

# Brain Drain or Gain? The Dynamics of Health Professional Migration from Nepal

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## Introduction

Health professional migration refers to the movement of health professionals such as doctors, nurses, and other medical staff from one country to another country. The migration can be temporary or permanent. It is driven by push factors such as better job opportunities, higher salaries, improved conditions, and advanced training and education opportunities.<sup>1-3</sup> The global health professional's migration has increased dramatically over the past decade. There has been a 60% rise in migrant doctors and nurses working in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD iLibrary reveals migrant health professionals are particularly high in OECD; for example, Israel has nearly 60% of foreign-trained doctors; New Zealand, Switzerland, Australia, and the United Kingdom have about 20%-25% of foreign Nurses.<sup>4</sup>

The exact number of Nepalese healthcare professionals working abroad can be challenging to identify due to changeable sources and the dynamic nature of migration. Nepal's stressed healthcare system is among 55 countries on a WHO red list of nations with a severe shortage of healthcare workers.<sup>5</sup> The healthcare system of Nepal has already faced significant challenges due to a severe shortage of health professionals, though it is the least prioritized issue. Nepal needs about 93,000 health workers including doctors, nurses, and technicians but has only about 25,000 sanctioned posts; the gap severely impacts healthcare delivery, especially in rural areas.<sup>6</sup> WHO recommended that almost 135 health workers from 13 different categories per 10,000 population be needed to achieve a Universal Health Coverage (UHC) index of 70%. WHO also recommended that every 1000 people needed 1 doctor and 3 nurses and midwives. According to the annual report 2021/22 Department of Health Services of Nepal, approximately 0.17 doctors and 0.92 Nurses per 1000 people which is very critical.<sup>7</sup>

Nepal is significantly affected by the huge number of health professional migrants. Health professionals are migrating to higher-income countries from Nepal. The Nepal Nursing Council disclosed that as of March, there are 82,471 nurses registered till March 2023, among them 40539 nurses have obtained verification letters for international employment from Nepal Nursing Council<sup>8</sup> and many of them are preparing to get those verification letters. Similarly, approximately 2,000 doctors from Nepal pursued approval from the Nepal Medical Council to work abroad in 2022, a significantly increased number compared to 2021 when 1327 obtained such permission. According to the Nepal Medical Association, there are about 30,000 doctors registered, but only 18,000 doctors are currently working in Nepal.<sup>8-10</sup> The migrant health professionals from Nepal have chosen the United States, Australia, Maldives, Canada, Germany, and Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Dubai as the most popular destinations. The migration rate of health professionals from Nepal is a growing concern.<sup>11</sup>

## Causes of Health Professionals' Migration

Migration of health professionals from Nepal is influenced by numerous factors; which can be categorized into "Push and Pull" factors.

### Push Factors

- 1. Low salaries:** Health Professionals in Nepal face low wages compared to international standards. The monthly salaries are 10 times higher in developed countries than in the hospitals of Nepal.<sup>11</sup>
- 2. Limited Job Opportunities:** There is a lack of sufficient employment opportunities and specialized roles.<sup>9,12</sup> The World Health Organization reveals the global challenges of mismatching the supply of health professional and the demand for their

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services. Many newly graduated Nurses and Doctors face these mismatches, they are appointed to posts that do not fully utilize their advanced education and training due to lack of specialist positions.

3. **Unsatisfactory working conditions:** Most health workers experience poor working environments, including inadequate facilities and resources.<sup>13</sup>
4. **Lack of career Development:** opportunities for further training and career advancements are limited. At least 2000 MBBS students graduate from Nepal every year but only 700 students are enrolled in postgraduate courses.<sup>8,9,13</sup>
5. **Political Instability:** Political issues and instability can create an uncertain and stressful working environment. Unstable political conditions lead to poor governance and mismanagement of resources that demotivate and frustrate health professionals.<sup>14</sup>

## Pull Factors

1. **Higher Salaries Abroad:** Countries like the United States, Australia, and Gulf nations offer significantly higher wages. The employer also provides accommodation and food along with a high-paying job. Nurses are compelled to seek opportunities abroad due to Nepal's lack of well-paying jobs.<sup>7</sup>
2. **Better working conditions:** The developed and high-income countries have improved facilities, resources, and working environments to attract health professionals. Those high-income countries have clear and strict laws about working hours, payments, and other facilities Improved facilities, and resources with keen monitoring agencies.
3. **Career Advancement:** Developed countries have numerous opportunities for further education, training, and career growth. A study conducted in Nepal in 2017 reveals more than three-fourths of migrant nurses from Nepal were attracted to better job and career opportunities, followed by family security and better working conditions.<sup>15</sup>
4. **Demand in High-income countries:** The rapidly growing aging population, medical advancements, and pandemic impacts like COVID-19 contribute to the high demand for skilled health professionals across specialties.<sup>10,16</sup> Those countries have a better healthcare delivery system with a more specialized scope.
5. **Favorable Immigration Policies:** some countries have policies that facilitate the migration of health professionals, making it easier for them to move and work abroad.<sup>16</sup>

## Impacts of Health Professional Migration

The migration of health professionals from Nepal impacts the country's healthcare system and overall well-being. The shortage of qualified health professionals affects the quality of healthcare services and expected outcomes in the overall outcome of healthcare systems of Nepal. Hence, the migration of health professionals from Nepal has positive and negative impacts.

## Positives Impacts

1. **Remittances:** Health professionals working abroad often send remittances back to Nepal, which can significantly contribute to the country's economy. In 2023, remittances contributed over \$ 11 billion to Nepal's GDP, accounting for almost 26.6% of total GDP. These funds can improve living standards and support education and health care for families.<sup>16</sup>
2. **Economic Growth:** The inflow of remittances helps alleviate poverty and improve household incomes contributing to overall economic growth. People can spend on education, healthcare, food, and proper shelter. They can promote their living standards.
3. **Skill Development:** The migrant health professionals gain valuable experience and skills while working abroad, which they can bring back to Nepal if they return. This can boost the quality of healthcare services and introduce new practices and technologies.
4. **International exposure:** Nepali health professionals are exposed to different scientific evidence-based medical practices and standards; which they can introduce in Nepal, the innovation of scientific best practices can be adopted in the health care system of Nepal.
5. **Networking and collaboration:** Health professionals working abroad can establish international networks and collaborations. These connections can facilitate knowledge exchange, research partnerships, and access to global resources, benefiting Nepal's healthcare sector.

## Negative Impacts

1. **The shortage of health professionals:** The migration of skilled health workers, doctors, and nurses, leads to a shortage of qualified professionals in Nepal. This can strain the health care system, especially in rural and underserved areas.
2. **Quality of Care:** With the novelty and less experienced health professionals, the quality of healthcare services may decline. This can affect patient outcomes and overall public health.
3. **Training and education:** The loss of trained professionals can impact the training and mentorship of new healthcare workers, creating a cycle of skill shortages.
4. **Increased Workload:** The remaining health professionals often face increased workloads, which can lead to burnout and reduced job satisfaction and further exacerbate the problem of workforce retention.
5. **Economic Costs:** The cost of training healthcare professionals is significant, and when they migrate, the country's investment in their education and training is lost.
6. **Brain Drain:** The migration of highly skilled professionals can lead to a "Brain Drain", where the country loses its best and brightest minds. This can hinder the development of innovative healthcare solutions and research.

It is critical to the growing migration rate of health professionals and the future need for health services. The shortage of Health Professionals is one of the major challenges in Nepal. Health