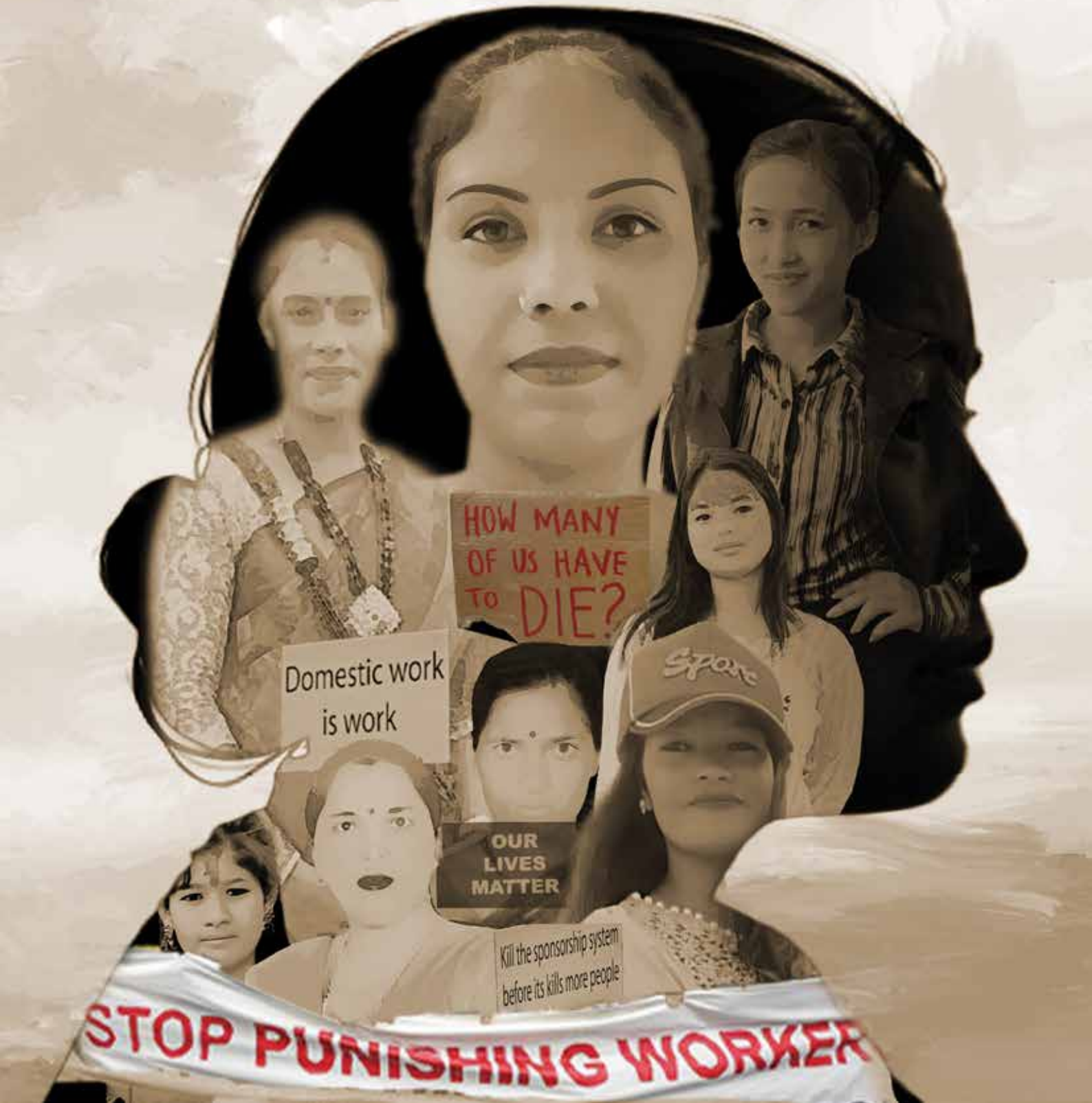
# INVISIBLE IN LIFE AND DEATH

## Visibilising the Deaths of Female Nepali Migrant Domestic Workers and the Struggles of Their Families



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*This report is dedicated to those Nepali migrant domestic workers who never returned home.*

# Foreword

We live in a world which is marked by suffering, exploitation and death. Living in such a world presents all kinds of moral and political challenges, and many people and organisations have become increasingly sick of suffering. They are not, however, sick of actual suffering. Extreme exploitation is the motor that drives our global economy, so we clearly have a very high tolerance for misery and death. The problem instead is that people have become sick of hearing about suffering. There is now so much misery and death taking place across the globe it has become increasingly easy to tune out the suffering of others. This is sometimes known as empathy burnout, or compassion fatigue. These terms are usually used to describe the psychological and personal toll that frontline workers endure while trying – and often failing – to care for people in acute distress. It is clear, however, that communities who provide no direct role in providing care have also become fatigued by suffering, and no longer want to hear about it. Some people look at images of starving children in Gaza, the product of an Israeli genocide armed and funded by US and its European allies, and seek to act (once more) in solidarity with the Palestinians. Others just want to have their breakfast in peace.

Palestine is front page news. There are very few cases which generate similar levels of interest and investment. Campaigners seeking draw attention to other cases of exploitation and death, such as the lives of the Nepalese women documented in this report, invariably struggle to reach a sympathetic and engaged audience. In this environment, it can be tempting to fall back on sensationalism and spectacle: to push the dial up to eleven and hope that stylised stories of extreme suffering will find their way through to otherwise indifferent audiences, and thereby help to mobilise action.

The fundamental problem with this strategy is that too many campaigners and organisations have been running the same playbook. Pushing the dial up to the eleven is not a novel innovation, but a standard operating procedure, and the fact that similar organisations tend to tell similar stories in similar ways can become counterproductive. It has also become clear, sadly, that there is almost nothing that cannot be tuned out.

One especially tragic example of this dynamic is the reception given to cases of self-immolation. In April 2024, U.S. Air Force airman Aaron Bushnell died of injuries sustained after he set himself on fire in an 'extreme act of protest' against complicity in the Gazan genocide. His horrifying act was front page news, but it also tended to be filtered through a prism of entrenched political positions, and thus had a limited long-term effect. Other people who have engaged in similarly tragic acts of self-harm have also struggled to gain traction. According to the International Campaign for Tibet, at least 159 Tibetans have set themselves on fire protesting Chinese rule since 2009. There are times where acts of self-immolation have broken through politically, with Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in 2010 being probably the most well-known example, but these should be regarded as the exception and not the rule. There is no rule of politics that says that turning up the dial to eleven brings about desired change.

This report attempts to chart a different and more productive path. It tries to avoid falling back on sensationalism and spectacle, and instead attempts to put together individual stories which capture the multiple strategies which migrants and prospective migrants pursue, and the constraints and opportunities they face, by focusing our attention on their everyday experiences and the layered effects of economic and political systems.  The goal is to render Nepalese women visible – their lives, strategies, communities, ambiguities – without reducing them to one dimensional victims who require rescue. Death and all its tragic consequences are made visible, but the act of making death visible should never be mistaken for treating death as spectacle.

The report makes clear that the portrayal of Nepalese migrant women as one dimensional victims has done tremendous harm. It has paved the way for counterproductive bans on migration, and created an anti-trafficking infrastructure that has become more concerned with trying to stop women from migrating than with ensuring that they are able to migrate safely. Both caste and gender clearly play major roles with this larger equation, with gendered notions of "protection" being selectively invoked to validate the exclusion and surveillance of female migrants.

The ultimate goal of any migration system should be to enable migrant workers to move safely, to secure decent pay for decent work, and to return home safely. Yet this statement probably sounds utopian and unrealistic. It is well known that migrants from the Global South who are subject to tied work visas are routinely exploited and abused, and that this too often results in cases of premature and avoidable death. This report offers further evidence which confirms this now widespread and longstanding pattern. There is now so much evidence of harm that it can be hard to imagine any alternatives.

Put more directly: if tied migrant labour systems cannot be reformed than perhaps there is no point in trying to reform them? One of the reasons why compassion fatigue is now so widespread is that people increasingly despair of the possibilities for positive reform.

There is absolutely no reason to despair when it comes to tied migrant labour systems. This is not the civil war in Sudan, where there is acute suffering on a catastrophic scale and no obvious intervention points since all of the key players are deeply compromised. There are any number of measures which governments could introduce easily and quickly in order to ensure greater safeguards for migrant workers. These include the right to change employers, civil liability for wage theft and premature death, effective public workplace inspections (which are not immigration raids), clear reporting lines and effective safeguarding for sexual assault, and universal provisions for repatriation. They key sticking point here is not that there are no good policy options available, but instead that there are lots of good options available and no will to implement them.

Ask nearly anyone with practical expertise on tied migrant labour systems what it would take to make existing systems fairer and safer for workers and they can be expected to list half a dozen regulatory reforms in under five minutes. This isn't rocket science.

Attempting to prevent migrants from moving in the first place should not be on anyone's lists of potential remedies. The key starting point must instead be how to move safely.

**Prof Joel Quirk**
University of the Witwatersrand
3rd August 2025

# Preface

This research, “Invisible in life and death: Visibilising the death of female migrant domestic workers and the struggles of their families”, does not begin with numbers, but with absence. At its core, this study interrogates the structural violence that underpins Nepal’s labour migration regime—one that exports care while failing to care for those who sustain it by bringing into sharp focus how gender, caste, class and citizenship intersect to produce disposable lives. Its clear to all, except few policy makers who are not tired of repeating the mantra of protecting women by restricting their mobility that the so called “ protective” migration bans for domestic work have not safeguarded women rather forced them to take irregular and unsafe pathways which in turn is forcing them either to rely on those agents who take control of their lives or remain in silence in case of abuses, or convert their untimely deaths into natural deaths without proper investigations.

No need to say women’s work is key to sustain the world, and yet global patriarchal regime is not tired of extending women’s work as extension of the role assigned by patriarchy by controlling and undervaluing. Patriarchy uses different tantrums to silence women workers demanding justice. This becomes even more obvious if the women are from the countries which has been converted into the labour sending countries by those who control the labour. This can be evidenced by increased number of suicide by Nepali women working as domestic workers in different countries, sudden deaths converted into natural deaths without any investigations or cases of mysteriously missing women in the process of their migration. This preface is an ethical positioning. As feminist researchers, we at WOREC understand that documenting death is not a neutral act—it is a political one. We owe it to the families we met across Nepal not only to report their truths, but to amplify them as demands for justice. We reject the normalisation of migrant deaths as an unfortunate cost of global labour markets. To that end, this report is not only an archive of grief—it is an act of resistance.

I extend my sincere gratitude to my team members at WOREC, Brunel University London, the research team, and all the individuals and organisations who contributed to this study. This report is neither the beginning nor the end of our collective struggle. Our long-standing demands for the recognition of women’s labour, the right to safe and dignified work, and freedom of mobility find renewed strength in these findings. The path ahead for policy advocacy remains long and urgent. It is essential that all actors working on migration and labour rights recognise that women’s work is work and women have the right to migrate and take the work they like and yet get respected, recognised and protected.  Every single death of a woman demands justice, investigation and a mechanism to address. Let’s hope the evidence generated through this research sparks our thoughts and collective academic activism and activism at ground levels to make a difference. WOREC, as a lead organisation working for women’s rights is committed to taking the work forward and hopeful to get all actors solidarity and support in this journey

Sincerely,

**Dr. Renu Rajbhandari**
Founder Chairperson, WOREC

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# List of Abbreviations

**BLA –** Bilateral Labour Agreement

**FEB –** Foreign Employment Board

**GCC –** Gulf Cooperation Council

**ICU –** Intensive Care Unit

**INGOs –** International Non-Governmental Organisations

**IT –** Information Technology

**NGOs –** Non-Governmental Organisations

**NPR –** Nepali Rupees

**SaMi –** Safer Migration

**UN –** United Nations

**WHRDs –** Women Human Rights Defenders

**WOREC –** Women Rehabilitation Centre

# Executive Summary

In this report, we offer an urgent examination of the deaths of female Nepali migrant domestic workers abroad and the consequences for their families. Drawing on 17 cases across multiple districts in Nepal, we foreground the voices of bereaved family members and argue that Nepal's migration industry systemically fails its most vulnerable citizens – women from Dalit, janajati, and low-income backgrounds. At the heart of this pilot feminist research is an important question:

What happens when the state that benefits from migrant women's labour disowns them in death?

## Research findings

### 1. Grief, debt, and dispossession

- Families of deceased female migrant workers suffer severe mental health related issues. These include, but are not limited to, depression, trauma, anxiety, and social withdrawal. Elderly parents and children are particularly impacted but receive no formal psychosocial support.

- The death of a female migrant workers often results in financial collapse due to unpaid migration debts and lost income. As a result, several family members are forced to sell their houses, land and assets and relocate to different locations. Many families fall into high-interest debt cycles, with women-headed households suffering the most.

- Families endure social stigma and blame from their communities for sending women via irregular channels. Marginalised castes face heightened exclusion, and children are often ostracised at school.

### 2. Institutional failures and irregular migration

- Body repatriation is slow, uncertain, or denied, especially for undocumented migrant women. Families often pay large sums or rely on community and diasporic donations to bring their loved ones home.

- Nepali missions provide minimal support; civil society's support is mostly absent; and there is no systematic investigation into suspicious deaths is conducted despite the Supreme Court of Nepal ordering dual post-mortems. These deaths are often labelled as suicides or resulting from natural causes, and family members refuse to accept these official reasonings.

- Migration bans on domestic work force lower class and caste women into irregular migration channels. This increases their vulnerability to exploitation, abuse, and death.

### 3. Structural inequality and intersectional injustice

- Nepali women's labour and deaths are rendered invisible through a combination of gendered, caste-based, and class-based oppression.
- Protectionist policies, like the domestic work migration ban, are based on outdated assumptions on gender and serve to control women's life, mobility, and labour, not to protect them despite their enormous contribution to Nepal.

- Even those with legal documents face bureaucratic hurdles and lack access to justice. These highlight a fragmented, inefficient system more concerned with regulating migration than safeguarding lives.

## Core policy recommendations

To restore dignity and justice to female migrant domestic workers and their families, we call for a comprehensive restructuring of Nepal's migration governance.

- Lift migration bans in domestic work and enable legal migration
  - Lift the ban on domestic work migration.
  - Facilitate accessible legal migration channels.
  - Unconditionally, recognise, register, and protect all undocumented migrants in embassies.

- Strengthen compensation and social protection
  - Extend financial support and insurance coverage to all migrant families.
  - Establish a government-funded repatriation programme.
  - Create simplified and localised claims processes.

- Improve institutional capacity and accountability
  - Increase staffing and resources at embassies.
  - Mandate dual post-mortems for migrant deaths.
  - Create a Migrant Death Review Board and a legal aid cell for bereaved families.

- Expand mental health infrastructure and community support
  - Establish ward-level psychosocial counselling infrastructure.
  - Support community-based organisations in offering legal and emotional support.
  - Launch national campaigns to reduce stigma around women's migration.

- Promote intersectional feminist migration governance
  - Include returnee migrants and bereaved families in policymaking.
  - Promote intersectional research led by Dalit, janajati, and other researchers and scholars from intersectionally marginalised communities.
  - Release disaggregated data on migrant deaths and repatriation.

- Build gender-sensitive structures
  - Conduct gender impact assessments of migration policies.
  - Recognise care work as labour in both policy and practice.
  - Ensure safe, transparent, and just migration systems for all citizens.

This report is a refusal to forget the women who left Nepal to support their families and never returned. It challenges all actors, government, civil society, media, and academia, to recognise the systemic violence that allows these deaths to occur without due justice or acknowledgement. Their deaths are not isolated events, but the result of policy failures, institutional neglect, and deeply rooted inequalities. Each death is a national failure. Each story is a demand for change. This report is both an archive of grief and a call to action.

# Visibilising systemic invisibility of female migrant domestic workers of Nepal

Kamala Bhujel had once returned home from Kuwait a proud citizen of Nepal. Her first migration, in the domestic work sector, was enabled by a "labour permit" issued by the Government of Nepal. That journey allowed her to buy land, build a house, lift her family out of poverty, and secure a future for herself and her loved ones. But when Kamala, now a proficient Arabic speaker, sought to migrate again, she encountered a state-imposed migration ban on domestic work. The ban forced Kamala into an irregular route, facilitated by the very same agent who had once arranged her legal migration to Kuwait. Her second journey quickly escalated into irreparable loss. Within two months of arriving in Kuwait, Kamala fell ill. She was denied medical care, abandoned by her employer, and left to starve while sick. Eventually, she was taken to a hospital; her family witnessed her body strapped to a hospital bed with tubes running down her throat, shown to them through a video call. In desperation, her family pleaded with government authorities and elite members of Nepal's migration and anti-trafficking industry, but no one intervened. Because she had migrated "illegally", everyone refused to help. The entire migration industry of Nepal turned away. Her family then assembled hundreds of thousands of rupees to pay the agent hoping to bring Kamala home alive. What returned however was her body, in a coffin. Her phone, her belongings, and any official explanation, support, or compensation never followed. Today, her family is still repaying debts incurred to send Kamala abroad. They have no access to mental health support. They have been ostracised and blamed by their community. The very state that once benefited from Kamala's life not only pushed her into dangerous domestic work migration channels in Kuwait but also disowned her and her family in death.

## 1.1 Invisible in life and death: Female migrant domestic workers of Nepal

Kamala's story is just one among thousands of Nepali migrant domestic workers'. Every year, hundreds of thousands of Nepali citizens, particularly women, migrate for domestic work. Yet, like Kamala, they are not only failed by the state, but also by the very actors who exist for their protection: migration officials, anti-trafficking organisations, domestic work organisations, and labour institutions that have built an entire industry around "protecting" poor migrant women. Many of these actors, including the Nepali media, have sensationalised the experiences of exploitation faced by Nepali women in the gulf countries. In response, for the past twenty-five years, the Government of Nepal has relied on migration bans as its principal strategy for protecting women who wish to work abroad in domestic labour.

Since 2017, a total ban has been imposed on emigration for domestic work from Nepal. This ban was partially eased in 2020, when several preconditions, such as the requirement for a bilateral labour agreement in domestic work with the destination country, were scrapped (ILO, 2021). However, the fundamental logic of restriction remains unchanged. This policy stance of migration bans reflects a broader anti-migration sentiment among Nepali policymakers. Despite the fact that more than one-quarter of Nepal's gross domestic product is sustained by remittances sent by citizens working abroad (Shahi, 2025), there remains an apathy toward the needs and rights of migrant workers. This is evident in the low level of staffing at Nepali diplomatic missions. In key destination countries, such as those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) and Malaysia, embassies are staffed with only seven to seventeen personnel, despite these regions hosting more than eighty-five percent of Nepali migrant workers.

Whilst the latest official figures suggest that approximately thirteen percent of these migrants are women (Kharel et al., 2023), this statistic fails to capture the true extent of female migration. Many Nepali women working in domestic roles abroad do not possess labour permits and are therefore not recognised as legitimate migrant workers. Some estimates suggest there are around sixty thousand Nepali women in the Gulf countries, while others claim that forty-eight thousand are working in Kuwait alone (Karki, 2025). The true figure is likely far higher. Without official documentation, these women are rendered invisible. Their labour does not count in national records, and their deaths are rarely investigated or acknowledged. Whether they live or die is treated as irrelevant.

Although previous research has examined the lives of migrant domestic workers. For example, their decisions to migrate (Aryal, 2023), the impact of protectionist policies (Sijapati et al., 2019), the irregular channels they use (Bhagat, 2023), their encounters with borders (Bhagat, 2022), and the abuse and exploitation they face in employment (Simkhada et al., 2024). However, very little attention has been given to the ways in which their contributions are erased in public discourse (for exception, see: Wadhawan, 2022). Because these contributions are excluded from the formal workforce, they remain invisible not only in life but also in death. The most troubling aspect of this erasure is the widespread silence around what happens to female migrants' family members: What, in other words, are the consequences for those left behind? How do families make sense of the loss, navigate grief, or seek justice?

## 1.2 Research questions

This pilot research attempts to fill this gap by asking the following questions:

First, how does the death of female Nepali migrant domestic workers abroad affect their families emotionally, socially, and financially? How does the loss impact the emotional and mental well-being of family members? What financial problems do families face? And how does death change the family's position within their community?

Second, how do families interact with government and legal systems in their attempts to secure repatriation, compensation, or justice? What barriers do they encounter in getting the deceased's body back, receiving compensation, or accessing official documents? In what ways does the use of irregular migration channels make these processes more difficult? What roles do agents, employers, embassies, and government officials play in shaping these experiences?

Third, how do broader structures of gender, caste, indigeneity, and class shape what families go through? How do these social positions influence the way families are treated by institutions and their communities? Whom do families hold responsible for what happened? And how do their identities shape their ideas of justice?

This report is an attempt to listen closely to the families of Nepali women who never returned, to trace not only the loss but also the silence that follows it, and to question how the state of Nepal benefits from its female migrant workers while abandoning them in death.

## 1.3 Rationale and significance

Kani Sherpa was perhaps the only migrant domestic worker who received proper attention from human rights groups in Nepal, albeit after her death. In 1998, at a time when international migration in the domestic work sector was permitted, reports of her alleged suicide shocked the country. Several human rights groups argued that Kani was killed at the hands of her employer in Kuwait. Her death triggered a major public outcry in Nepal, followed by the imposition of a series of migration bans that continues to this day (Pyakurel, 2018). These bans have in no way stopped Nepali women's exploitation and deaths

abroad but have instead removed the only protection once provided by the state of Nepal. Kani Sherpa's sensationalised story has strengthened the belief that women's contributions to society do not matter much. Her case marked a shift in how the state and civil society framed female migration as inherently dangerous. The memory of her death was publicised and instrumentalised rather than honoured. Kani Sherpa's death thus served as a rhetorical device to justify restrictive policies. Despite public attention, and several so called 'safe migration' infrastructure that followed Kani's and others' deaths, structural changes did not occur. In short, migration bans have further forced several Kani Sherpas to die in invisibility.

While migration bans are framed and rationalised as the only way to protect female Nepali citizens abroad from labour exploitation, indeed as the state's desire to prevent its citizens from dying, this reasoning is difficult to accept. This is especially so given the extreme exploitation and deaths, almost exclusively, of men, as highlighted by Nepal's migration industry, with reports that two to three male bodies arrive back in coffins each day (Aryal et al., 2016, PNCC, 2017; Adhikary et al., 2019). Despite international outcry over Nepali men dying abroad, particularly in Qatar (Regueiro, 2020; Pattisson et al., 2021; ILO 2021), the Government of Nepal did not choose to ban migration to Qatar during the FIFA World Cup in 2022. The absence of a ban afforded dignity to the dead male bodies, as most family members received compensation from the state through insurance payouts. In contrast, the logic of gendered protectionism becomes difficult to defend when the debate shifts towards migrant women. In effect, Nepali men migrant workers' deaths are relatively more acknowledged, even though undocumented male workers, often stratified by class, caste, and indigeneity, also die without compensation or visibility. However, for women, these intersectional vulnerabilities are exponentially exacerbated by their invisibility as informal, feminised labourers in the care sector. What, then, we must ask, is happening in the case of domestic work?

Several explanations have been proposed by scholars, activists, and policymakers. Some argue that the root of the migration bans lies in the state's longstanding devaluation of care work performed by women within the home (Ghosh and Chopra, 2019). Others point to the role of anti-trafficking and human rights organisations, whose framing of female migration as victimhood may have encouraged the state to adopt a risk-averse stance (Shivakoti, 2020). The chronic under-resourcing of Nepali missions abroad has also been cited as a key constraint on providing effective protection (Khatiwada and Basyal, 2022). Meanwhile, placement agencies and protection-focused NGOs may resist the lifting of bans due to concerns over funding loss, in turn implementing protectionism and reinforcing institutional relevance. Yet female Nepali citizens continue to migrate in domestic work sectors in large numbers. They challenge every restriction imposed by the state, often with the assistance of unlicensed agents who work closely with placement agencies. As a result, migration bans benefit these agents as well. In fact, the bans have become a win-win situation for everyone except the domestic workers and their family members (Bhagat, Mademba and Neupane, 2024).

These bans strip the agency of Nepali migrant domestic workers in many different ways. Bans do not allow workers to migrate via official channels or to seek support from Nepali missions when something goes wrong. When workers return, they are not eligible for official government reintegration support. In several ways, these bans strip Nepali women aspiring to migrate for domestic work of their right to life. Yet they also strip them of their right to dignity in death. When they die, there is limited support for body repatriation from the embassy. Although the embassy cannot access money from the welfare funds, there are small amounts allocated to Nepali embassies from a common funding pot by the Ministry of Finance, but this is rarely usable due to bureaucratic hurdles. Even when embassies assist with body repatriation, the cost is largely covered by the Nepali diaspora or by the deceased's family members, who must collect money, reinforcing another layer of debt. After death, no financial or psychosocial support is offered to the bereaved family members. These institutional failures reflect broader legal and policy gaps.

In one of the interviews conducted for this research, a leading migration actor remarked, "in Nepal, family is more important than the individual." Yet there is an unspoken silence around how family members cope after the death of their loved ones. While stories of women's pain and suffering are often documented in the aftermath of men's deaths abroad, often in voyeuristic and tokenistic ways that serve as a consumable narrative device, the silence around the impact of women migrant workers' deaths on their families reveals a form of individualisation of women's plight, decision-making, and resulting emotions. Whilst existing research has focused on women's vulnerability during and after labour migration (Paoletti et al., 2014; Sijapati et al., 2019; Laurie and Richardson, 2020), with a substantial body of work addressing their health-related issues (Simkhada et al., 2018; Hendrickson et al., 2019; Pradhan et al., 2019; Khatri et al., 2021), we know little about how their deaths reverberate in their places of origin, in their homes and community networks. This research responds to that gap, building on critical work in migration, gender, and labour that calls for greater attention to the after lives and deaths of feminised migration.

## 1.4 Methodology, ethics and scope

In this research, we have adopted feminist methodology to understand how the deaths of female Nepali citizens speak to the migration industry of Nepal. Hence, rather than reducing women to mere statistics, we moved beyond the fictional 'neutrality' of masculinist research practices that prioritise numeric data and metrics over embodied knowledge (Haraway, 1988) — practices have indeed long shaped migration studies in Nepal. For example, there are numerous labour migration surveys that recognise remittances but erase the deaths of those once responsible for securing them. Instead ours is a politically committed research guided by the stories of the deceased, as told by their family members.

This study draws on 15 cases of deceased and 2 cases of Missing Nepali women migrant workers from Sindhupalchowk, Jhapa, Dang, Surkhet, and Karnali districts. These female Nepali citizens were employed as domestic workers in GCC countries. Their ages at departure ranged from 19 to 47, with most women in their twenties or early thirties. Most cases of death cluster after 2015, with a concentration around 2018 and 2020–2021. These two latter periods coincide with the enforcement of stricter migration bans, highlighting a link between restrictive policy environments and increased vulnerability. We interviewed women from Dalit, janajati, and Brahmin/Chhetri backgrounds. Whilst a few travelled through formal channels with labour permits and insurance, most used irregular routes and lacked official documentation, limiting their access to compensation or support. Nearly all families incurred substantial financial costs for migration, yet very few received compensation upon workers' deaths. Based on the insights and the questions raised by bereaved family members, we then brought these concerns to over seventy migration industry actors of Nepal -only ten of them decided to engage with us.

### Ethics

Guided by feminist ethics of care, this pilot project attempted to minimise extractive data collection and centred around reflexive accountability. We recognised that we were entering spaces of grief and loss, which required more than institutional protocols of informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, which we upheld throughout the study. Feminist ethics of care demanded attentiveness, reflexivity, agency, and accountability. Drawing on the diverse positionalities within the research team, including fieldwork experience, language skills, and academic and activist networks, we became aware of the privileges and vulnerabilities that travelled with us throughout the process. As a result, we practised reflexivity throughout the research project, through regular internal dialogue which indelibly shaped our methodology and findings.

We approached consent as an ongoing, transparent, and flexible process, with clear communication, written approval, and the right to withdraw at any time. We treated confidentiality with strict care, anonymising the names of the deceased and their family members. All data generated in this research was securely stored at the Brunel University of London's OneDrive cloud. We also provided immediate counselling support with the help of a trained counsellor who was present during fieldwork, sometimes for extended periods, understanding that interviews could be both cathartic and retraumatising. In some cases, participants continued to reach out, seeking support beyond the formal research encounter. We remain in contact with families through our local partners to provide support where possible, and we are committed to returning to our interlocutors with Nepali-language materials to ensure their voices stay central to ongoing advocacy.

### Limitations

This pilot feminist research brings 17 stories of death from select districts of Nepal. Limited in number and scope, we do not claim to represent the gamut of Nepali women migrant workers' deaths or the varied impacts on their families. Rather, these narratives serve as important entry points. It highlights urgent issues for all of us – Nepali migration actors, anti-trafficking organisations, researchers, and government bodies – urging us to acknowledge and to take steps towards minimising these preventable deaths and to fight for the dignity of the deceased Nepali citizens who have given so much to the country, including their lives.

We faced many challenges at various stages of research, including initial funding cuts, difficulties in accessing families, privacy constraints, and limited local support for participants' emotional needs. These limitations are not excuses but important lessons for all of us. They underscore the need for more sustained, trauma-informed, and inclusive approaches in future research to better serve affected families and uphold the integrity of feminist inquiry.

## 1.5 Purpose

This report is dedicated to those Nepali women migrant domestic workers who never returned home. Its purpose is to help those family members who continue to wait for these women. It is a refusal to forget these women, their labour, and the family members they left behind.

This report seeks to bring together all actors in Nepal's migration industry who, in one way or another, are accountable for these preventable deaths and the ongoing denials of justice. The deaths of Nepali women migrant workers are not isolated incidents: they concern everyone working on women's and children's issues, the feminist movement, advocates for domestic workers, human rights organisations, and those engaged in anti-trafficking work. They also concern the recruitment agents facilitating women's mobility, the parliamentarians whose rigid stance on migration bans contributes to these deaths, those working within Dalit and indigenous communities' rights, and every government department, ministry, or embassy, whether responsible for labour, health, women and children, social welfare, or finance. These deaths also implicate academic and policy researchers who have long overlooked this issue. Each death of a Nepali migrant domestic worker is a collective failure of all of us.

Within this report, stories of women migrants' deaths can therefore be read as a cry for justice. We present key findings emerging from these narratives, followed by preliminary policy recommendations. Grounded in feminist methodology, the report begins with our research approach, followed by the stories of the deceased, an analysis of the structural failures, and finally, proposed actions. As there is no closure for these families, we offer no conclusion. Instead, we invite all actors to draw their own conclusions about what these deaths say about our responsibility as a nation. We humbly request not to read these stories as just another statistics—rather, they are unapologetic demands for justice, for memory, for change.

# Listening to silenced stories: Feminist research with families of deceased female Nepali citizens

## 2.1 Origins

This project was born out of research, advocacy, grief, and anger—at years of witnessing the systemic abandonment of Nepali migrant female domestic workers. Grounded in the structural, deliberate, and everyday silences and invisibilisations of the lives, mobilities, labours and deaths of Nepali migrant women, this research speaks to, and aims to address, their continued exclusion from state records and public discourse. As such, this research is neither concerned with what prompted the 'migration decision', through which channels women migrated, or what happened to them. Nor does it centre on statistics. Instead, it asks what their deaths reveal, who is responsible for the deaths of female Nepali citizens abroad, and why we must ask these questions now. The project builds on the first authors' engagement with questions of mobility, labour, abandonment, borders, exploitation and subversion of Nepali citizens, where he encountered reports of women dying abroad in every site he intervened. Whilst conversations with activists, professionals and scholars informed the inquiry, this pilot research project took form following a very small grant from Brunel University of London.

## 2.2 From proposal to partnership: The making of feminist research

Before any fieldwork began, the first author sought support from various institutions and organisations working on migration, domestic workers, and labour rights. It was not until the proposal was brought to WOREC that the research found a home. WOREC recognised the urgency of the issue and offered its full logistical support. Ethical approval was granted by Brunel University, and the project was carried out collectively by the first author and the Kathmandu and district-based field teams of WOREC, with support from Sunita Foundation, its sister organisation. From the outset, this research has thus been a collective undertaking. The research team held a series of initial preparatory meetings in which we collectively discussed not only the ethical practices of remaining attentive to local contexts and community sensitivities, but also, and more critically, how to hold grief carefully and how to enter families' homes, not as extractive researchers or NGO professionals but as listeners. Together, we developed our research protocols from a position of consistent care and accountability.

### Identifying families in a landscape of erasure

One of the most difficult aspects of this research was identifying families willing to speak to us. This difficulty was compounded by the migration ban imposed on women seeking domestic work abroad, which has produced a culture of shame, stigma, abandonment, criminalisation, and silence. Case identification was conducted through a dual approach, combining formal institutional coordination with informal community-based networks. We approached ward and gaonpalika offices across districts to access official records of migrant deaths. These records, however, proved fragmented and deeply exclusionary. They largely accounted for women who migrated via official labour permits, offering little to no trace of the many who had travelled via informal channels. We therefore relied heavily on informal community knowledge gathered through women's collectives, elected local representatives, and grassroots activists, and on extended trust-based kinship ties. This approach proved essential where many families had no official documentation, and where shame, fear or distrust of institutions often prevented disclosure.

### Interviews: creating space for grief

Our interview approach followed a slow structure, recognising that storytelling in contexts of trauma and grief cannot be rushed. We developed a three-phase protocol:

Initial contact: We tried to meet participants multiple times before conducting interviews. We began with informal conversations to explore each family's relationship to foreign employment, identifying any deaths or disappearances, and gauging their willingness to speak.

Research information and consent: We provided detailed information on our project's purpose and how participant's stories would be used. We shared interview themes in advance, giving our participants some time to prepare their answers in advance. We ensured that the participants knew that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw completely, till a certain period after the interview had taken place. We therefore treated consent as an ongoing conversation rather than a one-off contract.

In-depth interviews: We conducted semi-structured interviews lasting between one hour to more than two hours. After each interview, we offered counselling support through local networks. We also compensated for their times.

In total, we interviewed 17 family members—15 of whom had lost someone abroad and 2 of whom still had missing family members—located in Sindhupalchowk, Dang, Jhapa and Karnali districts.

## 2.3 Analysis: Storytelling as method

Our plan initially was to conduct thematic coding, breaking each transcript into categories and analytical fragments. But this quickly felt extractive. To carve these stories into codes felt detached, indifferent, violent. As a team, we thus returned to our ethos and decided instead to adopt a storytelling approach.

We decided to hold the fullness of each family's grief and remembering without dissecting their stories with our analyses, which leaves their narratives essentially raw. Yet, each story was developed collaboratively from transcripts and field notes, which includes some of our interpretations of their stories. Some are shared in this report, others form the basis of our findings and recommendations. In total, these stories are archives of resistance, expressions of grief, political testimonies, and, ultimately, demands for justice. Furthermore, they became the basis for our key informant interviews.

### Key Informant Interviews

To understand the broader policy and institutional landscape, we reached out to around 70 actors – including government ministries, trade unions, international organisations, research institutes, UN agencies, embassies, anti-trafficking bodies, and domestic worker rights groups. Our aim was to connect the stories of grief we documented to the powerful and privileged actors in Nepal who claimed to protect migrant workers' rights. Whilst we followed up with some of the most important government and non-government actors, only ten agreed to participate. Many declined, stating they had "no statistics," "no time", or "no expertise". Not a single governmental institution (including women's commission) agreed to discuss the deaths of their own citizens. We understand these silences as refusal—a political silence—and a form of institutionalised erasure.

### Document Analysis and Media Mapping

Finally, we conducted a critical review of public and policy discourse. We analysed government databases, especially those provided by the Foreign Employment Board, and reviewed existing analytical/statistics-based reports, and engaged with hundreds of English and Nepali language newspaper coverage of migrant workers deaths. Using Microsoft Excel, we mapped where and how the deaths of migrant domestic workers were discussed, paying attention to whether family members were acknowledged with dignity, or erased altogether. This work helped us understand the discursive terrain of death and the politics of visibility in Nepal's labour migration regime.

## 2.4 Feminist ethics of care

This research entered spaces marked by grief, trauma, silence, and unanswered questions. We began with the understanding that asking about death carries emotional weight. Our ethical approach thus extended beyond institutional protocols towards feminist ethics of care (Clark-Kazak, 2023).

### Positionalities

This research was possible because we combined our resources, including fieldwork experience, counselling skills, language proficiency, and access through academic and activist networks. The work was shaped by the different positionalities of those involved. Our roles in institutions, education, class, caste and mobility affected how we were received and what we could access, and these privileges travelled with us throughout the process. At the same time, our own vulnerabilities—emotional, institutional, and ethical—also travelled with us, as we listened, transcribed, thought about, and wrote stories of loss that could not be resolved. While we shared our identities with participants, such as language, caste, race, gender, nationality and citizenship, we recognised that these neither removed structural inequalities nor resolved power differences. Despite ongoing reflexivity, our intersubjective understanding is therefore limited; rather, we seek to hold space for the complexity of lives and deaths without reducing either to data.

### Reflexivity and Agency

We regularly discussed every aspect of our research with members involved in this research. These discussions provided a space for us to reflect on our ever-shifting positionalities and to share and navigate the ethical and emotional challenges that came up during fieldwork. This ongoing dialogue shaped our decisions and approaches, as we tried to uphold the highest ethical standards of care throughout the process. At the same time, we treated participant agency as very crucial to this research. For example, research questions for key informants and some policy recommendations were shaped by participants' suggestions and insights shared during interviews. We remain committed to returning these recommendations to the participants, ensuring their voices continue to guide the work beyond the data and findings presented here.

### Consent and Confidentiality

Consent constituted an ongoing conversation on transparency, flexibility, and the right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. The process unfolded in three phases: We first contacted family members by phone with a broad, non-intrusive question: "Has anyone in your family been involved in foreign employment?" Only if they chose to share more did we introduce research details. We then explained our research purpose in accessible language, including what we were seeking, why, and how their stories would be used. We made it clear that participation was voluntary. We obtained written consent before each interview. Those with limited education was assisted by next of kin members to read and explain the process. Moreover, we reminded our participants throughout the interviews that they could pause the interview, skip any question, or withdraw entirely. We anonymised all transcripts based on the confidentiality clauses. No identifying details of the deceased people or family members will appear in this report or any public output. All data was stored securely on the Brunel's OneDrive cloud and shared only within the core research team.

### Aftercare

Our fieldwork reminded us that grief is not data, and that listening is labour. We learnt that conversation could be both retraumatising and cathartic, both for the families and for ourselves. We paused to cry, to listen, and to sit in silence when words were not enough during the interview. Some participants asked us to leave. Others called again and again, seeking our presence.

Recognising the toll of sharing narratives loss, we provided psychosocial support immediately after the interviews, often continuing for an hour or more.

**Our aftercare, by region, includes:**

1. Dang: The WOREC team remains in contact with the family and will continue to offer support as needed.
2. Sindhupalchok: The Sunita Foundation will ensure the family receives counselling and care if required.
3. Karnali: A WOREC team member will remain a point of support for the family.
4. Jhapa: Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) will provide counselling rooted in local practice and understanding.

We will remain in touch with families and ensure that support responds to their pace and needs. As part of our commitment, we will return to these sites with a Nepali translation of our executive summary and policy recommendations, so families stay part of the advocacy which their stories have shaped.

## 2.5 Limitations and recommendations

Despite being grounded in feminist commitments to care, this project encountered a lot of challenges in places where care was insufficient, and the realities of fieldwork intersected with structural and emotional limitations. We acknowledge these shortcomings as lessons to ensure that future research uphold higher standards for the participants, their family members, and the integrity of feminist research.

1. Initially, identifying family members willing to speak was difficult. As we looked more closely, more death cases surfaced, but we chose not to approach families who had recently lost someone.
- *Recommendation: Work with local networks to enable long-term engagement.*

2. Many family members refused to participate in this research.
- *Recommendation: Make initial contacts, share information, and allow them to decide in their own time. Approach members only when they are ready. If they chose not to participate, respect their decision.*

3. During initial interviews in Sindhupalchok we rushed the interview process.
- *Recommendation: Contact participants at least three times beforehand. Share the research questions, and take them through the consent and confidentiality process before conducting the interview.*

4. Interviews took place in semi-public or interrupted spaces, limiting privacy and safety.
- *Recommendation: Secure private, quiet, and neutral venues, especially where women's autonomy is restricted.*

5. Despite our commitment to supporting family members, we recognised that their emotional needs would never be fully addressed.
- *Recommendation: Establish counselling networks in partnership with grassroots organisations before undertaking research of this sorts. Commit to at least 3–5 follow-ups as a core ethical practice, not just data validation.*

6. Despite our awareness and support mechanisms, we recognise that interviews could have retraumatised participants.
- *Recommendation: Integrate trauma-informed approaches, including pauses, flexible questioning, and trained counselling support present during all the interviews.*

7. Researchers faced emotional exhaustion due to high interview loads and lack of support.
- *Recommendation: Provide regular debriefing and mental health resources for those interviewing.*

8. Government data on migrant deaths was incomplete.
- *Recommendation: Do not rely on government data; there are lots of gaps in it, highlighting systemic exclusion of Nepali citizens. Instead, focus on the grassroots, and intervene directly at ward level.*

9. Some team members found it difficult to handle trauma during the interviews.
- *Recommendation: Mandate comprehensive pre-fieldwork training on trauma for all researchers.*

10. The research raised expectations for justice or compensation that could not be fulfilled.
- *Recommendation: Clearly communicate research scope and limitations upfront to responsibly manage participant expectations. However, make sure that you ask questions to every single actor working on women, migration and labour related issues.*

11. Since this project was a one-off pilot engagement, we believe that our aftercare will not be sufficient.
- *Recommendation: Build long-term partnerships with local organisations and the pressurise state to provide ongoing care beyond the research timeframe.*

# A collective failure: The invisible deaths of Nepali women in domestic work abroad



These are not isolated stories of death.

The deaths of female Nepali migrant domestic workers are often met with silence, disbelief, or dismissal by the very systems meant to protect them; by communities that benefit from their bodies, mobility, and labour; and by Trade Unions, NGOs and INGOs who claim to support them.

This chapter shares stories of loss that are deeply personal but politically significant.

When a migrant woman dies abroad, her family is often left without information, support, or any route to justice. These stories trace this violence and explore them as a consequence of systemic neglect.

To read them is to ask: Why are their deaths made invisible? Who is accountable, and why is no one answerable?

**Maya Bhandari's murder and the emotional aftermath for her family left behind**

Two years before her murder, Maya's husband migrated to Malaysia for work, leaving her in Nepal with their 4-year-old daughter. He frequently accused her without reason and demanded that she should leave the house. Seeking refuge, Maya moved in with her aunt. With no work and no way to support herself in Nepal, Maya began to consider migration to give her daughter a better life.

Though her mother begged her to stay, she could not stop her daughter from migrating. Maya had no money of her own, but with a promise from her husband to send money for her flight, she decided to migrate via legal channels.

Maya went to Malaysia, where she worked in a data entry job at a hospital, earning 80,000 NPR per month. Though she and her husband lived in different cities, they occasionally met, but their relationship was beyond repair. She was lonely. Yet, she always told her parents that she was fine. She had asked them to care for her daughter.

Ten months passed. Her husband invited her to visit, telling her he was planning to return to Nepal. She visited him one evening. That evening, he killed her in his room. Meanwhile, her friends and family desperately tried to contact her. They called her husband. He lied about her being in his room while he was at the market. When the Malaysian police arrived at the husband's room, her body was already decomposing.

Her body, found wrapped in plastic, was sent back to Nepal after months. Her family couldn't bring her home. She was cremated in Kathmandu.

Maya's murder destroyed everything. Her parents, burdened with grief, moved to Dang to care for her daughter. Her daughter had fought so hard to protect her child and had ultimately sacrificed herself for her. The burden of the loss was heavy on them. They had no idea how they would afford the child's

education or support her future. The insurance payout was their only lifeline, and it wouldn't last long. They had no other income, no other source of hope. Each day was a battle to survive, not just financially, but emotionally.

Maya's daughter, at just five years old, knew about her mother's death. She knew her mother was gone forever. She knew the pain it had caused to her grandparents. In school, the other children bullied her, mentioning her father's role in her mother's death. The little girl would defend her father, unaware of the horror he had caused.

The family's pain was unbearable. They needed help, but where would it come from? There is no mental health support for them. They needed psychosocial counselling, and they needed financial aid for Maya's daughter's education. The grief was too much for any of them to bear alone. They had lost more than a daughter and a mother. They had lost hope.

**Meelan Sunar died in her sleep: Her only 'crime' was changing countries to survive after her employer asked her to leave**

Meelan Sunar had migrated to Oman for foreign employment through official channels, with full labour approval from the Government of Nepal.

After her employer passed away, his family informed her that they could no longer pay her salary and advised her to return home. She had only been abroad for a year and was still burdened with debt from the cost of her migration.

Despite her husband urging her to come back, she made the difficult decision to stay abroad until she could repay the loan. At the same time, her sister, also working overseas, was facing abuse and unpaid wages. In desperation, the sister decided to flee illegally to Kuwait.

Meelan, knowing this was against the law, chose to join her sister, escaping from Oman via Dubai. The family only found out about this seven days later. Meelan remained in regular contact with her husband. She had started receiving her salary and told him she would soon send money home. She spoke of returning in time for the festival season and finishing the construction of their new house. But then, without warning, she stopped answering calls.

Her sister found her dead—Meelan had passed away in her sleep.

No government agency came forward to assist the family in repatriating her body. As she had travelled to a third country without a labour approval, the authorities declared that they could not help. It took more than a month, and the collective financial support of relatives and neighbours, to bring her body home for the funeral. No compensation or official assistance was ever provided.

Meelan was the family's sole breadwinner. After her death, the household income disappeared overnight. Her husband, now left to raise two sons alone, faced relentless pressure from moneylenders demanding repayment of loans. With no reliable income, he feared for his children's education and struggled to afford even the most basic necessities.

Since Meelan's death, survival itself has become a daily battle for the family.

### Goma Oli died in her sleep, then society blamed her and the system abandoned her

Goma's journey to Kuwait began in desperation. Her husband was sick and bedridden, the children were out of school, and the household was drowning in debt. An agent from the neighbourhood promised it would not cost much to go abroad—just fifty thousand rupees. She borrowed the money and left via India.

From the beginning, the signs were troubling. She called home in tears, unable to understand the language, and complained of beatings and burns inflicted by her employer's wife. She used to say the heat of the kitchen was nothing compared to the cruelty.

Then the calls stopped. One morning, a Nepali woman telephoned the family.

Goma was dead.

She had gone to sleep and never woken up. The employer claimed the cause was extreme heat. But the family believes there is more to the story. The shock was paralysing for her family, but the suffering did not end there.

Government offices refused to help, citing her irregular status as a migrant worker. It took three months just to bring her body home, and that was only possible because neighbours and relatives gathered money to cover the costs.

No salary. No compensation. Not a single official reached out.

After Goma's death, her family was abandoned by their community and relatives because she had migrated irregularly through India. Neighbours who once supported them socially and financially withdrew their help. The family members were treated as outsiders in their own community spaces. Relatives refused to assist, blaming the family for her decision to go illegally and denying any support for repatriation or debts. Moneylenders became aggressive, demanding loan repayment and pressuring them to sell their home.

Goma's death left a family abandoned by the very systems that should have protected them.

### Upama Dangi's "suicide" and the bruises on her body: social ostracisation and a family's struggle

Upama once dreamed of building a better life. She wanted to send her children to good schools, repay the family's debts, and build a proper house with a toilet. Going abroad seemed like the only way to achieve this. The family discussed it together and agreed. They found an agent who said travelling through Nepal would be slow and difficult, but going via India would be quicker. Many women from their village were leaving in similar ways.

For five months after Upama migrated, the family heard nothing.

Then one day, Upama sent word that she had reached her destination. She asked them to care for the children and said she would send money in a few months. She reminded them to build the toilet. She would never contacted her family again.

Nine months later, news came from a cousin in Kathmandu. Upama had died by hanging.

Her body was brought home, and her final rites were performed according to tradition. The medical report said it was suicide. But her family noticed that her body was covered in bruises. Her eyes were damaged. There were injuries on her arms and legs. Her husband did not believe she would take her own life over small hardships.

He was already deep in debt from arranging her travel. After her death, hardship only increased for the family. She had left behind two small children and a sick mother-in-law. The loans taken for her treatment remained unpaid. Her husband now had to care for everyone alone, with no income.

In the past, the community would have stepped in. But after Upama's death, people turned away. Her family was severely social ostracised in their village. Neighbours and former supporters withdrew their assistance and distanced themselves. Those who had previously lent money refused further help, openly doubting the family's ability to repay debts and often blaming them for Upama's irregular migration. This social rejection increased the family's grief and economic hardship, leaving Upama's family isolated at a time of need. The stigma attached to her death led to emotional and financial exclusion, deepening their vulnerability and forcing them to face their struggles alone.

There was no money for medicine, no support, and no work in Nepal.

Out of desperation, her husband also went abroad. He left the children with his parents and travelled to Saudi Arabia—the same country where Upama had died.

### Prabha Nepali was buried without a name, and her family was destroyed

Prabha Nepali left for Kuwait through India in 2016. She was undocumented and desperate to repay the family's debts. Her sister remembers that no one in the family understood the risks of irregular migration. The agent had promised a fast and inexpensive process. They simply wanted a way out of their financial desperation.

For six long months, there was complete silence. Then, one day, Prabha called them secretly. She had bought a phone with her own salary. Her voice trembled, but for a brief moment, it brought relief to her family. What followed, however, were stories filled with pain. She had been burned for oversalting food. She had been locked inside a toilet. She was treated like a prisoner.

Still, Prabha endured everything. She sent money home and kept most of her suffering hidden. Her return home was arranged. She had packed her bags. On a video call just two days before her flight, she smiled through tears and said she was finally coming home.

But she never arrived.

The employer claimed that she had tested positive for COVID-19. Within two days, she passed away. There was no official medical report. There was no communication from any government office. Only the employer informed the family that she had died. Not a single document was shared. Just a video call to show her burial.

The trauma did not end with Prabha's death. There was no compensation. There was no support. Debt collectors arrived and locked the house. Her family was forced to move from one relative's home to another. Her children were left with nothing.

One child fled to India and disappeared. The other went abroad to find work, repeating the same cycle that had destroyed their mother. Emotionally broken and financially ruined, Prabha's family continues to live in limbo. Justice, for them, would mean, at the very least, receiving her body. It would mean being heard.



**Meghawati Dangol died under the weight of debt and hope for her daughter, while her husband took the compensation meant to protect her daughter's future**

Meghawati Dangol was the only daughter in her extended family. Driven by family debt and a desire to secure her daughter's future, Meghawati decided to migrate, despite her father and brother's objections, as they did not believe there was happiness abroad but only hardship. The first time she tried to migrate, her visa was rejected. But Meghawati in quiet defiance prepared again this time without telling her family and left for Cyprus.

For a while things seemed fine. She sent remittance, called regularly, and assured them she would come home after repaying her debts. But there were signs: sleep problems, unexplained rashes, and bruises. She told her mother she could not sleep but not her brother or father. Whilst she would get emotional, she kept most of her pain inside. Then, one day, everything stopped. The news came not from her employer or the embassy but from the training centre in Nepal.

Meghawati had died.

The official report stated suicide, but no one in her family believed that. She was not the kind of person to take her own life. She had marital problems, but she never spoke about them. Her body came home after forty-five days, sealed. They were not allowed to open the coffin. Her final rites were held without closure.

Then began the family's struggle over her insurance and compensation amount. Meghawati's mother wanted the money saved in a bank account for her eleven-year-old daughter. Her only request was to let the money be used for her granddaughter's future. But the husband objected.

Within a year of being widowed, the husband remarried. Now he has a daughter from his new marriage, and they fear Meghawati's daughter's life is now at grave risk.

Despite efforts including contacting the mayor visiting government offices and petitioning the bank, Meghawati's maternal family was shut out. They were told they had no legal claim, and everything now belonged to the husband.

To this day the family has not been able to contact Meghawati's daughter freely. They tried to support her but were cut off. The emotional damage is compounded by social and legal barriers. The child was only eleven. She had lost her mother. Her father had moved on.

What hurt her family the most was Meghawati's silence. If she had asked her family for help even once, they would have moved mountains to bring her back.

Her family insists that the insurance must go directly to the child or be divided equally between both them and her husband. Otherwise, women like Meghawati will continue to die abroad while their husbands profit from compensation meant to secure the futures of their innocent children.

### Ambika Giri was killed in Kuwait; the agent gave NPR 50,000 to the family; her husband turned to substances to cope

Ambika Giri left home to work as a domestic worker in Kuwait. Her journey was arranged by a local agent, who assured the family she had labour approval and insurance. But from the moment she arrived at her destination, Ambika never contacted her family.

Within just three months, news came of her death.

The message was relayed by her brother-in-law and the police in Kathmandu. Ambika's body bore questionable signs—her neck was bruised and blue, pointing to possible strangulation. But no official confirmation was ever given. Whether it was murder or suicide, the truth was never revealed.

The family received a few documents, the details of which remain unclear. Her eldest son holds what little paperwork was ever handed over. Beyond that, there were given no answers. No investigation ensued. No closure was provided.

The agent who facilitated her migration gave the family NPR 50,000 to cover the funeral and cremation. Despite strong suspicions of negligence or foul play, the agent was never questioned. He lived in the same village, denied all wrongdoing, and walked away untouched.

Ambika's death led to the family members to sell their land and livestock to manage expenses. Today, her husband works as a daily wage labourer, struggling to survive and maintain the household alone. His children now live apart with relatives in Kathmandu, while the emotional and financial strain weighs heavily on all of them.

The family never received legal advice, counselling, or government support. There were unaware of any mechanisms that might exist for families who lose their loved ones abroad. They are left with nothing but questions.

Her husband lives with constant emotional distress, often retreating into sleep or, at times, drinking to escape the weight and suffering of his loss. Though he believes Ambika was likely murdered - and that her death could have been prevented with proper oversight - he has resigned himself to live a painful reality marked by grief.

With no resources and no one willing to listen, he has reluctantly accepted the loss. The system that failed Ambika continues to fail those she left behind.

### When a mother dies abroad, no amount of money can compensate their children's mental health

Jiban Tamang decided to migrate to Saudi Arabia for work. She did not inform her family, not even her son Suresh, because she feared they would try to stop her. It was only when she called from the airport that they learned of her departure. At the time, Suresh and his wife were working in Malaysia.

A few days after Jiban arrived in Saudi Arabia, she contacted them to say she had started work as a cleaner in a school. She had migrated through legal channels and held a valid labour permit. Everything appeared to be in order. The family spoke once a week. Jiban described her work as manageable, involving cooking and cleaning. Then, just three months after her arrival, Jiban collapsed in her room and was rushed to the hospital by her colleagues.

She spent several days in the intensive care unit but did not survive. The official medical report stated that she had died due to an underlying health issue.

Accepting the report, the family did not pursue further investigation. It took nearly a month to repatriate her body to Nepal. The Nepali Embassy and one NGO coordinated the process, and her body was transported by vehicle to their village.

Financially, the family received 1.4 million rupees from insurance and a further 600,000 rupees through other support channels.

Yet emotionally, the loss left a permanent void. Jiban had been the pillar holding the family together. After her death, the family's emotional, financial, and social stability was shattered. Suresh's mental health deteriorated; he lost motivation to work. His sister took on new responsibilities, and his niece, who shared a close bond with Jiban, was deeply affected.

Social support was present briefly, around the time of the funeral, but it quickly faded. The family was left to carry their grief in silence.

**Ved Kumari Sarki's death: A mother's silent struggle and fear for her granddaughter's future**

Laxmi Sarki, a 55-year-old woman from Nepal, lives a life of silent struggle and solitude. Her only companion is her young granddaughter, the daughter of her deceased child Ved Kumari Sarki. With her son estranged in India and her two married daughters living separately, Laxmi spends her days caring for her granddaughter.

Ved Kumari Sarki left for Kuwait in 2017 at the age of 26 in search of better opportunities for her impoverished family. Her migration was arranged informally, without a labour permit. Her husband had taken out loans to cover the costs. Despite Laxmi's deep concerns about this irregular route, Ved Kumari was determined to build a better future for her daughter.

Over the two years Ved Kumari worked abroad, Laxmi spoke to her daughter only a handful of times. During these rare conversations, Ved Kumari shared that she worked as a domestic worker and later mentioned opening a small beauty parlour. Then came the devastating news.

A Bengali co-worker contacted the family to inform them that Ved Kumari had died.

The official cause of death was reported as suicide. Laxmi never accepted this explanation. She believed her daughter was murdered and that the truth was concealed. A spiritual ritual she performed had strengthened her conviction that Ved Kumari's death was not self-inflicted.

Because Ved Kumari migrated irregularly, government agencies refused to assist with repatriating her body or to offer any compensation. The agent who had arranged her migration had vanished after her death. The burden fell entirely on the community, who took three months to raise the funds needed to bring Ved Kumari's body home.

Her death changed everything. Laxmi lost not only her daughter but also the family's main breadwinner. Without Ved Kumari's remittance, affording food, medicine, and her granddaughter's school fees was increasingly becoming impossible.

Once respected in the village for their steady income from abroad, the family now faces social stigma and avoidance by relatives spreading gossip.

Laxmi's grief is constant. She says, "the loneliness and emptiness are unbearable."

Laxmi longs for justice. She wants an investigation, accountability and recognition of the truth. She hopes for a dignified closure. She fears her granddaughter may have to leave school due to financial hardship but prays she will be able to continue her education.

### Banned to Death: How restrictive policy erased Kamala Bhujel's life

Kamala Bhujel's mother had once welcomed her daughter home from Kuwait, safe and successful. On that first journey, Kamala had migrated through legal channels, worked for over three years, and returned with hard-earned savings. With the money, she built a house, bought land, and elevated her family's standing in the village.

But when Kamala decided to go abroad again, this time through an informal route via India due to migration bans, her mother never imagined it would be the last time she would see her daughter alive.

Her second journey was arranged by an agent who promised work, safety, and a quick migration process. Though Kamala had no labour permit, the agent assured the family there was no cause for concern.

Once Kamala reached Kuwait for the second time, everything began to fall apart. She fell seriously ill. Her hand was badly injured. She grew increasingly weak and could no longer work. Her employer refused to provide medical treatment and sent her back to the agent's office. There, she remained for 22 days and was fed only lentil soup.

She was admitted to the hospital after falling unconscious. When she briefly regained consciousness, she managed to utter a few broken words to her family over a video call, strapped to a hospital bed in the ICU with feeding tubes blocking her throat.

Back in Nepal, the agent began to demand money for her rescue. First, Kamala's brother sent NPR 75,000. Then, her mother somehow raised and sent over NPR 100,000 in the hopes of bringing her daughter home. Kamala's family had never expected her to arrive in a coffin.

The family never received a medical report. Kamala's phone and belongings were never returned.

The agent contributed just NPR 30,000 towards the funeral and even issued threats when pressed for more. Though the Nepali Embassy in Kuwait helped repatriate Kamala's body, government bodies in Nepal refused any assistance, saying she had gone abroad 'illegally' and was thus not eligible for any support.

Kamala's death led to her family's financial ruin. The family was still repaying loans taken to fund her migration. The family now faced social stigma. Some villagers began to avoid them, as they were thought to have brought the misfortune upon themselves. But Kamala's remittances had once built a home, lifted her family out of poverty, and contributed, as thousands of female migrant domestic workers do, to Nepal's economy.

### Legal migration of Sumitra Kunwar still led to her death: Who is accountable?

Sumitra Kunwar left Nepal for Kuwait, with her passport in hand and her family's hopes resting on her shoulders, at 27.

Her family had scraped together 150,000 rupees to send her abroad, money that came at great personal sacrifice, including the sale of her mother's jewellery. The goal was simple: a better life for Sumitra and her children.

Before she left, Sumitra had already endured hardship. After her husband secretly remarried, and she became a single mother. Her uncle then suggested she go abroad to work, promising that her family would care for her children. With little choice, Sumitra agreed.

She found domestic work in Kuwait, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. But soon, her employer's father began to sexually harass her. When she rejected his advances, she was accused of stealing and beaten. Sumitra left and found another job caring for an elderly couple. But her peace was short-lived as the younger son-in-law began harassing her too. She confided in her sister-in-law of fearing being left alone in the house.

Days later, Sumitra was found hanging in her room, her death deemed a suicide.

But the tragedy didn't end there. The family struggled to bring her body home. Sumitra had left Nepal legally, but once she changed employers, her status was erased, and she was labelled an "illegal migrant." Government offices and immigration officials refused to help. Despite her legal status, Sumitra's rights vanished the moment she became an "illegal migrant" in their eyes.

The family ran from office to office, agents, embassies, and government departments, and were given empty promises. Five months and 60,000 rupees later, Sumitra's body was returned - with no state support. Her family was left to bear the remaining cost, relying on relatives, neighbours, and the community to gather money.

The government's indifference was matched by the employers' negligence. Not only had they failed to protect Sumitra, but they also ignored her suffering as she endured abuse. When she died, they offered no compensation. The role of agents was equally critical. They facilitated Sumitra's migration, but once she encountered problems, they disappeared. With no recourse through official channels, the family's desperate cries for help went unanswered.

Sumitra's death is a reminder of the vulnerability migrant workers face. The roles of agents, employers, embassies, and government offices are crucial in either preventing or enabling such tragedies. Yet, each failed to protect Sumitra, leaving her family to carry the weight not just of her death but of the crushing debt and social isolation that followed. Despite migrating legally, the label of "illegal" followed Sumitra to her death, stripping away her dignity and her family's hope for a better future. Now, her children face a future without a mother; her family is left burdened by unpayable loans and broken promises.

### When a strong swimmer drowns: The story of Shrijana Oli's death and denied justice

Shrijana Oli had gone abroad for domestic from Kathmandu airport. She had previously worked as a domestic worker overseas for around two years before returning home. When she decided to go again, a relative claimed to know a manpower agent and arranged her departure after taking money. The relative gave assurances that nothing would go wrong. The family had taken out a loan of NPR 700,000 to cover her migration and related expenses. Within two months, she was sent to Dubai on a visit visa.

Communication with family was limited to phone calls. Shrijana would mention that she was very busy with work and would call whenever she could. There were occasions when her salary was withheld by

employers. As a result, she was forced to change companies, the first did not pay well, and the second promised better wages.

One day, representatives from SaMi, who had tracked down the family's address, informed them that Shrijana had drowned in a swimming pool.

The family refused to believe she had drowned, as she was known to be a good swimmer. After speaking to members of the diaspora network, they learned that she had allegedly been drowned by some men from Pakistan.

The family struggled for four months to repatriate her body, managing only with financial and logistical help from relatives and neighbours. Both government agencies and manpower agents failed to offer any support.

The authorities refused assistance, citing she had travelled on a visit visa, making her ineligible for compensation or support. Bringing her body home and performing the final rites proved extremely difficult due to the lack of funds.

Losing her was already deeply painful, but the pressure from the lender made her husband's life unbearable. The lender began visiting the home daily, shouting, and demanding repayment. These constant visits caused the family immense stress. Attempts to claim insurance failed. Eventually, her husband was forced to sell the house they had built in order to repay their debts.

Shrijana's husband tried to seek justice, but no one listened. When the family visited government offices, they were blamed for allowing her to travel on a visit visa, eventually blaming Shrijana for changing employers.

When Shrijana was alive, the community had supported the family both socially and financially. After her death, that support faded. Because she had travelled on a visit visa and was viewed as an illegal migrant, people distanced themselves from the family.

Shrijana's family believe they were treated like outsiders by their own people and country.

### Remembering Shriti Nepali: A friend's account of loss and injustice

*[Note: This is a first-person account of two friends who travelled abroad together as migrant workers]*

Shriti Nepali was my neighbour and close friend. She was a young mother who was determined and desperate to build a better life for her daughter. After her husband remarried and abandoned her, she moved back to her maternal home. While her parents supported her, her brothers did not. She often spoke of her hopes. Her daughter was now attending school, but she could not find work locally and wished to go abroad.

Her parents borrowed 80,000 rupees to fund her migration to Kuwait through a recruitment agency. We travelled together via India.

However, what we were promised was very different from what we faced. We were told we would be employed by companies, but upon arrival in Saudi Arabia, we were taken to Kuwait to work as domestic workers. Our passports were immediately confiscated. Shriti was placed in her employer's father's house, while I was sent to the son's.

Her life there was a nightmare. She endured relentless work during the day and suffered sexual abuse from her employer at night. Refusal brought starvation, sometimes lasting days. Twice she was beaten so severely that her body was covered in bruises. She confided in me that she feared the man would one day kill her.

Then, suddenly, she vanished.

I did not see her for several days. When I inquired, the employer told me she had taken her own life. I was shocked and devastated. I strongly believe she was killed for resisting abuse.

Eventually, the authorities sent her body home. I returned to Nepal with her remains. Her family was shattered. Unable to bring her remains back to their village, they cremated her in Kathmandu.

Her parents were left to raise her daughter alone. Her mother's mental health deteriorated. Debt collectors visited them repeatedly. In time, the family was forced to sell their home. Her mother migrated to India and never returned.

Now, her daughter lives with her stepmother. When she sees me, she asks where her mother is and why she did not return with me.

We received no support. The recruitment agent stopped responding. The authorities claimed that because she had travelled via India, they could not be held responsible.

There was no counselling, no legal assistance, no justice.

The community that once supported us began to distance themselves. The stigma and silence drove us out of the village.

### Suvarna Pariyar vanished without justice

Suvarna Pariyar' husband drank heavily and did not support the family. Her in-laws had passed away. Suvarna was left to care for the children on her own. Hence, she decided to travel to Kuwait, hoping to build a better future for her two young sons.

However, due to migration ban, she went to Kuwait through informal channels via India. When she reached Kuwait, her employer locked her in the house and cut off her contact with her family. She was made to work hard all day and was abused at night, often by male guests of the employer. At first, she was given food and basic care, but soon that stopped. She was treated as property, used and mistreated relentlessly.

After a year, Suvarna managed to secretly buy a cheap mobile phone. She recorded the abuse and kept a diary of the beatings and insults. One day, her employer tried to kill her by pushing her off the roof. Instead of being protected, she was accused of theft and put in jail.

In prison, she met another Nepali woman. Suvarna told her that she feared she would die someday. She asked that her children be told the truth—that she went abroad for their future. But she had not been paid anything.

Back in Nepal, her family was told she had died. But her body never came home. Because she had travelled informally, the government refused to help return her alleged remains. Her family's requests were ignored. The agent who arranged her travel made false promises, then disappeared.

Her sons cried for days, hoping to see their mother one last time. But that chance was never given to them. The loss hit the family hard. Her husband had a mental breakdown and went to India for treatment. He never returned either.

Suvarna's older sister, Kamala, took in the boys. Many in the community told her to marry and leave the children behind, but she refused. She became their guardian. Life was very difficult. People stopped helping. Moneylenders would not give loans because the household was woman-led, and there were no men in the family capable of earning a living.

Kamala worked as a labourer and raised goats and chickens just to feed the children. The younger boy often asked when his father would come back. Kamala had no answer. Without Suvarna or her husband, there was no income. The family slipped deeper into poverty. The government gave no support. NGOs offered nothing. Kamala faced grief and responsibility alone. She worked every day to keep the boys in school and put food on the table. Kamala also needed help—emotional, mental, social. But no one offered it.

She tried to protect the children from the harshness of the truth, only speaking about their mother in private moments. Justice, for this family, feels impossible. They did not know how to seek legal help, and no one guided them. No one was punished. They were left alone, to grieve and to survive.

### Sabitri Thapa: A Dream That Never Came Home

Sabitri Thapa was 22 when she left Nepal for Jordan, hoping to lift her family out of poverty. Her mother, Sanu Thapa, had spent much of her life working alone to raise three children. Her husband had spent years abroad but remained distant after returning. Sanu moved closer to her maternal home, rented a small house, and supported her children by running a small business.

Sabitri was quiet, responsible, and determined. She wanted to migrate. So, her family borrowed between seventy thousand to one lakh rupees to pay an agency for her migration. She received labour approval and left through Kathmandu airport.

In Jordan, Sabitri worked for a company doing domestic tasks. She sent money home, and her family believed things were improving. In 2018, Sanu heard from a relative who saw something alarming on Facebook.

Within minutes, the news was confirmed: Sabitri had died.

The official report from Jordan claimed Sabriti had committed suicide. Sanu was devastated and confused. Her daughter had dreams. She had shown no signs of despair. The news felt impossible to believe.

Sabitri's body arrived in Kathmandu with two company representatives and documents, including a postmortem report from Jordan. The family, overwhelmed by grief and unfamiliar with their rights, cremated her body the next day at the Pashupatinath temple.

No questions were asked. No investigation took place.

The loss left the family shattered. Sabitri had been the main source of income. Without her, the family slipped into deeper debt, eventually reaching thirteen lakh rupees.

Her younger brother tried to help by studying IT on scholarships and taking on responsibilities beyond his age. Her younger sister, already struggling with mental health issues, could not continue her education. Later, she married, had a child, and was abandoned by her husband, who left for Dubai.

Sanu now cares for her granddaughter while coping with chronic grief and physical ailments. She developed chest pain, joint problems, and difficulty eating, symptoms that doctors could not explain. She believes her pain is rooted in unresolved loss.

To this day, Sanu does not believe her daughter took her own life. She suspects mistreatment or abuse but was never given the opportunity to ask questions.

The family received 7.5 lakh rupees in insurance, but no one helped them understand what had happened. No government official initiated an investigation. The agent who facilitated the migration never followed up.

For Sanu, justice is not about money. It is about the truth—of knowing what happened to her daughter, and why. But no one tells her anything. The silence from officials and the unanswered questions remain. For Sanu, the absence of her daughter, of justice, and of truth will never fade. Sabitri left with a dream; she never came home having fulfilled it.

# Listening across stories

The stories of death presented in the previous chapter offer human insights into the reality of family members left behind who endure the loss of their loved ones. Every single story of death represents the migration, labour, and sacrifices of female Nepali citizens whose lives unfold in invisibility and end in silence.

With these stories, we not only aim to record the tragic loss of female Nepali citizens, but also to offer a window into the systemic challenges that shape the migration experience. In addition to these personal narratives, it is important to consider the official data collected by the Government of Nepal through the Foreign Employment Board (FEB). For the government, between 2008 and 2024, approximately 400 female Nepali migrant workers' deaths have been officially recorded. Total compensation payouts during this period was NPR 168,269,000. The caste breakdown of these deaths includes 244 adibasi / anajati (tribal and indigenous nationalities), 104 Brahmin/Chhetri, 43 Dalit, 7 Madhesi, and 2 unknown. Whilst these statistics provide a snapshot of the scale and demographic distribution of recorded deaths, they only represent cases reported through formal migration channels with valid labour permits. Many female migrant workers travel through informal routes or face situations where bodies are not repatriated. Nepali mission's involvement in repatriation is not made available in publicly accessible data. Therefore, the official statistics are incomplete and do not represent the true magnitude of loss.

Recognising these limitations, our research relied on extensive qualitative fieldwork. We engaged directly with family members of the deceased and stakeholders from the migration industry to capture fuller and more complex realities behind the numbers. It is through this lens that we now move from personal narratives to the analysis section. While the stories highlight the human cost of female migrant domestic workers' deaths, the analysis broadens the focus, moving from individual deaths to the systemic forces and structural failures behind these deaths and their consequences. This analysis examines the intersecting issues of grief, financial collapse, social stigma, institutional neglect, irregular migration, and the complex web of accountability that shapes the experiences of families left behind.

We intentionally present our points in a clear format that distils key insights into mental health challenges faced by bereaved families, the cycles of debt and dispossession that follow, and the social exclusion that adds to their suffering. The analysis also looks at institutional failures such as delays in body repatriation, legal barriers, and the roles of agents, employers, and government bodies that leave families without justice or support.

Central to this analysis is the recognition of how gender, caste, class, and indigeneity intersect to deepen vulnerabilities and keep female Nepali migrant domestic workers invisible and disposable. However, we do not claim these interpretations to be exhaustive or definitive. Given the complexity of these cases and the different perspectives of stakeholders, including families, policymakers, civil society, and migration industry actors, we acknowledge that same facts can lead to multiple understandings. We therefore present this analysis as a foundation for further dialogue and reflection. We offer these findings to actors in Nepal's migration sector: policymakers, recruitment agencies,

civil society organisations, anti-trafficking NGOs, trade unions, labour experts, and families of migrant workers. We understand that each actor in Nepal's migration industry brings a unique insight shaped by their role, experience, and priorities. By engaging critically with this analysis, stakeholders can better identify gaps, challenges, and opportunities for action that suit the realities they face.

Ultimately, this report aims to foster a shared understanding and commitment to improving protections and support for female migrant domestic workers and their left behind family members. The analysis is an important step in moving beyond the immediate grief of individual stories towards sustained systemic change. We invite readers to consider these insights carefully, question assumptions, and join a discussion that respects the complexity of gendered migration, the dignity of those who have lost their lives, and the demand for justice for left behind family members.

# Amplifying Silenced Voices of Survived Family Members

In this section, we present core insights drawn from the stories of deaths of female Nepali migrant domestic workers and interviews conducted with their families, communities, and stakeholders in the migration industry. Rather than offering descriptive case studies, we identify recurring patterns in point form. These insights trace the emotional, financial, and social consequences of such deaths and examine the institutional and structural conditions that sustain, invisibilise, and erase them.

In most cases, families first learn of their loved ones' death abroad through brief, often vague phone calls, or Facebook posts. What follows is a difficult process. Family members encounter contradictory accounts, delays in documentation, and institutional silence. These deaths are not isolated incidents, but outcomes shaped by restrictive gendered migration policy, fragmented accountability, and internal hierarchies that determine whose life is protected and whose death is explained. Repatriation processes, compensation claims, and access to justice expose the limits of state responsibility and the conditions under which citizenship fails to guarantee support.

This chapter highlights how these deaths reveal broader patterns of exclusion, and how the governance of migration renders women's lives invisible in death.

## 5.1: Grief, debt, and dispossession

### Mental health challenges

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|---|---|
| 1. | Family members of deceased female migrant domestic workers experience long-term mental health issues. |
| | Depression, anxiety, insomnia, and panic attacks are common. |
| | Physical symptoms such as chronic pain persist. |
| | Grief leads to social withdrawal and substance abuse. |
| 2. | Elderly parents face increased burden after their daughters' deaths. |
| | They are often left with the care of young children and adolescents which increases their financial, emotional and safeguarding burdens. |
| | Their health deteriorates due to stress. |
| 3. | Children experience trauma that impacts their behaviour and wellbeing. |
| | They often lack proper support and emotional outlets. |
| 4. | The delay or denial of body repatriation increases anxiety and grief. |
| | Families are unable to perform last rites or mourning rituals. |
| | Uncertainty and lack of closure prolong mental health issues. |
| 5. | Lack of mental health support to the family members of the bereaved. |
| | Government responses ignore the emotional needs of bereaved families (even for those migrating via regular channels!). |
| | No official mental health or psychosocial counselling support mechanisms exist at ward level. |
| | Families often lack information on how to seek help. |
| 6. | Stigma around mental health. |
| | Grief remains unspoken due to cultural stigma around mental health. |
| | Family members carry their pain in silence. |

***Upama Dangi's Husband***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"My wife used to comfort me by saying suffering is temporary and good days would come. But when I got the news of her death, even I, a man, cried from the pain."

***Ved Kumari Sarki's Mother***
*(Dalit)*

" The loneliness and emptiness are unbearable. She was my only support, and now life feels heavy and sad. "

***Suvarna Pariyar's Sister***
*(Dalit)*

" Her sons cried for days, wanting to see their mother's face one last time — but her body never came home."



### Financial collapse and debt cycles

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Families face financial collapse after the death of a female migrant domestic worker. |
| | The loss of income leaves households unable to meet basic needs. |
| | Debts incurred for migration remain unpaid. |
| | Family members are trapped in high-interest debt cycles. |
| | Informal lenders apply constant pressure for repayment. |
| 2. | Asset loss becomes common in the struggle to repay loans. |
| | Family members often sell land or property to repay loans. |
| | Homes and livestock are frequently forfeited. |
| 3. | Women-headed households bear the brunt of financial stress. |
| | Female caregivers are left to support children alone. |
| | Absent or remarried husbands provide no support. |
| 4. | Children's wellbeing and education are jeopardised. |
| | Financial pressure forces school dropouts, especially for girls. |
| 5. | The state provides inadequate financial assistance. |
| | Insurance and compensation often exclude informal migrants. |
| 6. | The economic impact extends to wider communities. |
| | Neighbours and co-signers also face financial loss. |
| | Community trust and stability are eroded. |
| 7. | Families feel forced to send another member abroad to compensate for the financial losses. |
| | A new family member is expected to repay outstanding loans. |
| | Intergenerational cycles of debt and migration are reinforced. |

***Maya Bhandari's parent***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"Her death completely shattered our family's finances. Not a single rupee has come from her husband's side. We don't know how we will manage her daughter's future."

***Prabha Nepali's sister***
*(Dalit)*

"We borrowed money hoping for a better life, but after her death, the loans remain, and even the house was locked by the moneylender. Our debts have become a prison"

***Suvarna Pariyar's sister***
*(Dalit)*

"No one trusts me to lend me money anymore. How can I repay my debts when there is no breadwinner left?"

***Meelan Sunar's husband***
*(Dalit)*

"We had borrowed NPR 300,000 to build a house. Now the lender comes day and night demanding repayment. I don't know how to repay the money. What will become of my sons?"

## Social stigma and disintegration

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | The death of a female migrant domestic worker often brings social stigma and exclusion. |
| | Communities view irregular migration as immoral or shameful. |
| | Sympathy is short-lived and often replaced by blame and gossip. |
| 2. | Families experience a loss of respect and community standing. |
| | Social support diminishes after the migrant's death. |
| | Families are excluded from community events and networks. |
| 3. | Left behind family members are blamed by society. |
| | Relatives and neighbours often accuse them of sending women abroad. |
| | Parents and spouses face accusations of negligence. |
| 4. | Stigma is more intense for families from marginalised castes and classes. |
| | Dalit and poor families face more social exclusion after deaths of their family members. |
| | Informal safety nets often vanish quickly in the wake of the tragedy. |
| 5. | Poor upper-caste families are also not spared from exclusion. |
| | Community ties are broken regardless of caste when income is lost. |
| | Respect and support disappear with the death of the breadwinner. |
| 6. | Children of deceased migrants face discrimination at school. |
| | They are teased or ostracised by peers. |
| | Stigma affects their mental wellbeing and sense of belonging. |

***Meelan Sunar's husband***
*(Dalit)*

"After her death, some community members distanced themselves. Help we once received disappeared, and even neighbours stopped supporting us."

***Prabha Nepali's sister***
*(Dalit)*

"When she sent money, people respected us; after she died, neighbours turned away, gossip grew, and we lost not just her, but our place in society."

***Maya Bhandari's parent***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"At school, when classmates say, 'Your mother was killed by your father,' she says, 'Don't talk about my father like that, he's abroad.' She doesn't let anyone blame him."

***Suvarna Pariyar's sister***
*(Dalit)*

"Neighbours told me to remarry and leave my sister's children behind. But I refused to abandon them."



## 5.2: Institutional failures, irregular migration, and structural complicity

**Repatriation of dead bodies of Nepali citizens and legal barriers for their family members.**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Repatriation of deceased migrant workers is often delayed. |
| | Families face weeks or months of waiting with no clear guidance. |
| | Lack of coordination between embassies, employers, and governments. |
| 2. | Irregular migrants face the greatest repatriation challenges. |
| | Host countries and Nepali embassies deny responsibility due to lack of documentation. |
| | Legal frameworks exclude families from any support and recognition in Nepal. |
| | Families receive no compensation or support for the deaths of 'undocumented migrants'. |
| | Dead bodies seldom arrive at their homes. They are either buried abroad without the family's consent or presence, or cremated in Kathmandu. |
| 3. | Institutional neglect forces family members to rely on personal networks. |
| | Repatriation becomes a burden on relatives, neighbours, or local communities, especially when diaspora support is not available (affecting Dalit community members the most). |
| 4. | State assistance is minimal. |
| | Foreign Employment Board (FEB) only provides a vehicle to transport bodies from the airport to home districts. |
| | Even the symbolic NPR 25,000 provided by the FEB for cremation support is sometimes difficult for the family members to receive. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 5. | Civil society support is non-existent. |
| | Except for a few organisations, Nepali civil society organisations have not assisted in the repatriation of bodies. |
| | Even when embassies explicitly request their support to repatriate Nepali citizens who have suffered extreme exploitation and abuse, there have been cases where Nepali civil society organisations have either delayed or denied such requests, leading to the deaths of Nepali citizens. |
| 6. | Deaths are often labelled as suicide or natural causes without investigation. |
| | Family members suggest that, even when bruises are visible on the bodies, post-mortem reports often classify the deaths as suicides. |
| | Lack of double post-mortem reports prevents truth and accountability. |
| 7. | Shifting legal definitions deny support to even documented migrants. |
| | Changes in workplace as a result of extreme labour exploitation can invalidate the legal status. |
| 8. | Bureaucratic failures, institutional discrimination reflect structural injustice. |

***Meghwati Dangol's brother***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"It took 40 to 45 days for her body to return. We weren't allowed to open the coffin because of chemicals. That distance felt like a punishment."

***Ved Kumari Sarki's mother***
*(Dalit)*

"We had to struggle for months just to bring her body home... No government agency or migration office guided or supported us."

### Irregular migration and systemic vulnerability

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|---|---|
| 1. | Migration bans and lack of formal options force Nepali citizens into informal routes. |
| | Restrictive policies (migration bans, preconditions of migration) prevent access to official labour migration for domestic work. |
| | Women rely on unregulated agents and travel without contracts or legal protection. |
| | Informal migrants live and die without state recognition. Their undocumented status denies them diplomatic support or compensation. |
| 2. | Safe migration policies do not protect women in domestic work sectors. |
| | Authorities often blame Nepali citizens for taking informal routes. This discourages families from seeking help or justice. |
| | Even those who return face exclusion from the state's reintegration policies, thereby triggering their remigration. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 3. | Migration bans in domestic work kills women. |
| | The migration bans push some of the poorest women in Nepal to take dangerous risks. |
| | It fosters secrecy and stigma. Women often hide their migration plans from family members. Social stigma and fear of judgment often makes their migration process risky. |
| | Debt, survival, and children's future needs override concerns about safety and legality. |
| | Migration bans decreases bargaining power of Nepali citizens abroad. |
| 4. | Irregular migration reflects structural violence and policy failure. |
| | The state's inaction perpetuates gendered and caste-based exploitation. |
| | Women remain invisible in both life and death. |
| | Families are left with loss and no form of redress as the state does not acknowledge or compensate Nepali citizens who have taken informal routes to migrate. |



***Meghwati Dangol's brother***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"She didn't tell our father about going abroad because he wouldn't let her. She went alone, quietly, afraid people would stop her."

***Kamala Bhujel's mother***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"Because she travelled without a permit, the government turned its back on us. No compensation, no clear answers—just silence and barriers at every step."

***Sumitra Kunwar's neighbour***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"We sold all the jewellery to send her abroad. That hope of making new jewellery after she returned was shattered forever."

***Meelan Sunar's husband***
*(Dalit)*

"After her employer died, they told her to return home without pay. She fled to Kuwait illegally because she had to repay her debt no matter what."

### Complicity of agents, employers, and the government

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|---|---|
| 1. | Migration agents facilitate departure but abandon workers and families after departure or death. |
| | Agents often disappear after migrant domestic workers deaths, leaving family members without assistance. |
| | Many agents extract more money to rescue domestic workers when they report distress in their labour relations. |
| | Agents sometimes offer token money after death and threaten family members to remain silent about the issue. |
| | Investigations and accountability are rarely pursued against such agents. Family members have no legal way to hold them accountable due to informal migration. |
| | Agents sometimes disappear after women die, leaving families without information or support. |
| 2. | Employers exploit female migrant domestic workers with impunity. |
| | Employers are aware that migration bans make Nepali citizens vulnerable to exploitation. |
| | Employers understand that migration bans in domestic work protect them, allowing them to exploit, or even cause the deaths of, Nepali workers with little risk of accountability. |
| | Workers face abuse, including caste-based insults, sexual exploitation, physical violence, psychological trauma, and neglect, with no legal consequences for employers. |
| | Employers do not communicate transparently about incidents, providing unverified explanations and refusing responsibility. |
| 3. | Government policies and failures exacerbate vulnerabilities and deny recognition. |
| | Migration bans on domestic work push women into illicit routes, denying them legal status and reintegration support. |
| | Nepali government agencies, citing bureaucratic constraints, often shirk responsibility, despite migrants' significant economic contributions. |
| | Nepali missions frequently refuse support to Nepali domestic workers abroad, citing informality, overwork, and limited staff and resources. Nepali government refuses to increase capacity of the missions. |
| | Even though there are designated funds within the mission, bureaucracy and a lack of will excludes female Nepali migrant domestic workers even after their deaths. |
| | Whilst the Nepali embassy sometimes assists with body repatriation, it does not release data. Data on death is published only by the FEB, and only for those who migrate through formal channels. |
| 4. | Suspected foul play and violence highlight the severe risks faced by migrant Nepali women. |
| | Families report injuries inconsistent with natural causes and suspect murder or severe abuse. |
| | Community silence and institutional neglect compound victims' isolation and suffering. |
| 5. | The systemic complicity of agents, employers, and government institutions perpetuates injustice. |
| | Structural power imbalances devalue migrant women's lives, making their exploitation invisible in life and death. |
| | Multi-layered abandonment ensures that justice and accountability remain out of reach for affected families. |




## 5.3: Structural inequality and intersectional injustice: The conditions that shape death and deny accountability

### Gendered migration and the politics of disposability

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Systemic invisibility of Nepali women's lives, labour, mobility and death. |
| | Nepali women's roles as caregivers and economic providers are largely ignored, reinforcing the perception of their disposability both in Nepal and abroad. |
| | Nepali women, especially from lower-caste and poor backgrounds, face entrenched hierarchies that render their labour and lives undervalued and invisible. |
| 2. | Protectionist policies further excludes female Nepali citizens. |
| | The migration bans reinforce the systemic invisibility of women in Nepal. |
| | These protectionist policies fail to recognise Nepali women's presence, their labour, their remittances, their lives, their desires, their expectations—or their love for their country, which they demonstrate by sending regular remittances to support the education and health of Nepal's future generations. |
| | These restrictive state migration policies push women into irregular, undocumented migration, exposing them to exploitation and abuse without formal protections. |
| | Domestic work remains unregulated in destination countries, leaving migrant women vulnerable to physical, sexual abuse, and neglect, often within isolated private households. |
| | Deaths of female migrant domestic workers are frequently dismissed as suicides or natural causes without proper investigation. |
| 3. | Gendered politics of disposability embedded in migration governance. |
| | Institutional failures in repatriation, investigation, and compensation reveal a political system indifferent to women's lives, suffering and deaths. |
| | The state's inaction is a continuation of structural violence and gender bias that normalises exploitation and erasure of female migrant workers. |
| 4. | Broader implications and the need for structural change. |
| | These individual deaths of Nepali citizens signify systemic marginalisation rooted in gendered power hierarchies within Nepali society and state policies. |
| | Until these hierarchies are dismantled, female Nepali migrant workers will remain disposable, with their contributions ignored and their deaths unacknowledged as national concerns. |

***Sabitri Thapa's mother***
*(Janjati)*

"She went because of poverty and family problems... She wasn't even of the appropriate age to migrate, but the pressure of our family situation pushed her to leave."

***Kamala Bhujel's mother***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"Women like my daughter are treated as disposable labour. She was sent away without protection, forgotten when they fall ill or die."

***Meghwati Dangol's brother***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"Her death was ruled suicide abroad, but that is not who she was. Women like her are seen as disposable and their deaths are forgotten or ignored."

***Upama Dangi's husband***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"She said, 'Even if I suffer abroad, my family will be happy in Nepal. That thought makes me happy.' But as a woman, she was disposable, exploited, abused, and lost."

## Caste, class, and indigeneity: The intersectional struggles of Nepali migrant women

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Intersectional oppressions shape domestic work emigration. |
| | Migration for domestic work by Nepali women is influenced by intersecting structures of caste, class, and indigeneity. |
| | Dalit, janajati (indigenous), and low-income women face marginalisation that dictates their migration routes, labour conditions, and vulnerability to injustice both at home and abroad. |
| 2. | Exclusion from formal migration channels. |
| | Systemic barriers, lack of education, skills, and financial means, restrict intersectionally marginalised women from accessing formal, legal migration pathways. |
| | Consequently, many are forced into informal, unregulated migration through unlicensed agents, resulting in heightened risk of exploitation, debt, and absence of legal protection. |
| 3. | State policies perpetuate disposability. |
| | Nepal's restrictive and protectionist migration policies, such as the ban on domestic work migration, exacerbate exclusion and push historically marginalised Dalit, indigenous, Muslim and other lower caste women into dangerous irregular migration. |
| | The absence of formal documentation leaves these women and their families vulnerable and voiceless when abuse, exploitation, or death occurs abroad. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 4. | Persistent discrimination with or without legal status. |
| | Even with formal labour permits, caste and class based discrimination persist, limiting access to information, support, and justice for families. |
| | Legal recognition does not guarantee safety or dignity, as systemic discrimination continues to undervalue the labour and lives of Dalit and indigenous migrant women. |
| | Caste-based discrimination is also present within civil society organisations working on human rights, human trafficking, and domestic work—even among those that claim to advocate for these communities. |
| | In the event of a death, many Dalit communities face extreme challenges in navigating complex bureaucracy, repatriating bodies, and accessing financial support. |
| 5. | Social isolation for marginalised families. |
| | Families from marginalised communities experience isolation and lack of support following the death of a migrant woman, compounded by social stigma and exclusion. |
| | Financial hardships force these intersectionally oppressed families into precarious decisions such as selling homes or relocating, often to avoid social humiliation tied to a death abroad. This often perpetuate the cycle of irregular migration which the state, anti-trafficking, and other safe migration actors problematise. |



***Maya Bhandari's parent***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"We moved from Bardiya to Dang for our granddaughter's care, but now we cannot return because no one else can look after her. Poverty and social class trap us in this cycle of loss."

***Sabitri Thapa's mother***
*(Janjati)*

"We had no relatives to help... We didn't know what to do."

***Suvarna Pariyar's sister***
*(Dalit)*

"We had no knowledge or power. Poor, uneducated, and informal migrants are left to suffer alone."

***Meelan Sunar's husband***
*(Dalit)*

"Despite being Nepali citizens, we are treated like outsiders—no support, no compensation, no justice. Restrictions and poverty trap us in endless suffering."

## Fragmented accountability and the limits for justice

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Fragmented accountability and legal barriers. |
| | The legal framework focuses more on controlling and managing migration than on protecting every Nepali workers' rights or supporting families. |
| | Families face complex and inaccessible bureaucratic procedures with no clear pathway to justice. |
| 2. | Shifting of responsibility among government bodies. |
| | Multiple agencies pass responsibility without providing concrete support. |
| | Responsibilities are scattered across institutions, leading to ineffective support. |
| | Even those with legal migration documents face bureaucratic confusion and lack of guidance. |
| | Families are caught in bureaucratic loops without resolution. |
| 3. | Family members seeking justice and dignity. |
| | Families question why, if Nepali citizens are sending remittances to the country, which contributes to the development of Nepal, the government does not protect them. |
| | Families suggest that justice would mean:<br>- recognition of Nepali citizens' death;<br>- acknowledgement of the human cost of death;<br>- less bureaucratic economic compensation;<br>- transparency regarding the circumstances of death;<br>- quick body repatriation;<br>- provision of emotional support;<br>- accountability of the host countries, employers, agents, Nepali civil societies, Nepali trade unions, and Nepal state. |

***Ved Kumari Sarki's mother***
*(Dalit)*

"Justice means knowing the truth, holding those responsible accountable, and receiving the support we deserve."

***Upama Dangi's husband***
*(Brahmin/Chhetri)*

"The report said she committed suicide. Once you lose your sight, you have no choice but to believe what they say. There is no justice, no one to help us."

***Suvarna Pariyar's sister***
*(Dalit)*

"Justice was never served. We faced only silence and refusal from every government office we approached."

***Shriti Nepali's friend***
*(Dalit)*

"We never received any legal support. Justice never came for Shriti. The government should lift the ban on women working abroad—restricting their choices only prolongs suffering."

***Prabha Nepali's sister***
*(Dalit)*

"Justice means being able to bring her body home and get help for her children—but because she went 'illegally,' we were ignored. Does poverty erase our right to justice?"



## 5.4 Conclusion

What we have presented here are voices of those families who have lost daughters, wives, sisters, and mothers to an exclusionary migration industry. These women did not die because of an accident or a misfortune. They died because they were placed at the intersection of restrictive laws, economic desperation, class, caste and indigeneity based intersectional oppression, and exploitative labour relations. We have heard the stories of women whose deaths were reduced to a sentence in a phone call, whose deceased bodies were delayed or denied repatriation, and whose families were left with grief, debt and silence. We have spoken to elderly parents, often without support, who are raising the future generation, and communities that turn away instead of offering support and solidarity.

What we have outlined here must serve as the foundation for action. We need gender responsive migration policies that expand safe and legal routes instead of closing them. We need systems of repatriation that function without delay or discrimination. We need compensation and insurance schemes that include all migrants, regardless of their documentation status. We need mental health services, legal aid, and public recognition that support families beyond the immediate crisis. And we need investigations into deaths abroad that do not stop at speculations and assumptions. We also need to confront the deeper structures—the caste, class, and gender hierarchies that decide whose lives are protected, whose labour is valued, and whose suffering is seen as acceptable. A woman's passport may declare her a citizen, but her social position determines what that citizenship means when she is exploited, when she disappears, or when she dies. This chapter is not a conclusion; it is a starting point.

What we ask is simple and urgent: Stop treating these deaths as unfortunate events. Stop sensationalising women's deaths. Start recognising them as a result of a protectionist policies built to profit from vulnerability. If Nepal is to claim the remittances of all its migrant workers, it should also claim responsibility for their lives, and for the lives of those they leave behind.

# Policy Recommendations: Towards Justice and Dignity for Female Nepali Migrant Workers and their Family Members

## 1. Ensure legal migration pathways

**• Lift the bans (and preconditions) on domestic work migration**

Immediately revoke restrictions on women migrating for domestic work. These bans push women into irregular routes, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, and abuse.

**• Facilitate legal migration channels**

Simplify documentation processes and reduce delays to make legal migration more accessible.
Strengthen regulation and oversight of recruitment agencies to reduce dependence on informal brokers.

**• Recognise informal migrants in policy frameworks**

Move beyond the harmful "legal vs illegal" migration binary. All migrants, regardless of routes they take, contribute to Nepal's economy and deserve protection, recognition and state support.

## 2. Strengthen social protection and compensation mechanisms

**• Extend existing schemes for family members of deceased migrant workers (with labour permits)**

Include undocumented migrants in the same support systems.
Simplify claims process for families regardless of the migration route.
Allow local government offices to process claims.
Encourage fellowship or grant programs for young researchers from marginalized backgrounds working on migration justice.

**• Include all migrant workers in the Social Security Fund**

Ensure that all migrants, whether regular or irregular, are automatically enrolled and protected.

**• Establish a government-funded repatriation programme**

Create a centralised fund to ensure: Timely and dignified repatriation of remains; Funeral assistance; Immediate financial relief for affected families.

**• Mandatory insurance and compensation schemes**

Encourage mandatory insurance that guarantees compensation for death, injury, or disability sustained during employment abroad.

## 3. Strengthen institutional and legal support abroad

**• Enhance embassy and consular capacity**

Increase staffing and resources at Nepali embassies, especially labour attachés, legal counsellors, and case managers to provide timely and adequate support.

Include trauma-informed care, gender sensitivity, and rights-based approaches in mandatory training to all embassy officials.

**• Make bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) enforceable and stronger**

Ensure BLAs contain binding provisions on worker protection, legal aid, employer accountability, and repatriation rights.

Include specific clauses addressing the rights and safety of domestic workers, redress mechanisms and gender-based protections.

**• Mandate dual post-mortems and transparent investigations**
Require post-mortem examinations in both the destination and home countries to ensure proper investigation of migrant deaths and prevent negligence or cover-ups.

## 4. Expand mental health and community support systems

**• Establish mental health infrastructure at local level of governance**
Establish psychosocial counsellor at ward level.

Link national mental health systems with local female community health volunteers (FCHVs) to reach rural areas.

Develop a national network on trauma-informed counselling for bereaved families.

**• Support community-based organisations**
Encourage NGOs and civil society groups to offer sustained support to bereaved families through local initiatives, including home visits, legal advice, and solidarity groups.

**• Launch national anti-stigma campaigns**
Combat stigma around women's migration and death using feminist, caste-sensitive, and inclusive narratives to shift public perceptions.

## 5. Ensure justice and accountability

**• Establish a migrant death review board**
Empower embassies to investigate suspicious deaths, monitor patterns, and make legal referrals where required.

Mandate embassies to report publicly on the number of cases handled, their outcomes, and any pending issues.

**• Mandate transparent investigations**
Require dual post-mortems and full access to findings in local languages.

**• Create a legal aid cell for bereaved families**
Offer specialised support for those seeking justice in cases of abuse, negligence, or unexplained deaths.

**• Improve monitoring and accountability**
Set up independent oversight bodies to monitor employers, agencies and agents conduct, embassy performance, and repatriation timelines, with clear penalties for negligence.

**• Localise access to justice and support**
Equip ward and municipal staff to act as first responders, trained in trauma-informed care, grievance handling, and appropriate referrals.

## 3 Promote inclusive policy-making and representation

**• Include returnee migrants and bereaved families in policymaking**
Institutionalise their participation in government consultations and policy design to ensure migrant-centred and reality-based governance.

**• Promote qualitative research on death of Nepali migrant workers**
Promote work led by Dalit, Madhesi, janajati, and rural researchers to reflect diverse lived realities.

Support studies on how migration and death affect people differently, based on intersecting identities, to guide responsive policymaking.

**• Release actual disaggregated data on migrant deaths and repatriation**
Mandate that embassies publish disaggregated data on deceased migrants, regardless of migration status, to expose systemic gaps.

## 4 Ensure child-centred protection and compensation for families of migrant workers

- Establish a national child protection protocol for children of deceased and disappeared migrant workers, especially where the mother was the sole caregiver.

- Mandate that compensation or remittance intended for dependent children be deposited into a dedicated child account. For children under 18, assign a legal guardian based on the child's best interest, with joint familial agreement to prevent misuse and ensure long-term security.

- Empower local child protection committees to monitor the wellbeing of such children and ensure proper use of funds for their care and future.

## 5 Improve financial literacy programmes at local level

**• Address financial exploitation and debt**
Regulate lending practices linked to foreign employment.

Monitor recruitment agencies and moneylenders for predatory practices.

Provide access to low-interest loans and financial literacy programmes.

## 8. Build gender-sensitive migration governance

**• Conduct gender impact assessments**
Review all migration policies through a gender lens to ensure inclusivity and safety.

**• Develop a National action plan on gender and migration**
Include protocols for women's protection, mental health support, and anti-violence measures.

**• Include measures in reintegration services**
Provide psychosocial support, economic opportunities, and community programmes to support returnees.

**• Develop gender-specific protections**
Establish confidential reporting systems in destination countries.
Partner with safe houses and legal clinics to support survivors.
Penalise those involved in coercion, abuse, or gender-based violence.
Maintain a public blacklist of offending employers and agencies.

**• Recognise care work as labour**

# Conclusions



**Untimely workers' deaths offer no closure - and no conclusion**

This report thus ends here. Its meaning is left open.
We invite readers, stakeholders, and all concerned to reflect, respond, and act.

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