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Covid-19 and Nepali Labor Migration: Challenges and Changes

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Abstract

Foreign labor migration is a cornerstone of global economic dynamics, significantly affecting both sending and receiving nations. This study examines the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on foreign labor migration in Nepal, with a specific focus on the experiences of migrant workers returning through Tribhuvan International Airport. The economic importance of labor migration is underscored, particularly through remittances, which are crucial for the economy of Nepal. However, this sector is highly susceptible to external disruptions such as the pandemic. Despite its critical role, migrant workers often face numerous challenges and discrimination both abroad and upon their return to Nepal. This research aims to explore the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on remittance flows, identify the challenges faced by returning migrant workers, and evaluate the effectiveness of social security provisions for these workers.

Methodologically, the study employs a descriptive and analytical approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods for comprehensive data collection and analysis. Utilizing purposive sampling, the research targets migrant workers returning through Tribhuvan International Airport. Data is gathered through questionnaires. The findings reveal significant disruptions caused by the pandemic, including employment instability, financial insecurity, and difficulties in accessing social protection and support services. Despite the resilience of migrant workers, they face heightened vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic. The study concludes with recommendations aimed at policy reforms, enhanced support services, international collaboration, awareness campaigns, capacity-building initiatives, and ongoing research and monitoring.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, economic impact, remittance, resilience, social security

Introduction

Foreign labor migration involves individuals moving from their home country to another country to seek employment or engage in work. This migration can be temporary or permanent and is influenced by factors such as economic disparities, employment opportunities, wage differences, and labor demands. It affects global labor markets, contributes to economic growth, impacts remittance flows, and fosters cultural exchange. This is widely analyzed in academic and policy contexts to explore its implications for both sending and receiving nations. Foreign labor migration is driven by various

factors, including economic disparities, employment prospects, wage differentials, and labor demand in destination countries. It plays a significant role in shaping global labor markets, contributing to economic development, remittance flows, and cultural exchange. The concept of foreign labor migration is widely discussed in academic literature, policy documents, and international organizations' reports to understand its implications, challenges, and potential benefits for both sending and receiving countries (International Organization for Migration, 2015).

Foreign labor migration has profound economic effects, especially through the remittances that migrant workers send back to their home countries. The World Bank reported that global remittances totaled \$554 billion in 2019, with developing countries receiving the largest share. This highlights the critical role remittances play in supporting economic stability and growth in these nations. The flow of remittances typically follows migration trends, with countries that see significant numbers of their citizens leaving often benefiting from substantial remittance inflows. (World Bank, 2021).

Foreign labor migration has become a significant global phenomenon, driven by factors such as economic disparities, demographic changes, and demand for labor in certain industries. There were an estimated 169 million international migrant workers worldwide in 2019, a substantial increase from 150 million in 2013 (ILO, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed had a profound impact on labor migration, reshaping migration patterns and influencing both sending and receiving countries.

The Covid-19 Pandemic had unthinkable effects on many facets of human existence. The first COVID-19 case was found in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Subsequently, the illness has dispersed globally, resulting in a persistent epidemic. Throughout the first half of 2020, an epidemic has swept the globe. After being recognized as a novel corona virus (SARS-CoV-2, also known as Corona virus Disease-19, or COVID-19), it was subsequently dubbed Corona virus Disease-19 (Qiu et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed brought about unprecedented crises in human mobility and foreign labor migration, significantly affecting global economic and social structures. The estimated number of international migrants in the world is 272 million, which equates to 3.5 per cent of the global population (IOM, 2020).

One of the most important economic trends is labor migration; in Nepal, the largest country in South Asia, over one-third of families have a family member who has moved overseas for work (Bossavie & Denisova, 2018). For policy makers, migration frequently presents a challenge (Ozden et al., 2018). Remittance migration helps millions of people improve their lives and those of their families, but there is strong opposition to it, with many claiming that it will increase unemployment, criminality, and strain on social services in the countries where migrants settle. Migration is seen as a source of income for the country of origin, but it also causes other socioeconomic inequalities, a labor shortage, and the loss of skilled labor (Bossavie & Denisova, 2018). As of mid-March 2021, 4,466,973 workers with work permits had left the country for employment abroad; of these, 4,248,547 were men and 218,426 were women (Economic Survey, 2020/21).

Covid-19 Pandemic

The World Health Organization announced the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020. It was brought on by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, which first surfaced in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. Millions of migrant workers around the world saw their lives and means of subsistence severely disrupted by this global health catastrophe, which had a major effect on international labor migration.

Many migrant workers were left stranded, jobless, and without access to social protections or healthcare in their host countries as countries imposed stringent lockdowns and border restrictions to stop the virus's spread. The pandemic highlighted the precarious character of migrant populations' living and work conditions and increased their preexisting vulnerabilities (International Labour Organization, 2020).

Remittance

The World Bank defines remittances as "personal transfers of money and/or in-kind goods sent to or received from abroad by migrants and temporary workers" (World Bank, 2021, p. 2). Remittances play a crucial role in the economies of many developing countries, including Nepal. They contribute to poverty reduction, enhance household consumption, and support investments in education, healthcare, and housing. Remittances also help to mitigate the impacts of economic shocks and provide a stable source of income for recipient households (Ratha et al., 2021). The World Bank estimates that remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries reached a record high of \$553 billion in 2020 (World Bank, 2021). This highlights the significant impact of remittances on the global economy and the well-being of recipient communities. Furthermore, remittances have social and developmental implications. They contribute to social cohesion, as they strengthen familial and community ties by supporting the well-being and welfare of families left behind. Remittances can also promote human capital development through increased investments in education and skills training (Ratha et al., 2021).

Social Security

One commonly cited definition of social security comes from the International Labor Organization (ILO). According to the ILO, social security encompasses "the protection that a society provides to individuals and households to ensure access to health care and to guarantee income security, particularly in cases of old age, unemployment, sickness, invalidity, and loss of a breadwinner" (ILO, 2019). This definition emphasizes the fundamental purpose of social security in safeguarding individuals and households from various risks and ensuring their basic needs are met.

The United Nations also provides a definition of social security, stating that it refers to "the set of public measures that a society establishes to protect and support individuals and households to ensure access to income and health care in the event of sickness, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, invalidity, old age, and death of a family member" (United Nations, 2018). This definition highlights the comprehensive nature of social security, encompassing a range of risks and contingencies that individuals and families may encounter.

Social Security Provision for Returnee Migrant Workers in Nepal

The Government of Nepal has established the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (FEWF) to provide social security benefits and services specifically targeted for returnee migrant workers. The FEWF, established under the Foreign Employment Act, aims to safeguard the rights and welfare of Nepalese workers employed overseas (Government of Nepal, 2008). It offers various benefits such as life insurance, medical treatment, and emergency repatriation assistance to migrant workers and their families. In addition to the FEWF, the government has implemented the Pravasi Nepali Sahayata Kosh (PNSK), also known as the Migrant Nepali Support Fund. The PNSK, established in 2015, focuses on providing support and assistance to Nepalese workers returning from foreign employment (Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security, 2015). It offers financial support, skill development programs,

and reintegration services to returning migrant workers to facilitate their smooth transition and sustainable reintegration into the local labor market. To enhance social security provision for returnee migrant workers, the government has also strengthened its diplomatic efforts and bilateral agreements with destination countries. These agreements aim to protect the rights and welfare of Nepalese workers abroad and ensure access to social security benefits in host countries. They often include provisions for health insurance, workers' compensation, and repatriation assistance (Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security, n.d.). Furthermore, the government has taken steps to raise awareness among foreign labor migrants about their rights, entitlements, and available support services. Information campaigns and pre-departure orientation programs are conducted to educate migrant workers about labor laws, safe migration practices, and avenues for seeking assistance (Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security, n.d.). These initiatives aim to empower migrant workers with knowledge and promote their access to social security benefits and protection.

Social Security Provision Implemented during Covid-19 Pandemic for Foreign Labor Migrants of Nepal

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Nepal implemented several measures to provide social security provisions and support for foreign labor migrants affected by the crisis. While specific references for these measures are limited, the government took various steps to address the challenges faced by foreign labor migrants during this unprecedented time.

One of the key initiatives was the establishment of the COVID-19 Crisis Management Center (CCMC) by the Government of Nepal. The CCMC was responsible for coordinating and managing the repatriation of stranded Nepali migrant workers from different countries during the pandemic (Government of Nepal, 2020). This effort aimed to ensure the safe return of foreign labor migrants to Nepal, providing them with support and assistance during the crisis.

Additionally, the government collaborated with the international community and relevant stakeholders to facilitate the provision of food, medical supplies, and temporary shelters to Nepali migrant workers stranded abroad due to the pandemic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). These initiatives were implemented to address the immediate needs of foreign labor migrants and mitigate the impact of the crisis on their well-being.

Furthermore, the government engaged in diplomatic discussions and negotiations with destination countries to ensure the welfare and protection of Nepali migrant workers. It sought assistance from host nations to safeguard the health, safety, and social security of foreign labor migrants during the pandemic (Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security, n.d.). While detailed references and specific information on the social security measures for Nepalese foreign labor migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic are limited, these efforts reflect the government's commitment to supporting migrant workers and addressing the challenges they faced during this difficult period.

Objectives

This study discusses and explores the effectiveness of Social Security provisions in supporting individuals employed abroad during the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the research analyzes the challenges encountered by foreign migrant workers in both destination countries and Nepal prior to the pandemic.

Materials and Methods

The research design utilized in this study is a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to offer a thorough analysis of the dynamics of foreign labor migration and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The quantitative component involved the systematic collection of numerical data through structured questionnaires administered to 118 returnee migrant workers at Tribhuvan International Airport, allowing for statistical analysis of trends related to remittances, employment conditions, and social security measures. The qualitative component sought to capture the detailed experiences and perspectives of migrant workers using narrative methods, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) with experts in the field. By triangulating quantitative and qualitative data, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and impacts linked to foreign labor migration, offering valuable insights for stakeholders and contributing to evidence-based policy development.

Results and Discussion

The findings from the socioeconomic analysis of respondents at Tribhuvan International Airport provide a comprehensive understanding of the landscape of foreign labor migration from Nepal amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The data reveals a predominant trend of younger individuals, particularly those aged between 18 to 35 years, constituting a significant proportion of the migrant workforce. This demographic trend indicates a greater tendency among younger and mid-career individuals to pursue international employment opportunities, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. Moreover, the gender distribution shows a notable overrepresentation of male migrant workers, highlighting potential gender-specific patterns in labor migration. The majority of respondents identified as Hindu, mirroring Nepal's religious demographics, while ethnic diversity was evident, with significant representation from the Chhetri and Janjati ethnic groups. Furthermore, the analysis sheds light on family structures, literacy levels, educational backgrounds, marital status, ecological zones, and geographic origins of migrant workers, providing valuable insights for policymakers to develop targeted interventions aimed at promoting the well-being and socioeconomic empowerment of migrant workers and fostering inclusive development in Nepal.

The data reveals that Qatar is the most common destination for Nepali migrant workers, with 24 individuals, representing 20.3% of the total respondents. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) follows closely, with 18 migrants, accounting for 15.3% of the total. Malaysia is the third most popular destination, with 14 migrants (11.9%), and Australia ranks fourth, with 10 migrants (8.5%). Korea and Japan are also significant destinations, with 9 and 8 migrants, respectively, constituting 7.6% and 6.8% of the total.

Additionally, the data shows that foreign labor migrants from Nepal have diverse destination countries, with smaller numbers of migrants heading to Saudi Arabia, the USA, and various other countries.

Analysis of the Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Remittance, Challenges Faced by Foreign Migrant Worker and Effectiveness of Provision of Social Security Support in Foreign Employment During Covid-19 Pandemic:

This section provides a detailed analysis of the data collected from the study's respondents. It begins with an assessment of their physical and mental well-being, followed by an examination of

different aspects of their foreign labor migration experience, including destination preferences, length of stay, and employment trends both before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, it delves into the remittance patterns of migrant workers, examining their monthly income distribution, preferred channels for remittance transfers, and the utilization of remittance funds by their families. By elucidating the challenges encountered by migrant workers, particularly amidst the pandemic, this section highlights the need for targeted support mechanisms to address their vulnerabilities effectively. Furthermore, it explores the social security measures available to returnee migrant workers and the support received during times of crisis, offering valuable insights for policymakers and support organizations to enhance the welfare and protection of Nepali migrant workers.

Work Destinations Transformed

Table 1: *Work destination of Nepali labor migrant before and after COVID-19*

SN	Occupation	Before		After	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	Agriculture	7	5.9	6	5.1
2	Business	3	2.5	4	3.4
3	Domestic Worker	4	3.4	4	3.4
4	Driver	9	7.6	9	7.6
5	Factory Worker	14	11.9	14	11.9
6	Government Officer	2	1.7	2	1.7
7	Hotel Worker	24	20.3	23	19.5
8	Labor	15	12.7	14	11.9
9	Mechanics	13	11.0	13	11.0
10	None	1	0.8	1	0.8
11	Nurse	2	1.7	2	1.7
12	Sales	19	16.1	21	17.8
13	Security	5	4.2	5	4.2
	Total	118	100.0	118	100.0

Source: Field Study 2024

Above table provides a comparative analysis of the occupations held by Nepali labor migrants before and after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Before Covid-19, the most common occupations among the respondents included hotel workers (20.3%), followed closely by sales (16.1%) and factory workers (11.9%). However, after the pandemic, the distribution of occupations remains relatively similar, with slight fluctuations in percentages across different categories. Hotel workers still comprise a significant portion of the workforce (19.5%), along with sales personnel (17.8%) and factory workers (11.9%). Interestingly, some occupations, such as business and domestic work, witnessed a slight increase in representation after Covid-19 compared to before. Overall, the data suggests that while the pandemic may have influenced certain occupational trends among Nepali labor migrants, the core

distribution of occupations remains relatively stable, with individuals continuing to engage in similar lines of work despite the challenging circumstances posed by the global health crisis.

Information Regarding Income of Foreign Labor of Nepal

Table 2: *Monthly Income of Foreign Labor Migrants of Nepal before and after Covid-19 Pandemic*

SN	Monthly Income	Before Income		After Income	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	Below Rs. 25000	3	2.5	2	1.7
2	Rs. 26000-50000	23	19.5	22	18.6
3	Rs. 51000-75000	29	24.6	32	27.1
4	Rs. 76000-100000	18	15.3	15	12.7
5	Rs. 101000-200000	17	14.4	18	15.3
6	Above Rs. 200000	28	23.7	29	24.6
	Total	118	100.0	118	100.0

Source: Field Study 2024

Above table no 3 provides insight into the monthly income distribution among Nepali labor migrants both before and after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The table categorizes the monthly income into six ranges and presents the frequencies and percentages for each range for both periods.

Utilization Pattern of Remittance by Family:

Table 3: *Utilization of Remittance by Family of Foreign Labor Migrants of Nepal after Covid-19 Pandemic*

SN	Utilization	Before Utilization		After Utilization	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	Home Expenses	91	77.1	92	78.0
2	Home Expenses and Education Fee	9	7.6	9	7.6
3	Home Expenses and Medical Fee	6	5.1	9	7.6
4	Home Expenses, Education Fee and Medical Fee	2	1.7	2	1.7
5	Home Expenses and Loan Payment	7	5.9	3	2.5
6	Others	3	2.5	3	2.5
	Total	118	100.0	118	100.0

Source: Field Study 2024

Before the pandemic, most remittance funds were primarily allocated towards home expenses, with 77.1% of respondents reporting this utilization. This suggests that a significant portion of the remittance income was used to cover basic household needs such as food, shelter, and utilities. Additionally, a smaller proportion of respondents reported utilizing remittances for home expenses combined with other specific purposes such as education fees (7.6%), medical fees (5.1%), or loan payments (5.9%). A minor percentage of respondents also reported other miscellaneous uses for remittance funds (2.5%).

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the utilization patterns of remittance funds remained largely consistent with pre-pandemic trends. Home expenses continued to dominate as the primary utilization category, with 78.0% of respondents allocating remittances towards this purpose. Similarly, the distribution across other utilization categories, including combined expenses for education, medical fees, or loan payments, remained relatively stable. A small percentage of respondents also reported other miscellaneous uses for remittance funds, consistent with pre-pandemic levels.

These findings suggest that, despite the challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of remittance funds by families of Nepali labor migrants remained stable and aligned with previous trends. The data highlights the crucial role of remittances in covering household expenses and fulfilling essential needs, thereby contributing to the socio-economic welfare of migrant families in Nepal.

Challenges faced by Foreign Labor Migrants

Table 4: *Challenges of Foreign Labor Migrants of Nepal before and after Covid-19 Pandemic*

SN	Challenges	Before Challenges		After Challenges	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	None	117	99.2	79	66.9
2	Partially Jobless	1	0.8	4	3.4
3	Jobless	0	0	9	7.6
4	Late Salary Payment	0	0	5	4.2
5	Price Hike in Goods	0	0	9	7.6
6	Compact Residence	0	0	6	5.1
7	Others	0	0	6	5.1
	Total	118	100.0	118	100.0

Source: Field Study 2024

Above table reveals that before the pandemic, an overwhelming majority of respondents, constituting 99.2%, reported facing no challenges. This indicates that most Nepali labor migrants did not encounter significant obstacles in their work or living conditions prior to the Covid-19 outbreak. However, a negligible proportion of respondents (0.8%) reported being partially jobless, indicating some level of employment instability or insecurity.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the scenario shifted significantly, with a notable increase in the number of respondents reporting various challenges. While the majority still reported facing no challenges (66.9%), a significant proportion reported experiencing difficulties such as joblessness (7.6%), partial joblessness (3.4%), late salary payments (4.2%), price hikes in goods (7.6%), compact residence (5.1%), and other unspecified challenges (5.1%). These challenges reflect the adverse impact of the pandemic on the employment and living conditions of Nepali labor migrants, ranging from loss of employment opportunities to financial strains and difficulties in accessing necessities.

Social Security Status of Foreign Labor of Nepal

Table 5 Types Social Security for Foreign Labor of Nepal

SN	Social Security Measures	Frequency	Percent
1	No information	112	94.9
2	Insurance	6	5.1
	Total	118	100.0

Source: Field Study 2024

Table 6 explain that, out of the total 118 respondents, a significant majority of 112 individuals (94.9%) reported having "No information" regarding social security measures. This high percentage suggests a considerable lack of awareness among the majority of Nepali migrant workers about the social security benefits and protections available to them in their host countries. On the other hand, 6 respondents (5.1%) reported having information about "Insurance" as a form of social security. While a relatively small proportion of migrant workers have some knowledge in this regard, the data emphasizes the need for greater awareness and education regarding social security measures to protect the rights and well-being of Nepali labor migrants during their employment abroad.

Supporting for Foreign Labor of Nepal during Covid-19 Pandemic

Table 6: Supporting Organization for Foreign Labor of Nepal during Covid-19 Pandemic

SN	Supporting organization	Frequency	Percent
1	Co-Workers	2	1.7
2	Embassy of Nepal	13	11.0
3	Government of Destination	12	10.2
4	Local Club	12	10.2
5	None	78	66.1
6	Own Company	1	0.8
	Total	118	100.0

Source: Field Study 2024

Table 7 presents information on the supporting organizations that foreign labor migrants of Nepal turned to during the Covid-19 pandemic. Out of the total 118 respondents, a majority of 78 individuals (66.1%) stated that they received support from "None" of the listed organizations. This indicates that a significant proportion of Nepali migrant workers did not have access to any specific supporting organization during the pandemic. The next most common source of support was the "Embassy of Nepal," with 13 respondents (11.0%) seeking assistance from their country's embassy in the host country. Additionally, 12 respondents (10.2%) reported seeking support from both the "Government of Destination" and a "Local Club" in the host country. A smaller number of respondents sought help from "Co-Workers" (1.7%) and "Own Company" (0.8%). The data highlights the challenges faced by Nepali

migrant workers during the Covid-19 crisis and underscores the need for stronger support mechanisms and coordination between relevant organizations to ensure the well-being and protection of migrant workers during challenging times.

Types of Support to Foreign Labor of Nepal during Covid-19

Table No: 7: *Types of Support to Foreign Labor of Nepal during Covid-19*

SN	Types of Support	Frequency	Percent
1	Food Support	4	3.4
2	Medicine Support	7	5.9
3	Food and Medicine Support	17	14.4
4	Rental Support	4	3.4
5	Financial Support	5	4.2
6	Others	3	2.5
7	Total	40	33.9
8	Not Received Any Support	78	66.1
	Total	118	100.0

Source: Field Study 2024

Above table provides information on the types of support received by foreign labor migrants of Nepal during the Covid-19 pandemic, presenting both the frequency and percentage of respondents in each category. Out of the total 118 respondents, 78 individuals (66.1%) stated that they did not receive any support during the pandemic. Among those who received support, "Food Support" was provided to 4 respondents (3.4%), "Medicine Support" to 7 respondents (5.9%), and "Rental Support" to another 4 respondents (3.4%). A total of 17 respondents (14.4%) received both "Food and Medicine Support," while 5 respondents (4.2%) received "Financial Support." Additionally, 3 respondents (2.5%) reported receiving "Other" types of support. The data highlights the challenges faced by a significant number of Nepali migrant workers during the Covid-19 crisis, with a considerable proportion not receiving any support.

Conclusion

Migrant workers face significant challenges, including labor exploitation, deceptive recruitment practices, and inadequate occupational safety, which were exacerbated by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the profound vulnerabilities faced by undocumented workers and women, exacerbating the already precarious conditions in which they find themselves. The limited access to justice and social security measures further compounds these difficulties.

Social security provisions for returnee migrant workers have faced significant challenges in terms of coverage and implementation. These issues have been particularly pronounced during times of crisis, such as the recent global pandemic. The inadequacies of the existing systems became glaringly evident as migrant workers struggled with insufficient support during these turbulent times. Despite the disruptive impact of the pandemic, remittance flows exhibited remarkable resilience, playing a crucial role in sustaining livelihoods and bolstering economic stability in Nepal. The resilience demonstrated by remittances during periods of economic uncertainty, particularly amidst the global health crisis,

underscores their critical role as a lifeline for countless households. Despite widespread disruptions and economic challenges, remittances have continued to provide essential support to families across the globe. However, behind these aggregate figures lie the individual stories of migrant workers grappling with multifaceted challenges, both in destination countries and upon their return to Nepal.

In summary, while labor migration promises economic prosperity, it also presents formidable risks and disparities. To foster a more equitable and humane migration experience, concerted efforts are needed to tackle structural drivers, enhance social protections, and foster international cooperation. By addressing and prioritizing the issues systematically, Nepal can improve the social security provisions for returnee migrant workers, ensuring that they receive the support they deserve after years of hard work abroad.

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