

Who Benefits from Migration Bans If Nepali Domestic Workers Don't?

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In 1998, the tragic and sensationalised [suicide of Kani Sherpa](#), a Nepali domestic worker in Kuwait, ignited outrage and cast a shadow over domestic work migration from Nepal. In response, Nepal's government has since enacted [various forms of bans on migration to protect its citizens abroad](#), culminating in [an umbrella ban on domestic work migration since 2017](#).

Yet, the demand for Nepali domestic workers remains high, as evidenced by the visas issued by employers abroad. As a result, many poor Nepali citizens, [predominantly lower caste women](#), continue to seek domestic work abroad without proper labour permits, [facing increased vulnerability to exploitation](#). The government refuses to acknowledge that domestic workers could achieve better migration outcomes and ignores the actors benefiting from these restrictions. Be it unlicensed agents, licensed recruitment agencies, employers, politicians, government agencies, civil society organisations, insurance agencies, travel agents and research consultancies all recognise that lifting the ban would empower Nepal's poorest women but disrupt their businesses. The fact that this ban has endured for eight years – [solidified by the government's imposition of seven pre conditions in 2020 with no clear timeline](#) – reveals a disturbing truth: these actors prioritise their own interests over the well-being of Nepal's most vulnerable.

In this essay, drawing on research conducted in [Sindhupalchowk](#) and [Jhapa](#), we invert the dominant narrative by exploring: if migrant domestic workers aren't benefiting from Nepal's migration ban on domestic work migration, who is reaping the benefits at the expense of thousands of Nepali domestic workers?

The Recruitment Industry

The true beneficiaries of the migration ban are recruitment industry actors, primarily unlicensed agents (or brokers), licensed recruitment agencies and employers. With estimates of [50,000 to 100,000 active agents in Nepal](#), this business thrives as Nepali citizens seek domestic work abroad.

Many Nepali citizens rely on trusted individuals – relatives, teachers, former ward presidents, politically connected persons – as their "agents". Women seeking domestic work either

contact these agents or are targeted through house-to-house recruitment drives, with agents focusing on households facing vulnerabilities like debt, illness, or domestic violence.

[These agents receive a portion of the recruitment fees paid by employers.](#) For example, a Kuwaiti employer might pay over 1,200 Kuwaiti Dinars (about 525,000 Nepali Rupees) to Kuwait agencies to recruit a Nepali domestic worker, with more than 50% returning to Nepal and shared among various actors. In some cases, agents offer women's families lump sums (from 10,000 NPR to 70,000 NPR) for selecting them. In other cases, women pay to migrate via tourist visas from Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu.

This illicit migration increases vulnerability to strandedness in transit spaces and weakens Nepali domestic workers' bargaining power in the international labour market. The perception of 'illegal' slapped on Nepali domestic workers by their own government and embassies invites abuse and exploitation by agents and employers, even though most enter foreign countries legally. While some employers and agents act fairly, the migration ban grants others the impunity to control, discipline, and even punish Nepali domestic workers as they see fit.

Many of these agents work for [971 registered recruitment agencies in Nepal](#). According to one 'ethical agency' representative, recruitment [agencies must deposit a hefty 'guarantee money' into state coffers](#), which the government sometimes use to compensate the exploited labour. As a result, they fear that lifting the ban on domestic work will thrust the burden of ensuring labour rights onto them – a burden they feel ill-equipped to handle. They dread that allowing migration for domestic work could drive many licensed recruitment agencies to bankruptcy or, at worst, result in blacklisting.

The Civil Society Organisations:

Civil society organizations amplify the fear of domestic worker exploitation by spotlighting selective cases of exploitation and abuse. This outcry, [often sensationalised with terms like 'modern slaves' imposed by western funders](#), is fuelled under the guise of anti-trafficking and domestic work advocacy. This allows them to showcase (if not sell) women's suffering and leverage selective cases to further their own agendas.

A pressing question raised by participants is: why do these organisations, which run anti-migration campaigns and block mobility at the Indo-Nepal borders often fail to provide essential alternative employment opportunities? We found significant distrust in these organisations, which receive substantial funding from sources with political agendas –

ranging from anti-immigration to anti-sex work, religious perpetuation – while discouraging or denying women's mobility and rights.

At-least two types of organisations benefit from the ban. First, anti-trafficking NGOs, which employ [fear-based awareness campaigns](#), [discipline rescued women in their rehabilitation centres](#), [detain and deport \(intercept\) aspiring women from Indo-Nepal borders](#) to the very communities and families they try to escape. Whilst many [women resist these anti-trafficking measures](#), [some efforts often decay like zombies, threatening to tear apart the fabric of their communities](#).

The second group comprises organisations that advocate for domestic workers, often referring to vulnerable Nepali returnees as their 'clients'. Some of these organisation's staff go to the airport at night to 'rescue' poor looking returnee women. They take these women to their shelter homes, subject them to questioning and profiling, and send them back to their communities. Many women interviewed express fear of people they meet at the airport upon return, noting that avoiding them is crucial to protect themselves and their agents from potential trouble.

While many returnee migrant domestic workers need support, it should come from the government, with proper ethical considerations that do not exploit their vulnerability by treating them as 'clients'. The fierce competition for funding leads to a lack of cooperation and coordination, producing repetitive 'rescue' and 'interception' data shown only to donors. This data, fixated on negative migration outcomes, overlooks the countless domestic workers who have had positive migration experiences.

Conclusion: From restrictions to rights

The government of Nepal often bases its restrictive policies on sensationalised news, diplomatic consultations, and skewed data that depict domestic work negatively. This approach allows the government to absolve itself of responsibility for its most vulnerable citizens, disregarding their rights while punishing them.

Many returnee domestic workers report that seeking help from the Nepali embassy for labour exploitation is almost impossible, forcing them to arrange their own rescue. Some pay local agents (sometimes their elected representatives), while others pay recruitment agencies abroad, which can lead to raids and prolonged jail terms. When domestic workers die, their body repatriation often relies on the Nepali diaspora or NGO funding in Nepal. If

these women return alive, they do not find [any sustainable reintegration infrastructure developed by the government](#) that specifically addresses their needs.

Hence, the migration ban shifts the burden away from the government of Nepal, allowing it to abandon rights of its poorest female citizens. Whilst other countries are [willing to negotiate rights of Nepali domestic workers](#), the government's lack of political will betrays Nepal's most vulnerable, prioritising the interests of benefiting actors over the rights of its people.

Hence, it is time to immediately lift the migration ban on domestic work, strictly regulate the actors benefiting from these restrictive policies, and urgently begin negotiations with receiving countries to assure rights of hundreds of thousands of Nepali citizens – NOW!

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Acknowledgement:

We extend our gratitude to Aditi Aryal, Dr. Jeevan Baniya, and Professor Joel Quirk for their invaluable feedback on earlier drafts.