



## Mobilising Returnee Migrant Workers (RMWs): Struggling for Social Reintegration



Country: Nepal  
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### Issues Facing Women Migrant Workers from Nepal

Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in foreign migration from Nepal, with the number of women workers migrating abroad increasing by 71 per cent.<sup>1</sup> In the name of protection of women migrant workers (WMWs), the government of Nepal's restrictive policies, coupled with their Middle East labour migration ban on women<sup>2</sup>, have compelled women to choose unofficial means to migrate abroad for employment. In 2018, nearly 90 per cent of the 2.5 million women who migrated

overseas were undocumented.<sup>3</sup> Despite the growing significance of migrant women's contributions in the economic and social spheres, there is a failure to recognise and account for their share of remittances and contributions to the economy.

There is a huge gap between the idea of orderly return and reintegration envisioned in the international frameworks and the migration country's policies compared to the harsh realities faced by the returnee women migrant workers (RWMWs).<sup>4</sup> Supporting RWMWs reintegration continues to remain one of the more neglected areas of policymaking. Structural barriers and gender-based discrimination continue to keep many women from being able to access their rights and realise the benefits of their labour. Society's devaluing of women's labour coupled with

- 1 Shreshta, Adhrit. (2022, February 15). Key Highlights from the Census Report 2021. Nepal Economic Forum. Retrieved from <https://nepaleconomicforum.org/key-highlights-from-the-census-report-2021/#:~:text=The%20census%20report%20also%20highlighted,development%20of%20information%20and%20technology>.
- 2 Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Nepal. (2007, September 5). Foreign Employment Act, 2064 (2007). [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new\\_delhi/documents/genericdocument/wcms\\_300684.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new_delhi/documents/genericdocument/wcms_300684.pdf)
- 3 P P Simkhada et al. (2018). A Survey of Health Problems of Nepalese Female Migrant Workers in the Middle-East and Malaysia. BMC International Health and Human Rights, 18 (4), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-018-0145-7>
- 4 United Nations Network on Migration. (2021). Ensuring Safe and Dignified Return and Sustainable Reintegration. Retrieved from: [https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1416/files/docs/position\\_paper\\_-\\_ensuring\\_safe\\_and\\_dignified\\_return\\_and\\_sustainable\\_reintegration.pdf](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1416/files/docs/position_paper_-_ensuring_safe_and_dignified_return_and_sustainable_reintegration.pdf)

women lacking bodily autonomy and control is one of the root causes for the violence faced by WMWs and RMMWs.

## Organisation's FPAR Journey

This Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) was undertaken by the Women's Rehabilitation Centre, Nepal (WOREC). WOREC is a national feminist movement-based organisation working for women's rights and social justice that contributes to peace, social justice and sustainable development. The FPAR, while documenting the issues and challenges faced on the social reintegration of RMMW, aims to mobilise and build a network of RMMWs towards demanding a social reintegration programme from the local government.

The research was held between November 2022 to December 2023 and included RMMWs from Barahkshetra Municipality in Sunsari district. The feminist participatory research methods employed for data collection included participatory discussions, power mapping, timelines, storytelling, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs) and a quantitative survey with 109 respondents (60% women). An innovative training manual on gender-based violence (GBV) was employed to collect data and co-learn through shared experiences.

## FPAR Findings and Analysis

### Patriarchal control over women's sexuality

Why society judges women's character based on their work instead of recognising their contributions?

*Sita Pariyar, an FPAR Member RMMW who went abroad at 35 to seek better prospects, raises questions in a discussion based on her experience upon returning. Her husband's attitude soured due to financial troubles, and he accused her of infidelity.*

More than 65 per cent of the RMMWs surveyed confirmed that improving and supporting the family's welfare was one of the reasons for their migrating abroad for employment. While 33 per cent cited this as their primary reason for migrating.

34 per cent of the women surveyed noted that the society did not view women's migration positively. Migration and employment increase their vulnerability,

as it is linked to perceptions of morally promiscuous sexual conduct by women. 68 per cent of those surveyed reported a reflection of this negative and biased view by society towards RMMWs. Women cited that close family members and partners often threw accusations at them. On return, many WMWs experienced disfavour and suspicion by their relatives and immediate communities of being sexually impure and having been inappropriate when abroad. This includes being suspected of consuming beef, drinking beer, wearing Western clothing or having sexual relationships when abroad (WOREC, 2022).

WMWs are also blamed for the family's 'care crises' as other family members, especially husbands, did not step up and fulfil childcare tasks. This further emphasises the disparity between societal perceptions and the reality of women's work. However, the narrative is not as linear and is more complicated. Many RMMWs also recognise leaving their homes represents a sense of empowerment and liberation from these imposed moralities. It is a transformative process, with them reporting an improvement in their understanding of their rights. It also positioned them as the primary income earners, which aided in elevating their status within their families and the broader society. During the research, one participant shared her joy when she saw a plane for the first time. Reflecting on it, she notes that for some time, she felt like she was free from all social rules and was living for herself.

### Increased vulnerability owing to multiple marginalisations.

The first time I felt injustice was when the so-called upper caste people insulted us for being from the Dalit community. I remember that I was a teenager, and they did not allow us to fetch water together in the community tap. I wanted to go to school. But could not join the school. It was because I was a daughter, and the second thing is we were financially unstable. I feel a change in myself now because I have money to fulfil the basic needs of my family, and now, I can raise my voice against caste-based discrimination but don't dare to do so because of existing cultural practices.

*Chandika Pariyar shared during a preliminary research key stakeholders discussion held in Chataara ward no. 2, Barahachetra Municipality, Sunsari district.*

Many WMWs experienced not just gender-based discrimination but also other forms of discrimination based on factors such as age, race, caste, ethnicity and socio-economic status. These intersecting forms of discrimination exacerbate existing gender inequalities and reinforce imbalanced power and resource distribution. Specifically, given RMMWs are from remote and inaccessible regions with low-productive land and no local employment opportunities.

In the last decade, the percentage of women who have experienced physical violence since age 15 has remained at 22 to 23 per cent. However, there has been a slight increase in the percentage of women who have reported experiencing physical violence, i.e., from nine per cent in 2011 to 11 per cent in 2022 (NDHS 2023).<sup>5</sup> WOREC's analysis of domestic violence cases highlights husbands/live-in partners as the primary perpetrators of violence, followed by other family members. Women, particularly from oppressed castes and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, experience severe social discrimination in various aspects of community life, and this discrimination serves as a constant barrier to their active participation in community programs.

During the FPAR, all RMMWs shared having undergone varying degrees of violation of their rights at home, work and during migration. Women, especially those who undertake domestic work and support in community activities, bear a disproportionate amount of violence targeted towards them. RMMWs belonging to the Dalit community often face higher levels of discrimination and bear the brunt of discrimination owing to both these identities.

### **Women's lack of control over their economic resources and assets.**

Most FPAR members culturally do not have access and control over their family's property. Despite international human rights law guaranteeing women's economic rights, women often lack access to property as it is registered in the names of the male family members.

Women's lack of control over property and land contributes to their exclusion from community decision-making processes, which tend to be male-dominated. Economic disparities cause women to depend on men for access to resources, rendering them vulnerable, insecure and susceptible to

“ I went abroad when I was 20 years old but had to return as the work was intense and hard. I ended up staying and working in Kathmandu, where I managed to cover some expenses by earning some money and eventually returned home. After getting married, things didn't improve quickly; my husband wasn't nice, and he used to get drunk and beat me. I had to take on jobs to support the family and used to work for 200 rupees a day in Chakra-ghati, toiling throughout the day.

*Pabitra, an RMMW, shared during the FPAR.*

violence within their communities.

In the case of RMMWs, a large part of the money earned abroad is spent on household expenses, children's education, family health treatment or household support. Nearly 88 per cent of the surveyed RMMWs shared that they are still unemployed, with many sharing that they are still trapped in the cycle of poverty and are looking at options to remigrate or send someone from their family abroad for employment. There is a lack of necessary support mechanisms when trying to operate self-entrepreneurship based on the skills, knowledge and experience they have learned. Many RMMWs do not have assets in their name, which is required to take loans. Access to capital or loan concession without a mortgage has been impossible.

### **Lack of recognition of women migrants' needs in the related laws, policies and directives.**

Recently, the Government of Nepal endorsed the reintegration directives for RMWs, with the aim of facilitating their socio-economic reintegration and ensuring a decent standard of living.<sup>6</sup> The directive is very generic and does not specify, recognise or cater to any specific needs and requirements of WMWs or RMMWs. Localised policies are completely absent, posing a significant challenge in addressing the unique issues RMMWs face. The local governance system frequently lacks the technical skills necessary to address the issues of working women.

5 Ministry of Health and Population [Nepal], New ERA, and ICF. (2023). *Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2022*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Ministry of Health and Population [Nepal]. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR379/FR379.pdf>

6 Government of Nepal. (2022). *Reintegration Programme (Operation and Management) Directives for Returnee Migrant Workers*. 2022. [https://www.feb.gov.np/extra\\_upload/62f8d26354d68\\_Reintegration%20Directives\\_unofficial%20translation.pdf](https://www.feb.gov.np/extra_upload/62f8d26354d68_Reintegration%20Directives_unofficial%20translation.pdf)

Additionally, there is a low awareness of existing laws and policies among WMWs and local communities. Even the local media has failed to spotlight this issue and bring it to mainstream attention.

## Women-Led Actions Through the FPAR

Before the FPAR, the RMMWs were not a part of any network, and they had no collective of their own. During the FPAR, a need emerged to collaboratively address their concerns with the relevant authorities by uniting and providing mutual support. Thus, emerged the RMMWs collective and a network- 'Uddhamsil Mahila Samuha' (Entrepreneur Women's Group). The group is an initiative of the local feminist leaders and aims to advocate with their local government for their rights to employment and decent work. This collective actively participated in different celebrations and campaigns such as 16 Days of Activism, International Women's Day and the Decent Work campaign, among others, which has gained them recognition in their villages.

The collective formally submitted a memorandum to the municipality, sharing their demands and requesting a budget allocation to support their work. They were successful in their request and the local ward budget of NPR. 50,000 was allocated to them to support their entrepreneurial endeavours. They are also actively advocating within the local governance structures to formulate policies specifically addressing the needs of RMMWs.

## Women's Demands and Recommendations

The FPAR has led to the creation of a comprehensive list of demands and recommendations. Primarily, ensure that WMW's and RMMW's voices and needs are meaningfully included in the national and local policies developed for them. To ensure this, there is a need to:

- Revise the current protectionist and restrictive laws to eliminate barriers to safe migration for migrant women, such as the country's ban on women's labour migration to the Middle East, which compels women to choose irregular pathways to migrate.

- Regulate and monitor recruitment agencies and immigration officials.
- Amend the reintegration guideline from a gender perspective while ensuring the reintegration plans are endorsed in the 16<sup>th</sup> periodic plan of the Government of Nepal.
- Ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of the Family (CRMW) and ILO Conventions 189 and 190.
- Ensure the local governance system centres WMW's and RMMW's needs from an intersectional lens by:
  - Providing comprehensive support for migrants across all phases of migration.
  - Developing a disaggregated data collection system of returnee migrant workers, which includes requirements for social and economic reintegration of the women.
  - Developing a comprehensive localised reintegration plan with a budget and providing proper information on government schemes to all the RMWs.
- Conducting skill mapping, providing for the job placement of RMWs and providing community-based training, including financial literacy training among others.
- Ensuring access to health services for RMWs through health posts.
- Leading campaigns against harmful social practices and on the right to decent work.
- The stringent implementation of the laws in cases of rights violations, especially in instances of cases of untouchability and gender-based violence, included here are laws related to workplace harassment and violence.



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