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Lift the migration ban on domestic work

The ban pushes women into precarious and undocumented journeys, making them invisible to the state that must protect them.



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Nepal remembers women migrant domestic workers exist when their remittances arrive home. However, it forgets them when they seek support from the state. Somewhere in West Asia, a poor Dalit Nepali domestic worker is fulfilling the care needs of a household. Driven not only by gender- and caste-based oppression at home but also by the lack of economic opportunities in the country, she sustains households in the Gulf, contributes to Nepal through remittances, helps her family escape intergenerational caste oppression, and invests in the next generation of Nepali citizens.

While she is legal in the country where she works, she is invisible in the country to which she 'belongs', having migrated without the government-issued 'labour permit'. By refusing to recognise her labour migration, the state has chosen to evade its responsibility towards her, thereby rendering her disposable.

Nepal's migration bans on domestic work push women into precarious and undocumented journeys, making them **invisible** (<https://doi.org/10.17633/rd.brunel.29804651>) to the state that bears a constitutional duty to protect its most marginalised citizens. If she suffers exploitation, abuse, **disappearance** (<https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2025/06/27/missing-nepali-women>) or even death, the state has no official record that she ever migrated. It excludes her from consular protection, accountability and pathways to redress against exploitation. In effect, she is punished for navigating the very deficit in state care, opportunity, welfare and protection from gender-based violence that thousands of women confront every day.

Yet for 25 years, successive governments have **waged a war** (<https://www.ilo.org/publications/no-easy-exit-%25E2%2580%2593-migration-bans-affecting-women-nepal>) against women's migration into domestic work whilst failing to confront exploitation within that sector. They have mistaken Nepali women's mobility for the problem, turning some of the most marginalised citizens into the targets of **state restriction and confinement** (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23996544241251961>). Their solution has been to prevent Nepali women from migrating, resulting in successive bans on domestic work migration.

However, **research from Nepal** (<https://researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/report/A-comprehensive-analysis-of-policies-and/995219578702676>) and countries such as **Sri Lanka** (<https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/243370>), **Indonesia, the Philippines** (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40878-021-00250-4>) and Bangladesh challenges this assumption. It shows that migration into domestic work is neither inherently nor exceptionally exploitative. Instead, exploitation is embedded across migrant labour regimes, with male migrant workers from these countries experiencing exploitation that is often comparable to, or even more severe than, that experienced by women domestic workers.

Research (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/anti.12882?utm_source=consensus) suggests no ban can stop determined Nepali women from migrating. The ban prevents the state from knowing about their migration, abandons thousands of women who are working as domestic workers, and absolves the state from being obliged to respond when things go wrong.

More recently, Nepal imposed a blanket migration ban in 2017. This total ban on migration for domestic work followed a field visit by and recommendation from a **parliamentary committee** (<https://researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/report/A-comprehensive-analysis-of-policies-and/995219578702676>). These parliamentary committees carry institutional weight, but their decisions are not fixed; they can revise recommendations when new evidence or circumstances demand it.

For example, the committee in **2020** (<https://researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/report/A-comprehensive-analysis-of-policies-and/995219578702676>) recommended seven preconditions for lifting the migration ban, the most important being the presence of a dedicated Bilateral Labour Agreement (**BLA** (<https://researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/report/A-comprehensive-analysis-of-policies-and/995219578702676>)) on domestic work with a host country. In practice, this has functioned as an indefinite postponement, since most of the preconditions lie largely beyond what Nepal can secure on its own.

These preconditions have become an instrument of state abandonment, enabling the government to evade its constitutional obligations whilst thousands of already marginalised citizens continue to bear the consequences.

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Even where BLAs exist, they have not delivered what is claimed. Nepal already has **BLAs** (<https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2025/07/15/blas-in-domestic-work>) with several destination countries where migrant workers continue to face degrees and forms of labour exploitation and abuse. Hence, a signed agreement alone cannot guarantee safe working conditions.

Nine years on, we now have a substantial body of evidence about what the ban actually produced: growth in irregular migration, greater exposure to abuse and exploitation, invisible and premature deaths (1) and the denial of safe and regulated employment to thousands of women. This evidence should prompt a parliamentary committee to revisit earlier recommendations.

Consider the numbers: In the first 10 months of the last fiscal year, 1,273 (<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/1273-nepalis-return-home-in-coffins-in-10-months-56-29.html>) Nepali migrant workers returned home in coffins. Of these, 1,229 were men and only 44 were women. These figures cover only migrants who travelled through formal channels; the deaths of women who migrated informally are not counted at all. Nepali men's deaths in sectors such as Qatari construction have occurred at a comparable or greater scale, yet this has never led to a ban on men's mobility. Only women's migration into domestic work has been treated this way, an asymmetry that traces back to the 1985 Foreign Employment Act, which required women to obtain a male guardian's [permission](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/124875096/SA3-19611136-libre.pdf?1759654237=&response-content-disposition=inline;+filename=Restrictive+Labour+Migration+Policy+on+N.pdf&Expires=1784619216&Signature=JAQizaSHjo~zikVbQYI7aFebMgehmzMD7Jz6jTuE9b28HX6A6onB9hhtfxGzUqPS966pSyCPuiXo9g9NY39RLIJvtdIInX3eqodtypuyOc-9gnDCyrHMHr3QzFGhPU9TxCO214v-xAfUExMch2d~7hZaRDXuu34CW4Ayh7B9n2Xu8Fi4BguNQaffRDc4pGhEJLaC34x7kdge5CaJjix-BQpaUAV5c~ptqilhMpB~fw&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA) (<https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/124875096/SA3-19611136-libre.pdf?1759654237=&response-content-disposition=inline;+filename=Restrictive+Labour+Migration+Policy+on+N.pdf&Expires=1784619216&Signature=JAQizaSHjo~zikVbQYI7aFebMgehmzMD7Jz6jTuE9b28HX6A6onB9hhtfxGzUqPS966pSyCPuiXo9g9NY39RLIJvtdIInX3eqodtypuyOc-9gnDCyrHMHr3QzFGhPU9TxCO214v-xAfUExMch2d~7hZaRDXuu34CW4Ayh7B9n2Xu8Fi4BguNQaffRDc4pGhEJLaC34x7kdge5CaJjix-BQpaUAV5c~ptqilhMpB~fw&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA>) to migrate.

Yet, the ban fails to keep Nepali women at home. Estimates suggest that between 60,000 and 100,000 Nepali women currently [work](https://doi.org/10.17633/rd.brunel.26892934) (<https://doi.org/10.17633/rd.brunel.26892934>) as domestic workers in the Gulf, most through informal channels, and this may understate the actual figures, given how much of migration in domestic work is invisible.

An ILO report [suggests](https://www.ilo.org/publications/no-easy-exit-%25E2%2580%2593-migration-bans-affecting-women-nepal) (<https://www.ilo.org/publications/no-easy-exit-%25E2%2580%2593-migration-bans-affecting-women-nepal>) that when the ban was briefly lifted in 2010, the proportion of women migrating through legal channels [tripled](https://www.humanmovement.cam.ac.uk/news/critical-analysis-migration-ban-lifecycle-women-domestic-workers-indo-pacific-region-june-30) (<https://www.humanmovement.cam.ac.uk/news/critical-analysis-migration-ban-lifecycle-women-domestic-workers-indo-pacific-region-june-30>). This highlights that women are migrating at similarly high rates, only now without a labour contract, registration with Nepali missions abroad, consular assistance and any route to compensation if they are injured or killed.

Civil society groups, returnee workers and concerned Nepali citizens should consider a formal route open to them now: a petition to the Women and Social Affairs Committee and the Law, Justice and Human Rights Committee, requesting a review of the ban on the grounds of women's rights, labour migration, human rights and access to safe employment. This migration ban must be revisited in light of nearly a decade of evidence showing that it has failed to serve the purpose for which it was designed.

None of this suggests domestic work abroad is free of risk, or that bilateral agreements and other preconditions have no value. BLAs, embassy capacity, recruitment reform and compensation systems should be [built](https://doi.org/10.17633/rd.brunel.32973386) (<https://doi.org/10.17633/rd.brunel.32973386>) after the ban is lifted. For nine years, these preconditions have allowed the state to wash its hands of thousands of marginalised Nepali women who care for families abroad and sustain households at home through remittances, yet officially do not exist as migrant workers in the eyes of the state to which they belong.

The committees that recommended this ban in 2017 acted within their authority and, one assumes, in good faith. Parliament cannot continue claiming to protect women whilst defending a policy that leaves thousands beyond the protection of the Nepali state. Hence, the choice before Parliament is whether it will accept responsibility for a policy that has exposed thousands of Nepali women to abuse, exploitation and death, while making their suffering invisible to the very state responsible for protecting them.



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