

## **Exploitation of Nepali Women Workers**

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The formal or informal in-coming remittances from 3 million Nepali youth migrants working globally contribute to 30 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or more than 250 billion rupees. This is despite the fact that three-fourths of the Nepali overseas youth workers are unskilled.

The contribution from women migrants to the total number of remittances is estimated at 15 percent. Research studies have shown that women migrant workers are consistent in terms of sending remittances intended for children's education and health and general well-being of their families.

Nepal has officially identified 108 countries as potential working destinations for Nepali foreign job aspirants. Currently, more than 90 percent of foreign bound Nepali ends up in Gulf countries' informal sectors which are characterized by a lack of any form of social protection.

More than 100,000 Nepali women migrant workers are estimated to be currently working in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman in the Gulf. Given the reality of more than 800 Nepali hopefuls leaving the country for foreign employment every single day, the time is running out to take decisive steps towards protecting vulnerable women from possible exploitation.

As women and young girls mainly from rural areas are vulnerable to false promises of good jobs and higher wages they are easily cheated by traffickers. According to United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (current UN Women) and Nepal Institute of Development Studies (NIDS) data, there are about 147,000 Nepali women currently engaged in overseas jobs, the majority—46 percent—in Saudi Arabia followed by Kuwait (17 percent) and other countries. Likewise, the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) data reveals that women represented about 5 percent of total Nepalis leaving for overseas jobs until the first quarter of 2010.

The story of 45-year-old Ajabun Nesha Dewan drew the attention of the media and women's rights activists when she returned to Kathmandu from the Saudi city of Hofuf early this year. She had sustained spinal injuries and was suffering immense mental trauma after being thrown out of a second floor window by her landlady. She had gone to Saudi Arabia in the hope of a better life when her neighbor, a manpower company agent, promised her a job as a caretaker with a handsome salary.

Experts have acknowledged that a significant number of people unaccounted for reach their foreign job destinations through illegal channels. Adversaries such as low

pay, poor work conditions, documents confiscation, physical abuse, etc, are the common things workers, who are 'trafficked' without formal government-level agreements between the countries involved, experience soon after they arrive the destination countries.

Government officials pass the blame on the 700-plus manpower companies currently operating in Nepal by citing their inability to promote skill available with Nepali women to better job-offering countries. For instance, even with the tremendous possibility of hiring Nepali women as domestic helpers, caregivers, staff nurses, etc, by Japanese employers, manpower agencies are not able to exploit this opportunity. There also exists possibility for Nepali aspirants as trainee workers in Japan.

Negotiating bi-lateral agreements with destination countries in line with globally-recognized rights of working migrant women shall top the to-do list of the government. Empowering the Nepali missions and consulates abroad to take decisive steps towards upholding the rights of Nepali workers, rather than merely coordinating deportation of alleged workers or the transportation of coffins of fellow country people, is another important work to accomplish. That should be followed by revisiting national laws, policies and monitoring mechanisms in order to make them more stringent towards upholding the rights of migrant workers.

While the government's on-going effort towards opening new diplomatic missions in destination countries is laudable, parallel steps have to be urgently taken towards introducing interim measures. As it is likely to take significant time to satisfy even our internal bureaucratic requirements and procedures for establishment of new diplomatic missions given the on-going political chaos, it may be effective to appoint Labor Attache' or comparable staff tasked with overseeing issues related to protection of basic rights of migrant workers until a fully-fledged embassy becomes functional.