandaki and Lumbini did not have any respondents aware of trade unions working for migrant workers, while Madhesh had the highest percentage (20.6) followed by Bagmati and Karnali with 14.9 per cent each (Table 41).

Table 41: Respondents who knew trade unions work with labour migrants in Nepal

| | Number | % | Number of respondents (N) |
|--------------|-----------|------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 1 | 1.5 | 67 |
| Madhesh | 14 | 20.6 | 68 |
| Bagmati | 10 | 14.9 | 67 |
| Gandaki | - | - | 66 |
| Lumbini | - | - | 68 |
| Karnali | 10 | 14.9 | 67 |
| Sudurpaschim | 4 | 5.7 | 70 |
| Total | 39 | 8.2 | 473 |

7.4 Interest in affiliating with trade unions

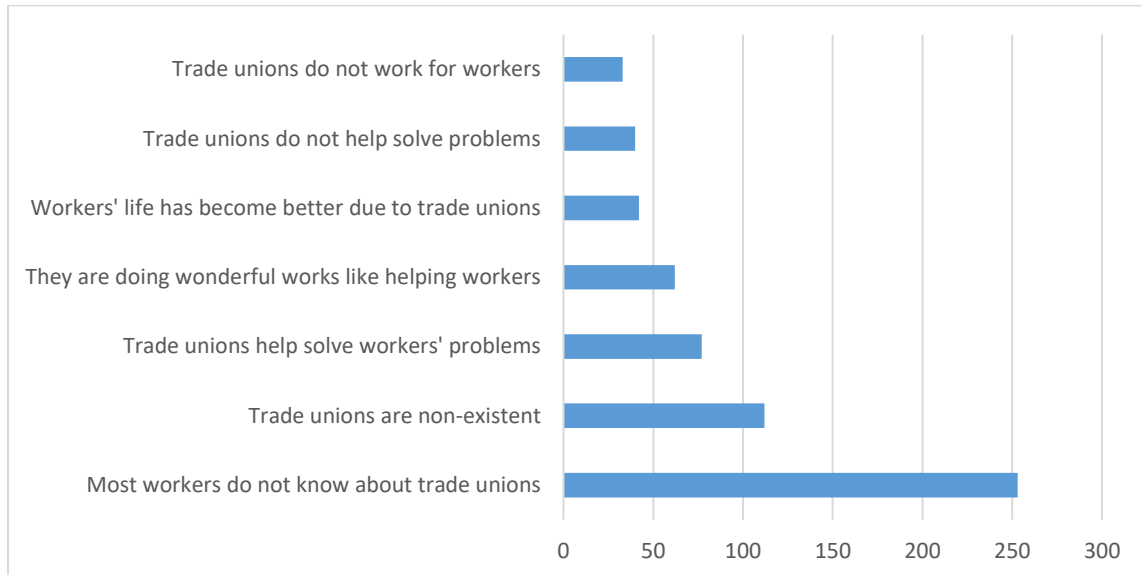
Just over one-fifth (22 per cent) of the respondents expressed an interest in affiliating with trade unions. The rates were highest for Sudurpaschim and Bagmati while the respondents from Lumbini and Gandaki expressed the lowest level of interest in joining trade unions (Table 42).

Table 42: Respondents interested in affiliating with trade unions in Nepal

| | Number | % | Number of respondents (N) |
|--------------|------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 11 | 16.4 | 67 |
| Madhesh | 14 | 20.6 | 68 |
| Bagmati | 28 | 41.8 | 67 |
| Gandaki | 6 | 9.1 | 66 |
| Lumbini | 1 | 1.5 | 68 |
| Karnali | 13 | 19.4 | 67 |
| Sudurpaschim | 31 | 44.3 | 70 |
| Total | 104 | 22.0 | 473 |

Most of the respondents reported that the workers are not aware of trade unions in Nepal or the trade unions were non-existent. Some held positive perception of trade unions. They believed that trade unions were helping solve workers' problems (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Reasons for interest or lack of interest in trade unions



(Multiple responses; N=473)

8 Pre-departure Migration Information

This chapter is based on the analysis of data collected from current and returnee migrant workers on the understanding of migration process and access to safe migration information prior to departure.

8.1 Safe migration information

Only a quarter of the respondents (25.8 per cent) had obtained information on safe migration from different organisations, and all workers except four had found the information useful. However, the rates were different across the provinces: while none of the migrant workers in Lumbini had obtained any information on safe migration more than half of the migrant workers had obtained such information in Bagmati. The rates were also lower for Madhesh (7.4 per cent) and Karnali (11.9 per cent) (Table 43).

Table 43: Migrant workers obtaining information on safe migration prior to departure

| | Per cent (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|--------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 32.8 | 67 |
| Madhesh | 7.4 | 68 |
| Bagmati | 56.7 | 67 |
| Gandaki | 47.0 | 66 |
| Lumbini | - | 68 |
| Karnali | 11.9 | 67 |
| Sudurpaschim | 25.7 | 70 |
| Total | 25.8 | 473 |

The information on safe migration were provided by multiple organisations, but mostly by SaMi project (42.6 per cent), recruitment agencies (35.2 per cent) and pre-departure orientation training centres (19.7 per cent). The information was also provided by municipal offices (4.9 per cent) and trade unions (1.6 per cent) to a small number of workers.

8.2 Knowledge of migration process

The returnee migrant workers were asked if they had a good knowledge of migration process prior to their departure. Only half of them (50.4 per cent) reported of having a good knowledge of migration process (Table 44).

Table 44: Did you have a good knowledge of migration process?

| | Per cent (%) | Number of respondents (N) |
|---------------------|--------------|---------------------------|
| Province-1 | 60.6 | 33 |
| Madhesh | 54.5 | 33 |
| Bagmati | 90.9 | 33 |
| Gandaki | 33.3 | 33 |
| Lumbini | 6.1 | 33 |
| Karnali | 29.4 | 34 |
| Sudurpaschim | 78.8 | 33 |

| | | |
|--------------|-------------|------------|
| Total | 50.4 | 232 |
|--------------|-------------|------------|

The rates were significantly different across provinces. While the rate was very high for Bagmati (90.9 per cent) it was lowest for Lumbini (6.1 per cent).

8.3 Leaving copies of documents with family in Nepal

It is being emphasised by different organisations, including the government bodies, that migrant workers leave copies of important documents, such as passport, labour permit, job contract, insurance policy, to their family in Nepal prior to departure. These documents can be helpful to the family to track the migrant workers and assist them in rescue and repatriation if anything unfortunate happens in the destination. However, the study finds that many migrant workers still do not leave the copies of documents with their family. Only 41.3 per cent of current migrant workers and half the returnee migrants had left the copies of documents with their families (Table 45).

Table 45: Current and Returnee migrant workers who had left copies of documents with family

| | Current migrants (%) | Returnee migrants (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Province-1 | 45.9 | 42.4 |
| Madhesh | 50.0 | 63.6 |
| Bagmati | 21.2 | 30.3 |
| Gandaki | 29.4 | 45.5 |
| Lumbini | 91.7 | 97.0 |
| Karnali | 12.1 | 11.8 |
| Sudurpaschim | 34.3 | 60.6 |
| Total | 41.3 | 50.0 |

In terms of the provinces, this rate was lowest in Karnali (12 per cent) while highest (above 90 per cent) in Lumbini (Table 45).

9 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study was conducted broadly to understand the experiences of aspirant, current and potential migrant workers from Nepal in the context of COVID-19, which has disrupted the regular migration flows due to the decline in job demands overseas and frequent travel restrictions enforced by the home and host countries. The objectives of the study were also to examine the working conditions in foreign countries and assess whether the migrant workers were informed about safe migration and whether they used the labour permit renewal services at the province headquarters.

The study finds that Nepali migrant workers from across seven provinces were employed in the popular destinations of Nepali migrant workers, i.e. GCC countries and Malaysia. Most workers would get one-day off in a week while some workers had to work for all seven days. Many workers are still forced to do more than 8 hours of regular work and even without overtime payment. The non-payment of wages and withholding of passport still prevail. The exploitative working conditions still exist in the major destination countries of Nepali workers despite the bi-lateral legal instruments Nepal has signed prohibiting against them.

Recruitment cost has been at the centre of discussion among policy makers and other stakeholders in recent years. Nepal government has also adopted 'free visa, free ticket' policy since 2015 to curb the recruitment costs. The policy allows the recruitment agencies to collect a maximum of NPR 10,000 from each worker migrating to GCC countries and Malaysia, and even this amount can only be collected if the recruitment fees are not provided by the employer companies. However, the study finds that the migrant workers still pay over NPR 100,000 for labour migration to GCC and Malaysia and most of the migrant workers take loans often at a high interest rate to finance their migration, which places the migrant households on what is called a 'debt trap' especially when the labour migration turns out to be unprofitable.

Despite the provisions of labour permit renewal from provincial headquarters (except for Bagmati) this service has been still minimally used. A major reason is the necessity to travel to Kathmandu anyway for return to the destination since only the capital city has an international airport. The government of Nepal is trying to eliminate informal labour intermediaries (agents) from labour migration sector but they still play important roles. Many migrant workers take their services even for the renewal of labour permit as it would be difficult for the migrant workers to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles without their support. The agents also collected recruitment fees from the migrant workers although such an act is prohibited by the law.

A large number of migrant workers have returned to Nepal with the pandemic and there has been calls for the reintegration of returnee migrant workers. However, the findings of the study suggest that the labour market reintegration of returnee migrants will remain a challenge as there are very limited job opportunities available in the country. Most returnees were either engaged in subsistence agriculture, looking for a job, doing nothing or trying to re-migrate. The popular programs, such as the subsidized loans for entrepreneurship development are hardly accessible to the returnee migrant workers.

The study also finds that labour migration from Nepal will continue. Most of the aspirant migrants surveyed for the study were planning to migrate to the conventional destinations, such as the GCC and Malaysia while a few were trying to go to South Korea or Israel. The aspirant migrants have spent substantial amount of money and time for their migration. Many were

trying for over a year for labour migration. The aspirant migrants also find the migration process difficult and most of them think that the process of labour migration has become more difficult post-COVID-19. Most of the aspirant migrants also did not have skill training just like the current and returnee migrants.

Only a small percentage of migrant workers are associated with trade unions in Nepal and many are not aware of the existence of trade unions at all. A majority of the migrant workers are not provided information on safe migration prior to departure and many still do not leave copies of important documents with their family. These documents could become handy at the time of emergency, such as workers' deaths, injuries, illness, passport loss or passport withholding by employer. These documents are also essential to obtain necessary support from the government bodies.

Based on these findings, the study makes following recommendations for future engagement of trade unions in Nepal:

- **Expand membership and outreach in general:** Only a fraction of migrant workers and their family are aware of the trade unions in Nepal and the number of those who know about trade unions working for migrant workers is even small. In this context, Nepali trade unions should work to enhance their outreach and expand their membership. They should also work to present themselves as the organisations that really work for the welfare of workers, including Nepali migrant workers in foreign countries. This can help gain the confidence of a larger number of migrant workers and their family, who are otherwise doubtful of the engagement of trade unions.
- **Dissemination of information on safe migration:** Although the dissemination of information on safer migration alone cannot save the migrant workers from fraud and deception, this is the first step in this regard. The study finds that still a significant number of migrant workers participate in labour migration without obtaining proper information on the migration process and without a good knowledge of the migration process. The pre-departure orientation trainings (PDOTs) are conducted towards the end of the pre-departure phase, when the migrant workers have completed most of the steps of migration process. There are also reports of many workers not attending the PDOTs. In this context, trade unions can work with other existing organisations working on the same sector to disseminate information on safe migration to a large number of vulnerable migrant workers.
- **Continue pressuring the governments in home and host countries for workers' access to justice:** Although several years have passed since Nepal's adoption of 'free-visa, free-ticket' policy workers are still paying an exorbitant amount in recruitment fees. A strong implementation of this policy is necessary to stop the workers' exploitation in the migration process. Nepali trade unions can work together to pressure the government of Nepal in the implementation of the policy and they can also establish a desk to hear migrant workers' issues and file complaint on behalf of the defrauded migrant workers.

The migrant workers' overall conditions deteriorated during the pandemic. A large proportion of workers did not receive some of their wages from the employer companies. When this kind of situation occurred abroad, workers did not find any agencies to get support from. The trade unions can work in this regard by hearing

workers' complaints and communicating the workers' problems with the relevant authorities. The host country governments should establish mechanisms to hear complaints from the workers and penalize the companies that bypasses the local labour laws and bilateral labour agreements (in this the host country's labour agreements with Nepal). They need to make sure that the workers' rights are protected all the time, including the pandemic.

- **Continue raising voices against high recruitment fees** The trade unions in Nepal and the host countries can work together to pressure the employer companies, many of which are multinational companies, to make sure that migrant workers have paid no fees in the recruitment process. The employer companies should cover all the recruitment related expenses, and be held accountable if any workers are charged unauthorized fees by the recruitment agencies.
- **Work with the trade unions in host countries to improve working conditions in destination:** The study finds that migrant workers in GCC countries and Malaysia work under harsh conditions. Many workers still do not get a day-off in a week while even a larger proportion of workers are forced to work overtime often without a payment. Many companies make migrant workers work extra hours off the record. In this context, the trade unions in the host countries, if they exist at all, can work to protect all workers' rights, including migrant workers, as guaranteed by different international conventions. In a situation where there are no national trade unions in the host countries the international trade unions and international governing bodies such the International Labour Organization should pressurize the national governments and employer companies to protect workers' rights at the workplace, even during the pandemic.
- **Engage in the facilitation of labour permit renewal and returnee migrants' access to government programs:** The study finds that many migrant workers take the support of labour intermediaries, such as agents, for the labour permit renewal. This has caused additional financial burden among the migrant workers. The trade unions can also provide support to these migrant workers in labour permit renewal so that the workers do not need to take the help of intermediaries.

The study finds that hardly any returnee migrants have access to the government programs, such as soft loan schemes, that are targeted to migrant workers returning due to the pandemic. The trade unions can make work to make the returnee migrants aware of such schemes and also work with the relevant stakeholders, such as the banks, to increase migrant workers' access to loans for entrepreneurship in Nepal.