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Research Article

Livelihood of Nepali Migrant Workers

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Abstract

People migrate for the quality of life. Livelihood mainly depend on income, social status, quality education and health. It is found that there is significant growth of labor migration to Japan, Korea and European countries. Economic improvement directly boost housing, health, education and minimizing poverty of MWs. Thus FE is the powerful economic force that reshape household assets, social structure and individual capabilities, directly impacting local livelihood and broader socio economic landscape. Majority of youth choose Gulf and Malaysia for FE, After 2022 the trend has shifted towards the Europe, South Korea and Japan. Male MWs is higher than the female MWs. According to DoFE 2024; Labor approval was issued largely to the skilled MWs (72.9% male, 62.7% female) which is good for Nation. Death of Nepali young MWs is serious matter in FC; every day 2 to 4 death body is reaching in Nepali's airport. Returnee MWs had Mainly choose agriculture sector (21.5% male and 33.5% female) followed by self-employment (27% male and 17% female). Un-appropriate job placement, excessive service fee, difficulties in workplace caused by language barriers, increasing number of injury and death of MWs, divorcee, family detachment and family conflicts are visible challenge of Nepali MWs. Despite of challenge; foreign employment remains main alternative due to job creation, poverty reduction, skill transfer, quality education, vocational training, business investment, experience share and ICT. Thus Livelihood of Nepali MWs is increased with certain challenge.

Introduction

The socio-economic condition of a country determines the livelihood of its people (Kerlinger, 2016; Shahi, 2020). Every person in this world seeks a better quality of life. In search of improved living standards and economic opportunities, people migrate and become migrant workers (Massey et al., 2008; Khatri, 2007; Castles et al., 2014). In most underdeveloped countries, where employment opportunities, quality education, infrastructure, and other basic services are inadequate, foreign employment has become a common strategy for improving household livelihoods (Harris & Todaro, 1970; Stark & Bloom, 1985; de Haas, 2010). Nepal is no exception to this global phenomenon. Every year, thousands of Nepalese youths migrate abroad in search of employment opportunities (MoLESS, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Consequently, the number of skilled and unskilled migrant workers (MWs) has increased significantly over the past two decades (MoLESS, 2019–2024).

The major destinations for Nepalese migrant workers include the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Malaysia, India, Australia, Japan, Europe, and North America (MoLESS, 2024; IOM, 2024). Generally, highly educated individuals prefer developed countries, whereas people from lower-income households often migrate to India and the Middle East due to lower migration costs and easier access to employment (Shahi, 2021; Khatri, 2007). The history of formal labour migration from Nepal dates back to the Nepal–British India War (1814–1816), when Nepali youths began serving in foreign military forces (Shahi, 2021). Since then, labour migration has expanded considerably, particularly after the enactment of the Foreign Employment Act, 2007 (Ministry of Labour and Transport Management, 2007).

Large-scale labour migration from Nepal is concentrated in the GCC countries and Malaysia. Labour migration to these destination countries accounted for approximately 85 percent of total labour migration between the fiscal years 2008/09 and 2014/15 (MoLESS, 2019–2024). Although migrant workers originate from all provinces of Nepal, the majority have traditionally come from the eastern and southeastern regions of the country (MoLESS, 2019–2024). Likewise, labour migration has remained predominantly male, with more than 95 percent of migrant workers being men during earlier migration periods (MoLESS, 2019–2024; CBS, 2021). According to the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE), more than 6.8 million labour permits were issued between FY 2008/09 and FY 2022/23 following the implementation of the Foreign Employment Act, 2007, indicating the growing dependence of the Nepalese economy on overseas employment (Ministry of Labour and Transport Management, 2007; MoLESS, 2024; Nepal Labour Migration Report, 2023/24).

Migrant workers in India are mainly engaged in tea, cotton, and rice harvesting, whereas workers in Australia and other developed countries are involved in wool shearing, meat processing, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, hospitality, transportation, and other labour-intensive sectors (Gaur et al., 2018; ILO, 2021). Despite their significant contribution to destination countries, migrant workers often face insecure employment conditions, limited labour rights, inadequate social protection, and restricted access to

formal labour markets (ILO, 2021; IOM, 2024). Most migrant workers do not possess re-employment rights and are generally excluded from labour unions and collective bargaining mechanisms (Gaur et al., 2018; ILO, 2021).

Middlemen, labour brokers, recruitment agencies, contractors, and crew leaders play an important role in facilitating foreign employment by recruiting workers, arranging transportation, supervising employment, and distributing wages (Gaur et al., 2018; MoLESS, 2024). These intermediaries also negotiate wages and working conditions with employers. Nevertheless, many migrant workers continue to experience lower wages, poor living standards, unsafe working environments, excessive working hours, and limited legal protection compared to native workers (ILO, 2021; World Bank, 2024; IOM, 2024).

Most Nepalese families depend heavily on the earnings of migrant workers for their daily livelihood (Shahi, 2021; Nepal Rastra Bank, 2024). In Nepal, where joint family systems are still common, one or more family members frequently migrate abroad to support household expenses. Consequently, migrant workers bear major financial responsibilities, including housing construction and maintenance, children's education, healthcare, food security, agricultural investment, and other household expenditures (Shahi, 2021; Levitt, 1998). Foreign employment has substantially improved household income and living standards, yet it has also created several social challenges, including family separation, internal migration, changing family structures, intergenerational conflicts, and the broader effects of globalization (Levitt, 1998; Massey et al., 2008; Castles et al., 2014).

At the same time, foreign employment has contributed positively to local economic development through remittance inflows, technology transfer, knowledge exchange, improved consumption patterns, housing development, and investment in education and health (Levitt, 1998; Adams & Page, 2005; World Bank, 2024). These social and economic remittances have significantly transformed the livelihood strategies of many Nepalese households, particularly in rural communities (Levitt, 1998; Taylor, 1999; de Haas, 2010).

Objective of study

The specific objective of the study are as:

- To find out the occupation, income and skill of Nepali MWs.
- To analyze livelihood of Nepali MWs due to FE.

Methodology

According to Kerlinger (2016), "Research design is the plan, structure, and strategy of investigation conceived so as to obtain answers to research questions and to control variance." Research design provides the overall framework that guides the entire research process, including the formulation of research questions, objectives, data collection procedures, methods of analysis, and interpretation of findings. It serves as a systematic blueprint that ensures a study is conducted in a logical, scientific, and organized manner. Accordingly, this study adopted a descriptive research design, which is appropriate for fact-finding research aimed at describing existing conditions and identifying patterns without manipulating variables. The descriptive design was selected because the study

examines the livelihood of Nepali migrant workers using existing evidence on migration trends, labour approval, destination countries, occupational distribution, skill levels, earnings, remittance contribution, workplace injuries, deaths, and the status of returnee migrant workers. Since the study relies entirely on documented information rather than primary field data, a descriptive research design is considered suitable for achieving the research objectives through the analysis and interpretation of secondary data and published literature (Kerlinger, 2016; Shahi, 2023).

The study is based exclusively on secondary data and literature sources. Secondary data refer to information that has already been collected, processed, and published by government agencies, national and international organizations, and previous researchers (Shahi, 2023). The use of secondary data is appropriate because it provides comprehensive, reliable, and nationally representative information on labour migration and its socio-economic implications. Published documents from the Government of Nepal, its ministries and departments, constitutional bodies, and recognized national and international organizations constituted the principal sources of information. Particular emphasis was given to the annual reports and statistical publications of the Department of Foreign Employment, Nepal Labour Migration Reports, Economic Surveys, Nepal Rastra Bank publications, Nepal Labour Force Survey reports, and reports published by the ILO, IOM, and the World Bank. These sources provide updated information on labour migration, remittance inflows, employment conditions, destination countries, occupational patterns, and the socio-economic contribution of migrant workers. Using multiple documentary sources also enhances the credibility and validity of the study by enabling the cross-verification of information.

After collecting the required information, the data were carefully reviewed, classified, verified, and organized according to the research objectives. The collected information was tabulated using standard formats to facilitate systematic analysis and interpretation. Descriptive statistical techniques, particularly frequencies, percentages, tables, and graphical presentations, were employed to summarize and present the available data.

Data analysis involved the systematic examination, organization, interpretation, and synthesis of secondary information to answer the research questions and achieve the study objectives (Shahi, 2023). In addition to descriptive statistical analysis, documentary analysis and literature synthesis were employed to interpret the findings within the context of existing migration theories and previous empirical studies. Relevant national and international literature was used to explain observed trends, compare findings, and strengthen the discussion. By integrating statistical evidence with documented literature, the study provides an evidence-based understanding of the livelihood of Nepali migrant workers and offers meaningful insights for policy formulation and future research on foreign employment in Nepal.

Result and Discussion

Happiness level of SAARC countries

Happiness of the country is the measures of citizens overall wellbeing. This is analyzed by using the factor like GDP, per capita, healthy life expectancy, social support, generosity,

freedom and governance. As GDP, health status, social condition of people are directly associated with the income source. The happiness level of SAARC countries is shown in the table below as:

Table: 1

Happiness level of SAARC countries

Country	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Nepal	100	87	84	78	93	92
Pakistan	67	105	121	108	108	109
Bangladesh	125	101	94	118	118	134
India	140	139	136	126	126	118
Sri Lanka	130	129	127	114	114	133
Afghanistan	154	149	146	137	143	147
Maldives	Unranked	89	Unranked	Unranked	Unranked	Unranked
Bhutan	95	Unranked	Unranked	Unranked	Unranked	Unranked

Source: UN's World Happiness Report, 2024

Above table showed that Afghanistan is happiest country among SAARC countries. Across 147 countries, the Finland remains the happiest country in the world. Nepal's happiness level is slightly decreasing since 2019.

Mode of Obtaining Labor Approvals

FE starts when G to G agreement held between two countries. individual must need certain document such as passport and medical report. The process of FE is possible at individual and by private agency. Labor Approval is must be taken from government of Nepal. The mode of obtaining labor approval is shown in the table below as:

Table: 2

Mode of Obtaining Labor Approvals

Year	Individual	Recruiting Agency
2011/12	45000	275000
2012/13	27000	390000
2013/14	27000	440000
2014/15	22000	449000
2015/16	23000	375000
2016/17	22000	350000
2017/18	22000	325000
2018/19	22000	215000
2019/20	22000	175000
2020/21	10000	60000
2021/22	38000	310000

Source: MoLESS, FEIMS, 2011-2022

Above table showed that individual mode of labor approval is highest in FY2011/12 and decreasing on later fiscal year. Recruiting Agency mode of labor approvals are highest in FY-2014/15 and increasing on later fiscal year. Recruiting Agency mode of labor approvals are lower in 2019 to 2021 due to Covid-19.

Major Destination and Occupation

Nepalese MWs choose Malaysia and gulf countries for their working destination. Reason behind this is easy visa processing, no need of higher education and skill, low cost and government policy. EPS- skilled worker choose for South Korea for factory and agricultural work. For study and skilled worker choose different country as per their expectation and dream. Major destination and occupation is shown in the table below as:

Table:3

Major Destination and Occupation

S.N	Destination Country	Major Occupation
1	Malasiya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE	Construction Work, Factory work and manufacturing, ,Domestic worker
2	South Korea	Agriculture ,Manufacturing
3	Japan	Industry and caregiving sector
4	Australia,United States, UK	High skilled jobs involving self- financed initiatives and typically leading to long term residency and higher living standards.
5	Europe(Poland, Romania)	construction Work, Factory work and manufacturing, Hospitality, Domestic worker, Agriculture

Source: DoFE , 2024

There is diverse in choice of Nepali MWs working abroad. Depending upon the skill, education and capability; they choose their working country. Majority of youth choose Gulf and Malaysia, After 2022 the trend has shifted towards the Europe, South Korea and japan of Nepali MWs.

Minimum Salary of MWs

Salary is fixed regular payment which can be received after the work on daily, weekly or monthly basis. Different country have different payment schedule. Earning mainly depend up on nature of work, worker's capability and skill. Minimum monthly salary of major destination countries is shown in the table below as:

Table: 4

Minimum Salary of MWs

SN	Country	Salary/month (In NPR)
1	United Arab Emirates	39168
2	Qatar	39461

3	Saudi Arabia	49832
4	Malaysia	59383
5	Bahrain	46858
6	South Korea	201584
7	Japan	138011

Source: NLSS 2023/24

From above table; Different country have provided different level of payment. Minimum salary was guaranteed in the agreement by the employer. Less wages is seen in Middle East country compare to South Korea and Japan. Nepali MWs prefer South Korea, Japan and European Countries but skilled and educated only be able to get Visa for work. Comparatively easy visa processing to the gulf countries and high education and skill is also not mandatory so that maximum Nepali MWs were there.

Gender of Nepali MWs

Nepali youth migrating to the foreign employment is increasing. Previously FE is restricted for female . but constitution of Nepal 2015 opened door to go abroad for female too. The gender of Nepali MWs is shown in the table below as;

Table: 5

Gender of Nepali MWs

Year	Male		Female		Total (No.)
	No.	%	No.	%	
2009/10	220,761	98.35	3,708	1.65	224,469
2010/11	242,156	98.63	3,376	1.37	245,532
2011/12	434,002	95.45	20,679	4.55	454,681
2012/13	572,229	94.82	31,252	5.18	603,481
2013/14	622,481	95.16	31,642	4.84	654,123
2014/15	633,588	95.57	29,358	4.43	662,946
2015/16	564,257	94.82	30,803	5.18	595,060
2016/17	583,259	94.66	32,918	5.34	616,177
2017/18	578,012	94.61	32,919	5.39	610,931
2018/19	476,589	93.69	32,120	6.31	508,709
2019/20	339,901	92.28	28,431	7.72	368,332
2020/21	155,223	93.13	11,455	6.87	166,678

2021/22	580,947	92.20	49,128	7.80	630,075
2022/23	699,187	90.65	72,133	9.35	771,320
2023/24	661,125	89.18	80,172	10.82	741,297

Source: FEIMS, 2024

Above table showed that male MWs is higher than the female MWs. Over the year number of people for the foreign employment has increased from 224469 in FY 2009/10, reaching a peak of 771320 in FY 2022/23. the trend of female migration also increasing from 3708(1.65%) in FY 2009/10 to 80172 (10.82%)in FY 2022/23, which is 22 times higher than in 2009/10.

Skill of Nepali MWs

Choose of their place depend majorly upon skills and education. Nepali MWs are Unskilled, skilled, semi-skilled, professional and high skilled. Depending upon the skilled they got the opportunities that is, higher the skill more the chance of getting best salary. High salary upgrade quality of life which improves the livelihood of MWs. Type of skill among Nepali MWs is shown in the table below as;

Table: 6

Skill of Nepali MWs

Category	Male Percent	Female Percent
Unskilled	18.6	28.3
Skilled	72.9	62.7
Semi-Skilled	8.1	8.3
Professional	0.4	0.5
High Skilled	0.1	0.2

Source: DOFE, 2023/24

According to DoFE, (2024) Labour approval was issued largely to the skilled MWs (72.9% male, 62.7% female). Skill of the youth depend upon the government policy, education, globalization, socio economic condition. Various people have different types of skills. The demand of professional who is skilled have the opportunity to work at different part of the world. Male are more skilled than the female in context of Nepali MWs. Unskilled female are more in the foreign employment.

Province Wise Injury of MWs

The challenging part of FE is health. The work in abroad is dirty, difficult and dangerous. on the other hand some time their high exploitation to female MWs. Implementation of labor agreement is weak but Government of Nepal careless on it. Among MWs province wise injury is shown in the table below as;

Table:7

Injury of MWs

Province	2019/20			2020/21			2021/22		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Province 1	53	2	55	28	1	29	43	6	49
Madhesh	31	0	31	25	0	25	41	2	43
Bagmati	20	3	23	20	1	21	35	8	43
Gandaki	31	1	32	20	2	22	53	2	55
Lumbini	29	0	29	14	1	15	34	1	35
Karnali	10	0	10	3	0	3	10	1	11
Sudurpashchim	2	0	2	2	0	2	7	0	7
Total	176	6	182	112	5	117	223	20	243

Source: FEWIMS, 2022

Above table showed that Koshi province have more injury and illness of MWs. Thus financial assistance from the company and destination country is important aspect of FE. Nepal government also tried to facilitate this matter. GoN encourage the MWs to involved in social security fund and insurance.

Death of Nepali MWs

MWs are working in FC on challenging situation. Nature of work is based on 3d ie dirty, difficult and danger. Some of example are working at more than 55 degree hot condition in Qatar. fishing by boating in sea, security Guard at Night and so on. Nepali MWs are earning , getting employment in one side soFE trend is increasing. on the other side 2 to 4 death body per day are reaching in Nepal. In this context , death of Nepali MWs is shown in the table below as:

Table :8

Death of Nepali MWs

Fiscal Year	Number of Death	Percentage
2013/14	877	8.5728
2014/15	1006	9.8338
2015/16	816	7.9765

2016/17	756	7.40
2017/18	821	8.0254
2018/19	754	7.3705
2019/20	661	6.4614
2020/21	1242	12.1407
2021/22	1395	13.6364
2022/23	1208	11.8084
2023/24	694	6.7840
Total	10230	100

Source: Economic survey 2023/24

Above table showed that minimum death of MWs in FY2019/20 was 6.46percent which is average 2 person death per day. that Maximum death of MWs in FY2021/22 was 13.63 percent which is average 4 person death per day.

Status of Returnee MWs

One of the major challenge for the government of Nepal is to arrange employment opportunity for returnee MWs. Returnee MWs can be key assets for the economic growth because they have acquired skills and exposure while they are away from the country. status of returnee Nepali MWs is shown in the table below as:

Table: 9

Status of returnee MWs

Statement	Male (%)	Female (%)
Self employment-Agriculture	21.5	33.5
Self employment-Non Agriculture	27	17
Looking for work	14	7
Daily wage in non agriculture sector	0	17
Planning to re-migrate	7	8
Salaried government job	7	1
Salaried job (Private sector NGO)	0	4
Daily wage in agriculture	0	4
Social/Political work	0	1
Other	22.5	10

Source: Centre for the study of labor and mobility, 2023

Above table showed that returnee MWs had chosen different fields of works as their experience. Majority choose agriculture sector(21.5% male and 33.5% female) followed by self-employment (27% male and 17% female). Few used to work for private sector. Some of them again try to go abroad as a migrant worker. Livelihood of some of the MWs have improved.

Conclusion

The study has briefly reviewed relevance policies. This study is based on descriptive research methodology. Data used in the report is based on secondary source. It is found that there is significant growth of labour migration . Economic improvement directly boost living standard of MWs; that is housing, health, education and minimizing poverty. Thus FE often enable education level , vocational training, business investment , transferring skill and ICT, their economic status and social standing. FE is the powerful economic force that reshape household assets, social structure and individual capabilities, directly impacting local livelihood and broader socio economic landscape. There is a hierarchical bodies for the policy formulation and policy execution regarding migrant workers. The supreme institution that deas with labour migration on behalf of Government of Nepal are MoLESS and DoEF. FEB and FET is working to promote integration and access to justice.

Un-appropriate job placement, excessive service fee, difficulties in workplace caused by language barriers, increasing number of injury and death of MWs, devorse, family detachment and family conflicts are visible challenge of Nepali MWs. Despite of challenge; foreign employment remains maim alternative for job creation, proverty reduction and skill transfer. Thus FE is unavoidable at least for another decade till the Nepal would be able to produce thousands of new jobs every month. Thus Livelihood of Nepali MWs is increased by FE ; but it is challenging too.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this article.

Ethical Approval

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Data Sharing Statement

No additional data are available related to this study.

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AI Disclosure

The authors used GenAI (OpenAI) tools to assist with language editing, improving clarity, and organizing the manuscript. All interpretations, analyses, conclusions, and the final content were developed, verified, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work. This AI disclosure is concise, transparent, and consistent with the policies of many international journals regarding the use of generative AI in manuscript preparation.

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