



Women migrant workers are building our countries' futures

**A briefing on women's work and the
need to address structural inequalities**



Background

Recognising women's work as work and affording it the value that it deserves, is fundamental for any country committed to equality and sustainable development. Yet, despite the growing significance of migrant women's contributions, both in the economic and social spheres, structural barriers, and gender-based discrimination throughout the region continue to keep many women from being able to access their rights and realise the benefits of their own labour. This is especially true in the context of supporting migrant women workers to reintegrate upon their return home, which remains one of the more neglected areas of policy making.

Despite the inclusion of this topic in international frameworks and conventions, as well as in the migration policies of some countries, there are huge gaps between the idea of orderly return and reintegration envisioned in those policies and the harsh realities faced by migrants in real life.

In order to meet their targets under the Sustainable Development Goals, as well their obligations under the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and their commitments under international agreements such as the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India are obligated to ensure full and productive employment and decent work for all women.

Meeting these obligations is a precondition for enabling women to realise their rights and participate equally in all aspects of socioeconomic life, including by making an enormous contribution to their national economies. However, currently their rights remain unfulfilled, and this potential is not being realised due to systemic discrimination and a lack of adequate support for women migrant workers. In the context of their **return and reintegration**, the following are areas of particular concern:

- i. **Migration restrictions on women are preventing them from making a safe and meaningful contribution to their economies and societies:** Migration bans and age restrictions are paternalistic laws that are actually making women less safe. These restrictions force women to migrate using unofficial channels, rendering them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and automatically excluding them from many support schemes for returnees. This undermines states' international and domestic commitments to protect the rights of women.

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- ii. **Lack of employment opportunities for returning migrant women are depriving communities of returnee women’s valuable skills, experience, and economic contributions, and are forcing many women to re-migrate in unsustainable ways:** Unemployment rates for returning migrant women workers remain high across South Asia and the lack of decent work opportunities for returning migrant workers is hindering the transference of skills from migrant women workers to their home communities. The absence of employment schemes and access to financial systems, including start-up loans, means local economies are losing a valuable opportunity to benefit from migrant women workers’ knowledge and expertise. It also means that many returnee migrant women find themselves in the same precarious position that caused them to migrate in the first place.

 - iii. **Harmful cultural attitudes about the role of women in society are limiting the valuable contributions that women migrant workers can make.** Many returnee migrant women are subjected to social disapproval and stigma that depicts them as failing to fulfil their identities as wives and mothers by migrating overseas. These attitudes have been fuelling discriminatory policies and practices, including restrictions on women’s migration, as well as de facto exclusion from available social and financial services and decision-making structures. This environment severely impacts the ability of women to gain employment, contribute to family life, and enjoy the respect they deserve when they return home.



These problems need to be addressed by the Governments of Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India by acting on the following recommendations:

- i. **Lift legal restrictions on women's migration** for work, and instead focus efforts on promoting safe channels for migration and fair recruitment practices.
- ii. **Improve the content of pre-departure trainings** to be more focused on women's and workers' rights and to include more targeted and useful information about CODs. States should also actively include returnee migrant women as resource persons in pre-departure orientation programmes.
- iii. **Ensure overseas migrant workers are registered** and have full access to comprehensive social security schemes whilst overseas and upon return and make dedicated efforts to reach out to and include those with an irregular migration status.
- iv. **Support and promote the self-organising of women migrant workers** both in CODs and COOs
- v. **Invest resources into a public awareness campaign** at the grassroots level that highlights the valuable contributions of migrant women workers, and tackles harmful stereotypes and the stigma facing returnee migrant women workers.
- vi. **Improve women migrant workers' access to banking services and loans**, including by reducing interest rates and eliminating other barriers to eligibility.
- vii. **Establish access to employment schemes for all women workers** and implement a skills certification process for returning migrant women workers as part of this scheme.



Women migrant workers make a significant contribution to their home countries' economies

Remittances from overseas migrant workers have a huge impact on South Asian countries' economies. In 2019, remittances were 6.5% of Bangladesh's GDP, 8.3% of Sri Lanka's, and 24.8% of Nepal's.ⁱ In 2020, India received USD 83.1 billion in remittances, the highest inflow of remittances worldwide.ⁱⁱ Remittances have shown robust growth even during the pandemic years: in South Asia, they grew by around 8% in 2021, bringing the estimated amount to USD 159 billion.

A significant proportion of these remittances are increasingly coming from women migrant workers. Returnee migrant women also bring new skills and experiences that are directly transferrable and can be passed onto other members of the community.

This contribution of returnee women migrant workers to society, demonstrates the critical role women play in looking after their families and communities, as well as contributing to the overall economic development of the region.



Migration restrictions are exposing women to rights violations and preventing them from making a safe and meaningful contribution to the economy and society

In South Asia, the regulatory frameworks governing women's migration have swung back and forth between restrictive bans and liberal, permissive policies.ⁱⁱⁱ Some countries, such as Nepal, have an outright ban on women's labour migration to certain countries (in Nepal the ban is on migration to the Middle East), whilst others, like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India, impose age restrictions (for example, Bangladeshi women under 24 years old are not allowed to migrate).^{iv} Some countries have also banned migration for certain types of jobs in a way that disproportionately impacts women. For example, Nepali citizens are prohibited from working

overseas as domestic workers. This disproportionately impacts women who are more likely to work in these jobs.^v

There is clear evidence from all four of these countries, that irrespective of the restrictions in place, women will continue to migrate using unofficial channels. This is because the strong socioeconomic factors that encourage women to look for work overseas remain unchanged and unaddressed.^{vi}

As a result, women are forced to seek irregular migration channels through the help of smugglers and traffickers, thus making them more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and debt bondage. These bans and restrictions also mean that women miss the same pre-departure training as the migrants who travel through the state-approved recruitment agencies, and therefore miss vital information about their human and labour rights.

These gendered restrictions are also a form of discrimination and contravene States' obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Under the Convention, all four countries have a duty to remove restrictions on migration 'on the basis of gender, age, marital status, pregnancy, or maternity status'^{vii} as well as to realise the right of equal access to employment opportunities for women.



Lack of employment opportunities for returning migrant women are perpetuating their marginalisation and depriving communities of returnee women's valuable skills, experience, and economic contributions

A lack of employment opportunities is a large motivation for women to migrate from the South Asia region in the first place. In the case of women migrants, as GAATW's research has found, high unemployment rates compound pre-existing push factors of poverty, discrimination, and widespread gender-based violence.

The absence of comprehensive reintegration plans at the local level, means that unemployment rates remain high for migrant women upon their return. As a result, communities and economies are losing out on returnee women migrants' untapped potential and are perpetuating their exclusion and precarity.

Of the four countries, only Sri Lanka has an explicit sub-policy on reintegration (though implementation has been weak in part because women were either unable to cope with the stringency of the pre-conditions for assistance, or the available assistance was not appropriate for their needs).^{viii}

Despite the large-scale returns during the COVID-19 pandemic drawing attention to the importance of employment support, many women still could not access any schemes. In India, Nepal and Bangladesh, employment schemes for returnee migrant women exist only on an adhoc basis, and even for those areas where they do exist, a significant proportion of returnee women were not made aware of them.^{ix}

Where women have been aware of the schemes and tried to apply for support, such as in Nepal, returnee women have reported that when they tried to apply for the scheme, they found that no jobs were on offer for them, or the wages were too low.^x

Further, currently there is inadequate recognition of the valuable skills that returnee migrant women have acquired overseas. For example, women who have worked as domestic workers can be successfully employed in the tourism and hospitality sector with little need for further training. Yet, without a formal skills certification process for returnee migrant women, employers are unable to see this potential. In a recent research study, two-thirds of the returnee migrant women who participated were still unemployed.^{xi}

The skills acquired in countries of destination have also given many women the necessary skills to establish small self-enterprises, yet cultural attitudes and stigmas continue to dissuade women from doing so. For example, in Bangladesh, many women used their earnings and savings to fund their husbands' enterprises, when in reality the women's newly acquired skills and experience in the fast food or garments industries in countries of destinations meant that they were better positioned to earn income than their partners.^{xii}

During the Covid-19 pandemic, returnee women's savings have also depleted much faster and in the absence of Government-provided start-up grants and loans, even women who were open to setting up their own self-enterprises had no financial capital to do so. In the study referred to above, only 1/10 of returnee women in Nepal had managed to start businesses upon their return.^{xiii}



Harmful cultural attitudes about the role of women in society are undermining their equal access to rights and limiting the valuable contribution that women migrant workers can make

For many women workers, migration allowed them to gain a measure of agency and start making a valuable contribution to their economy and society in a way that was not available to them within their families and communities.

However, women's contributions to their communities and families remain undervalued and upon return this new agency has often been met with disapproval and even violence by their home communities. Women have been accused of having been sexually impure or having transgressed religious or cultural norms whilst overseas.^{xiv} For instance, some returnees in Sri Lanka have reported that their partners were unhappy with the recognition and publicity their wives received and responded with violent and controlling behaviour.^{xv} In Bangladesh, women have shared that their husbands had become obsessed with concerns about their sexual purity.^{xvi}

Not only are governments failing to address these harmful cultural attitudes, but the restrictions on women's freedom to migrate reinforces these patriarchal norms. Migration bans and restrictions send a clear and damaging messaging that women who migrate for work are doing something wrong.

At the extreme end, this social stigma has inhibited the ability of returnee women to access employment in their home community, as well as forced them to remigrate due to feeling socially ostracised from their home community. As a result, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India are losing out on the valuable contribution women workers can make at home.



Conclusions and Recommendations

For decades women migrant workers have been making valuable contributions to their families, communities, and the economy. However, the true potential of women migrant's contributions to South Asian countries has yet to be realised due to discriminatory policies that restrict women's migration, perpetuate harmful cultural attitudes, and inhibit women's access to employment.

These problems need to be addressed by the Governments of Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India by acting on the following recommendations:

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Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)

191/41 Sivalai Condominium, 33 Itsaraphap Road

Bangkok 10600, Thailand

T: +66-2-864-14-27/8 F: +66-2-864-16-37

Website: www.gaatw.org

Twitter: @GAATW_IS

Facebook: [GlobalAllianceAgainstTrafficInWomen](https://www.facebook.com/GlobalAllianceAgainstTrafficInWomen)