

# Reducing Vulnerability to Exploitation of Nepali Migrant Domestic Workers

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**Policy Context:** In 2017, the government of Nepal issued a directive banning international emigration for domestic work, with the aim of protecting Nepali citizens from labour exploitation in the domestic work sector abroad. The ban has since been eased slightly, [subject to preconditions](#) including the establishment of [Bilateral Labour Agreements \(BLA\)](#) on domestic work, which are non-legally binding labour migration regulatory frameworks with each receiving country. Despite the ban, overseas employers continue to issue domestic work visas. The ban overlooks evidence of positive outcomes for Nepali domestic workers and leads to [several unintended and damaging consequences](#).

**Advice:** To address the Nepali migrant domestic workers' vulnerability to becoming stranded and exploited, the migration ban should be lifted, alongside initiating legally binding negotiations with countries employing these workers. Support mechanisms for domestic workers in host countries and reintegration processes for returnees in Nepal should be strengthened.

## Key research findings

- > **The migration ban creates several unintended and damaging consequences.** When domestic work visas are issued by overseas employers, [disadvantaged Nepali women](#) – estimated to number over 100,000 – [risk their lives by resorting to illicit migration routes to reach their countries of employment](#). This leads to many of them becoming stranded in multiple sites thereby increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.
- > **Nepali women labelled as 'illegal' are exposed to violence from those who exploit the restrictive migration ban.** Several organisations in Nepal [restrict their mobility and infringe on their rights in actions intended for their protection](#). [They also face abandonment by agents, recruitment agencies, and their own embassies](#), which do not protect them abroad when they face exploitation in their labour. They are rarely able to access any government protection or insurance against exploitation or death. As a result, many Nepali women end up paying for their own rescue, either to overseas agencies or local agents.
- > **Returnee women face significant challenges when they return to their communities after working abroad.** [There are no specific policies to support their reintegration](#), and they have limited options for seeking justice against those who have exploited them during their migration process. As a result, many women are compelled to migrate for domestic work again via illicit routes.
- > **The migration ban on domestic work is based on unfounded assumptions about inherent exploitation,** overlooking substantial evidence that migrant domestic workers often experience financial stability, skill enhancement, language learning, and greater autonomy. These positive outcomes can surpass those of male counterparts in other sectors, while also enabling poor, illiterate Nepali women to improve their children's education, access healthcare for their families, and construct homes in their villages.

## Policy recommendations

- > **Given that the migration ban has had unintended consequences, it is recommended that the ban on domestic work migration be lifted.** This change would allow women to migrate through formal channels, ensuring they receive proper skills and language training, protection assurances from recruitment agencies, and comprehensive insurance coverage.
- > **Strengthen Support Mechanisms for Migrant Nepali Domestic Workers in Receiving Countries.** Recognise the presence of Nepali domestic workers abroad by registering them with Nepali embassies or consulates. Establish dedicated service centres in major cities with Nepali domestic workers. These centres should assist workers facing labour exploitation, physical and mental health issues, and support stranded workers, including facilitating efficient repatriation and preventing severe outcomes such as loss of life. Engage in diplomatic dialogue to negotiate legally binding agreements for better working conditions and safeguards for Nepali domestic workers.
- > **Develop and implement concrete reintegration plans for returnee domestic workers at the local level of governance to assure their social, political and economic empowerment.** Empower local authorities, including employment service centres, to better address the diverse needs of returnee domestic workers and protect their rights upon their return through strong and accessible legal frameworks.
- > **Regulate the Recruitment Industry in Nepal at the local level:** Mandate the registration of all recruitment agents and agencies involved in domestic work migration through local employment service centres to ensure accountability. Establish a secure and accessible mechanism for domestic workers to file complaints regarding exploitation and human rights violations experienced during their migration process, ensuring prompt and effective resolution of grievances.

### Work with me

[Dr Ayushman Bhagat](#) is a lecturer in Political Geography at Brunel University London with a research interest in spatial politics of anti-trafficking and migration control. Prior to his academic career, he served as a consultant to the ILO on forced labour, human trafficking and bonded labour related issues, and worked with various government and non-government agencies. His current research, funded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, is part of the project “Forced Migrant Labourers: A Study of Abandonment, Strandedness, and Desertion of Migrant Workers in Asia”.

Contact Dr Bhagat at [ayushmanbhagat@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:ayushmanbhagat@brunel.ac.uk), if you would like to learn more about his research, invite him to speak at your event, seek advice on lifting migration bans and defending migrant workers’ rights, or collaborate on advocacy, grassroots work and participatory research in this area.