
Journey of a Lifetime

**A study on women and girls migrating
for work in entertainment businesses**

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HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal
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This study is an outcome of the collaboration between Campaign for Rights, a loose network of organizations working to address the issues facing entertainment workers in Kathmandu Valley, and SaMi/HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal.

Three organizations Chhori, Biswas Nepal, and Women's Forum for Women, carried out the study on behalf of the Campaign for Rights. SaMi/HELVETAS provided the technical and financial support for the study.

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Hira Dahal
Study Team Leader

Executive Summary

More and more women and girls working in the entertainment sector in Kathmandu Valley have been opting to migrate in search of better jobs and better lives. They go without sufficient information of the job, the destination country, and the proper process of migration.

This study aimed to understand the vulnerability of these women and document the difficulties they face while migrating. It was also designed to provide information on safe migration to the women/girls that participated in the study.

Five-day mobile information and counselling camps were organised in each of the four major hubs of Kathmandu Valley's entertainment businesses: Gongabu, Sundhara, Thamel, and Koteshwor. The researchers interviewed 312 women and girls using closed questions at these camps. They were then provided orientation on safe migration. The research team also provided one-on-one counselling to participants who were at various stages of the migration process and needed advice. Further, selected women were invited to participate in focus group discussions (FGD) after the camps. Twenty-four FGD participants shared their stories on their experiences. The study findings are based on some quantitative data that was generated, and more on the qualitative information that was collected.

Of the respondents, 14 per cent (43) had been to a foreign country for employment at least once, and some had worked in more than one country. The average age of the respondents was 27 years. Data showed that 28 of 43 women had reached their destinations without obtaining permission to work abroad, and 25 of 43 who had migrated, had not undergone the mandatory health check-up before departure. The women who went to the African and Arabian Gulf countries to work as dancers had travelled on visit visas and had not complied with the legal process for migration.

Of respondents, 61 per cent (190) were considering going abroad for work within a year. This number included the 27 who had gone abroad at least once – they had also had some bad experiences. The majority (88) among those who wanted to go abroad had not decided when they would apply for work.

The desire of women wanting to go abroad for work was very strong, with no variation in terms of caste, ethnicity, education or income levels. There were more women from Janajati groups in the sample, so their numbers among those wanting to go abroad for work was also high. There were more unmarried girls, and divorced or separated women among those wanting to go abroad for work compared to married

women living with their husbands. The main reason why the women wanted to go abroad was to earn money to support themselves and their families – more so for those who were separated or divorced.

A majority of the potential migrants were aware of the need to inform their families about where they were going, and also the need to know about the culture of the destination. Some respondents knew about the need to obtain labour permits, have a health check-up, and train on skills before departure. However, a majority were unaware about the specific safety measures for safe migration such as where they could seek legal help in case they faced problems, and how they could obtain the agreed compensation. They were also unaware about the need to obtain receipts for the documents they gave to recruiting agents, or about the benefits of attending a pre-departure orientation.

Typically, the migration process for the women/girls in the entertainment sector began after a recruiting agent approached them or someone they knew at the work place told them about the opportunity. On many occasions the agent was someone they came to know through a relative or friend. The agents were very persuasive and promised appealing alternatives to the low-income jobs they had. The agents also helped with the procedures after the women handed them their passports. The women trusted the agents and did not bother checking the documents they received from the agents before travel.

According to the respondents, after the visas were obtained a 'leader' escorted them throughout the journey. They were usually first taken to India to bypass Nepali laws on migration for domestic work or to work as dancers. In India the women were held in secure lodgings until the visas that had to be processed there completed. In many cases the women did not travel beyond India, where they were forced to work. Typically, the agents would take their passports to prevent the women from returning to Nepal or to head to other countries on their own. Further, because most women transiting through India did not have proper permits and documentation in Nepal, they had no place to complain and press charges against the agents who cheated them.

Except for a few migrants, most of the respondents said they endured exploitation, and restriction of mobility and communication after they reached their destinations abroad. Those employed as housemaids said long working hours, restrictions on mobility, cruel and inhuman treatment by employers, late or lower payments than had been promised, health problems, and not having adequate skills to perform the required tasks as the main problems they faced abroad. Some said they were not even provided proper food as a result of which they became sick and had to return to Nepal with severe illnesses.

Women who had gone abroad as dancers said they had to dance all night, in high heels, without any breaks. After the performance they were locked in their lodgings throughout the day and were not permitted to use mobile phones without approval by the employer. Despite such hardship, some respondents said they would still like to go abroad as dancers because it ensured a higher income within a short period of time. Another reason why they said they would still go was because while doing that they did not need to go through the process of documentation in Nepal before travel.

The research has recommendations addressed to Government and its agencies, and also for civil society groups working to combat trafficking and exploitation of women and girls. They include recommended changes in policy and laws, and also some thing that could be done intermediately –such as improving workplace conditions and terms for women and girls working in entertainment businesses in Nepal. The study also has some recommendation for civil society organisations, including one on the need to make continuous efforts to understand the complexities of the migration of women/girls for work abroad.

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1

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

Kathmandu Valley's entertainment sector includes but is not limited to: cabin restaurants, dance bars, massage parlours, guesthouses, lodges, 'bhatti pasals' (small restaurants that serve alcohol) and 'dohori' restaurants (which play Nepali folk music). These venues employ over 11,000 women and girls, and about one-half of them are minors. An estimated 6,000-7,000 girls and women currently work in cabin restaurants, 3,000-4,000 in the dance bars, and about 900 in the dohori restaurants with an equal number in the massage parlours; adding up to about 15,000 girls and women in a rapidly growing industry (Terre des Hommes, 2010).

According to a study by the Human Rights Commission on Trafficking in Persons Especially on Women and Children in Nepal, it is common for women and girls who work in the businesses to be treated in an exploitative manner. Not only do their employers disregard their rights as workers, but also their human rights, and sexual abuse and harassment is common. Often, the women are treated as modern-day slaves, as victims of debt bondage.

The informal nature of the work arrangements force women and girls to obey their employers and even endure acts of sexual harassment and violence. For example, waitresses or dancers often have to entertain customers in ways that go beyond traditional job functions. It is important to note that all girls and women in the entertainment sector are not sex workers.

The researchers have taken care to keep the identities of participants in the study confidential, using changed names in case studies, and have also taken care to report as accurately as possible in order to avoid causing further damage to the reputation of individuals working in this sector. Although all entertainment workers do not engage in the sex trade, most work in conditions in which they are subjected to sexual harassment and abuse. Among those that engaged in sexual work, a large proportion did so unwillingly under coercion from the employer or customer (National Human Rights Commission, 2013).¹

Although cabin and 'dohori' restaurants, and dance bars are found throughout the Kathmandu Valley, they are generally concentrated in specific areas. Many of them are located around the Ring Road, particularly near bus terminals and truck rest

1 [http://www.nhrcnepal.org/nhrc_new/doc/newsletter/1289900699Report%20of%20Trafficking%20in%20Persons%20\(Especially%20on%20Women%20and%20Children\)%20National%20Report%202012-2013-Eng.pdf](http://www.nhrcnepal.org/nhrc_new/doc/newsletter/1289900699Report%20of%20Trafficking%20in%20Persons%20(Especially%20on%20Women%20and%20Children)%20National%20Report%202012-2013-Eng.pdf)

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stops. High concentrations of entertainment establishments are found in the Koteswor-Singamangal area, around Kalanki, and in the Balaju-Gongabu area. Old Baneshwor was one of the first localities in the Valley with a high concentration of dance bars and cabin restaurants. The tourist hub Thamel has many dance bars, cabin and dohori restaurants. Thamel also has a high concentration of massage parlours. The research took into account these locations and was designed in a manner that made reaching the entertainment industry workers and collecting data possible.

Women and girls in the entertainment sector usually have poor education and lack the skill sets required for other jobs. Therefore they often have no choice but to do the work. The unpleasant and exploitative nature of the work causes many women to desire other types of jobs, which is one reason they look for opportunities to go abroad for “better work”. The agents who represent similar businesses abroad visit the entertainment hubs in Kathmandu Valley to recruit those interested to seek options abroad. Often, they mislead the women and girls by promising them glamorous lifestyles in the countries they promise to take them.

A report – Labour Migration Trends and Patterns, Bangladesh, India and Nepal 2013 – by the Asia Foundation said there were a number of “non-economic factors such as adverse conditions at home, favourable conditions abroad, demonstration effects, inducement by an agent, family or friends; escaping an abusive spouse, and illness or sudden death of a principal member of family” that significantly influenced migration decisions. This was particularly true for women who felt that they would have greater independence and economic empowerment through good jobs abroad. But the reality is often different. The outcome is determined by the process they choose to go abroad and access they have to relevant information and other resources needed for safe migration. Among migrants, women are more vulnerable to labour and sexual exploitation and trafficking since many are heavily dependent on the agents who channel them through the illegal route (India) (The Asia Foundation, 2013).

²It has been easy for recruitment agents to lure women and girls from entertainment businesses because they can reach them directly as customers. Agents with links to entertainment businesses abroad recruit the women and girls in Kathmandu Valley with promises of improved lifestyles abroad. The promise of better lives abroad contrasted with the unsatisfactory work conditions at home is what causes many entertainment workers to decide to leave often to discover that the reality in their destination is different.

The entertainment workers usually decide to leave because of the unsatisfactory work conditions and their financial situations. Many even risk migrating to foreign countries without complete information about what they will be doing, how much they will be paid, or where they will stay.

Many of the women often end up in conditions far more exploitative and dangerous than their previous jobs in Kathmandu. A report in The Himalayan Times newspaper based on information in a study by the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility on migrating to Kuwait (a popular destination for migrants) said,

Workers from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Philippines, Indonesia and other countries migrate here [Kuwait] for work but are forced to work in miserable conditions including non-payment of wages, long working hours without rest, deprivation of food, threats, and physical and sexual abuse (The Himalayan Times, 5 July 2012)³.

The story is similar for many destinations abroad, especially when the women migrants travel illegally (without required permits), which most of them do unknowingly because they are unaware about the requirements. Because the majority of migrant women in the entertainment sector come from poor families with low

² <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/LabourMigrationTrendsandPatternsBangladeshIndiaandNepal2013.pdf>

³ <http://www.ceslam.org/index.php?pageName=newsDetail&nid=2192>

education and exposure, they have no one to turn to for guidance other than the “manpower” (as recruitment agencies are known in Nepal) agencies, without realising that this approach to seeking employment abroad can be dangerous.

The women migrants trust these agencies and head abroad – often after paying hefty fees – hoping to find well-paying jobs. Many migrants find themselves in situations that are worse than that in Nepal. And for those who do not have proper documentation, no one back home knows his or her whereabouts. Some of the women migrants even go missing but are impossible to track down for lack of proper documentation. Some land in jails in their destinations and lack the means to return home. Of those who are fortunate enough to make it back to Nepal, some return with unwanted pregnancies and/or illnesses.

Girls and women are often trafficked abroad under the guise of travel for tourism or legitimate labour purposes, particularly domestic service or work in restaurants and shopping malls. Traffickers, including some local manpower agencies, use labour migration as a cover for illegally sending women and girls abroad. Often women are promised work conditions that do not exist in the destinations as a result of which those taken abroad are placed in poorly paid, and exploitative work situations. Providing services isolates the migrants from the larger society and risk both physical and sexual abuse. In the majority of cases the migrant women cannot leave their employers because they are indebted to the manpower agencies or to their employer. Moreover, those who leave Nepal without proper documentation end up being illegal residents in their destinations, and the only alternative they have left is endure the exploitation because reporting to authorities could get them in prison and/or lead to deportation.

The entertainment businesses in Nepal have served as recruiting grounds for agents to lure unsuspecting girls and women for work abroad because recruiters can make contact with them as customers. These girls and women are usually dissatisfied with their jobs in Nepal and are already searching for alternatives, and can therefore be easily convinced by the agents. Many of the potential migrants begin making necessary arrangements to go abroad after the agents offer them the options.

At a workshop organised by the Campaign for Rights on the 29-30 December 2014, all organisations from the network present said that most of the entertainment workers they had come in contact with in the course of their work were discussing migration with recruitment agencies. They said these women did not spend enough time in planning and the majority of them did not even have detailed information about the places they would work at and stay, or about how much they would earn. This indicates that the vulnerability of migrant women from the entertainment industry is very high.

The Nepali entertainment sector mainly has women and girls who have migrated from villages to the cities in search of work. Not only are these women working in slavery-like conditions, they are also extremely vulnerable to being lured and/or coerced into unsafe migration to foreign countries.

This study focuses on the vulnerability of women and girls migrating for working in the entertainment sector. Prior to this whatever was known about work conditions in the destinations was anecdotal and scattered. This study sought to understand the conditions under which women and girls working in the entertainment sector migrate for work abroad. The underlying assumption was that women in the entertainment sector faced greater risks of unsafe migration because they lacked access to information on safe migration.

1.1. Objectives

This study aimed to understand unsafe migration practices of women and girls working in the entertainment sector in Nepal and their vulnerability to trafficking. The specific objectives of the study were:

- a. To gauge the knowledge levels of women and girls in the entertainment sector on safe migration, especially that about the destination countries, nature of work, salary, contract paper, and contact in the destination for emergencies;
- b. To discover how women and girls end up resorting to unsafe migration practices, including the involvement of agents, fees paid to migrate, and how they were enticed to migrate in the guise of labourers;
- c. To collect information on the situation the women and girls faced in their destinations; and
- d. To provide information on safe migration to about 400 entertainment workers.

1.2. Methodology

Prior to this there has been little or no research the vulnerability of migrant women from the entertainment sector. Further, enough information on safe migration was also not readily available to the potential migrants.

This study aimed to understand the vulnerability faced by women and girls from the entertainment sector who migrate for work abroad. It was carried out among the women and girls working in the entertainment sector, and provides an insight into the vulnerabilities they face. The study is also one of the first attempts by the Campaign for Rights to address the vulnerabilities. The study approach included providing information to potential women migrants from the entertainment sector at four major business hubs in Kathmandu Valley – Gongabu, Koteshwor, Sundhara and Thamel – through mobile camps. The information that was offered and individual counselling that was given out had provided reason for the girls and women to participate in the study.

A purposive sample was used to collect data from the respondents. Respondents under the age of 18 years were also interviewed to demonstrate that even underage girls migrate without proper documentation. The methodology included organising five-day mobile information and counselling camps at each of the four major entertainment business hubs of Kathmandu Valley: Gongabu, Sundhara, Thamel, and Koteshwor.

A questionnaire was used to obtain information from 312 women and girls who had attended these camps. The study also included four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and stories on the experiences of 24 participants. The focus group participants included those who had started the migration process, those who were thinking of migrating for work abroad, those who had met an employment agency or agent to start the process, those who were facing difficulties after having handed over their passports to agents or employment agencies, and those who had returned after working in at least one country abroad. Owners of two dance bars also wanted to share their experiences of taking girls from Nepal to South African countries, and were also included in one of the FGDs. This approach allowed the generation of both quantitative and qualitative data.

The research team had developed and distributed a leaflet at restaurants located in the four major hubs for entertainment businesses inviting entertainment workers to the camps. About 15 participants visited the camp each day.

Following registration, the participants were provided basic information about the camp and were interviewed individually. They were provided information on safe migration after the interviews. Counselling was provided

to participants based on need, and also based on their experiences and/or the problems they shared with the researchers. The Asian Human Rights and Culture Development Forum, Asian Forum provided information on safe migration. This partnership with the expert organization enabled researchers to provide verified information on migration-related issues. There were 385 participants in the counselling sessions. Participants for the FGDs were selected on the basis of information collected through the survey and from information they shared during counselling.

The study was done between 9 March and 24 April 2015. The earthquake of 25 April disrupted one FGD that had been scheduled in the first week of May. The study team carried out two FGDs after the earthquake to assess how the disaster had affected female workers in the entertainment sector.

Many respondents were hesitant about identifying their work places, which was largely because of the stigma associated with working in the entertainment industry. Given this social sensitivity and also the personal nature of the information that was collected this report has changed all the identities of the respondents.

1.3. Limitations

The earthquake of 25 April disrupted the plan to have a sample of 400 entertainment workers. The camp originally scheduled in the first week of May had to be cancelled because the entertainment establishments did not reopen for business for a long time after the earthquake.

Another obstacle faced during the research was the refusal of some women to confirm that they worked working in the entertainment sector, even though the field workers had information on their work in related businesses. The fear of social stigma was what caused them not to disclose their work and this explains the high number of “others” in information related to the profession of the respondents. This has created some issues in reporting.

The participants were better informed about safe migration than what the researchers had expected. One reason for this was the association of some participants with the organisations carrying out the study. These respondents were familiar with some safety measures they needed to take while seeking work abroad. This limitation resulted from the purposive sampling approach that was adopted because those sampled were likely to have sought information of foreign employment, even though the earlier assumption was that they would not.

Finally, the respondents had been invited to participate in the research through a leaflet that also offered counselling on safe migration. This explained the participation of many women and girls who had negative experiences with migration and were in need of counselling. Further, the offer for counselling could also have attracted only those who thought it would benefit them and not those who had positive stories to tell about going abroad for working in the entertainment sector.

2

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

2. Analysis of the Findings

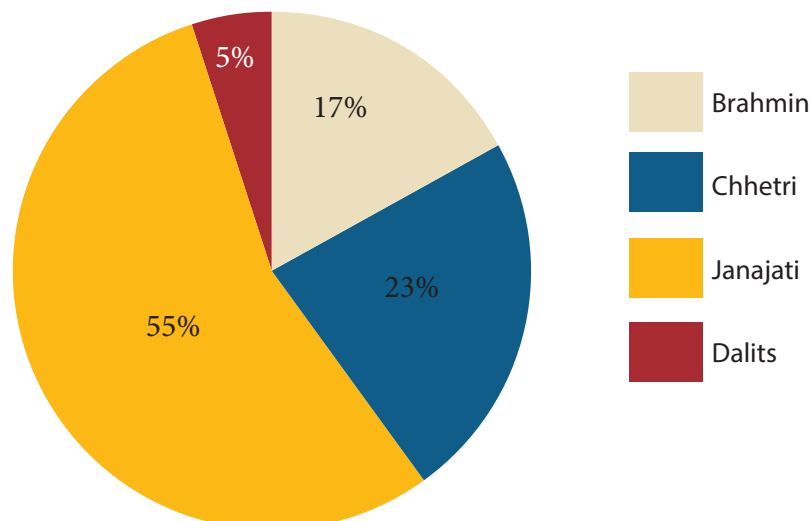
This section discusses the results from the survey as well as the qualitative information obtained from the FGDs, and individual interviews carried out with the respondents. It provides some demographic information on the respondents, including their socio-economic backgrounds and some insights on migration patterns, procedures followed for migrating, their levels of knowledge about safe migration, and their experiences in the destination countries.

2.1. Socio-economic background of respondents

Caste and ethnicity

A majority (55%) of 312 women who attended the camps came from Janajati (indigenous nationalities) groups. Chhetri accounted for 23 per cent, Brahmin 17 per cent and Dalit five per cent. The proportion of women and girls from the Janajati groups was higher compared to other groups. The owners of entertainment businesses explained this saying that their clients “had a preference” for women and girls with Mongoloid features, which, however, may not adequately explain the larger proportion of Janajati women and girls working in the entertainment sector compared to the other groups. The proportion of Dalits was also fairly high.

Graph 1: Respondents by caste and ethnicity



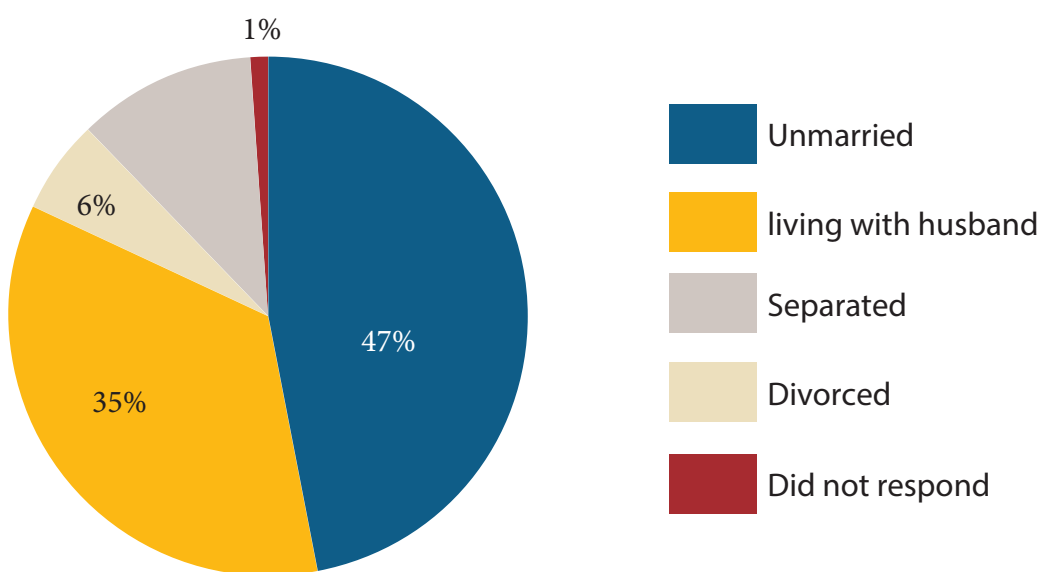
Districts of Origin

The respondents included women and girls originating from 47 of Nepal's 75 districts, with largest numbers coming from the Central Development Region (CDR). There were 23 participants from Kavrepalanchok, 19 from Nuwakot, 19 from Dhading, 19 from Dolakha, 16 from Sindhupalchok, and 16 from Makawanpur districts. These districts lie in the neighbourhood of Kathmandu Valley, with fairly good road access, and this could suggest that a large number of women and girls from these districts come to the capital in search of work.

Marital Status

A majority of the respondents (53.5%) were married, of which 35 per cent continued to live with their husbands, 11 per cent were separated but not formally divorced, and six per cent were divorced. A majority of the respondents (47%) were unmarried.

Graph 2: Marital status of respondents



Among those who were married 73 per cent had at least one child and 27 per cent had no children.

The women and girls who participated in the study had few alternative opportunities for sustenance and also had small or no support networks. The observations of the researchers suggested that almost 50 per cent of the participants were young mothers struggling to provide for their children, and had little or no financial support from their spouses. Many respondents said early marriage and domestic violence had caused them to resort to come to Kathmandu, and later bidesh (foreign lands), for work. It was a similar story for Chanda:

Chanda came from Chitwan District. She had just turned 21-years-old and had married at an early age. After marriage her husband began drinking a lot of alcohol, and tortured her both physically and mentally. Thereafter she took her two-year-old son to her maternal home and began living there. But life there was also not easy because custom dictated that women should live with their husbands and not 'burden' their parents after marriage. So she eventually decided to work in order to avoid dependence on others.

Education

There was large variation in the education of the respondents. Most had some schooling and 51.6 per cent had passed the School Leaving Certificate (Grade 10) examinations. Thirty-five per cent had dropped out of school and 13 per cent were illiterate.

Table-1: Education level of respondents

S.N.	Education level	Number
1	Illiterate	41
2	Class 5	56
3	Class 8	52
4	SLC	88
5	Intermediate level	52
6	Graduate	18
7	Masters	1
8	Did not respond	4
	Total	312

Source: Fieldwork

Employment and Income

Most of the respondents were employed as waitresses, singers or dancers. They worked at businesses frequented by agents seeking girls who wanted to go abroad for work. They ‘other’ jobs they did included employment at spas, bag and carpet weaving factories, offices as help, tailoring, or were homemakers.

Ninety-nine respondents did not respond to the question on their jobs. These women – based on informed guesses informed by informally obtained information on what they did – were also employed in the entertainment sector but were ashamed to discuss their work. This conclusion is based on what field workers had told the counsellors and enumerators, “They would not admit they do this work.” The high non-responses to questions related to employment and income could also be due to unemployment and that the respondents were on the lookout for jobs and opportunities to work abroad when the study was done.

Table 2: Current employment of respondents

S.NO	Employment	Number
1	Waitress	5
2	Dancer	30
3	Singer	25
4	Hostess	8
5	Cashier	2
6	Bartender	2
7	Other	94
8	Did not respond	19
	Total	312

Source: Fieldwork

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Of the 312 respondents, only 192 disclosed their income. Most of them said they were earning NRs 10,000 per month or less and only 17 said they earned more than this amount.

Irrespective of the marital status of the respondents — single woman living alone, married woman supporting a family, or single mothers supporting children — the income most of the respondents worked was insufficient to cover their necessities. Such low salaries were the push factors in the women’s decision to seek foreign employment. The higher salaries they could earn abroad (real and promised) compared to what they received in Nepal provided a strong incentive to migrate. This was true for a young couple the researchers had met.

Twenty-two-year-old Bikhu came to Kathmandu from Salyan District. She had been married for five months. She worked as a singer at a dohori restaurant and earned NRs. 7,000 per month. Her husband also worked at the same restaurant as a singer. She said, “I don’t see any future working at restaurants here. When we have a baby the expenses will rise but with little education it will be difficult to find work elsewhere.” The couple was thinking that at least one of them should seek foreign employment.

2.2. Migration Patterns

This section has two parts. One is about women who had already been to a foreign country for work, and discusses the kind of work they did there, their salaries, and the safety measures they had taken. The second part discusses concerns and expectations of women who had decided to go abroad in the near future, the type of work they wanted to do, and their knowledge of safety measures.

Previous Migrants

Of the 312 respondents, 14 per cent had already been abroad for employment at least once. They had worked in 15 different countries, and some had worked in more than one country. Most of these respondents belonged to Janajatis (23) and Chhetri (12) communities. Thirty-five of these women had gone abroad through agents and three, through employment agencies. Table 3 shows the countries where the women had worked, the work they did and the average salaries.

Table 3: Countries of employment, type of work, and average salaries

Country	No. Of women	Average income (NRs/ month)	Type of work
Kuwait	13	17,436	Domestic work, gardener at school, office work
Dubai	12	69,062	Dancer, singer, cleaner, office work
Malaysia	6	75,833	Dancer, retailer, beautician
India	5	61,666	Dancer, domestic work
Singapore	4	50,000	Dancer, domestic work
Lebanon	4	12,000	Dancer, domestic work
Tanzania	3	80,000	Dancer
Saudi Arabia	2	12,500	Domestic work
Oman	5	25,000	Domestic work
South Africa	2	95,000	Dancer, beautician
Israel	1	80,000	Domestic work

Kyrgyzstan	1	10,000	Domestic work
Bahrain	1	20,000	Waitress
Iran	2	80,000	Dancer, (domestic work NRs. 20,000)
Total	61		

Source: Fieldwork

Note: Only 43 respondents had been abroad so the higher total shows that some had been to more than one country

Most of the women had gone abroad for domestic work (eight countries), and as dancers (six countries). These women had travelled not only to the usual foreign employment destinations in the Arabian Gulf countries but also to countries such as Tanzania, South Africa, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq.

The amount of money these women paid to agents ranged from a low of NRs. 1500 to as much as NRs.400,000. The average amount paid to agents was NRs.72,700. Most of these women were unaware that they did not have to pay a fee for going abroad for domestic work. In fact, they did not know the exact amount they had to pay for going to work in any one country. They expected to earn good amounts of money abroad and therefore paid high fees to the agents. Only a few (8) had obtained receipts for the amount they had paid. This indicated how vulnerable they were to being cheated, and not being compensated in case there were problems after migrating.

The average age of the migrant women was 27 years, which meant that they were younger when they went abroad. During the study period, the Government had banned women below 30 years of age from going to the Arabian Gulf countries for domestic work. But the study revealed that one girl was only 17 years old, the youngest in the group, when she went to work abroad. .

Further, as Table-3 suggests, women who had migrated to dance in bars were earning more compared to other jobs. The women who had gone to South Africa for dancing jobs earned up to NRs. 95,000 per month. They were also given advances ranging from NRs. 50,000 to NRs. 100,000 for shopping (clothes and make-up kits) before departure. Saru, a returnee, said, “The agent gave me NRs. 60,000 to buy dresses. It was equivalent to what I earned each month.”

Safety Measures taken by Former Migrants

Based on information from 43 respondents, most migrants are unaware of precautionary measures they needed to take when traveling abroad. The following table provides an indication of the safety measures that former migrants had taken.

Table 4: Safety measures taken by former migrants

Safety Measures	Yes	No	Did not respond
Had left copies of passport at home	21	21	1
Had left contract paper copy at home	17	24	2
Had approval from the Department of Foreign Employment	13	28	-
Had health check-up report	16	25	2
Had embassy contact number	11	30	2

Source: Fieldwork

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The data indicated that migration of women from Nepal is not safe. Not leaving behind photocopies of the passport and contract papers makes it difficult for relatives to file reports if the migrants face difficulties in their destinations. Having a health check-up report is another equally important requirement for migrating for work with proper documentation. However, 25 among 41 respondents had not had health check-ups.

Obtaining permission from the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) is another important step in the migration process. But, the study shows, that 28 of 41 respondents had reached their destinations without such permissions. In fact, the women who went to the African and Arabian Gulf countries as dancers travelled on short-term visit visas without following the documentation procedures required for safe migration. They had travelled through an informal arrangement known as ‘setting’ and did not follow the procedures such as having health check-ups and work permission from the DoFE. Further, they did not have proper contracts from their employers.

Not having the contact number of a Nepali embassy is also a risk. Thirty of 41 returnees did not have the contact number for the embassy when they had gone abroad. Further, 31 respondents had gone abroad from Nepal while seven had first gone to India from where they took their flights to their destinations. Travelling from India is another risk but this was the only way they could leave the country, as they did not have proper documentation.

Participants Considering Foreign Employment

A large number of participants (190 of 312) had plans to go abroad within a year. This number also included 27 who had already been abroad once. Twenty respondents said they were planning to leave within three months, and 14 by six months. Both these groups seemed certain about how and where they would go. The remaining 64 who said they would leave within a year and 88, said they did not know when they would go (but wanted to) faced the risk of unsafe migration. Most of the women who wanted to go abroad did not know how to go about with the process or who to contact for assistance. This indicated that they could be waiting for the agents to come and recruit them from their work places.

The average age of those who were thinking of going abroad for work was 22 years; the lowest age was 14 years, and the highest 42 years.

Destination Countries

The major destinations for Nepalese for work abroad have been the Arabian Gulf countries and Malaysia. It was similar for the respondents of this study (Table-5).

Table 5: Preferred destination for respondents

S.N.	Countries	Number
1.	Gulf	107
2.	Malaysia	14
3.	Africa	5
4.	Other	60
5.	Non Response	4
	Total	190

Source: Fieldwork

Even though a majority of the respondents wanted to go to the Arabian Gulf countries they were either unaware about the Government ban on travel by females below 30 years of age to those countries for domestic work, or wanted to take the risk by travelling without proper documentation. Another reason for choosing these countries could be their knowledge that a large number of Nepalese who had gone there for work, and assumed they were safe. A few respondents said they wanted to go to African countries and the large number of respondents who said they would go to ‘other’ countries was prepared to go to any country the agent could arrange..

Desired Occupations

Many respondents did not know what they wanted to do abroad. Although some respondents wanted to go abroad to work as dancers, waitresses, housemaids and singers, a larger proportion of respondents (85) said they wanted to seek “other” jobs. There were also many who did not know what they would like to do or did not respond to the question. (Table-6)

Table 6: Desired jobs of respondents

S.N.	Desired jobs	Number
1.	Dancer	17
2.	Waitress	13
3.	Singer	4
4.	Housemaid	6
5.	Other	85
6.	Don't know	44
7.	Did not respond	21
	Total	190

Source: Fieldwork

The jobs in the ‘other’ category included working at beauty saloons, tailoring, etc. The number of respondents who did not know what they would like to do indicated their low knowledge on types of jobs available and also their lack of particular skills.

Visa Type

Table-7 shows the visa types the potential migrants were planning to obtain.

Table 7: Desired visa types

S.N.	Types of visa	Number
1.	Tourist	8
2.	Working	102
3.	Other	5
4.	Don't know	75
	Total	190

Source: Fieldwork

Journey of a Lifetime

Most of the respondents wanted to go abroad on work visas and eight with tourist visas. This indicated awareness about the need to obtain work visas, and also their familiarity with the requirements for foreign employment. But a large number of women (75) did not know which type of visa they would need, and seemed ready to travel with the visa the agent would help to obtain.

Desire to go abroad for Work by Caste/ Ethnicity

Respondents from all social groups included in the study wanted to go abroad. There were more Janajati respondents who wanted to travel abroad, and this could also have resulted from the sample, which had a higher number of respondents from these groups. (Table-8)

Table 8: Desire to travel abroad by caste/ ethnicity

Desire to travel	Brahmin/Chhetri	Janajati	Dalit	Total
Number thinking of going	72 (58.5)	107 (62.2)	11 (64.7)	190 (60.9)
Number thinking of not going	51 (41.5)	65 (37.8)	6 (35.3)	122 (39.1)
Total	123 (100)	172 (100)	17 (100)	312 (100)

Source: Fieldwork

Note: The figures in parenthesis are percentages

Education of Respondents Desiring to go abroad

There was no significant influence of education on the desire of respondents to travel abroad. The data suggested that those who had passed SLC and had higher qualifications were more inclined to go abroad for foreign employment. However, even the illiterate and those with lower secondary level qualifications wanted to go abroad for work. There were fewer respondents who had completed the Bachelor's Level desiring to go abroad for work. (Table 8)

Table 9: Desire to go abroad by Education Level

Education Level	Illiterate	1-5	5-8	SLC	10+2	Bachelor & Above	Total
Women/girls thinking of going abroad	22 (53.6)	32 (57.1)	29 (55.8)	59 (67.1)	31 (59.6)	13 (68.4)	186 (60.4)
Women/girls not thinking of going abroad	19 (46.4)	24 (42.9)	23 (44.2)	29 (32.9)	21 (40.4)	6 (31.6)	122 (39.6)
Total	41 (100)	56 (100)	52 (100)	88 (100)	52 (100)	19 (100)	308 (100)

Source: Fieldwork

Note: The figures in parenthesis are percentages.

Marital Status of Respondents Desiring to go abroad

A higher proportion of respondents who were unmarried, divorced or separated wanted to want to go abroad for employment compared to those who were married. The security women feel in marriage or the practicalities of managing family life and raising children seemed to explain why fewer married women wanted to go abroad for employment. The unmarried, divorced or separated women did not seem to have family-related responsibilities, and children they had to support financially (where they had them) to hold them back from seeking work abroad. (Table 10)

Table 10: Desire to go abroad for work by marital status

Desire to go for Foreign Employment	Marital Status				Total
	Unmarried	Married & with husband	Divorced	Separated	
Women /girls thinking of going abroad	103 (71.0)	48 (43.6)	15 (75.0)	22 (64.7)	188 (60.8)
Women/girls not thinking of going abroad	42 (29.0)	62 (56.4)	5 (25.0)	12 (35.3)	121 (39.2)
Total	145 (100)	110 (100)	20 (100)	34 (100)	309 (100)

Source: Fieldwork

Note: The figures in parenthesis are percentages.

Desire to go abroad by Income

Most of the respondents were considering going abroad for work, including those with relatively higher incomes. However, because a large number of respondents did not disclose their income or were housewives or employed, the table is not presented here. This finding suggests it was perhaps not just income that caused the respondents to consider going abroad.

Knowledge of Safe Migration

A person desiring to go abroad for employment is required to follow certain rules and regulations in order to ensure safe migration. He or she is therefore also expected to be knowledgeable about the requirements. Very few of the FGD participants who were thinking of going abroad for work said they knew what work they would have to do, how they would be taken abroad, the daily work hours, whether or not they would require contracts, and the kind of visa they would need to obtain. What most knew about was the need to have ‘done medical’ (meaning, health check ups) and obtain ‘labour permission’ (meaning, authorisation from the DOFE). The finding above suggested that women and girls migrating for working in the entertainment sector were completely dependent on the agents, and had not made efforts to seek information.

Table 11: Knowledge of safe migration among those wanting to go abroad

Issues	Yes	No	Don't know	Total
a. Need to know culture	168 (88.4)	8 (4.2)	14 (7.4)	190
b. Need to tell family	185 (97.4)	0	5 (2.6)	190
c. Need obtain labour permit	115 (60.5)	75 (39.5)	-	190
d. Need to obtain receipt for amount paid	133 (70.0)	44 (23.2)	13 (6.8)	190
e. Need to obtain receipt for documents given	58 (30.5)	110 (57.9)	22 (11.6)	190
f. Need to do health check up	164 (86.3)	26 (13.7)	-	190
g. Know about need for insurance	85 (44.7)	102 (53.7)	3 (1.6)	190
h. Know about having a contact person	85 (44.7)	105 (55.3)	-	190
i. Know about legal help in case of need	35 (18.4)	155 (81.6)	-	190
j. Know about compensation	20 (10.5)	170 (89.5)	-	190
k. Know about having contract with employer	83 (43.7)	90 (47.4)	17 (8.9)	190
l. Need to take skill training	150 (78.9)	40 (21.1)	-	190
m. Need to attend orientation before departure	89 (46.8)	84 (44.2)	17 (8.9)	190
n. Need to leave copies of important documents behind	158 (83.2)	32 (16.8)	-	190

Source: Fieldwork

The survey questionnaire had general as well as specific knowledge-related questions designed for checking the knowledge of respondents on safe migration. Responses to issues such as ‘whether or not they had to inform their family’, or ‘whether or not they should know about the foreign culture’ suggested that they were aware of these basics. These questions were asked because the women migrating to Kathmandu from the villages and working in the entertainment sector did not usually tell their families where they were working. The purpose of the question was to know if they still intended to keep work information from their families to themselves if they were to travel abroad.

However, a large number of respondents were unaware about important safety measures such as the need to obtain a permit from the DoFE, need to obtain receipts for money paid, the need to have health check ups, and the need to have training on employable skills. A majority of respondents were also unaware of the availability of legal assistance in case they faced problems, and about the compensation/ remunerations. What most respondents knew was that they should leave copies of important documents behind.

Overall, the women knew something about safe migration while there also were several issues that they did not know about. The relatively good knowledge about these matters among some respondents was explained by the fact that they had already been in touch with the organisations working for the wellbeing of women in the entertainment sector. These respondents were therefore more knowledgeable about the important issues related to safety during migration.

However, based on observations during counselling and the FGDs, the researchers found that the awareness of most respondents on safe migration was low.

Binu (name changed), a participant at one of the FGD, said with confidence that she was in regular contact with a friend in Dubai who had promised to make visa arrangements, and she was planning to leave as his wife. She was so confident in the abilities of her friend in Dubai that she did not pay much attention to what others were saying during discussions about the risks, possible abuse, government rules and regulations. However, in reality, she did not even know the family of her friend but was ready to leave for Dubai as his

spouse upon obtaining a visa. This is one example of the strong influence agents can have over women/girls considering migration.

Further, safe migration was not a priority for the women who had decided to go abroad for dancing jobs.

Sangeeta (name changed) said, “Some of my friends have travelled to Singapore, Dubai, Kuwait for three months, have earned a lot of money and have luxurious lives. Some have even purchased a house in Kathmandu. Unlike other work (abroad), there is no need for health check-ups, investment, and there are no hassles. Instead, they (those going) are provided a month’s salary in advance.”

2.3. Process of Migration

The migration process for the women in the study was complex and often unpredictable. They had to rely on employment agencies or agents that often misinformed the women. The potential migrants were also largely unaware of the rules of different governments that they needed to abide by. Each migrant’s case was unique but a common pattern also emerged in the analysis of the different case studies. The situations and actions leading to the pattern are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Contact with Agent or Recruitment Agency (Manpower)

Most of the women interviewed during the study had been approached by an employment agent to offer the option of working abroad while they worked at dance bars, restaurants, massage parlours, or other jobs in the entertainment industry. It is understood that the agents were very persuasive and offered appealing alternatives to their low-income jobs. They promised high incomes and status to the women who were willing to travel to Dubai, Malaysia, Kuwait, and other destinations to work as dancers, domestic help, and factory workers.

Once the women made initial contact with the agents, the agents required them to seek assistance of particular companies they represented. Often, the respondents indicated they trusted the agents as people who were trying to help. Many had come to know the agents through a relative or a friend. The agents told them stories of other women in similar situations but who now were working abroad, living luxurious lives, and providing for themselves and their families. There were also stories of some who had even purchased land and had secured their future. Often, a ‘close’ friend of the potential recruits but working with the agents would have persuaded the women to trust the agents.

A majority of women who had come to Kathmandu from villages were uneducated and largely unaware about migration policies and processes. Not having anyone to turn to for advice, they believed in and followed advice provided by employment agencies. They paid these agencies a fee and followed their instructions. A few were fortunate to have received correct guidance for legal migration and work abroad. However, most of the women in the study said they had faced many hassles while trying to migrate because they had not followed the procedures. Often they had been misled, taken advantage of and even eventually abandoned by the employment agencies.

In most cases, the respondents had selected an agent that was not legally registered, and they were in contact only with the agents that had come to offer them the migration option. They also listened only to these agents, trusted them, and paid all the monies they were asked to pay through the agents. They were largely unaware about the possibility of being cheated if they did not follow the legal procedures. The chances of migrants of being abused and cheated increases when they seek to migrate through unregistered agents.

Obtaining a Passport

The first document that the employment agencies asked the women/girls seeking to work abroad was a passport. The women often had friends or relatives, and sometimes agents, to assist them to obtain a passport. Many girls who were legally too young to work abroad had altered their ages on their passports in order to qualify for traveling and working abroad.

Binita, a school dropout, is the eldest daughter of a poor family from Kavrepalanchok. When she was 13, a Tamang woman in her community persuaded her to pay an agent to find her work in an Arabian Gulf country. The agent gave her a falsified passport that stated her age as 20 years and charged her 30,000 rupees. She used the counterfeit document to travel abroad.

Acquiring Visas

Most of the women/girls going abroad as dancers said they participated in a photo-session arranged by the employment agencies for applying for work. The photos were sent to the potential employers along with their passports. They would be sent a visa if they were acceptable to their foreign employer. Women/girls seeking work as domestic help or in other fields did not require a photo session. They simply turned in their passports and other documents such as medical reports.

There were large variations in the processes for obtaining visas and actual travel. The case study below shows how Isha successfully travelled to work in Malaysia and later to South Africa on a tourist visa. This should not have been the case because she did not meet requirements of both education and income levels for this visa type. Others who travelled for work on tourist visas faced legal issues in foreign countries and were sent home with no compensation from the employment agencies that had enticed and misled them.

Medical Examination, Documentation, and Payments

Almost all the women who attended the FGD knew that they had to complete a medical examination before applying for permission to work abroad. But they were also overwhelmed by the process and did not know much about it before coming into contact of recruitment agencies. Generally, all the procedures were completed by the agent who handed over the documents to the women/girls before departure. Those travelling rarely checked the documents. Each recruitment agency had different standards on how thorough and legal they were while carrying out their business. The most reliable agencies required a passport, medical examination, insurance and labour contracts. These organisations also provided detailed information to clients, and offered an orientation and training before departure.

The main challenge faced by women seeking work abroad was the cost. They were promised higher salaries relative to that in Nepal – higher by 3 to 4 times. Even though they were in desperate need of money to make a living and pay off debts, they were willing to do whatever it took to pay the recruitment agencies for helping them to find work abroad. Many reported having an arrangement to pay one-half of the cost up front and the remainder after they were established in their work abroad. Most borrowed from family and friends, sold property or obtained loans to pay the agents. One woman said she sold her buffalo for NRs 20,000 and had promised to pay the agent there remaining NRs10,000 upon receiving her first month's salary.

The cost of recruitment services for jobs abroad varied by agencies but even those who had paid what had been asked often ended up in difficult situations, earned less than what had been promised, and either had to flee their employers and head back to Nepal or be deported for illegal immigration (where there was inadequate documentation). Many respondents said they had spent all of their money in the process of seeking foreign employment, and some had also lost their passports in the process.

A tourist visa for dancing jobs

Isha went to Malaysia in 2010 with dreams of an improved life with the money she would earn. She took a flight from the Tribhuwan International Airport in Kathmandu on a visit visa. At the airport, she showed US\$500 to the immigration officer who had asked her how she would pay for her stay. No further questions were asked except the routine, 'where she was going' and 'for what?'

Isha worked as a dancer in Malaysia for four months. She returned to Nepal and headed abroad four years later, following the same procedure. Her next stop was South Africa, also on a visit visa.

In Malaysia, she had to work 12 hours a day, from 8 p.m. till 8 a.m. She could only take one 10-minute break. In South Africa she had to dance without breaks.

When not dancing, she was kept in a house with other dancers and was not allowed to go out. Twenty dancers were provided with two mobile phones and they were required to seek permission and talk with their families, only in the presence of the owner. They were not allowed to visit the hospital when sick.

For most ailments, the owner of the workplace gave them medicine. Only very serious cases were taken to the hospital.

In Malaysia she was paid NRs. 80,000/month and in South Africa, NRs 100,000/month.

Isha said people could earn almost 10 times of what they earned in Nepal in a month abroad but for that they would have to work very hard. In both countries the dancers had to go through a checking almost everyday. They were given back their passports at the time of check by local authorities in their destinations but the owners would take it back after it was over. The dancers were aware that the visit visa did not allow them to work but had no idea how the owners managed to get around the rules.

Travel Arrangements

After obtaining visas, a 'leader' escorted the dancers through out the journey. Those going abroad legally exited the country from Tribhuwan International Airport and were assisted upon arrival by an escort. Dancers were then taken to shop for outfits.

An unpleasant trip

Malati had turned 21-years-old in 2015. Some eight months before her 21st birthday she had decided to travel to Dubai via India to work and earn money. However, she did not reach Dubai and instead returned from India. There were eight girls on the trip. All of them had tried exiting the country from Kathmandu and failing that had decided to take the India route.

They were kept in Delhi for three days and given food only once a day. It was when Malati became scared. The owner from Dubai came some days later and told the women there were no flights and that they would have to wait for some more days. They were then moved to Calcutta and then taken to another place in India that they could not identify.

Malati became sick but was not given any medicine. She wanted to call Nepal but had no money. In desperation she even slashed her wrist.

She had an Indian customer when she was in Nepal with who she had exchanged mobile numbers. She gave him a 'miss call' after which the person called back. He was with the Indian Police and so she told him what had happened. The sister of the agent had eavesdropped on the conversation and told her brother about what had happened. It was only then that she was sent back to Nepal. She borrowed some money from two Nepali men on their way to Singapore to pay for the return trip.

Malati had to suffer because she had trusted a friend. After counselling she said she would now travel only on a work visa, and is also training to become a beautician.

Legal Issues abroad

There were legal complications for women who had travelled abroad without work visas. A few were even detained upon discovery that their documentation was inadequate. Their employers were punished more harshly than the women who were sent back to Nepal. So they returned without money they needed to pay off debts taken for the trip and without any legal claim for compensation.

Women who had run away from homes where they worked or other places of employment that had harsh and abusive conditions faced difficulties in seeking assistance from authorities in their destinations. Many faced more trouble when they confided with the police because they were working without proper documentation. These women were eventually sent back to Nepal without payment for their work. Generally those who were working without proper documents – knowingly – faced the threat of their work place being raided by the police, being discovered, and jailed or sent home without money.

Return to Nepal

Many of the women had left Nepal with the understanding that they could return if the situation abroad was not to their liking. However, they were not allowed to return if they faced hardships at work. Their employers held their passports most of the time and often told them that they could return home only after they earned certain amounts of money by performing tasks that they did not want to do. There are examples of a few strong-willed women who had managed to escape and return to Nepal but the majority remained abroad until their contracts ended.

2.4. Condition of Women in Destination Countries

The situation of most women who had migrated for work abroad was not what they had expected irrespective of the type of work. Among the women who had attended counselling sessions, there were only two who spoke about positive experiences abroad. Almost all other respondents were unhappy with the jobs they did and their earnings compared to their workloads.

Domestic and Other Types of Work

Women who had worked as housemaids abroad said they had long working hours and were often mistreated by their employers. There were restrictions on their movement, were paid less than what they were promised and also had health problems. Since these women worked at individual homes and away from public scrutiny, what is known of the situation inside is what they have told. The information in this report is based on the recollections of housemaids who had returned to Nepal. One common problem all women faced was that of language and cultural differences. Most of the women did not know the local language. Even those who overcame the language barriers faced other problems.

Back from Iraq with an ailment

Soni was working at a restaurant in Kathmandu when a regular customer persuaded her to travel to Iraq for work as housemaid. She paid over NRs. 50,000 to the person who turned out to be an agent, and left for Iraq in 2011. She had been told that she did not require any skills, education, work permits or insurance, and that the work would be easy. The agent also told her that she could learn the language “within a few days”. She had done the required health check up before leaving.

In Iraq she found herself locked by her employer and could not leave the house. Her employer had taken her mobile phone so she could not call anyone. She had to use a vacuum cleaner of a make that she had not seen before, and because she did not know the language, had to communicate through gestures. Sometimes, when she did not understand what was indicated, she was scolded. Soni had long work hours, from 6 in the morning until 3 a.m. the next day. She was not given food on time and no one cared if she had eaten. Salt and spices were not allowed in the food and she had to survive on raw vegetables. After finishing work at her employers, she was sent to another house to assist an elderly woman.

She had to mop floors, wash clothes in cold water, and press and fold clothes and was allowed to eat only after finishing the designated tasks. One day she spilled boiling water on her hand and leg and ended up with blisters. Her employer did not send her for treatment, even though Soni had said the cost could be deducted from her salary. Eventually, the employer’s daughter visited the house, noticed Soni’s condition and took her to a hospital.

In the end she changed her employer for one who treated her better. After spending 30 months in Iraq, she developed an abnormal growth on her neck, had regular fever, and piles. She needed to have a surgery and asked her employer permission to return to Nepal. She was diagnosed with ‘gland tuberculosis’ and had to undergo through an expensive treatment regime. After eight months of treatment, the growth on her neck had shrunk but had not disappeared completely – and she had spent all the money she had brought back from Iraq.

Journey of a Lifetime

Housemaids, generally, are at the mercy of their employers in terms of the amount of work they have to do and the time they need to work. Many of those who had gone abroad for domestic work were not allowed to rest even when they were sick. Some housemaids did not even have a proper salary. Even where they had been promised money when they began working, they had not been paid at the time they returned to Nepal. At work some domestic workers were also abused verbally or even tortured by their employers. Many respondents in the study said they became sick because of the heavy workload and because they were not given proper food by the employers. The stories of women (below) illustrates the type of problems that female migrants face abroad:

Bina, 35, had travelled to Kuwait to work as housemaid after paying NRs.50,000 to an agent. She had travelled through India and the employer had taken all her documents (she did not know what they were). Her duty was to serve the wife at a house while there was another housemaid to work for the husband. The wife would not allow the two maids to work together.

After finishing work at the house, Bina had to work at four other houses but was never paid a salary on time. When she asked for her salary, her employer would scold her and tell her that she would be paid before she returned.

One day a neighbour saw her employer pulling Bina by her hair and told her to seek another work place. There was another instance when Bina was assisting the husband in some housework that the wife witnessed, and was thrown out of the house without pay for the nine months she had already worked. Thereafter Bina went to the police to file a complaint but was instead suspected of having stolen from the house. Eventually Bina was able to convince the police and they let her meet another Nepali woman who was running a prostitution ring in Kuwait. She was eventually able to find another home where she worked for one more year before returning to Nepal.

Sita, 30, had separated from her husband and travelled to Dubai leaving her 5-years-old son at her maternal home. There she had to work from 6 a.m. till 8 p.m. and had a salary of NRs.15,000. She returned to Nepal after two years but unable to find work she went back to Dubai. She earned NRs. 22,000/month the second time but also had to work harder and under more difficult conditions. If Sita wore nice clothes her employer asked her to remove them and use what they wore. She ate only when she was given, and whatever came her way. She had no day off. Upon returning to work from Nepal after a month's holiday, Sita had to accompany her employer's wife to Indonesia and look after their child. After spending two months in Indonesia, she began suffering from backache. She was later diagnosed as having osteoporosis. When she returned to Nepal she found out that her son had fractured his hand and could not move it properly because of late treatment.

Another migrant worker Basanti had ended up as housemaid at a large family. The household had five housemaids and her job was cleaning the house. She had to start at 6 in the morning and finished at 10 p.m. Her employer made sure that she worked non-stop, without a break, howsoever short. Further, the owner did not let her maids to help each other.

Similarly, Binita (not real name) had become a domestic worker at another large family in Qatar where she worked from 5 a.m. till 5 p.m. On special occasions she worked for 24 hours. She was desperate to leave but did not know how and eventually fled the house. However, the police intercepted her and she remained in detention for over a month after which they contacted her employer. After hearing Binita's complaints, he offered her extra money. Binita refused and insisted on returning to Nepal. She returned from Qatar after a year with NRs. 130,000, and now works at a cabin restaurant. Her family has no idea of the work she does.

According to some respondents, Nepali migrant workers also faced problems from other Nepalese who were either their agents or co-workers. Lila did not want other women to face the type of difficulties she had faced as a migrant worker. Her advice: all women migrants need to learn about the process and the work before heading abroad. She said that many Nepali women had been raped and killed by people from other nationalities at a company she did not name. She added that many Nepalese were still working at “that company” because they were helpless and that a lot of young girls were still being lured and trapped.

Women/Girls taken abroad as Dancers

During the FGDs, almost all respondents who had gone abroad as dancers said they had travelled under the impression that they would be performing cultural shows but later realised that they were being taken to dance at bars in the Arabian Gulf countries, Malaysia and South Africa. The Government of Nepal does not provide work permits for such jobs. The owners of such bars abroad or their agents visit different dance bars in Nepal to recruit dancers. The candidates are required to participate in photo-shoots and those selected are taken abroad through India. The condition that these women usually go through is depicted in a story of a girl who had recently returned after working at a dance bar in Africa.

Girl returns home with tuberculosis

Nineteen-year-old Sumi was living with her mother when an acquaintance visited them and discussed foreign employment. An agent told her she could make NRs. 80,000/ month in South Africa. He arranged a passport for her and after a photo-shoot, also convinced her to purchase some new clothes.

The agents arranged her trip with 20 others to India from where they were taken to Tanzania. She began working the next day. The work was dancing at the bar from 6 p.m. till 4 a.m., without rest or breaks. They were kept under strict watch by the employer and were not allowed to leave their rooms or use mobile phones without permission.

At the workplace the dancers were expected to ‘earn’ “50 large beads and 100 small beads” each evening (A garland of beads was used to measure the demand of a specific dancer). Sumi was able to earn her beads but to be popular she often had to pay special attention to some of the patrons, sit with them and occasionally, even exchange kisses.

One day she fainted in the bathroom. When she regained her senses she found her employer accusing her of faking illness. A doctor diagnosed her with tuberculosis and recommended medication.

She continued working until the police raided the bar three months later and arrested all the dancers. The dancers were detained for three months, the owner black listed and deported to his country. Each dancer was given US\$500 and deported. Sumi returned home both ill and without money. She is being treated for tuberculosis and is on the lookout for work.

The information collected suggested that women and girls going abroad to work as dancers are extremely vulnerable to exploitation. At work they had to dance continuously, in high heels, for long hours. They were locked inside their living quarters during the day and barred from using mobile phones. Their employers kept their passports and were not provided proper treatment when they were ill.

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However, during the FGDs, the participants who had worked as dancers abroad did not think they had been exploited. One respondent said, “We don’t have that difficult of a life. We earn good money and have to dance for the whole night in high heels.” It was only when asked if dancing all night with high heels was easy, that she added that it was very hard and tiring to dance without rest. This information indicates that the women face similar work conditions in Kathmandu dance bars and the only difference abroad was that they would earn comparatively more money for the hardship.

The dance bars assessed performance of the dancers based on the profit they made, types of customers the place attracted, and cards, garlands and crowns that the women/girls earned after each performance. A woman at the FGD explained how that was practiced in Dubai and South Africa:

“In the bar there was a system of selecting the best or special dancer. After being ready to dance we were required to sit on a couch while a man stood nearby with garlands. Customers who wanted a particular woman to dance would buy the garlands and put it on the preferred dancer.

“Similarly, the customer could also buy a card and place that on a box with the names of the dancers. Another way to pick dancers was to purchase a crown and put that on the preferred dancer. They also selected the music to which the dancer would have to perform. Usually the V.I.Ps purchased the crowns. These customers were given phone numbers of the dancers so that they could talk to them and meet them when they wanted. After the show, the manager took the girls back to their room and locked them in.”

An example of the cruelty that the dancers go through was evident in information shared by a participant at a counselling session. She said her friend discovered that she was pregnant after she began dancing after which she was forced to have an abortion and was given only a day off to rest. Bar owners also used foul language and treated the dancers as prostitutes – as if they had purchased the women/girls from the agents for a specific period of time.

Remuneration of Dancers

The women/girls who were taken abroad to become dancers were given two payment options: they could opt for a share of the collection or a salary. The earning of women who picked a share of collection was fixed in Nepal. They relatively got larger sums of money. In return they also had a fixed number of customers to deal with, who they had to please by dancing. These women were also forced to have sex with their customers if they failed to earn enough for the collection. Earnings of those who opted for a salary were lower. They were relatively better off in terms of their work conditions than those who went for the collection option.

Women/girls who had been taken to work at bars in India experienced similar treatment although they were not expected to dance. They were mainly taken to India as a transit stop while the documentation and/or ‘channels’ for passage were arranged. Some women took up dancing jobs in India in the event the agents failed to take them abroad.

One who found her way home

Sukhimaya, 21, had been working at one of Kathmandu's dance bars for seven years but had not disclosed it to her neighbours or family members. She took leave from work at times her family members visited and this hide-and-seek caused her much stress. She thought about going abroad as a way to make enough money to start a new business and to put an end to the stress.

Then she and some of her friends found an agent, gave him their passports and attended a photo session. Within 15 days she was ready to go to Dubai via India where she hoped to earn NRs. 80,000/ month. The 20-person group was put up at a hotel in India and the agent had taken care of the costs. Nothing happened for two months. The agent did not buy them any clothes or take them to Dubai. Instead the agent formed small groups of five and transported the women across the country to Calcutta, Delhi and Mumbai to work as dancers. She asked him for her passport which the agent refused.

A few of her friends who had begun working as dancers in India told her about harassment and molestation they had to endure, and this led her to decide to return to Nepal. Despite efforts of the agent to prevent her return she and some others managed to come back. It had been two years after her return when Sukhimaya had shared her story with the researchers. Until then those who had taken up work as dancers in Calcutta had not returned. Sukhimaya has not been able to retrieve her passport from the agent, who she said, had been arrested in India.

2.5. The Effect of the Gorkha Earthquake

The earthquake of 25 April 2015 disrupted the study. Two FGDs were carried out after the earthquake to understand how the disaster had affected entertainment workers. The FGDs were held at Sundhara and Gongabu and included women/girls who had participated in previous FGDs.

Participants at the FGDs said most of the buildings where the entertainment establishments were located were reduced to rubble or were damaged by the earthquake and the businesses had shut down. There were fewer customers at businesses that were still open. This meant lower turnovers and this had affected the income of the women/girls. Those whose places of work had closed down had lost their source of income.

The participants said it costs NRs 3,000 to 4,000 per day to run a dance bar in Kathmandu and therefore most of the owners had decided to close their businesses after the earthquake. The women did not expect to receive their unpaid remuneration soon. One participant said, "I have not received my salary for four months. The manager keeps saying I'll give it tomorrow. It is a typical Nepali family restaurant, and I have no experience of working elsewhere, so I don't want to leave the place."

After the earthquake many owners simply ignored the phone calls from the workers to avoid responding to requests for unpaid compensation or employment. One respondent said, "I tried to call several times to demand my unpaid salary. The manager did not pick up the phone, and our dance leader asked us to wait for some days. We will have to look for other restaurants. It will be difficult to find work."

The earthquake damaged or destroyed many buildings rented by the entertainment workers, as well as the homes in the village. A large number of the women/girls lived in rented quarters in and around Gongabu, which was badly affected by the earthquake. Many of the respondents were living in tents while some had just moved back into their rented rooms, even though there were cracks on the walls. A respondent said, "We were staying in tents and went back to our rooms a week ago. We sleep on the floor, next to a wall that has cracks." Another respondent added, "My room had been destroyed, and I was injured while running outside."

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The entertainment workers said they also faced difficulties in caring for their children. Before the earthquake, they had arrangements of leaving children with caretakers or to send them to school while they worked. The earthquake disturbed this requiring the women to make alternative arrangements for looking after children while they worked. One respondent said, “I have left my son in the village. The place where I lived has been destroyed, I am taking refuge with my friends in tents.” Another respondent said she had not joined work after the quake because she had no place to leave her son. She had just moved into a new place and was afraid to leave him back on his own.

These findings suggested that the earthquake had affected the livelihoods of women/girls working in the entertainment sector, and this could become an added reason for them to want to go abroad for work. The post-earthquake circumstances and desperation for finding work could cause many to even resort to unsafe migration.

3

INFORMATION AND COUNSELLING SESSIONS

3. Information and Counselling Sessions

One objective of this study was to provide information on safe migration and counselling to women and girls working in the entertainment sector. Four camps were organized at the major entertainment hubs in Kathmandu for counselling, providing and obtaining information from the participants. The study team provided information and counselling to 385 women. The counsellors reviewed how each individual had completed the migration process and what kind of support they had sought. The counselling sessions included information on legal procedures required for safe migration.

The participants were in different stages of the migration process. Some had recently met recruiting agents, while others had handed over their passports to them and were waiting for visas. Still others had their passports with agents and had not been able to get them back. Some in the group were back in the country after having been cheated by employers abroad or by the agents. So the counselling sessions focused on specific issues the individuals faced. A SaMi/HELVETAS-partner organisation – Asian Human Rights and Culture Development Forum, Asian Forum – supported the research team in providing information and counselling.

The counsellors used the book on counselling developed by SaMi/HELVETAS during the sessions. The information covered almost all the legal procedures, safety measures and existing support mechanisms available for those cheated in the process of migration. Some participants at the sessions had worked at dance bars in Malaysia, the Arabian Gulf and South African countries. The counsellors had prepared for providing participants information on migration that was relevant to countries where they would be migrating to work as dancers.

The research-counselling combination adopted for the study also resulted in some value to the participants. This was evident in the learning from the FGDs, where the participants agreed on the need to prepare better before going abroad, to learn the language and also to train on specific skills. “We go for foreign employment without any skill or training, which is our drawback. There are other countries besides the Arabian Gulf countries to go for work, including Israel for working as caregiver, and South Korea for jobs at shopping centres. These jobs pay better and are also safer compared to other countries,” a participant said. The returnee participants also warned other participants why they needed to be careful, and why they needed to plan better before departure.

Right procedures, right result

Suntali had come to Kathmandu sometime in 2003, when she was 13-years-old and began working as a folk singer and dancer. In 2013 she travelled to Malaysia with a contract for working at a factory. She did not have copies of the employment documents.

Upon reaching Malaysia she discovered that her salary would be 700 Malaysian Ringgits (MYR) against the MYR900 that had been promised, which was reduced to MYR450 after a month. Further, she was not paid on time and after paying for food and accommodation she could not save anything. She returned to Nepal a year later, but only after borrowing money from friends to pay for the trip.

In Nepal, she began working at the restaurant where she had been previously employed. The agent who had sent her to Malaysia approached her again and promised to find her work in Dubai. She had paid him NRs.5000 to start the procedure when she attended the counselling sessions.

After attending the sessions Suntali realized that her agent was a fraud, and that she needed to be more diligent about the foreign employment procedures. She showed the researchers her 'agreement paper' that turned out to be only a demand letter, and the team assisted her in completing the process. She paid for insurance, obtained a work permit, attended an orientation, and received an updated agreement paper with clear clauses covering food and accommodation. She then headed for Dubai leaving copies of all necessary documents at home.

Suntali was working as a cleaner in Dubai in December 2015. She works for eight hours everyday and lives in a hostel. She said she likes the place where she is living, and was glad to have finally obtained the right information needed for safe migration.

4

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Discussion and Recommendations

4.1. Discussion

This study sought to understand the vulnerability of girls/women working in the entertainment sector of Kathmandu when they seek foreign employment. The assumption was that they were vulnerable because of the lack of necessary information on the process of migration. The analysis confirms the assumption and thus the conclusion: The low levels of knowledge on safe migration make the women and girls in the entertainment industry extremely vulnerable to being lured into undocumented migration, which is both dangerous and exploitive. However, while lack of information was one reason, the other was their desperation to earn a decent living that caused them to fall prey to recruiting agents. The entertainment businesses in Kathmandu are work destination for many women and girls who migrate from rural Nepal in search of better lives. These workplaces are now serving recruitment agents as places to meet and lure women/girls for employment abroad, and are also becoming hubs for the trafficking of girls and women from Nepal.

Nepalese women/girls working in the entertainment sector have been taken to dance bars in Africa and the Arabian Gulf countries without proper documentation. This makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. A June 2015 report in the Annapurna Post newspaper said police had arrested two agents who had taken many Nepalese women abroad for selling them – under the pretext of migration for work – in the Arabian Gulf and African countries. The news report said, “According to the Nepal Police, the detained agents had lured Nepali women by saying that they will find them work as dancers in dance bars in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda in Africa, and in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman and Malaysia. But they were forced into prostitution.” The report added that one of the agents who had lured women for undocumented migration, did so by giving them advances of NRs. 100,000-150,000 for buying clothes and cosmetics required for their promised jobs as dancers (Annapurna Post, 2 June 2015).

Typically, the recruiting agents lure unsuspecting women/girls by frequenting dance bars as customers. The agents entice the women/girls by offering advances for shopping before heading abroad for pursuing the glamorous lifestyles they promise.

The study found that those who had migrated without proper documentation and to places not officially approved do not find the promised jobs and lifestyles. Instead, the women/girls were treated like prisoners at their destinations. Many were kept

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locked up in a house/room all day and were also barred from using phones. Their employers held their passports and were not allowed to contact with any one outside the business. Every day they were escorted from their residence to the dance bars and forced to dance non-stop. They were brought back and locked in the wee hours of the morning.

The main challenge for promoting safe migration is preventing undocumented migration of women, including those working in the entertainment industry. The lack of proper documents has remained a challenge for pressing charges against the agents and recruitment companies that cheat their clients.

The respondents of the study said that the agents often 'fix' officials to take the girls and women out of the country without proper documentation even through the Kathmandu airport. They were taken through immigration as usual travellers, but by using a special 'setting' or a process. An owner of a dance bar said, "It is a network of organisations, including the police and Immigration Department officials involved in this 'setting' at the airport. Each person gets about NRs. 100,000 for cooperation. The tickets used for the purpose are open and the people that need to be taken through are generally wait-listed. The women/girls are generally on evening flights (after 7 p.m.) and they stay abroad for 3-12 months. Each woman with a tourist visa is required to show US\$500 at the airport as means of subsistence abroad. This same US\$500 is reused to provide passage to more than 20 women/girls."

Migrating legally for work on a tourist visa requires that the person has completed high school (Grades 10+2). They are also required to have relatives in the destination. However, many women and girls in the study who had gone to work abroad on tourist visas did not have the academic credentials or relatives at their destinations. Also they did not have the US\$500 needed for subsistence. The bar owner who had confided with the researchers said he had heard that the setting involves 11 persons for ensuring the passage of the women/girls.

An article in Nepali newspaper has also discussed 'settings' of sorts that exist at both the Nepali and Indian airports through which these women are taken abroad. The news report said, 27 Nepali women headed to Dubai via New Delhi were rescued and returned by an NGO in India in coordination with the Embassy of Nepal.

These women/girls were detained after a raid at their hotel near the Delhi airport. They had been brought to New Delhi through different routes at different times and were being prepared for travel to the Arabian Gulf countries under the 'airport setting' by two agents, who are now serving time in India's Tihar Jail. The women were headed to Dubai but did not have proper documentation. Two airport officials involved in providing boarding passes to the women at the airport are also being investigated. (Kantipur, 3 August 2015, and Kantipur 27 July 2015). One of the women told the reporter that she was going abroad in search of work because of hardships caused by the earthquake. The women were between 25 to 33 years of age and came from Gorkha, Sindhupalchok, Nuwakot, Kavrepalanchok and Dhading, districts that were most affected by the earthquake.

The ill treatment of women/girls by owners of entertainment businesses (including those in Nepal) and how these women/girls are held in locked rooms, and forced to do things they did not want to, and the profits made by middlemen can be described as a modern form of slavery. At the surface it seemed that the women/girls were going abroad because they wanted to. But analysis of their stories suggested that they are forced to take the decision by circumstances, both financial and social. They come to Kathmandu in search of work and better lives and end up in the entertainment businesses. The poor work conditions make them easy recruits for agents who help them to go abroad without proper documentation. Most of these women face more exploitation abroad and often return home without the money they hoped to earn and sometimes as victims of sexual exploitation.

Right Approach to a Proper Job

Luna, 21 years old, came to Kathmandu from Okhaldhunga District to flee poverty in the village, when she was 14. She had studied up to Grade 8 but did not have acquaintances in Kathmandu to help her find a job. Unable to find work she ended up working in a dance bar.

However, even though she had somehow adjusted to the work environment, she was not paid on time and was unable to support the treatment of her sick mother or pay rent regularly.

Eventually she decided to try going abroad hoping to earn enough to support herself and her family. But this was not easy either because she did not know how to do that, what would be needed, and what the workplace would be like. Nor did she have any idea of which country to go to and what she could do there. She then asked someone whom she knew to get this information for her.

At about the same time came in contact with Chhori at a mobile counselling camp organised to provide information on safe migration to entertainment workers. The information she obtained was different from what the other person had said, but seemed reliable. There she learned about the importance of seeking services of a registered recruiting agency, the cost that would be involved, different types of work she could do, where and how to seek orientation on the work, who to contact in emergencies, and the need to leave back copies of her documents with a family member. This helped her to decide to follow the procedures he had learnt about.

She showed up again at the next camp with some papers that the recruitment agency had given her when she had asked for her contract to get it checked. And she contacted the counsellors for assistance every time she did not understand something the recruitment agency told her. Eventually, she obtained a contract for a housekeeping job at a hotel in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The recruiting agency had asked her for NRs. 50,000 as service fee. She checked her work permit using the SMS service that is available and discovered that the cost was only NRs. 10,000. She went back to the counsellors for advice and overtime was able to negotiate her fees at NRs. 30,000 – while 14 in her group of 15 persons had paid NRs. 50,000 each.

She has been in the UAE since but has remained in contact with her counsellor. Sometime back she told her counsellor, “There are people here who have paid up to NRs. 150,000 for getting the same job I have. I would have faced a similar situation if I had relied only on the agent. We need to continue organising such orientation camps.”

4.2. Recommendations

Migration is an issue that concerns a large number of poor women, including those from socially excluded groups, and their families. The problem is rooted in poverty and often exacerbated by poor social protection measures. Addressing the problems associated with migration of women/girls therefore require a multi-pronged approach. The recommendations are therefore directed to specific agencies that are placed to lead the process of change. The multi-faceted nature of the problem also requires collaboration of different agencies and stakeholder groups for seeking a solution. Some of the major recommendations of the study are discussed below.

Government

The government needs to take urgent actions to protect women/girls from undocumented migration, international trafficking and the exploitation they face in their destinations. The following are some policy level interventions that could help control the flow:

- Effective implementation of the Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act, 2064 for prosecuting traffickers for all forms of trafficking
- Review the Foreign Employment Act, 2064 in consultation with stakeholders and make amendments to make the process simpler for migrants and stricter for traffickers.
- Formulate a policy and law for protecting girls and women working in the Nepalese entertainment sector from all forms of exploitation.
- Begin negotiations with destination countries to include domestic work that most women migrants do abroad as a category of work.

The following recommendations are intended for changes at the level of the implementing agencies.

- As an interim measure, issue a directive to control sexual exploitation of women in the entertainment sector in Nepal, and to assure that workers are provided appointment letters, have fixed working hours, fixed salary, and holidays; and a mechanism to file complaints against owners and customers. Proper work conditions in Nepal can contribute towards preventing many women from going abroad without proper documentation.
- Increase vigilance at border exit points to prevent international trafficking of girls and women and initiate investigations to uncover the ‘setting’ at the airport, and ensure strict implementation of the Foreign Employment Act, 2064.

Managing migration also requires interventions at the local level – the villages and districts where the migrants originate. The interventions recommended at the local level are:

- Design and implement a programme to reduce the number of women/girls migrating to the cities in search of work, particularly those who could end up in the entertainment sector. Provide them support for continuing education and alternative income generating options to help them engage in income generating activities in the areas where they live.
- Enforce workplace-related rules in the Labour Act in the entertainment sector, which has also been expanding in districts. The first step would be requiring employers to provide appointment letters and wages in accordance to the law.

Civil society

- Expand programmes aimed at increasing awareness of girls and women about the risks associated with migration and ways for migrating safely. The research approach of providing information and counselling services was very helpful for collecting information on migration from participating women. A similar approach can be replicated for continuously collecting information needed for understanding the complexities of migration and influencing policy change.
- Provide information, education and communication (IEC) materials to women in the entertainment sector, and have counselling arrangements.

5

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