



Policy Brief

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Understanding Reintegration and Remigration of Nepali Labour Migrants

Sadikshya Bhattarai, Jeevan Baniya, Sanjit Shrestha, Prasansa Thapa
Rajib Neupane, Dogendra Tumsa, Sita Nepali & Sita Mademba



Centre for the Study of
Labour and Mobility

Background

Labour migration is a prominent feature of Nepali society. The Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) has issued over 4.7 million new labour permits since 2008/09,¹ with the inflow of remittances bringing social and economic benefits to the country as well as individual households.² Formal labour migration from Nepal is concentrated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia³—countries that have restrictions on the integration of migrant workers in host societies.⁴ As such, labour migration from Nepal is characterised by ‘protracted temporariness’ whereby the migration, albeit temporary, entails multiple stints and lengthy stays in the country of destination. This signifies the importance of reintegration in Nepal’s context, not only to absorb the capital, knowledge and skills brought back by returnees, but also to facilitate their reintegration in the country whilst minimising their vulnerability and helping them find stability and opportunity. The COVID-19 pandemic further reinforced the importance of reintegration in Nepal’s labour migration regime as the pandemic precipitated migrants’ return to the country. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines reintegration as, ‘the re-inclusion or re-incorporation of a person into a group or process, e.g., of a migrant into the society of his or her country of origin or habitual residence’.⁵ The sustainability of the reintegration of migrant workers is determined by three parameters: ‘economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers’.⁶

Despite the fairly comprehensive legal regime governing labour migration in Nepal, the issue of reintegration was barely mentioned before COVID-19. The Foreign Employment Act, 2007 (FEA, 2007), the Foreign Employment Rules, 2008 and the Foreign Employment Policy, 2012 were adopted to facilitate and govern labour migration from Nepal and make the migration process safe and dignified for migrant workers. The FEA, 2007 only provides for the use of the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (FEWF) for implementation of reintegration programmes. Similarly, the Foreign Employment Policy, 2012 also mentions the need to economically and socially reintegrate returnees without mention of any specifications. Recent times have seen the government conceptualise reintegration in a more expansive manner. In 2022, the Government of Nepal (GoN) endorsed the Reintegration Programme (Operation and Management) Directives for Returnee Migrant Workers, 2079. The Directive introduced three kinds of reintegration programmes for returnees: socialisation, employment and entrepreneurial development.⁷ Similarly, the GoN also launched the Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Workers (ReMi) project in 2022. The project is mandated to conduct reintegration activities on a large-scale with the goal of ensuring returnee migrant workers (RMWs) are better able to reestablish themselves in Nepal.⁸ Programmes for skills testing, recognition and certification—crucial for the smooth reintegration of returnees—have also gained prominence. The Foreign Employment Board (FEB), in cooperation with the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB), has introduced programmes to evaluate the skills of returnees and provide recognition through certification.⁹ Vocational training programmes and concessional loans have also been designed for

returnees. Further, general employment programmes such as the Prime Minister Employment Programme (PMEP) and the Chief Minister Employment Programme also help returnees in their economic re-inclusion. Besides these, the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 and the Fifteenth Periodic Plan (2019/20–2023/24) mention the need to utilise the skills, expertise and remittances repatriated by migrant workers to Nepal.

However, the lack of specificity in these documents mean loopholes prevail in the country's reintegration regime. This brief, in light of recent developments, presents the reintegration situation of migrant workers and analyses the reintegration framework under Nepal's regime. The brief is based on a larger study 'Return, Weak Reintegration and Remigration: A Study of Nepali Migrant Workers' conducted by Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) in coordination with Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC). The research participants for this study were purposively selected from the data gathered by PNCC during registration of grievances by migrant workers. This study focused on a specific subgroup of returnees to Nepal: distressed returnees that have experienced suffering abroad and identify their migration as a failed migration episode.

Situation of Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Workers: Challenges and Barriers

Failed and fruitless migration

The circumstances of return of migrant

workers play a decisive role in their reintegration in the origin country. Many of the research participants had faced distress early in their migration stints and were, thus, unable to recoup their investment in migration, mostly financed through loans. Half of the respondents had not paid back all of their loans meaning their financial situation, instead of improving, had deteriorated post-migration because of the added debt burden (Figure 1). Likewise, nearly two-thirds (72 per cent) of the research participants were not able to save any money from their migration stints (Figure 2). Many of the respondents reported that their financial situation had worsened post-migration.

Challenges in utilisation of skills acquired abroad

Migrant workers who had returned from a negative migration experience, with their financial predicaments worsened, did not find ameliorative measures after returning to Nepal. The highest percentage of the returnees reported to be involved in subsistence agriculture post-return (Figure 3). Subsistence agriculture entails production for survival and generates very low returns, if any. Another 32.1 per cent of the returnees reported involvement in daily wage work in the non-agricultural sector, with 12.8 per cent opening up businesses—either in the agricultural or the non-agricultural sector. A large number, at 16.5 per cent, are unemployed, and a further 10.1 per cent are looking to remigrate. The situation indicates most of the returnees have not been able to find high-value, high-return employment, and because of their worsened financial predicaments, have not been able to invest in any business. And even for those who were able to ameliorate their financial situation dur-

Figure 1: Proportion of returnee migrant workers by situation of loan repayment

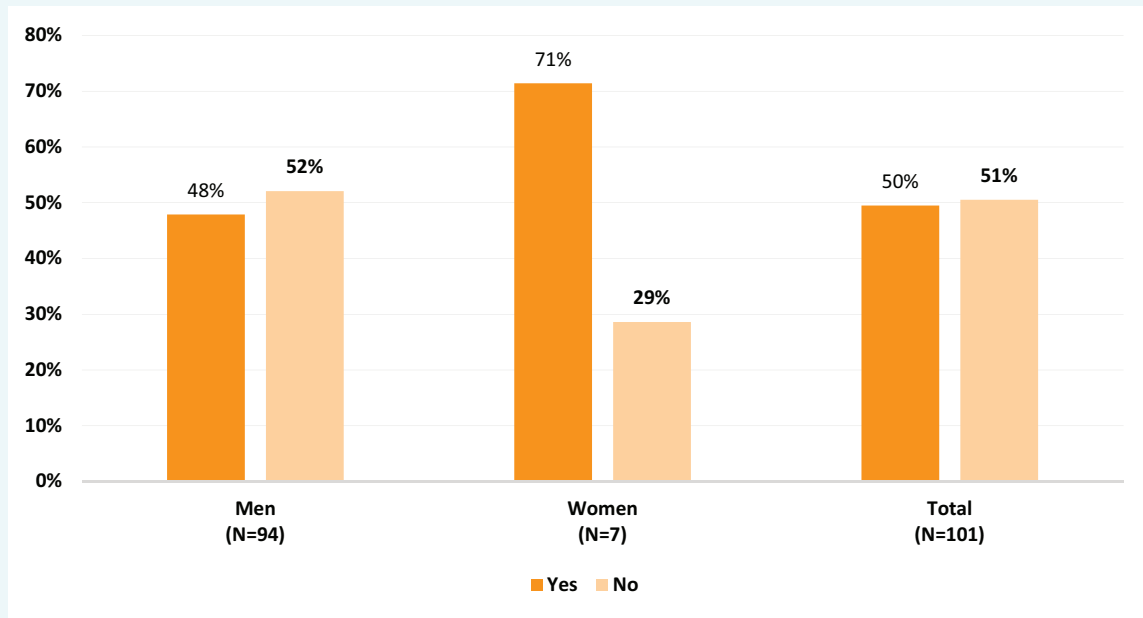
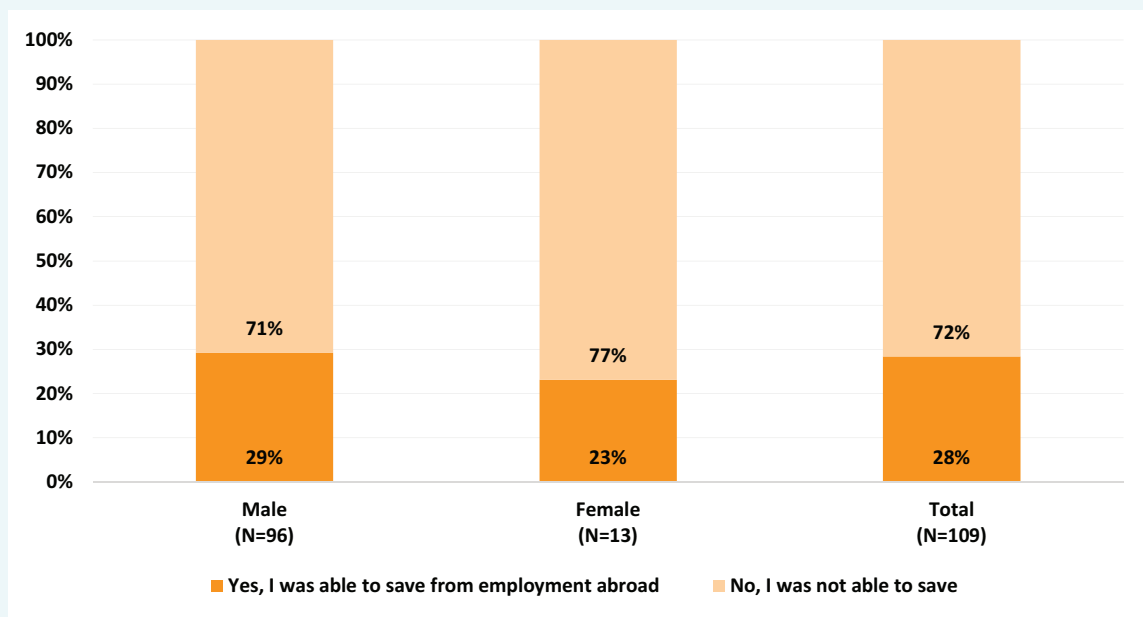


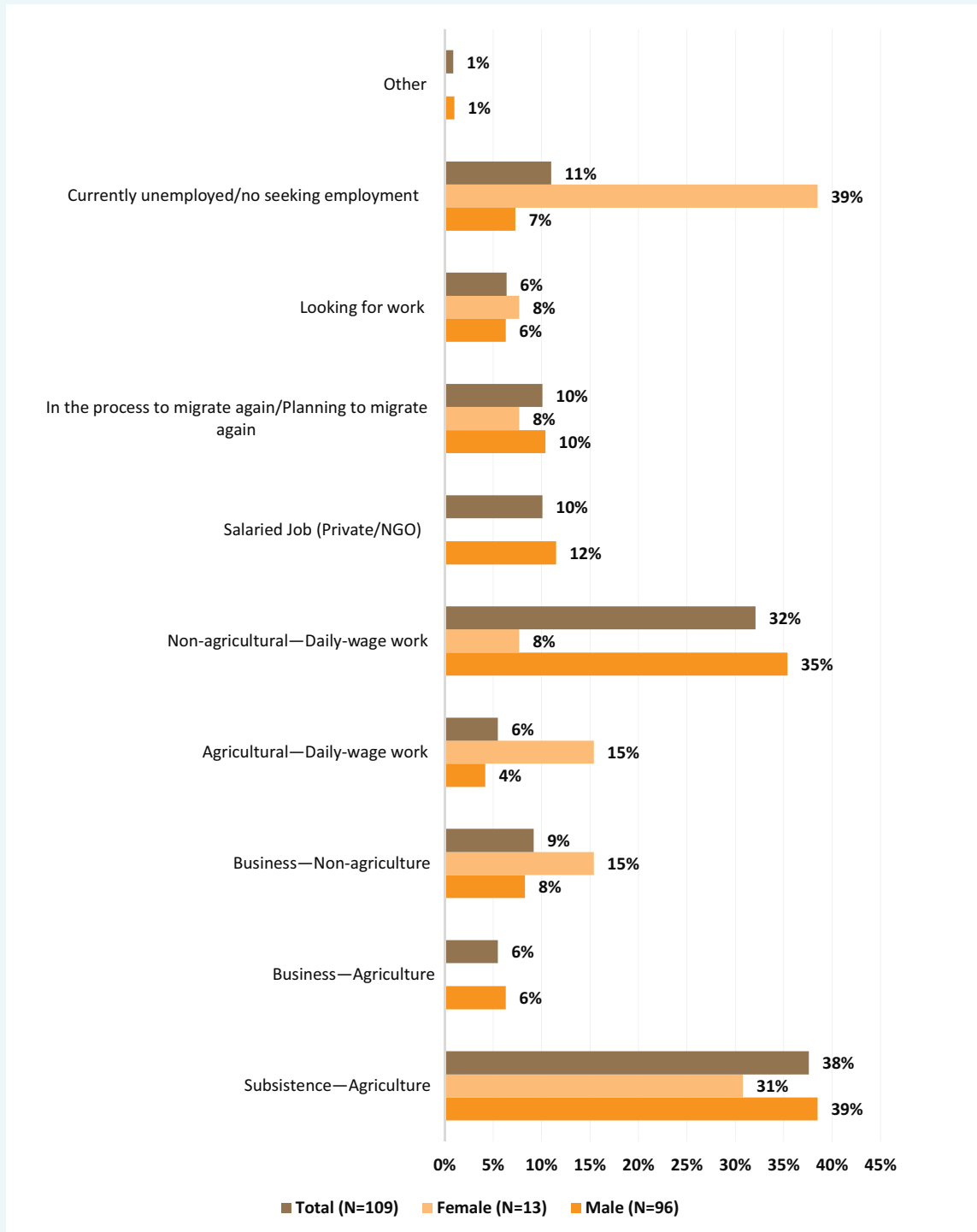
Figure 2: Proportion of returnee migrant workers by savings from foreign employment



ing their migration stints, the irrelevance of the skills learned abroad seems to be a major barrier to reintegration into the Nepali labour market. Only 9.2 per cent said the skills they had learned during their migration stints had been useful following their return.

The irrelevance of the skills learned abroad in the Nepali labour market and the unavailability of jobs similar to those performed abroad were cited as major reasons by migrant workers for failure to utilise the skills learned abroad (Table 1). However, for women migrant workers, the

Figure 3: Proportion of returnee migrant workers by situation of work after return



Note: Multiple responses

lack of information on the Nepali labour market was also cited as a major barrier. It is difficult for migrant workers who have suffered from an abusive and fraud-

ulent recruitment process to have fruitful migration experiences, particularly if they had truncated migration stints. Almost 20 per cent of RMWs reported

Table 1: Reason for inability to utilise skills learned abroad

Reasons	Male	Female	Total
The skills I learnt abroad are not relevant to the labour market in Nepal	37.2	7.7	33.3
Same job unavailable in Nepali labour market/Local market	23.3	0.0	20.2
Failed migration (e.g., did not do any work after arriving in destination)	16.3	23.1	17.2
Did not learn any skills from the job	14.0	30.8	16.2
Technological differences	11.6	7.7	11.1
Same skills level garners poor salary	5.8	0.0	5.1
Lack of information about labour market in Nepal	4.7	15.4	6.1
Lack of capital	3.5	7.7	4.0
Because I am unwilling to do the same job in Nepal	3.5	0.0	3.0
Inability to access loans	1.2	0.0	1.0
Care work at home	1.2	15.4	3.0
Because I want to switch sectors	0.0	7.7	1.0
Other	11.6	7.7	11.1
Total %	133.7	123.1	132.3
Total number	86	13	99

Note: Multiple responses

that they had not acquired any skills due to 'failed' migration as they were, in most cases, deceived by recruitment agencies or agents and became stranded in the destination country without a job.

Inaccessibility of reintegration measures

Reintegration programmes can be necessary elements for the full utilisation of capital, knowledge and skills repatriated by migrant workers from their migration stints and are crucial in engendering the facilitating environment that encourages migrant workers to stay. Prior to 2022, programmes targeted at RMWs in Nepal at the national, provincial and local levels primarily included employment programmes (such as the PMEPP and the Chief Minister Employment Programme), concessional loan schemes, skills development and vocational training. Most of these programmes target a broader audience: unem-

ployed people in Nepal, including RMWs. However, RMWs' access to these programmes remains questionable. A majority (58.7 per cent) of the RMWs reported they did not have any knowledge of the financial reintegration programmes that are being run by the government (Table 2). The most popular programme, the PMEPP, was known by 25.7 per cent of the returnees only.

The most prominent challenge that RMWs face in accessing these programmes is the lack of information on schemes and incentives (Table 3). And even for those who know about the programmes, limited seats and inadequate understanding of the application process seem to be an issue. Many of the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with not receiving placement in such programmes due to abuse of authority and power by officials. The Constitution of Nepal, 2015 mandates

Table 2: Knowledge of respondents on financial schemes

Programmes	Male	Female	Total
I am not aware about any such schemes	55.2	84.6	58.7
Prime Minister Employment Programme	28.1	7.7	25.7
Skills training and vocational training	22.9	15.4	22.0
Subsidised loans (low interest loan programme)	19.8	0.0	17.4
Cash grants	6.3	7.7	6.4
Chief Minister Employment Programme	2.1	0.0	1.8
Total %	134.4	115.4	132.1
Total number	96	13	109

Note: Multiple responses

equal and easy access of people to services and facilities provided by the state, with public administration being fair, transparent, free from corruption, accountable and participatory.¹⁰ However, the findings from this study show that migrant workers have developed a distrust in the government due to past actions, thus, discouraging them to participate in the programmes. Many of the respondents believe no benefits will be gained from applying to the programmes and others have even stopped collecting information on them.

A returnee migrant worker said:

I filled out the form for the PMEP three times but have not been yet listed as a beneficiary. People who worked under it the previous year are the only ones listed in it. The ward chairperson includes people close to him only.

Another returnee mentioned:

In my experience, such programmes and provisions are only for those with access and political connection. The local government provides agriculture grants but they are distributed to people who are close to the officials: a person with connections but who rears a single buffalo gets a grant but those who run larger commercial farming businesses but have no connections do not get such grants. The intake for such programmes would already be over when the information reaches us.

While another said:

There must have been training programmes conducted. But we are of no concern to the municipality and the ward. I did go to the municipality office to enquire about such programmes, but they told me nothing was being conducted at the time. We were told we would be informed if anything came up. But so far, I have not received any calls. I live at a distance from the ward and the municipal centre and do not have easy access. I have just heard about the PMEP. But I have never received an opportunity to work under the scheme. They enlist the people they know.

The same was true for various social and psychosocial reintegration programmes run by governmental or non-governmental bodies. None of the respondents had taken part in such programmes, with 83.5 per cent claiming they had no idea if such programmes were being run (Figure 4).

Remigration: An Informed Choice or Compulsion

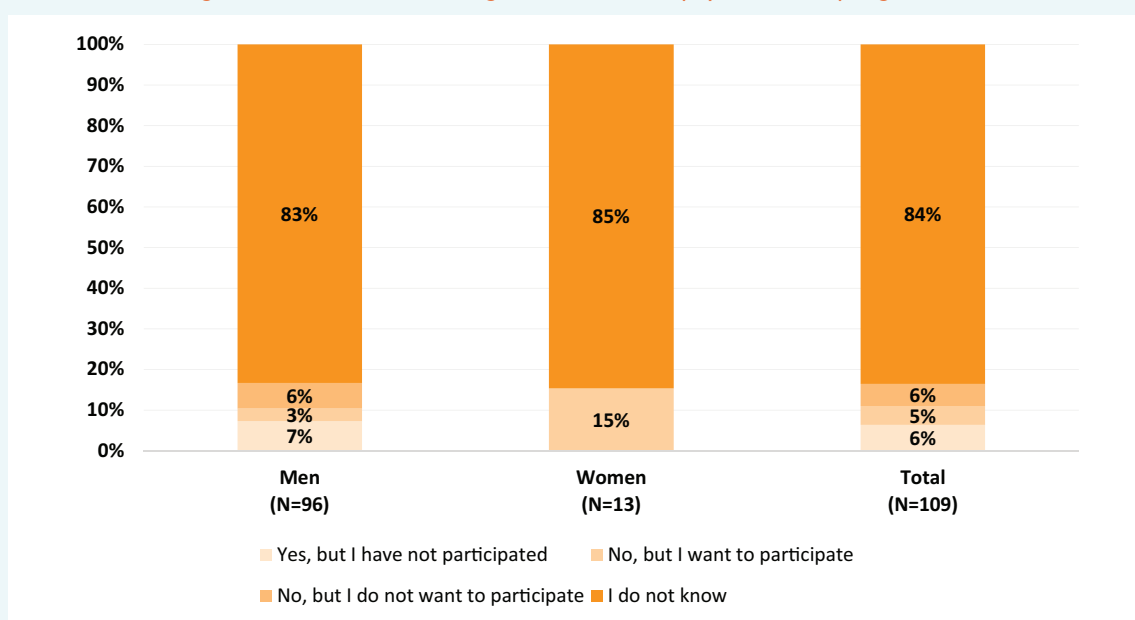
For the reintegration initiatives to be successful, the absorption capacity of the local economy plays a pivotal role.¹¹ As the findings of this study show, many respondents feel the need to remigrate for work as they live in places where there is a paucity

Table 3: Barriers in accessing government schemes

	Male	Female	Total
Lack of information about the scheme or incentives	68.8	84.6	70.6
Only accessible to those who are related, have connection or power	25.0	7.7	22.9
Limited capacity/seats	24.0	0.0	21.1
Inadequate knowledge on application process	11.5	15.4	11.9
Long and cumbersome process to access the schemes	4.2	7.7	4.6
Others	10.4	7.7	10.1
Total %	143.8	123.1	141.3
Total number	96	13	109

Note: Multiple responses

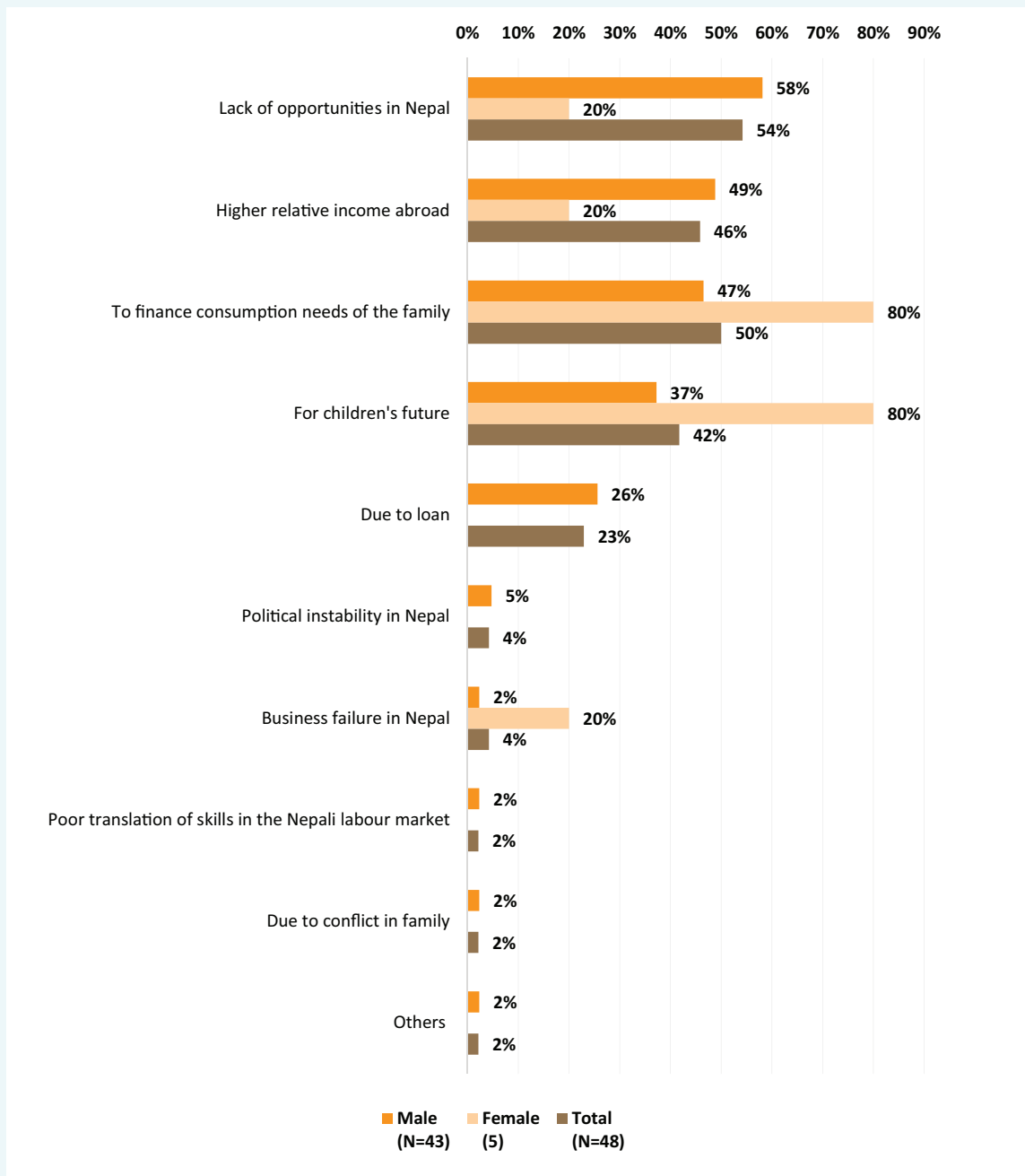
Figure 4: Awareness of migrant workers of psychosocial programmes



of opportunities to obtain secure, regular wage employment. Furthermore, many of the returnees stated their unwillingness to work on farms due to low returns, and problems like the unavailability of seeds and fertilisers, among others. There also exist other barriers such as lack of social support, bureaucratic red tape, inaccessibility of financial and human resources and services, and lack or incompatibility of skills and education, among others. With such barriers and challenges, returnees, particularly those who faced distress

in destination countries, can struggle after returning to Nepal in their quest to reintegrate into the Nepali society. Consequently, circular and step migration is becoming a commonly observed phenomenon. The inability to find stability and opportunity in their country of origin means migrant workers become compelled to seek remigration, not as an informed choice, but out of desperation. Almost half (44 per cent) of the RMWs interviewed in this study had decided to remigrate (Figure 5). The primary reasons for remigration included lack

Figure 5: Proportion of returnee migrant workers by reason of remigration



Note: Multiple responses

of opportunities in Nepal, financial needs of the household and relatively higher income abroad. Due to wage differences between Nepal and destination countries, RMWs are reluctant to work in Nepal and instead prefer to migrate abroad. For

migrant workers whose migration stint was a failure, remigration became necessary to pay back the previously accumulated loans.

Way Forward

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations have been put forth:

Returnee migrant-centric policies and programmes

- RMWs are diverse with varied needs. In particular, migrant workers who were victims of trafficking, forced labour, wage theft, injuries and fraudulent recruitment practices and those who could not acquire skills, lack savings and have a high debt burden are the most vulnerable ones. Hence, reintegration policies and programmes should ensure coverage of these migrant workers as well.
- The policies and programmes related to labour migration, reintegration and employment such as the Foreign Employment Act, 2007, the Foreign Employment Rules, 2008, the Foreign Employment Policy, 2012, the National Employment Policy, 2015, the PMEP, the Micro-Enterprise Development Programme (MEDEP) and the National Youth Action Plan should prioritise RMWs and their families (who had failed migration experiences), and thus represent the neediest. In particular, the eligibility criteria under the PMEP should be reviewed and revised to ensure that the neediest left-behind family members of migrant workers are eligible for the 100 days of employment provided under the programme.
- The process of application for obtaining concessional loans should be simplified so that RMWs can benefit from them. The provision of the Integrated Guideline for Interest Subsidy to Concessional Loan, 2075, which requires returnees to have

worked for at least six months in the country of destination to be eligible for a subsidised loan, should be scrapped as it excludes needy and vulnerable returnees who have returned before the six-month mark after facing distress early in their migration stints.

- While the Reintegration Directive provides a framework for reintegration of RMWs in Nepal, it has its share of limitations. Foremost, the GoN needs to work on the conceptualisation of reintegration considering the local context and define who the beneficiaries are. For this, the local government, particularly wards, can play an important role in identifying those who need economic and psychosocial reintegration. Further, the findings indicate that structural deficiencies in the economy mean migration drivers have remained rife, prompting the remigration of RMWs. As such, reintegration programmes, including those conducted by local governments, should be designed and implemented with a view to addressing remigration drivers.
- The Programme Implementation Committee is mandated by the government, through the Reintegration Directive, to implement reintegration programmes. However, the design of the programmes is to be determined through proposals to be sent by NGOs/INGOs and provincial and local bodies. Although proposal-based reintegration programmes can be encouraged, they leave too much room for non-compliance by implementing bodies as they depend on initiatives to be taken by the implementing bodies themselves. To circumvent this problem, a clear mandate, enunciated by the federal government, making the operation of reintegration programmes mandatory for local bodies, may be necessary.

- The 'how' of the monitoring and evaluation process of the reintegration programmes being run by the government also needs to be explicated in the policy documents. The procedural aspect of monitoring and evaluation needs to be explained, and the prodigious budget that will be necessary to perform the task in a comprehensive manner also needs to be made available.
- Compared to male RMWs, women face additional and specific challenges and barriers for reintegration at home, such as poor access to information on reintegration measures as elucidated by the brief. Hence, it needs to be ensured that gender-sensitive migration- and reintegration-related policies and programmes are mainstreamed. Women returnees need to be insulated from patriarchal norms prevalent in Nepali society to ensure they are able to access reintegration measures in the same capacity as men returnees.

Information dissemination and awareness raising

- It is crucial that reintegration programmes are made more accessible to returnees. Currently, the Reintegration Directive requires returnees to submit applications to the employment service centre to become possible beneficiaries of reintegration programmes. However, this necessitates awareness of the clause and the expenditure of time and money on the part of migrant workers in order to access reintegration programmes. Instead, the government needs to integrate this feature into the Foreign Employment Information Management System (FEIMS) so that migrant workers become eligible for programmes without having to undergo any bureaucratic hassle. For this, either the government officials at the airport or the migrant workers themselves should be able to mark the return of the latter. Further, the information on the launching of reintegration programmes can be made available through FEIMS, allowing returnees to match their aspirations and needs with the various programmes being conducted, and enrol themselves accordingly. Also, post-return information dissemination programmes can be used to make RMWs aware of this process.
- It is also important to increase the awareness of migrant workers about the available social security provisions such as the Social Security Fund (SSF), PERKESO/Social Security Organisation (SOCSCO), Malaysia, and the FEWF, etc. More specifically, procedural aspects associated with the SSF and SOCSCO need to be communicated to the migrant workers through outreach activities, the use of audio-visual communication materials and social media so that they are able to avail themselves of all the benefits of the schemes. For example, a migrant worker is required to send an acknowledgement letter to SOCSCO upon the initial receipt of social security payment in order to receive continuous payments. However, because migrant workers do not have knowledge of this procedural requirement, they remain deprived of the benefits despite having made contributions.
- Drawing on lessons from the existing programmes of the government such as MEDEP and financial literacy programmes conducted by the Safer Migration (SaMi) programme, awareness and counselling on financial literacy could be provided to the general public as well as migrant workers and their families for better planning and management of their incomes. Debt

management plans and counselling on debt should be integrated into financial literacy programmes. The reach of these awareness programmes could be extended through (digital) media and other outreach activities.

- The GoN needs to conduct awareness-raising campaigns, both at the community level and through the media (mass media and social media), to spread awareness about the contribution of Nepali women migrant workers to the national economy, highlight success stories and also document the working and living conditions of women migrant workers abroad.

Strengthening existing mechanism to support migrant workers

- With the phasing out of the SaMi programme, the government needs to ensure the assets for Nepal's labour migration regime developed by the programme are protected and sustained in the future. For this, it must be ensured that the Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) – which support Nepali migrant workers and their families – including through information dissemination, financial literacy programmes and psychosocial counselling – are provided the mandate and the resources to continue their work. While the MRCs are currently placed in the District Administration Office (DAO), it is important that the municipalities/rural municipalities within the district also take ownership of the centres. Likewise, the funding required for the continuity of the centres should be shared between the local, provincial and federal governments.
- The mandates of Employment Service Centres (ESCs) should be expanded to provide services to migrant workers and their families. This could, among others,

include information dissemination on available support services and employment schemes for RMWs.

- The establishment of shelter homes by the government and the capacity building of existing shelter homes by CSOs needs to be done to cater to vulnerable returnees who have faced acute distress in the destination countries. Psychosocial reintegration, in particular, can be better facilitated by operating these shelter homes effectively.

Skilling and utilisation of returnee migrant workers' skills

- Recognition of prior learning and skills certification by employers or the country of origin will be important for matching the skills of RMWs with the demand in the local labour market. Mutual recognition of skills and foreign qualifications can be incorporated into bilateral agreements to prevent brain waste and de-skilling of returnees. Existing efforts for this could be enhanced through better management and linkage of digital systems such as the National Employment Management Information System (NEMIS) and FEIMS, in particular.

Access to finance

- It is necessary for the government to make formal loan mechanisms accessible to migrant workers in order to reduce their debt burden. For this, the government can make the submission of evidence by migrant workers of having acquired loans (if taken) from government-approved lenders compulsory to process their migration. The provision for debt forgiveness in cases of return due to having faced distress should be incorporated into this mechanism, with rigorous monitoring to ensure authenticity.

Active multi-stakeholder engagement and social dialogue

- Reintegration programmes and interventions should be based on a consultative approach. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and trade unions should lobby with governments to ensure that programmes and policies are comprehensive and prepared in consultation with all relevant stakeholders.
- The role of CSOs will be crucial to ensure that all RMWs, irrespective of their savings, skills or their documentation status, are prioritised in the reintegration programmes. CSOs and trade unions should advocate for the decentralisation of roles and responsibilities related to the reintegration of migrant workers using national, regional and international platforms and forums. The government needs to make use of the extensive network of CSOs and coordinate with them in disseminating information on reintegration measures being run by the government.

Role of Donors and Reintegration Service Providers

- It is important that donors and reintegration service providers mainstream the problem of indebtedness in reintegration planning and policymaking. They should develop a debt repayment and reduction strategy to orient aspirant migrants and returnees.
- Donors and reintegration service providers should adopt best practices while providing intensive support to distressed migrant workers. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 3X6 approach – a crisis response programme for vulnerable groups, for instance – can be a good intervention strategy.

Furthering knowledge on return and reintegration

- Statistics on RMWs and their needs should be recorded and managed through FEIMS and through surveys and qualitative research. Such information will be important in identifying (vulnerable, needy, skilled) beneficiaries and the barriers and challenges facing them and in informing reintegration policies and programmes. The government should conduct a periodic migration survey that incorporates different phases of migration including return and reintegration.
- Administrative databases of CSOs and trade unions generated while providing support and assistance to migrant workers, like the one maintained by PNCC, have the potential to support evidence-based policymaking and complement existing data collected by different government agencies such as the National Statistics Office (NSO) and DoFE. The government should recognise the unique opportunity provided by such administrative data and make use of the findings on the patterns and trends in the experiences of migrants and returnees, in order to inform and guide future policies and programmes regarding safe migration and reintegration.

Endnotes

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PNCC

Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee (PNCC)

Chandragiri Municipality-14, Naikap, Kathmandu, Nepal

info@pncc.org.np | pncc.org.np