



Socio-economic and Health Impact of Labour Migration in Nepal

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Migration comprises population movements across international borders (out-migration) and within country (in-migration) which broadly includes migrant workers, internationally displaced people, asylum seekers, refugees, illegal migrants and victims of human trafficking (WHO 2007). Currently, 175 million people or 2.9 percent of the world's population live permanently or temporary out-side their country as out-migrants (WHO, 2003). In Nepal, labour migration in the international labour market is very popular. In this paper, migration is synonymously used for international labour migration. Labour migration is a very old tradition of Nepal but now it is becoming a very important component of the Nepalese economy in the recent decade. Growing political instability coupled with stagnate economic growth are considered as two vital inputs accelerating labour migration in Nepal. It has both positive and negative socio-economic and health consequences (Kahn et al. 2003). This article examines the role of migration on socio-economic and health issues, its negative consequences and suggests ways on how to overcome these consequences.

Nepal is an agricultural country where more than 66 percent of its economically active population engage in agriculture for their livelihood (DoA, 2013). In 1990, the figure was 95 percent. Due to stagnate agriculture production and lack of expansion of industry, the economically active segment of the population started to migrate abroad in mass numbers for

their livelihood options in recent years. Nepal had also experienced the civil war for more than one decade and which has impacted the national economy very badly and people were therefore compelled to migrate abroad.

Proportions of earnings of the migrants are sent back from the country of employment to the country of origin by the migrants, which serve a central role in the economics of the country of origin (WHO, 2003). In 1990, only the agriculture sector contributed more than 40 percent of GDP to the national economy. Now, the GDP contribution from remittances is slowly increasing and, amounting to 23 percent (218 billion Nepalese rupees) in 2009 (Hoermann et al. 2011). The significant portion of the GDP flows to the country through informal channels and some scholars estimate a higher figure than the actual (Seddon et al., 2002). Therefore, labour migration is contributing significantly to the national economy resulting in a significant reduction in the poverty ratio which was 41.8 percent in 1996, and dropped to 30.9 percent in 2004. It is only 25.2 percent in 2011 (World Bank, 2011) even though Nepal has gone through the bloody civil war and experienced stagnate agriculture growth during the same period. Therefore, this significant reduction in poverty level can be linked with remittance flows from migration.

The World Bank has estimated that there are 2.02 million Nepali labour migrants abroad (World Bank,

2009) and an average 1,300 labour migrants fly daily overseas for jobs (Kathmandu Post, 2010). According to the World Bank survey (2009), India, the Gulf countries and Malaysia are key destinations for Nepali migrant workers. It reported that 41 percent of the total migrant workers are working in India, while 38 percent are in the Gulf countries, with 12 percent in Malaysia, and 8.7 percent in other developed countries. Out of the total remittance sent to Nepal, the Gulf countries contribute the most at 48.9 percent. India contributes only 19 percent, with 10 percent from Malaysia and 21 percent from other developed countries. The World Bank survey also shows that almost half of Nepali households have at least one member working abroad (World Bank, 2009) and remittances account for more than 40 percent of the household income (Hoermann et al. 2011).

Among the total migrant population, 8.36 percent are females and 91.64 percent are males. Most of the Nepali migrant workers are aged between 20 and 44 years, who are considered the most productive workforce group. The survey shows that 75 percent of the total migrants are unskilled and only 25 percent are semi-skilled and skilled (World Bank, 2009). The unskilled migrant workers are paid very poorly and both the migrants and families left behind in Nepal suffer from socio-economic, health and psychological problems in most of the cases. Among the female migrants, most of them are voluntarily or forced into the global sex market. They never disclose this fact to their family at home due to social stigma. Therefore, female migration also partially covers the trafficking which in turn creates a series of socio-economic and health problems in Nepal. Estimation from informal sources indicate that there are more than 200,000 Nepali women sex workers and this number is increasing at the rate of 10-15 thousand per year and 13-14 girls are exported daily for prostitution to the international sex market from Nepal (based on informal discussion with metropolitan police personnel at Thankot, Kathmandu).

Obviously, remittance has played a significant and positive role in Nepal's economy and is becoming a dominant component of the national GDP but a large part of the remittance income has been invested

in consumption, which has indirectly created little employment and income generation activities for others. But various expectations of remittance-induced economic activities have not been realised in Nepal. For example, it is expected that remittances should help a household to reduce the need for taking credit required for farming, and also that it would be invested in urban-based commercial and industrial activities. But these have not transpired in a significant way. Therefore, remittance has brought about both positive and negative impact in the Nepalese socio-economic and health aspects.

There is positive health impact for those left behind due to the effect of remittance sent by the migrants one one hand. Due to the availability of additional cash, the households in Nepal have started to eat more dairy products, meat products and nutritious food which of course bring about positive health impact. More specifically the child's nutrition levels have improved significantly in recent times. Similarly, they started to visit doctors and the per capita health expenditure is expected to increase and now people are more health conscious than the before. To determine the exact positive impact on health of the migrants and those left behind, further research is needed. All the migrants cannot send the money back to home and some of them used to face a number of health and other psychological problems in the host country as well as in the country of origin. Negative health outcomes is higher in migrants than the host population and the migrants are normally dealing with injuries, physical violence, heart diseases, emotional and mental health, suicides, unwanted pregnancy and abortions, communicable, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS (WHO 2003 and 2007). As the female migrants in India as well as in the Gulf countries are voluntarily or forcefully engaged in the sex market and due to their illiteracy, they are not aware of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. They return with HIV and transmit it to their spouses. There were no reported cases of male sex workers in the international sex market but the male labour migrant was also found to have gone to the red light area during their leisure time and subsequently transmitted sexual dis-

eases to their wives when they return home. Apart from sexually transmitted diseases, many labour migrants use to die abroad due to serious types of injuries, heart attacks, suicides and other health complications. There have been 1,850 Nepali workers who died in Malaysia since 2003 (July 12, 2012, Kathmandu Post). Similarly, an average of 2.5 dead bodies of labour migrants return to Nepal daily (World Bank 2009). Kahn et al. 2003 have found similar negative health consequences in South Africa within households who had family members who went overseas to work.

There has been more than a 15 percent reduction in poverty from 1996 even though the country has undergone huge political turmoil and stagnate economic growth during this time. The remittance has significant positive as well as negative impact on the socio-economic aspect of the households therefore issues of migration in Nepal are always controversial. Households which did not used to send their child to school started to send their children to public school, and also started to send them to private and English speaking schools (in Nepal, private boarding schools are considered the best in providing quality education and are more expensive than public ones). The living standard of households who have migrants has tremendously increased in recent years. The author is from a remote village of Nepal where more than 50 percent of households have migrant members. One can easily differentiate which household has migrant members or not by simply looking at their living standards at home. Normally, those households who have a migrated member live in a house with concrete roof, and with a drinking water tank on the top of the roof. Those who do not have migrant members then live in wooden houses with mud walls and thatched or zinc roofs.

Apart from the positive socio-economic aspect of migration in Nepal, migration has its fair share of negative consequences as well. The most rampant social problem is the issue of marriage. Young labour migrants attempt to find a partner in the destination countries and to settle abroad, ignoring their spouses and children in the country of origin. Similarly, the spouse residing in the country of origin sometimes

goes for another partner, thus ignoring his/her children at home. When leaving the home, the spouse sometimes also took all the remittances sent by his/her partner. In this way, labour migration is slowly deteriorating social life in the home country. On the other hand, the social cost of elderly people and women at the country of origin cannot be compensated by the remittance sent by the migrants abroad.

A country like Nepal, which makes up a large proportion of its GDP by remittance, is more vulnerable to global economic slowdowns. Such countries have difficulty absorbing the shocks of declines in remittances. Economists have estimated that countries receiving more than 25 percent of their GDP from remittances could face serious problems when remittances decline. Nepal is certainly toeing this line. Therefore, the future economic depression in the developed and industrial countries firstly cut the employment of the foreigners. If the labour migrants who are basically unskilled return in blocks to the origin country, they may bring many social problems like robbery, gang fight, rape, murder and so on, causing market failure. Therefore, this study suggests the following strategies to solve the socio-economic and health impact of labour migration:

Assessment, Research and Information Dissemination:

Even though remittances are playing a very crucial role for the national economy, there are no research attempts from government agencies to assess the impact of labour migration. The government should take the initiative to carry out research and disseminate information on the socio-economic and health impact of international labour migration so that migrant labourers and their families at home could undertake precautionary measures to reduce the impact.

Awareness, Advocacy and Capacity building:

Most of the labour migrants are unskilled and lowly educated. Therefore, advocacy programs are essential to make them aware about the situation and capacity building activities should be initiated to pick up skills. Most of the unskilled labourers work in risky jobs like mining, construction work which require more en-

ergy and less skill. Similarly, sex education should be promoted to female sex workers working in the global sex market, where they can acquire knowledge about HIV/AIDS and preventive measures. Similarly, once the migrants reintegrate into their family, s/he must go through a medical examination to find out whether s/he has been carrying sexually transmitted diseases. In most of the cases, those migrants pass such diseases to their spouses unknowingly.

Insurance Policy for the Migrants:

Most of the labour migrants from Nepal are unskilled and have low educational status. They are unaware of insurance policies and most of them travel to a host country without insurance coverage. If the government makes insurance coverage mandatory, the health impact can be minimised to some extent.

Creation of employment opportunities within the country:

Many opponents of labour migration argue that labour migration will paralyse the national economy in the long run by sending young and energetic manpower abroad. Most of the Nepali migrant workers are aged between 20 and 44 years—the most productive workforce group. Therefore, labour migration is causing domestic labour supply shortages in many rural and urban areas. The government should invest on some income generation activities like small cottage industries and commercialisation of agriculture so that the potential energy of young labour can be tapped for the development of their own country and the labour migrants and their family will not have to face the negative socio-economic consequences and health impact from labour migration.

Counseling centre and settlement programme:

Nepali society does not accept HIV/AIDS affected people. Female sex workers used to be sent back to their home country once HIV/AIDS has been detected in their bodies. Their family and society hesitate to accept them and in many cases they committed suicide. There are some counseling and resettlement centres managed by some NGOs but their efforts are

insufficient. For example Anuradha Koirala (CNN Hero 2011) has been running an NGO named Maiti Nepal and her work is globally appreciated but the capacity of this NGO is too little in face of these massive problems. Therefore, the government should start counseling and resettlement programmes in order to address the health problems of migrants.

Conclusion

Labour migration is a traditional practice of Nepal but now the migration trend has increased sharply and remittance from labour migration is becoming a dominant sector of the national economy. It is considered positive as it has supported the economy during the time of civil war and there is a sharp decline in poverty figures over the last few decades. Similarly, it has brought positive health and education impact especially to the children. Besides such positive impact, the socio-economic and health impact of labour migration includes: increasing trend of divorces, ignorance to old aged, scarcity of agricultural labour and feminisation in agriculture, psychological problems, trafficking of young females, and an increasing trend of HIV/AIDS, STDs, heart attack and accidental injuries and death. The younger generation of Nepal who are considered as a potential force of national economic development are compelled to migrate as unskilled labourers and the remittance from migration is considered unsustainable as a significant proportion of this money goes to family consumption rather than productive uses. Similarly, current and future economic recession should quickly impact on the remittance driven Nepalese economy and there would be great negative socio-economic and health consequences in future. Therefore, this study has raised suggestions to minimise the negative health and socio-economic consequences of labour migration: the need for a more comprehensive research approach to address those issues, capacity building of labour migrants as most of them are unskilled currently, and health insurance policy coverage for migrants within the country.

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