



WHERE ARE NEPALI WOMEN MIGRANTS ON GCM REVIEW?



In anticipation of the second regional review of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), critical questions have emerged regarding the extent to which gender dimensions are being effectively mainstreamed. The lived experiences of returnee migrant women shed light on significant gaps in addressing gender-specific issues within migration frameworks. For instance, one returnee migrant woman shared her feelings of isolation upon reintegration into her home country. Such narratives are not isolated but resonate with the experiences of thousands of migrant women globally.

The second GCM regional review happened from 4–7 February 2025 in Bangkok. The GCM represents the first intergovernmental agreement that comprehensively addresses all dimensions of international migration. As a non-legally binding and cooperative framework, it aims to respect the sovereignty of States while adhering to their obligations under international law. However, this raises an important question: to what extent does the GCM demonstrate sensitivity to gender and women-specific concerns? As it is non-binding, how is Nepal government planning to present as a champion country based on its plans, policies and perception towards the women migrant workers.

The migration ban for domestic workers in the Middle East and Malaysia remains a contentious issue, paradoxically challenged by the actions of thousands of women migrant workers who continue to pursue undocumented pathways for foreign employment. Women who return to their communities after working abroad encounter substantial difficulties. The absence of targeted policies to facilitate their reintegration, coupled with restricted avenues for pursuing justice against those who exploited them during migration, leaves them vulnerable. Consequently, many are forced to resort to irregular channels to migrate again for domestic work. The [Nepal Census 2021 Report](#) reveals that 2,190,592 Nepalis are living abroad, of which 390,917—or 17.8%—are women. This marks a significant rise in female migration from 12.4% in 2011. However, data from the [Department of Foreign Employment \(DOFE\)](#) paints a different picture: only 36,702 women obtained labor approval for migration from 2022 July to 2023 July. This stark gap between census figures and official labor approvals suggests that many Nepali women are compelled to migrate through irregular pathways, often due to Nepal's restrictive migration policies. These policies, rooted in protectionist ideals, have inadvertently pushed women into informal migration routes, where they are more vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, and abuse.

The ban itself represents a form of state control over women's sexuality and mobility. Despite being framed as a measure for safety, the ban effectively limits the autonomy of migrant women, who are left yearning for agency within the broader context of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) review. There are rumors suggesting that the Government of Nepal, through the Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security, has lifted the ban on domestic workers through bilateral agreements with Middle Eastern countries. However, the specifics of this process remain unclear, and civil society organizations, along with networks of returnee migrants—who have long advocated for the ban's removal—are unaware of any such development. This raises important questions about how these accountability gaps will be addressed during the GCM review.

Furthermore, the GCM review's analysis of patriarchal control over women's sexuality remains a critical issue, particularly as migrant women often identify it as one of the most significant barriers to their socio-economic reintegration. Despite their contributions, women migrants endure experiences of domestic violence, marital rape, social policing and lack of recognition of their work. Simultaneously, the justice system has, in many instances, normalized their suffering as they cross borders, challenging patriarchal structures. This raises the question of whether the GCM offers an opportunity for a critical reflection on our perceptions of, and systemic control over, women migrants, with the potential to develop more effective strategies to address these issues. In the ongoing pre-review consultations in Nepal led by UN agencies and I/NGOs, the control over women's sexuality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is seldom discussed. SRHR encompasses reproductive freedom, which includes access to information and healthcare services related to family planning, pregnancy, fertility, and sexual experiences free from coercion, discrimination, and violence, as well as the prevention and management of disease and infection. However, there are numerous untold stories of migrants and returnees facing ongoing challenges.

Feminist scholars argue for a transnational approach to addressing the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of migrant women, emphasizing the importance of cross-border solidarity and the need to hold states and international institutions accountable for safeguarding these rights. Social economist Naila Kabeer's research highlights how structural inequalities, such as discriminatory laws, restrictive migration policies, and limited access to healthcare services, disproportionately affect migrant women's SRHR. Undocumented migrants women are especially vulnerable, as they are systematically excluded from healthcare systems, exacerbating their risks for poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

The National Implementation Strategic Framework of the Global Compact for Migration presents itself as a promising document for the implementation of GCM objectives and to stand alone as a campaign country. However, it remains unclear whether it will effectively address these critical issues of migrant women within its broader framework. The platforms developing frameworks and



WOREC at GCM Review: Advocating for Women's Rights in Migration!

WOREC is participating in the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) review with her feminist analysis rooted in lived experiences and Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) conducted by migrant women. We are in GCM review process to ensure that grassroots women migrant workers' voices, struggles, and demands are represented and echoed.

Women's migration is controlled by patriarchal structure and protectionist and restrictive policies. While migration empowers women by improving financial stability and challenging social norms, but when return back they have to face the same structural inequalities, stigma, and lack of support.

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plans related to migration are often dominated by masculine perspectives and controlled by large, limited organizations, which lack firsthand knowledge of migrant women's issues. There are thousands of migrant women who are deprived of their SRHR. The critical question remains: how will their engagement with the GCM review process unfold? As the saying goes, "nothing about migrants without migrants." Yet, regional and global review platforms are typically dominated by development cooperatives and governments. These platforms, often shaped by lofty aspirations and substantial investments, tend to be "NGOized" and heavily influenced by donor agendas, potentially overlooking the lived experiences of migrant women.

Regarding the objectives of the GCM, most of them are gender-neutral, which has drawn criticism from feminist scholars. Despite these critiques, the significance of this intergovernmental framework cannot be denied. The Global Compact for Migration (GCM) is often praised as a comprehensive 360-degree framework for addressing migration. However, it warrants critical examination to determine whether it genuinely incorporates the sensitivities of gender perspectives in migration. While one of the GCM's founding principles emphasizes a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, it is crucial to scrutinize whether this inclusivity extends to meaningful representation of the whole community especially female migrant workers or if it merely amounts to tokenism.

Women migrant workers and refugees face systemic social, economic, and health inequities, further compounded by gender-based violence, unfair recruitment, wage gaps, and exclusion from decision-making processes. They encounter numerous barriers, including limited access to social protection, stigmatization related to their sexuality, inadequate reintegration support, and a lack of disaggregated data and intersectional approaches. Women human rights defenders advocating for migrant rights face retaliation and insufficient support. Moreover, migrant women are often subjected to coercive practices such as forced contraception and pregnancy testing, while SRHR information remains inaccessible in migrant-friendly languages. Their voices are often excluded from decision-making processes, and intersectional barriers, particularly for marginalized groups like LGBTQIA+ individuals or those with disabilities, remain unaddressed.

Addressing these gaps requires the development of inclusive policies that center the voices and needs of women in migration governance. While the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) emphasizes safe, orderly, and regular migration, it falls short of fully addressing such unique challenges faced by women migrant workers. The upcoming GCM review should provide a platform for women migrant workers and ensure critical spaces for feminist groups to analyze the systemic weaknesses of both the framework and its implementation. Migrant women's issues of denial of bodily integrity needs to be the center of discussion. Accountability of source countries and giant corporate should be ensured. Furthermore, a collaborative effort involving governments, UN mechanisms, migrant workers, and feminist organizations is essential to finding effective solutions for ensuring safe and orderly migration.

