

Situational Assessment of Labor Migrants in Asia: Needs and Knowledge During COVID-19

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Photo: Terry Boynton



Introduction and Methodology

Half a million Nepali migrants are estimated to have lost jobs abroad due to the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ The government of Nepal shut the country's borders in late March to both its own citizens and foreigners alike, leaving migrants stuck and largely unemployed in dozens of countries. In India, where over two million Nepalis migrate for work, thousands attempted to cross the border on foot as severe lockdowns left migrant workers in desperate situations.² Nepal's borders will remain closed until mid-August, but in June the Nepali government started working with popular destination countries such as Kuwait to repatriate workers. In late June, it was estimated over 25,000 Nepali workers were repatriated from across the world.³

To better understand the short- and long-term needs of the returned migrant population in Nepal, the USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) project, implemented by Winrock International, conducted a quantitative study that reached 195 returned Nepali migrants through phone surveys that took place from June 9 to June 17, 2020.

Data was collected remotely through phone-based interviews using a closed-question survey. Kobo Toolbox software was used for all data collection. The sample was generated from contact information gathered by municipal governments on migrants who had returned to Nepal. The database of information was compiled by municipal governments in the provinces of Bagmati Pradesh, Province 5, and Sudurpaschim Pradesh, and the lists were obtained with permission by local organizations working in the three provinces who conducted the phone interviews: Pravasi Nepali Coordination Committee, Maiti Nepal and National

Environment and Equity Development Society (partners of the USAID-funded Hamro Samman project, also implemented by Winrock International). Those on the list with phone numbers and who had returned to Nepal after February 2020 were used as the sampling frame (341 in total). Of those, 195 were reached by phone and agreed to participate in the phone interview. No other parameters were used for identifying or choosing the sample (i.e. income level, employment status).

Of the 195 respondents who participated in interviews, 89% were male and 10% were female (one no-response). The low percentage of women reached can be explained by the fact that there were more male respondents in the sample, which is quite representative of the migration context: many more Nepali men migrate for work than women, largely due to the Nepal government's restrictions that ban women from migrating for work in informal sectors such as domestic work. In 2019, less than 10% of labor permits issued from the Department of Foreign Employment were to women.⁴

Respondents were reached in three of seven Nepali provinces: Province 5, Sudurpaschim Pradesh, and Bagmati Pradesh.

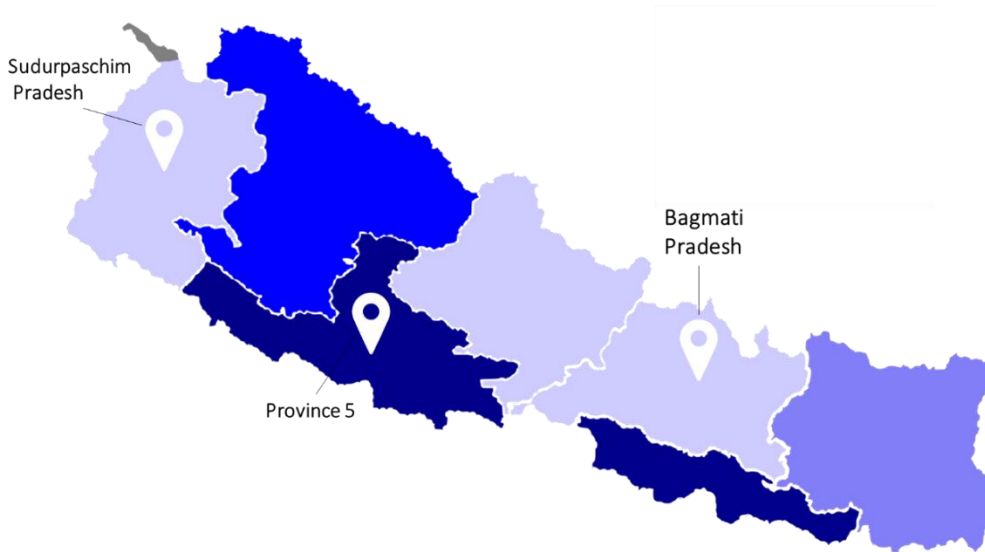
¹ IFAD, 'Coming back home: The road ahead for migrant returnees in Nepal', June 16, 2020. Accessed online: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/latest/blog/asset/41969816>

² Al Jazeera, 'Hundreds of Nepalis stuck at India border amid COVID-19 lockdown', April 1, 2020. Accessed online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/hundreds-nepalese-stuck-india-border-covid-19-lockdown-200401031905310.html>

³ The Kathmandu Post, 'Over 300 Nepali workers return home from Kuwait', June 12, 2020. Accessed online: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/12/over-300-nepali-workers-return-home-from-kuwait>

⁴ The Kathmandu Post, 'Nepal's labor migration policy: by men, for men', November 30, 2019. Accessed online: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/11/30/nepal-s-migration-labour-policy-by-men-for-men>

Location of Respondents, by Province



Due to the small sample size and limited geographical coverage, results should be taken with caution and cannot be assumed as representative of the migrant population. However, the findings do shine a light on the current situation and needs of some Nepali migrants as well as their knowledge of Covid-19.

Key Findings and Recommendations

1 Nepali returnees are facing extremely high unemployment rates: 92% of those interviewed said they were currently unemployed. As the country prepares to open its borders in August, millions of Nepalis who have been stuck abroad are anticipated to return home. **To ensure that current and future returnees have opportunities to enter the labor market, the government of Nepal – particularly at municipal level - should facilitate domestic job placement and skill training services for returnees.** International organizations should invest in programming that will provide income-generating opportunities to returnees.

2 Since returning to Nepal, 66% of respondents reported not having enough income to support themselves and 31% said they did not have enough food to eat every day. When asked if respondents had received any support services since returning, 68% said 'none'. **Immediate needs packages such as food and hygiene items should be distributed to returnees.** Cash transfer schemes should also be considered as an influx of more unemployed, vulnerable migrants make the journey home.

3 Over a third (36%) of returnees interviewed reported not receiving full payment for their work in the destination country before returning to Nepal. Migrant assistance and labor rights organizations could take this opportunity – while returnees remain at home – to **conduct outreach campaigns for those who may have faced exploitation while working abroad and connect them with needed support services such as legal assistance and/or mental health professionals.**

4 Over half of respondents (52%) said they plan to re-migrate for work and most (82%) said they would ask family or friends when deciding if it's safe and possible to re-migrate. About a third (31%) said they would get information from a recruitment agency. **Up-to-date travel restrictions and guidelines should be provided at community-level so returnees can receive the vital information needed to safely take on a return journey.** Both local and international organizations should work in coordination with municipal governments to support migrant resource centers that could provide this information as well as pre-departure orientations and worker rights briefings. This information should also be provided to recruitment agencies to ensure accurate and worker rights-focused messaging is being used by agents.

Profiles of Returned Migrants

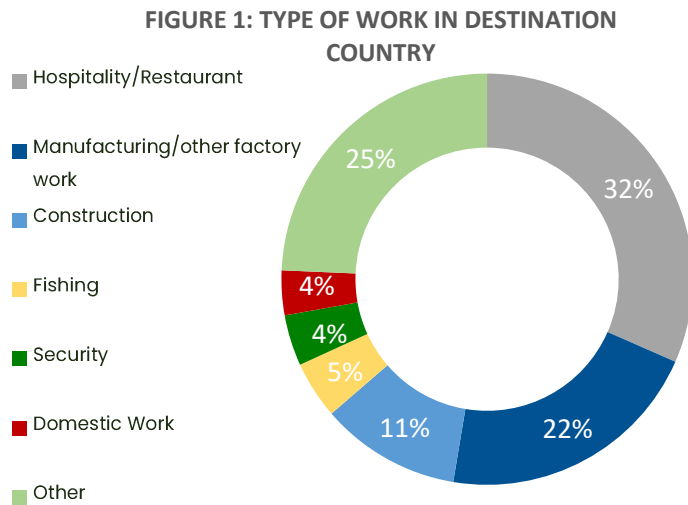
On average, respondents in the sample were Nepali males under the age of 40 who had returned from working in India. Forty percent (40%) of respondents were in Province 5, 32% were in Sudurpaschim Pradesh, and 28% were in Bagmati Pradesh.

Over half of respondents (58%) reported returning to Nepal more than two months ago, while about a quarter (23%) returned less than a month ago (from when surveys were conducted in the first two weeks of June).⁵

The majority of respondents (78%) returned from India.

Sixteen percent (16%) returned from the Gulf States of United Arab Emirates (10%), Qatar (3%), and Saudi Arabia (3%), while 3% returned from Malaysia.⁶

The most common types of work returnees had in the destination country include hospitality/restaurant work (32%), manufacturing/factory jobs (22%) or construction work (11%).

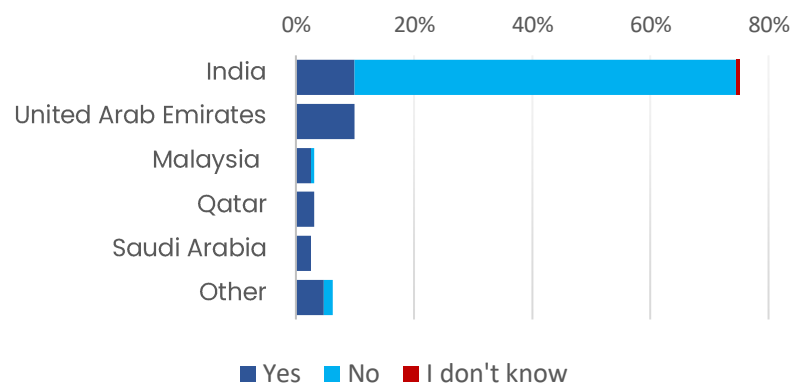


Returnees were asked a series of questions to understand whether their work experience in the destination country may have been exploitative and to better understand migration practices.

About two-thirds of respondents (59%) said they had legal documents to work and live in the destination country. Yet, 65% said they did not have an employment contract in the destination country. When looking at respondents from India specifically, 55 out of the 70 respondents who said they had legal documents did not have an employment contract. This discrepancy is likely reflective of the informal nature of jobs respondents reported having in India, such as in the restaurant and hospitality sector where employment contracts are not common. Although Nepali workers in India are legally required to have employment contracts - but not a work permit or Visa - some respondents may not be aware of this legal requirement and thus assumed they had all required documents even if they did not have an employment contract.

Nearly all returnees from the Gulf states did have employment contracts.

FIGURE 2: DID YOU HAVE AN EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT IN DESTINATION COUNTRY?



Respondents were also asked whether they received all the salary and benefits they were due before returning to Nepal, and over a third (36%) said no. Again, the sample is overwhelmingly dominated by those returning

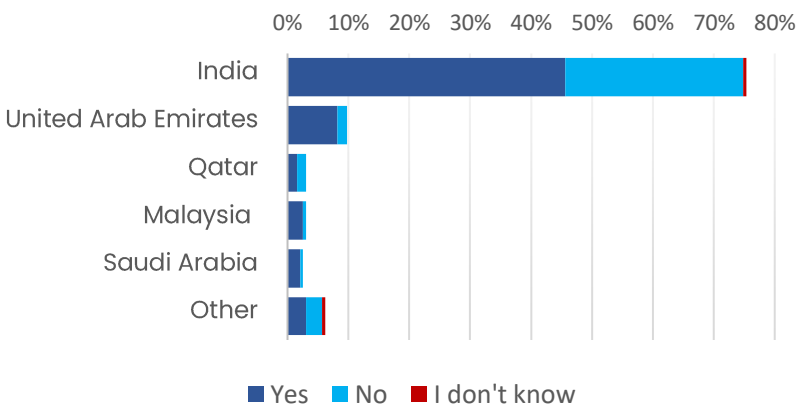
⁵ Surveys were conducted between June 9-17, 2020.

⁶ Less than five respondents returned from China, Maldives, South Korea, Romania, and Portugal.

from India, therefore the majority of those who said they did not receive full payment for their work returned from India (57 out of 70 respondents). Sectors in India with the highest rate of reported non-payment include security (5 out of 7 respondents did not receive full payment) construction (9 out of 16 did not receive full payment), and manufacturing/factory work (12 out of 23 did not receive full payment).

Less than a quarter of returnees from the Gulf states said they did not receive full payment for their work before returning to Nepal (7 out of 30 respondents).

FIGURE 3: DID YOU RECEIVE ALL SALARY AND BENEFITS DUE TO YOU?



Looking at the relationship between employment contracts and payment received for work among respondents, 24% of respondents who **had** an employment contract (n=63) said they did not receive full payment, whereas 41% of those **without** an employment contract (n=128) said they did not receive full payment. This finding could support the fact that employment contracts offer increased protection to migrants – at least those represented in this study.

Fear of getting Covid-19 was the primary reason respondents returned to Nepal (61%).

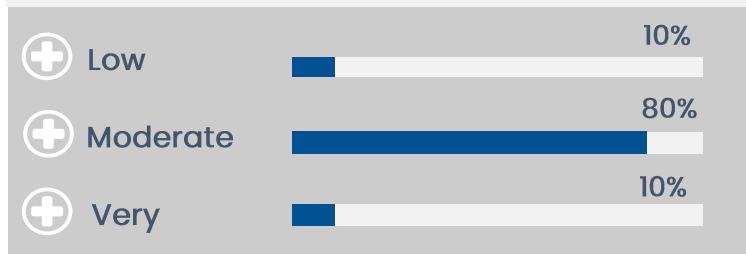
Only 8% said it was because a loss of employment, and even less (6%) said it was due to border closures/travel restrictions.

Needs and Access to Services

Since returning to Nepal, 66% of respondents reported not having enough income to support themselves and 31% said they did not have enough food to eat every day. When asked if respondents had received any support services since returning, **68% said 'none'**, 23% said they had received food assistance, and 12% said they didn't need any support (multiple responses could be given). Of those who received food assistance (38 respondents), most received it from the government (30 respondents) and seven received food assistance from friends or family.

Ninety-five percent (95%) of respondents said they had **not** been sick or had any kind of illness since returning to Nepal. Of the eight respondents who had been sick, five were able to access medical care. Those who had not been sick were asked what their level of confidence was in accessing medical care if they did become sick. Answers could be given on a three-level scale of low/moderate/very. Most respondents (80%) said they were moderately confident in accessing medical care, while 10% said they had low confidence and 10% said they were very confident.

FIGURE 4: HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU IN ACCESSING MEDICAL CARE? (n=187)

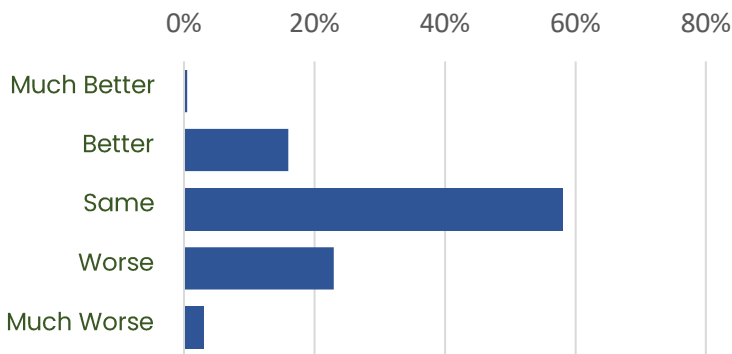


To gauge whether returnees are facing increased risk of discrimination, isolation, and/or violence, respondents

were asked whether they thought returned migrants are being treated differently than others. Most respondents (58%) said returnees are being treated the same, while some (16%) said returnees are being treated better.

About a quarter (26%) said returnees are being treated worse or much worse. Respondents who answered 'worse' or 'much worse' were then asked who was treating returnees that way. Most (88%) said community members and 12% said community leaders. Respondents of the Janajati ethnicity/caste made up 57% of those who said returnees are being treated worse, while 30% identified as Brahmin/Chhetri/Thakuri and 12% identified as Dalit.

FIGURE 4: ARE RETURNED MIGRANTS BEING TREATED DIFFERENTLY THAN OTHERS?



To assess whether gender-based violence is on the rise among returnees, female respondents – 10% of the sample - were asked if they faced an increased risk of violence since returning to Nepal and **nearly all (95%) said no.**

Employment and Future Plans for Migration

Most respondents (92%) are currently unemployed in Nepal. Over half of respondents (52%) said they plan to re-migrate for work, while 21% said 'maybe' and a quarter (24%) said they did not plan to re-migrate for work. Most respondents said they would return to the same country they were working in before returning to

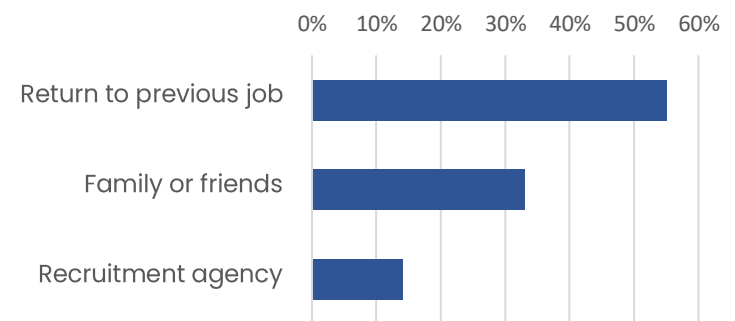
Nepal, primarily India (78 out of 101 respondents) and the Gulf states of UAE (8 respondents), Qatar (3), and Saudi Arabia (2).

FIGURE 5: DO YOU PLAN TO RE-MIGRATE FOR WORK?



When asked those planning to re-migrate how they plan to find a job in the destination country, slightly over half (55%) said they would return to their previous job, 33% said they'd find a job through friends or family, and 14% would use a recruitment agency (multiple responses could be given).

FIGURE 6: HOW DO YOU PLAN TO FIND A JOB IN DESTINATION COUNTRY? (n=102, multi-response)



Respondents who said they're planning to re-migrate were also asked how they will decide when it's safe and possible to re-migrate for work. Most respondents (82%) said they would ask family or friends and 31% said they would receive information from a recruitment agency (multiple responses could be given).

Knowledge and Information on COVID-19

Almost all respondents (96%) had received prevention information on Covid-19. The most common ways respondents received information on Covid-19 was



through television (135 respondents), radio (124 respondents), a social media platform (88), and family or friends (51). *Multiple responses could be given.*

Respondents were then asked what their level of trust was in the information received. Responses could be given on a scale from 1 (no trust) to 5 (full trust). Almost half (47%) chose '3' on the scale, while a little over a quarter (27%) chose '4' and 10% chose '5' for full trust, demonstrating moderately high trust in the information received.

Figure 7: Level of trust in information received

Level of Trust (1 being no trust, 5 being full trust)	Percent of Respondents
1	4%
2	8%
3	47%
4	27%
5	10%

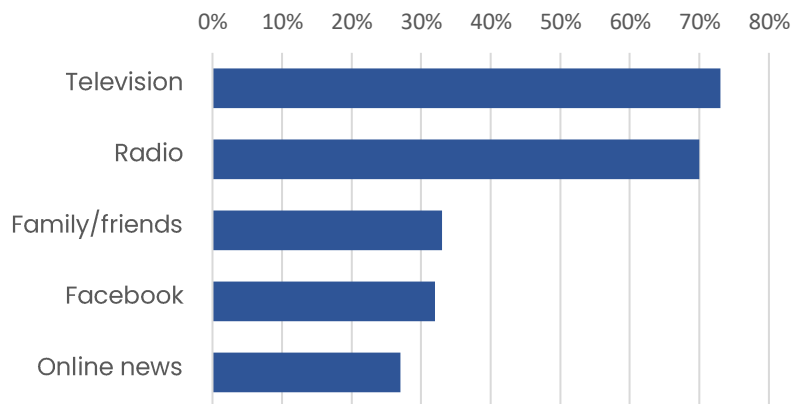
When asked respondents to list ways to protect themselves against Covid-19, 99% said hand washing, 95% said wear face mask or cover, 89% said don't join large groups, and 84% said social distancing. **Nearly all respondents (99%) knew three or more ways to protect themselves** and 80% could list four or more ways, demonstrating strong understanding of protective behaviors against Covid-19.

Most respondents (91%) would visit a hospital/health clinic if they developed Covid-19 symptoms. Less than 5% of respondents said they would call a government hotline, ask a community leader for help, or stay at home (only one response could be given for this question.)

When asked if respondents needed more information on Covid-19, **70% said yes**. Respondents would look primarily to television (73%) and radio (70%) for trusted

information on Covid-19. Thirty-three percent (33%) of respondents would receive information from family or friends and 32% would go to Facebook for trusted information. Less than 10% would look to the government for information and less than 5% said they would receive it from an NGO/international organization.

FIGURE 8: WHERE WOULD YOU GO FOR TRUSTED INFORMATION ON COVID-19? (Only primary answers shown >10%, multi-response)





*A five-year (2016-2021) program, **USAID Asia CTIP** is a regional activity that focuses on transnational and regional challenges to combat human trafficking. The program aims to reduce the trafficking of persons in Asia through a coordinated and consolidated action by governments, civil society and business that will foster cross-border cooperation, develop opportunities for private-sector leadership and improve the quality of data associated with human trafficking. [For more information about the project visit us online.](#)*

For more information about research methodology or findings presented in this paper please contact Jeanne Crump, Research Coordinator with USAID Asia CTIP at jeanne.crump@winrock.org