

Fall 2015

The Struggle Overseas: Risk Factors for Suicide among Female Migrant Workers in Nepal

Dhara Puvar

SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

 Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), and the [Mental and Social Health Commons](#)

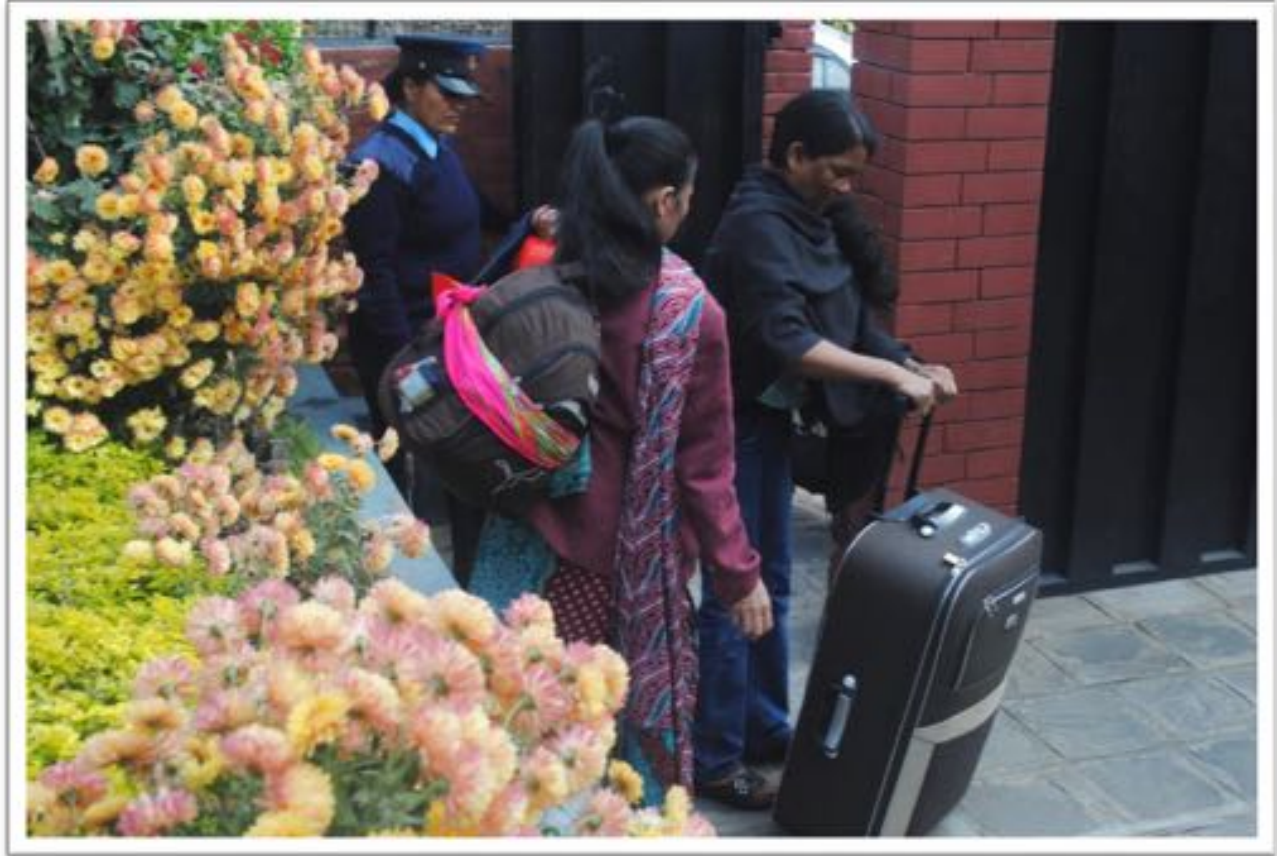
Recommended Citation

Puvar, Dhara, "The Struggle Overseas: Risk Factors for Suicide among Female Migrant Workers in Nepal" (2015). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 2228.

https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2228

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

The Struggle Overseas



Risk Factors for Suicide among Female Migrant Workers in Nepal

Dhara Puvar

Academic Director: Isabelle Onians

Senior Faculty Advisor: Hubert Decleer

Project Advisor: Nazneen Decleer

Loyola University Chicago, College of Arts and Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Nepal: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples,
SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2015

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	1
Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Terminology and Stigma Surrounding Suicide	5
Who is a Female Migrant Worker?	6
A Note on the “Feminization of Migration”	7
Prior to Departure	9
Why leave?	9
Preparing for Take-off	11
Illegal Channels	12
Time Abroad	14
Expectations and Exploitation	14
The Unique Plight of Domestic Workers	15
Far From Home	15
A Cry for Help	17
Coming Home	18
What happens next?	18
The Cycle of Migration	20
Working towards Safer Migration	21
Conclusion	23
Methodology	24
Limitations	25
Ideas for Further Study	26
Participants	27
Sources	28

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the dedication and generosity of the emergency shelter home staff members at Pourakhi Nepal. Thank you to Krishna, Neilam, Muna, Khet, Kolpana, Manju, and Sonu for feeding me too much, trying to teach me Nepali, and making me feel like a part of the family from the very beginning. A special thanks to Nazneen Decler for her guidance from this project's inception. Thank you to Isabelle Onians and all of the SIT: Tibetan and Himalayan Peoples faculty, staff, and students for their support throughout this journey. I am grateful to all of the mental health professionals and NGO affiliates for their invaluable contributions to this project. And finally, thank you to all of the returnee migrant women who shared their stories with me. Your resilience is inspiring, and the time we shared was truly a gift.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the various risk factors for suicide among female migrant workers in Nepal. Suicide is the leading cause of death among women in the country, and the prevalence of suicide among migrant women in particular warrants further investigation, especially considering the increasing number of women traveling abroad for foreign employment. What experiences do these women have that would lead to suicidal behavior? What personal and institutional challenges contribute to increased risk of suicide? How does the community respond to their needs? This research was conducted in the Kathmandu Valley, with the majority of data acquired through interviews, personal interactions with returnee migrant women, and field observation. This study found that although migration has empowered Nepali women to become financially and socially independent, it is clear that aspects of foreign employment can be detrimental to the mental and emotional well-being of female migrant workers. Risk factors for suicide exist for women over the course of foreign employment – from their departure to their time abroad, and even after their return to Nepal. Although organizations are working towards safer migration, suicide among female migrant workers deserves careful and proactive consideration, as these women are at risk due to societal and institutional factors widely outside of their control.

INTRODUCTION

For nearly two decades, studies undertaken by the Department of Health Services have maintained that suicide is the leading cause of death among women in Nepal. Since the last Maternal Mortality and Morbidity report was published in 2009, suicide has been recognized as a national public health problem.¹ Nepal is 7th in the world for highest rates of suicide per capita and 3rd for suicide among women, with over 4,000 people committing suicide each year.^{2 3} Incidence of suicide is widely underestimated, as attempted suicide is illegal in Nepal and highly stigmatized, often going unreported for fear of legal trouble and social rejection.⁴

These reports beg for answers as to why so many Nepali women are choosing to end their lives, and what changes have appeared in modern society that have caused these numbers to remain on the rise. Several sources point to husbands migrating for employment and financial dependence on men as major causes for suicide among women, including the Maternal Mortality and Morbidity study which attributed 11% of suicides to a spouse working overseas.⁵ However, with an increasing number of female migrant workers traveling abroad, the question arises as to the risks foreign employment poses for suicidal ideation and attempt for the individual migrating.

It is estimated that over 4 million Nepalis are currently working abroad, with women making up 12% of international migrants from Nepal as of 2011 – though it is nearly impossible to know for certain due to the number of women using irregular channels for migration.⁶ Although heart failure, natural causes, traffic and workplace accidents lead to the death of most male migrant workers abroad between 2008 and 2014, this was not the case for women. Among female migrant workers, over 30% of deaths were attributed to suicide, the leading cause of mortality over the six year period.⁷ In fact, Nepal's government banned women from working in Gulf countries for 12 years after the highly publicized death of Kani Sherpa, a domestic worker in Kuwait who committed suicide after enduring severe abuse from her employers, which sparked public outrage in 1998.^{8 9}

¹ Pradhan A, Poudel P, Thomas D, Barnett S. (2011). *A review of the evidence: suicide among women in Nepal*.

² World Health Organization. (2014). *Preventing suicide: A global imperative*.

³ Gautam, M. (2015, September 13). Significant rise in suicide after earthquake. *The Kathmandu Post*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pradhan, A., Suvedi, B. K., Barnett, S. et al. (2009). *Nepal maternal mortality and morbidity study 2008/2009: Summary of preliminary findings*. Family Health Division, Department of Health services, Ministry of Health, Government of Nepal.

⁶ Sharma, S., Pandey, S., Pathak, D., & Sijapati-Basnett, B. (2014). *State of migration in Nepal*. Kathmandu, Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility.

⁷ Department of Foreign Employment. (2014). *Labour migration for employment: A status report for Nepal*. Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Nepal.

⁸ Oneill, T. (2001). Selling girls in Kuwait: Domestic labour migration and trafficking discourse in Nepal. *Anthropologica*, 43(2). 154.

⁹ BBC. (2015, August 9). Nepal women banned from Middle East over exploitation.

The ban has since been lifted, modified, and reinstated several times in an effort to reduce instances of “young female workers [who] are reported to have been sexually and psychologically exploited in Gulf countries.”¹⁰ After the alleged suicides of Nepali migrant workers Sunit Bholan and Mina Rokaya in October 2009, Nepal reintroduced a work deployment ban for Lebanon that November, said to be “a necessary emergency step in the face of an alarming rise in the number of suicides by domestic workers.”¹¹

The prevalence of suicide among female migrant workers points to foreign employment as a potential risk factor for mental and emotional distress – especially for Nepali women who are already vulnerable. This study aims to investigate the causes of suicidal behavior among female migrant workers, including what puts women at risk prior to their departure, while they are abroad, and after their return to Nepal.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mahdawi, D. (2009, November 30). Nepal bans migration to Lebanon amid abuse fears. *The Daily Star*.

Terminology and Stigma Surrounding Suicide

Risk factors for suicide in this study are presented with the understanding that causes for suicidal behavior cannot be generalized to any one group. Reasons for suicide are unique to each individual, and factors that put people at risk can affect each person in different ways.

Terms such as depression, mental and emotional distress, and low mood are used throughout this study to describe mental states that heighten risk for suicide, with the understanding that a wide range of mental states, illnesses, and trauma can trigger suicidal ideation and intent. Research has consistently shown a strong link between suicide and mental disorders, with 90% of the people who die by suicide having an existing mental illness, diagnosed or undiagnosed, at the time of their death.^{12 13}

It is also important to make the distinction between suicidal *ideation* and suicidal *intent*. Individuals who are depressed (as well as those who are not) may experience suicidal ideation, which refers to thoughts of suicide, a desire to end their life, or that life may not be worth living. Suicidal intent refers to a conscious decision or objective to end one's life, which may be characterized by having a detailed plan to do so. Because both ideation and intent can result in a suicidal *behavior* (such as a suicide attempt), these terms are used in this study to describe the more immediate or direct effect of a potential risk factor.

Due to a lack of awareness, stigma surrounding discourse about mental health and suicide – particularly in Nepali society – make it difficult to define mental illness. The Nepali word used for mental health is *mansik rog*, which translates to “disease of the mind.” And yet, mental illness is not viewed in the same capacity as a cardiovascular disease or even a tooth infection. In Nepal, the words used to describe someone with a mental disorder, such as *pagal* (Nepali for “crazy”), contribute to the stigma that can overwhelm any serious discourse about mental health in the country.¹⁴

It can take changing personal values over a long period of time to actually let go of stigma surrounding mental illness. Therefore the way that mental illness is viewed, defined, dealt with, and linked to suicide is respective to culture. However, it cannot be denied that the risk factors that make people vulnerable to mental illness can translate to suicidal behavior – even in Nepal.

¹² National Alliance on Mental Illness. (Accessed 2015, November 26). Risk of suicide: Risk factors for suicide.

¹³ Rajkarnikar, K. (2015, November 26). Professional psychologist, personal interview

¹⁴ Ibid.

Who is a Female Migrant Worker?

In this study, the term “female migrant worker” is used with the understanding that the definition encompasses a much larger, more diverse group of women than those discussed in this report. Specifically, this study focuses on the experiences of international labor migrants, which distinguishes female migrant workers by the type of migration and sectors of employment.

First, this study differentiates women who migrate *internationally* for employment as opposed to those who migrate *internally*. Internal migration would include rural-to-urban or hills-to-plains migration in Nepal. However, this study is about those who migrate outside of Nepal, and the unique challenges this can present. The term “foreign employment” is also used in this study to make this distinction.

In recent years the most popular destinations for labor migrants traveling abroad are Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait.¹⁵ Although female migrant workers include women who are currently abroad with the *intention of employment*, the term “returnee migrant woman” is also used in this report to describe women who have previously traveled for foreign employment and have since returned to Nepal.

Moreover, this study focuses on the experiences of *labor* migrants. Data from the Department of Foreign Employment suggests that a very high percentage of unskilled migrants go abroad for work compared to an almost negligible percentage of professionals, with the most popular sectors of employment for female migrant workers being domestic work, manufacturing, and hotels.¹⁶ One reason a greater number of women have traveled overseas is due to the demand for female-specific jobs in foreign countries, particularly as domestic laborers in the Gulf region – the main occupation of female migrant workers.¹⁷ It would appear that the majority of migrant women from Nepal are in fact domestic workers in Gulf countries, as demonstrated by the participants in this study.

¹⁵ Department of Foreign Employment. (2014). *Labour migration*.

¹⁶ Sharma, S. et al. (2014). *State of migration in Nepal*.

¹⁷ Department of Foreign Employment. (2014). *Labour migration*.

A Note on the “Feminization of Migration”

Due to the rising number of independently migrating women, this phenomenon has been referred to as the “feminization of migration”.¹⁸ In many ways, migration can be seen as very empowering for women. They have the opportunity to become financially and socially independent, and earn the respect of their families and communities once they return to Nepal.

Foreign employment can also open doors for further opportunities. Take the example of Khet Kumari Ghimire from the Okhaldhunga District of Nepal. Ghimire was 20 years old when she traveled to Kuwait and spent three years there as a domestic worker. She said that prior to foreign employment she was very shy and did not have much confidence. But upon her return she was able to work in agriculture, learn to drive, and make decisions for herself. She even learned Arabic, and took notes in her diary every day in Kuwait to be able to speak and understand the language.

Today, Ghimire is a security guard for the emergency shelter home at Pourakhi Nepal – the first and only organization specifically dedicated to serving and advocating for the rights of migrant women. Her main responsibility is to ensure the safety of returnee migrant women in the shelter home, especially clients who are mentally disturbed, have psychosocial problems, or even become violent or unwell.

Ghimire feels that two decades ago, during her time abroad, there were less abuses, and that perhaps the reason so many of the women she now works with have suffered is because they are not prepared for the level of work to be done abroad. Although Ghimire does not believe that she was exploited in Kuwait, she recounts getting no more than two hours of sleep per night because of her responsibilities in her employer’s household. This suggests that rather than the presence of less abuses, perhaps women like Ghimire did not have the concept that many women traveling abroad today do about their rights as a worker. There is certainly a

“I thought, ‘If other can, why can’t I?’”



“My employers wanted me to stay, but I wanted to make something of myself in Nepal.”

¹⁸ Ghimire, A. B., Upreti, B.R., Gurung, G., & Adhikari, J. (2009). *Nepal Migration Year Book*. Nepal Institute of Development Studies.

difference between a hard worker, and someone who is made to work harder than they should. She went on to explain that the work was very laborious, and she had very little rest.

When asked why she returned to Nepal, Ghimire pointed to her eyes. “Do you see these dark circles?” she laughed.

Despite the fact that many migrant women may return to Nepal with a newfound sense of independence and respect, the exploitation and abuses women face in foreign employment can be masked by an idealized concept of the “feminization of migration,” which for some, like Ghimire, may only be the reality in hindsight. International migration cannot empower women if it is an institution ridden by the violation of women’s rights, and therefore should be open to scrutiny.

PRIOR TO DEPARTURE

Why leave?

Migrant workers leave Nepal for many reasons, though it seems that pressure placed on women to support their families, the lack of opportunities for them at home, and a desire for greater independence are the driving forces sending women abroad.

After her husband passed away, Sudha and her then 3 year old son went to live with her mother and brothers, the youngest of whom is severely handicapped. Suddenly, it became Sudha's responsibility to look after the family. She was 25 years old. A man had arrived in town, who told her and the other women in her village in Udayapur about the benefits of foreign employment. Determined to lift her family out of poverty and ensure a better future for her son, she decided to go to Lebanon.

Sudha is not alone in facing pressure to provide for her family. Every returnee migrant woman interviewed stated the desire – or need, in most cases – to earn more income as the main reason for choosing foreign employment. One migrant woman had taken on a large loan, and decided to go abroad in the hopes of paying it off sooner. The circumstances in which many migrant women leave – in poverty, in debt, or newly responsible for their household after the death or absence of a family member – put them at great risk for depression and suicide to begin



“I want to educate my son and make him capable. That is my dream.” – Sudha

with. World Bank data suggests that 25.2 % of Nepalis live below the poverty line.¹⁹ According to Nepali police, suicide cases triggered by financial crisis are increasing by the day, with poverty stated as the reason for suicide in over 60% of cases.²⁰

Moreover, women who decide to travel for foreign employment often cannot find a better alternative to generate income. “Foreign employment is their last option,” says Manju Gurung, founding member and chairperson of Pourakhi Nepal. “It is because women do not have any other options for livelihood. In Nepal there is no alternative. Women are uneducated, and do not have the skills for government positions or work in the development sector.”

Foreign employment presents an opportunity for women to earn income, independence, and even liberation from a world that gives them little respect or freedom to choose. However, without the education or skills to manage the environment they enter abroad, they are at even greater risk for exploitation. Gurung, who went to Japan for foreign employment at the age of 23, is no stranger to the discrimination and suffering one can experience upon entering the global workforce undocumented and unaware.

“[Women] leave Nepal without a capacity to decide. They leave without the capacity to say no,” Gurung laments. “They feel that within their household they are not secure, which is what pushes them to try foreign employment. Because of their low self-esteem, they face a lot of problems in the country of destination.” This low self-esteem is often the result of women not having the power to choose, even within their own homes – not just because of a lack of options for them, but because of societal and family pressures that can begin when they are children.

Eline Van Arkel, psychologist at Anicca counseling and consultancy center in Kathmandu, says, “Nepali women may not feel that they have a real choice when it comes to major decisions in their lives and futures.” These include decisions regarding marriage, education, children, or employment, and for this reason many women may feel trapped. According to Van Arkel, this hopelessness can lead to suicidal thoughts and behavior, as if it is the only way to escape their circumstances.

Another reason women may choose to go abroad is a desire for greater independence and freedom. But what can be truly damaging for these women in particular is that they often find themselves working in societies where they are still marginalized. This was echoed by Vinita Adhikari, psychologist and founding director of Antardristi, which provides mental health support services to women and girls who have been sexually exploited. She expressed her concern that many migrant women who travel abroad do not want to depend on their husbands, but simply move from one vulnerable situation to another by taking undesirable jobs where they are looked down upon.

“Women are second-class citizens everywhere in the world,” she says. “They don’t get respect. No one can understand their feelings, and that piles up. So ultimately, they see the door of suicide or depression.”

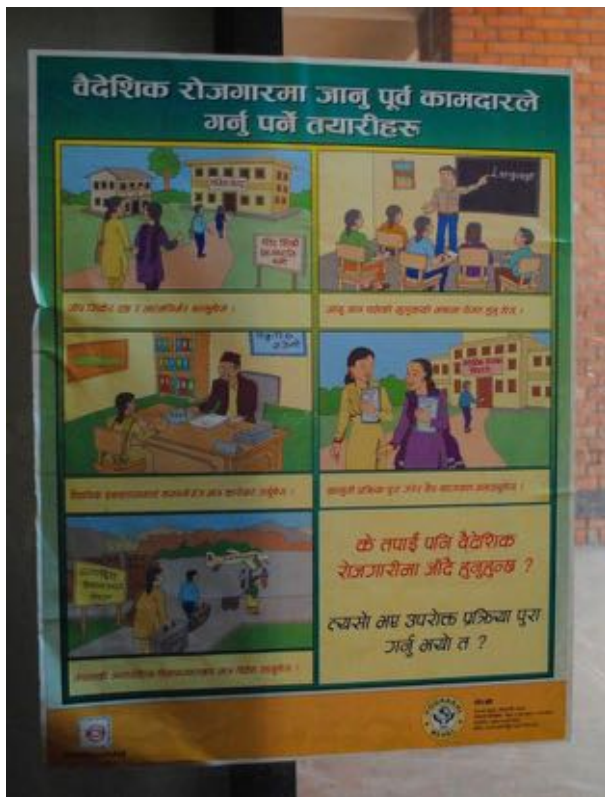
¹⁹ World Bank. (2010). Nepal: Poverty headcount ratio (% of population)

²⁰ Bhattarai, T. (2010). Poverty, inability to pay medical bills, leading cause of suicide in Nepal. *Global Press Institute*.

Whether women decide to leave Nepal to ease a financial burden, as a last option, or to become independent, it is clear that many women are at risk for depression and suicide even before they have a passport. Without proper preparation, foreign employment can simply heighten this risk.

Preparing for Take-off

The government of Nepal does offer orientation and training programs meant to prepare women for their time abroad, however very few women attend these workshops as they are not mandatory. All of these programs are also centrally located, so those living outside of Kathmandu cannot always afford to leave their families and stay in the city for 30 days – revised just this year from a 21 day curriculum – in order to attend an orientation program.²¹ There are



A poster located in the Foreign Employment Information Office at Tribhuvan International Airport explaining the steps migrant workers should take prior to departure.

organizations pushing the government to decentralize these programs and even make them mandatory, but until then women will not have the incentive or access to resources that could certainly make a difference in their experience abroad. One migrant woman felt that if she had known the details of her workplace, had the proper training, and language skills prior to her departure, it could have made a world of difference in her time overseas.

Til date, there is also no mental health screening process for migrant workers prior to their departure. Studies have found that mental illness is the predominant cause of suicide in both genders, but that women are at an even greater risk.²² With at least 25-30% of Nepal's general population struggling with one or more mental disorders, early diagnosis can be key to ensuring the safety and health of those traveling abroad.²³ As most individuals in Nepal with severe mental disorders and their family members are targets for stigma and discrimination, they may hesitate to come

²¹ Gurung, M. (2015, November 17). Founder and chairperson of Pourakhi Nepal, personal interview.

²² Hawthorne, K. (2000). Sex and suicide: Gender differences in suicidal behavior. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177. 484-485.

²³ LEADS Nepal. (2010). *Baseline Study Report*. Mental Health and Development Programme.

forward for appropriate treatment. This puts those with pre-existing conditions further at risk, especially those on psychiatric medication which may be discontinued while abroad.

Illegal Channels

Inadequate access to orientation programs and the absence of mental health screenings prior to departure prove to be examples of poor risk management by the government in an effort to ensure the well-being of migrant workers. Although these may be areas for improvement, these resources become irrelevant for the scores of women using irregular channels to travel abroad.

“[For] those who don’t go legally, their life is completely put at risk. They don’t fully understand how to complete the work that they have gone for, so they may receive beatings and verbal abuse,” says one source from the Asian Human Rights Forum. “Many will attempt suicide if they are physically or mentally tortured, home sick, abused – particularly female domestic workers.”

In 1998, the government imposed the first ban on women traveling to Gulf countries and Malaysia for employment. The ban has since been lifted, modified, and reinstated, with the current policy put in effect this year prohibiting the migration of women under 24 without a guardian in the country of destination.²⁴ Restricting women’s freedom of movement over the years to protect against exploitation abroad has ultimately backfired, due to an increasing number of Nepali women entering these countries illegally.

It is estimated that the majority of women working in Gulf countries and Malaysia have taken informal routes to get there. An estimated 30-40 Nepali women fly to Gulf countries via Indian cities daily, with 20-25,000 Nepali women working in Saudi Arabia alone.²⁵ ²⁶ These routes are typically controlled by agents not officially registered by the government. Due to a lack of information, many women borrow thousands – one returnee reported 70,000 NPR – in order to pay agents who are not authorized to recruit domestic workers, pushing them into debt and increasing their dependence on success abroad. This can be detrimental, as illegal migration cannot always guarantee job placement and even poses the risk of human trafficking.²⁷

This was a misfortune that fell upon Nirmala, who was recruited to become a domestic worker in Dubai. Little did she know that she would be sold to employers in Kuwait, and then to a family in Saudi Arabia soon after. She returned to Nepal no more than six months after her departure, carrying no more than a purse and a small purple duffel bag.

As an undocumented worker, the rights protecting women under a traditional labor agreement disappear, making them even more vulnerable to exploitation.²⁸ Human trafficking is extremely dangerous and difficult to escape. The feeling that there is no way out of their

²⁴ Gurung, M. Personal interview.

²⁵ Sedhai, R. (2014, April 27). Death, torture final fate of many migrants. *The Kathmandu Post*.

²⁶ Ghimire, A. B. et al. (2009). *Nepal Migration Year Book*.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

situation can put women in a position where they may even consider ending their own life.²⁹ For women like Nirmala, who are lucky enough to make it back home, even the experience of being trafficked can leave them in complete and utter despair.

“There is nothing,” said Nirmala. “I have nothing.”



Nirmala (right) at Tribhuvan International Airport upon her arrival, ready to be taken to Pourakhi Nepal’s emergency shelter home.

²⁹ Adhikari, V. (2015, November 23). Founding director of Antardristi, personal interview.

TIME ABROAD

Expectations and Exploitation

Certainly Nirmala's expectations for foreign employment were far removed from the reality of her time abroad. She suffered intensely, and was denied meals, soap and shampoo while bathing, and faced sexual harassment by her employers too explicit to report.

Krista Rajkarnikar, a Kathmandu-based psychologist with experience working in both private hospitals and rural areas of Nepal, says that just having expectations can prove harmful to the mental and emotional well-being of female migrant workers.

"It sounds like a dream. You can go abroad, make some money, and then come back and create a new life for yourself," she explains. "But anything could go wrong there. If women are not making that money or not matching your expectations that might actually be misconceptions, and if that affects their thoughts about themselves, then it can trigger low mood and impact self-esteem."

Regardless of expectations, the conditions migrant workers often find themselves in can be miserable. Even when they are under a labor agreement, relationships with employers – especially for domestic workers in the Gulf – can be source of major stress and conflict. One report even dared to write, "Psychological, physical, and sexual abuses are *common*."³⁰

At 22 years old, Sarmila faced verbal abuse from her employers almost daily as a domestic worker in Dubai. They criticized everything she did, which would result in unpleasant fights among the family members. "If you didn't want to work, then why did you come here?" they would say," she recalled. One day, her employers simply left her at the airport and told her to go back to Nepal. Without much money, she found another Nepalese worker who helped her get home.

When asked how she felt about her decision to go abroad, she expressed, "I am happy, but I am also sad. Foreign employment gave me the chance to learn many things, but the verbal violence was really a problem." These abuses are a major risk factor that push women over the edge when it comes to their mental stability. Whether it be the trauma of physical beatings, or an employer constantly telling a worker that she is not good enough, mental and emotional distress is certainly a consequence.

Sarmila decided to travel for foreign employment to earn money to help her family, but also to fulfil her dream of becoming a singer. As for her future, she says that whether or not she becomes successful, she wants to sing.

³⁰ Ghimire, A. B. et al. (2009). *Nepal Migration Year Book*.

The Unique Plight of Domestic Workers

Countless reports and news articles over the years have condemned the treatment of domestic workers abroad³¹. But the question still remains as to why these women are at greater risk for exploitation than those migrant women employed in manufacturing companies or hotels. In the Gulf region, where the majority of Nepali domestic workers are employed, the *kefala system* (Arabic for “sponsorship system”) gives employers easy opportunities to take advantage of their workers. The system requires migrant workers in the domestic sector to have an in-country sponsor, usually their employer, who is then responsible for their legal status.³²

After they arrived at Pourakhi Nepal’s emergency shelter home, it was undeniable how hesitant migrant workers were to hand over their passports to the shelter’s staff. Their lack of trust was likely reflective of the difficulties they faced abroad, as taking away passports is a common way for employers to keep migrants from leaving on their own accord.

Because private homes are considered “unorganized sectors,” employers are unlikely to face legal repercussions for abusing their workers.³³ This is aggravated by the fact that domestic workers often live within the homes of their employers, which can further complicate employee-worker relations and lead to isolation within the home, physical and psychological abuse amid forced labor and low wages.

Far From Home

It is clear that exploitation can lead to trauma that is not easily forgotten. But even women in the best working conditions can be vulnerable to suicidal ideation.

“Traveling, big transitions, or cultural changes, no matter how significant, can impact the way you think or behave. That’s culture shock,” says Rajkarnikar. “If it messes with your psychological well-being it can automatically trigger a wide variety of mental health disorders, which can then be the key to suicidal thoughts.”

Facing this transition alone can be even more overwhelming. All returnee migrant women interviewed in this study mentioned homesickness during their time abroad, with many unable to contact their family regularly due to international calling expenses, and in some cases the confiscation of their phones by their employers.

Positive interpersonal relationships can be a crucial element in protecting mental health, with friendships playing a key role in coping with problems and overcoming the isolation that often accompanies mental disorders.³⁴ Without any kind of support system, women are even more at risk for depression. As far as building relationships abroad, laborers or workers in the

³¹ Begum, R. (2015, October 16). Gulf states fail to protect domestic workers from serious violence. *Human Rights Watch*.

³² Gurung, M. Personal interview.

³³ Ghimire, A. B. et al. (2009). *Nepal Migration Year Book*.

³⁴ Mental Health Foundation. (2015). *Friendship and Mental Health*.

domestic sector such as housemaids or caretakers are often shunned by locals, as these positions are considered inferior and are therefore socially stigmatized.³⁵

One migrant woman, a domestic worker in Kuwait, said that she did not like to leave the house, because “the women in Kuwait do not have good character.” Her statement is telling, as it points to the isolation and confinement many migrant workers face, especially domestic workers. She also spoke about not being permitted by her employers to speak with other workers in public. “I was very alone,” she said, “But I became used to it.”

Gita, the only migrant woman interviewed who was not a domestic worker, actually left for foreign employment with other Nepali women. She is 39 years old, from the Rukum District of Nepal, a mountainous region where agriculture is the main source of livelihood. She had traveled to Malaysia along with 25 others who all lived together in the company’s quarters in one large, white hall. The rooms were not separated, but each worker was given their own bed and cupboard. Unfortunately relationships with the roommates were bitter.

“I couldn’t find any friends,” she remembers. “I missed home daily, especially my children.”

Jamuna Giri, the in-house counselor at Pourakhi Nepal’s emergency shelter home, sees depression and suicidal ideation as a major struggle for migrant women during their time abroad. Since the shelter opened in 2009, she has seen well over 150 cases of mental illness among her clients, all of whom are returnee migrant woman. She believes this to be a fraction of the reality for returnees, with suicidal ideation and attempt an unfortunate consequence of many women’s experiences. To demonstrate, Giri posed a scenario that she has found all too common among her clients:

“Many women abroad who will attempt suicide are those with children in Nepal. They will be working in Saudi or Kuwait somewhere, where their employers will keep them in isolation. They won’t be able to contact their families. They do not have rest, good food...Soon they begin living inside their own minds, their own hearts...They develop depression and begin to have negative thoughts. They don’t know if their child is alive or



“I sat in a chair for 12 hours per day, cutting and bending ply wood to put together tables for the furniture company.” – Gita

³⁵ Adhikari, V. (2015, November 23). Personal interview.

dead, if their husband has found a new woman. They then question why they are alive and conclude that it is better to die.”

With separation from their children, spouses, family members, friends, language, culture, and everything else that comes with home something all migrant women deal with, it is not surprising that many begin “living inside their own minds.” It can be a lonely journey. Without the support needed to help foster positivity and comfort in a new environment, that can be the toughest aspect of foreign employment.

A Cry for Help

For female migrant workers struggling overseas, there would ideally be a place to go in their country of employment for help. In actuality, there is a significant lack of in-country resources for migrant workers, not to mention accessible mental health care. Although there are many Nepali embassies abroad, women are often unaware of their existence, and the capacity for embassies to provide any useful services are very limited. Even if women were looking for help, it is unlikely that they will find it without the awareness and access to these resources. Help-seeking is vital for early treatment and prevention of mental health problems and is recognized as a protective factor against suicide.³⁶ But when these cries for help are not heard, women are left at risk.

There are reports of up to 100 women who are “rescued” by Nepali embassies daily in the Middle East, though the nature of these “rescue missions” are unclear.³⁷ It would seem that migrant workers who undergo severe abuse are somehow found by these embassies or make their way there themselves, and are then repatriated to Nepal. It is uncertain if this is truly the result of diligent work on the part of embassies, though the government of Nepal has allegedly made recent efforts to increase the number of embassy personnel across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Malaysia, Qatar, Israel, South Korea in order to address the growing number of migrant workers in these countries.

³⁶ Wilson, C., Deane, F., Marshall, K., & Dalley, A. (2010), Adolescents’ suicidal thinking and reluctance to consult general medical practitioners. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39(4).

³⁷ Sedhai, R. (2014, April 27). Death, torture final fate of many migrants. *The Kathmandu Post*.

COMING HOME

For all of the reasons women leave Nepal for foreign employment, they return home for just as many. Among the migrant women interviewed over the course of this study, a death or medical emergency in the family and being released by their employers were the primary reasons for return.

Just as women are at risk for suicide prior to foreign employment and while abroad, the circumstances in which they return can be even more threatening to their mental and emotional well-being. Fifteen days after her husband's death, one returnee migrant woman said she felt as though all was lost as she cried hysterically in the arms of her son-in-law who had come to see her home. Women may return from foreign employment in debt, in critical medical condition, mentally disturbed from exploitation or human trafficking incidents, with newborn children or pregnant. After a prolonged absence, to enter into another vulnerable, stressful situation can be wholly damaging for those at risk for depression and suicide.

What happens next?

In the arrivals area of Tribhuvan International Airport, a pattern begins to emerge among those exiting flights from the Middle East. The vast majority are men, wheeling checkered suitcases wrapped in plastic atop Rafea tea boxes shut closed with duct tape and ropes, often in



Guma (left), approaching migrant women as they arrive in Nepal.

groups and pairs of two as they search for their loved ones behind glass in the waiting area. A few women are also leaving these flights. Some are with family members, and some are foreigners immediately surrounded by taxi drivers and hotel managers once they have claimed their baggage. But then there are the women who are alone. Nepali, with little luggage, recognizable by their clothing, their face, the way they carry themselves.

At least they are to Guma, whose job it is to know these women. They are migrant workers, returning to Nepal from Gulf countries. When she identifies a returnee migrant woman, she approaches them and says, “Namaste sister. Do you have someone picking you up today?” Usually, the answer is yes – “my husband is here,” they’ll say. However, when the answer is no, Guma tells them about Pourakhi Nepal’s emergency shelter home, and lets these women know that they have a place to stay the night.

Pourakhi Nepal is the pioneer organization working to support returnee migrant woman, providing shelter, counseling, medical care, financial literacy courses, and legal services to their clients, all while advocating for the rights of female migrant workers across the country. With branches in 16 districts of Nepal, Pourakhi is an example of an organization working to ensure that women are protected throughout the migration process, especially in regard to mental health. Over 1,600 women have passed through their emergency shelter home in Kathmandu since it opened in 2009.

“[Our shelter home] sees many clients who have attempted suicide, and with some you can still see the signs,” says Giri. She recalled the story of one migrant woman from Udayapur who sat in the shelter for three days without a word, with a large scarf tied around her neck. Once the scarf was removed, it was clear that she had made an attempt on her life. Giri immediately referred the client to a psychologist for further treatment.

For organizations like Pourakhi working to reintegrate female migrant workers back into the community, the biggest obstacle can be helping those who went abroad without the support of their families. Many women do not want to disclose that they are migrating for employment due to a fear of judgment in an environment where they are culturally, economically, financially, politically, and socially dismissed. Families may not permit a daughter or a mother to travel abroad due to responsibilities at home and to the community, or even a fear of unsuccessful employment. This may lead women to go abroad through irregular channels so that the government also remains unaware of their migration.

Upon their return, women cannot immediately reenter their communities if they left home in these circumstances. This becomes even more relevant if they return in a condition where they are vulnerable to criticism, as women who return pregnant, for example, certainly are. In order to help returnee migrant women return home to a secure and healthy environment, individual and family counseling is a large part of the process. In addition, women who require prolonged medical care, therapy, legal help, or desire to participate in financial literacy courses have their needs addressed, so that they can become empowered, active women in their communities.

The Cycle of Migration

Upon successful reintegration into the community, many returnee migrant women will turn to agriculture or even start a small business for their livelihood. A large portion of women, however, return abroad. For women who have found success in foreign employment, this can be a positive choice. But others become trapped in a cycle of hope and hopelessness that can be devastating. Giri mentioned women who found themselves at the emergency shelter for the second, even third time, and planned to return abroad despite all they had been through.

“They say that they have no other option, that there is no one supporting them,” she laments. “Recruitment agents will give them a new dream. They think, maybe this time it will be different.” Giri felt that this was certainly true for one woman, who appeared at the shelter home on three separate occasions. The first two times she came back pregnant, and on the third she had a newborn baby. Despite these circumstances, she wants to try foreign employment again.

“I can feel her pain,” said Giri. Her husband left her, she was abandoned by her maternal family, and her community does not respect her because of her illegitimate children. In need of money, it is no wonder she may feel that she has no other options. But it is in this way that foreign employment appears to be addictive – a toxic relationship that one tries to leave but cannot abandon in the hope that things will change.



Jamuna Giri left for foreign employment in 1996 when she was 17 years old, in order to help support her family and pay for her brother’s medical treatment.

“I thought, why shouldn’t I go?” she recalls. “At the time my father did not permit me to leave openly, but my mother supported me. She collected money from all of her friends, I sold my earrings, and borrowed from relatives until I had enough.”

Giri worked abroad until she was 26, and spent almost five years as a domestic worker in the King’s palace in Oman.

“At the time, I never felt like a servant. But now I understand that I was naïve,” she says. “I worked far too much, that is why they liked me. I realize that now...I was just a baby, and thought that I had to do everything I was told and follow every order I was given. Maybe now, I would not work the way I did. At that time, I was not aware of my rights.”

Working towards Safer Migration

Creating options for women, not only after they have returned from foreign employment but from the beginning – options for employment, education, and independence – is vital to ensure that in the future, women do not feel trapped as a victim of circumstance. This, however, is no easy task, and requires the investment of time and energy from Nepali society as a whole. But until then, for women to be safe and treated with dignity in foreign employment, safer migration laws and implementation is necessary.

The Foreign Employment Office located in the departures area of Tribhuvan International Airport presents one step towards safer migration, with information officers standing by to provide information and counsel to Nepalis leaving for work abroad. One information officer, who himself spent 6 years as a migrant worker, believes that information and awareness prior to departure is the most important step towards safer migration. This office is also the one that arranges for dead body vans for migrant workers who have passed away during foreign employment – including those who have committed suicide. In his opinion, to reduce the exploitation of women abroad and instances of suicide, being proactive to ensure female migrant workers are prepared is a necessary step.



Foreign Employment Office at Tribhuvan International Airport.

But in order for this to be the reality, it is important that women seek foreign employment through legal channels. The government's protectionist mentality towards the violation of female migrant worker's rights has resulted in restricting women's freedom of movement. These laws must be revisited so that women may not resort to irregular channels of migration that make them even more vulnerable to exploitation. The implementation of safer migration laws both in Nepal and internationally are vital to women's safety and success abroad

Moreover, mandatory orientation programs, skills training, and language courses should be decentralized, and become more widely accessible outside of Kathmandu. For women working abroad, it is necessary to provide information and access to in-country resources even prior to departure to ensure that help can be sought out and provided to those who need it. This would require the cooperation of both foreign governments and Nepali embassies to ensure that the rights of female migrant workers are protected.

CONCLUSION

Migration has empowered Nepali women to become financially and social independent, but it is clear that aspects of foreign employment can be detrimental to the mental and emotional well-being of female migrant workers. This study found that various risk factors for suicide exist for women over the course of foreign employment – from their departure to their time abroad, and even after their return to Nepal.

Prior to their departure, the circumstances in which many migrant women leave put them at great risk for suicide to begin with. This study found that many Nepali women feel that foreign employment is their last option, and are unskilled, uneducated, and wholly unprepared for work abroad. When expectations for successful employment are not met, low self-esteem and low mood can follow, which are key to suicidal thoughts.

While abroad, the exploitation of female migrant workers – particularly in the domestic sector – is all too common. Physical, verbal, psychological, and sexual abuse can be a traumatic reality that is difficult to escape. In addition, this study found that aspects of the transition migrant women experience abroad can put any woman at risk. Homesickness, culture shock, isolation and confinement can all trigger suicidal ideation.

It is also clear that female migrant workers are at risk of leaving one vulnerable situation and simply returning to another, especially when the reason for their return is a death or medical emergency in their family. For those women who were exploited in their time abroad or unable to reintegrate into the community, the transition back to life in Nepal can be another risk factor without access to the right resources. These women are also at risk of returning abroad, a cycle which draws migrants in the hopes that their experiences will be different a second or third time.

The community has taken various steps to help rehabilitate returnee migrant women and work towards safer migration, including those in NGOs, mental health care facilities, and the government of Nepal. However, there continue to remain institutional restrictions on women's freedoms and a lack of access to resources that render foreign employment – especially via irregular channels – dangerous. Although suicide among women in Nepal has been recognized as a public health issue, this epidemic among female migrant workers deserves careful and proactive consideration, as these women are at risk due to factors widely outside of their control.

METHODOLOGY

The data collected over the course of this investigation was acquired through interviews, personal interactions with returnee migrant women, and field observation.

Interviews were conducted with licensed mental health professionals in the Kathmandu area to gain an understanding of the prevalence and causes of suicide among Nepali women at large. These trained professionals were working as psychologists or counselors in a hospital, counseling center, clinic, or NGO. These interviews also addressed the stigma associated with mental health disorders in Nepali society as well as potential methods for suicide prevention among women.

NGO affiliates were also interviewed for this study in order to better understand the risk factors for suicide among female migrant workers. These NGO affiliates were founders, counselors, shelter home staff members, as well as information officers serving migrant workers upon departure from or arrival to Tribhuvan International Airport. These interviews exposed the challenges female migrant workers face legally, socially, economically, and personally that make them vulnerable to suicidal behavior.

Interviews and personal interactions with returnee migrant women proved to be especially informative. Interviews were conducted at the emergency shelter home of Pourakhi Nepal, with the supervision of a Pourakhi staff member. Questions related to mental health and suicide which may cause distress were not directed to these participants, and were only directed to secondary sources. Returnee migrants often did not have to be prompted to share their experiences. Full informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants in this study.

Field observation took place at Pourakhi Nepal's emergency shelter home and at Tribhuvan International Airport while accompanying foreign employment information officers on duty. Officers waited at the arrival gate after flights from Gulf countries landed, and then approached women they identified as migrant workers to ensure they had a safe place to stay that evening. Women who did not were then brought to the emergency shelter home. Data was collected regarding the manner in which migrant workers returned to Nepal, their behavior, and the process of admission into the shelter home.

LIMITATIONS

It is important to note that this study had several limitations, including the sensitive nature of the topic, time constraints, and language barriers. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of suicide, it was no easy task finding spaces where it could be discussed openly and honestly with secondary sources. Mental health is also defined differently in various cultures, which could have created a bias in this project on the behalf of the researcher.

With more time afforded, there would have been a greater potential for field observation – including field work at foreign employment orientation programs, trainings, and recruitment agencies. Ideally, there would have been more participants in this study in order to show a wider range of experiences of female migrant workers and to include the insights and expertise of more mental health professionals and NGO affiliates in Nepal.

Another limitation was posed by language barriers, due to information inevitably being “lost in translation.” Interviews with the majority of returnee migrant women were conducted with the help of a Nepali translator. Those conversations often could not be as personal or include the subtleties of speech that would be possible without a language barrier, which also creates distance between participants and the researcher.

IDEAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Expanding the study of risk factors for suicide to other target groups:

- What risk factors for suicidal behavior exist among male migrant workers? Rural-to-urban migrants? Married women in Nepal? Students? In theory, this research question can be applied to any sub-population.
- And in-depth analysis of the experiences of female migrant workers in specific countries and sectors, such as domestic workers in Kuwait or manufacturing laborers in Malaysia.

Exploring frameworks for mental health and suicide in Nepal:

- What factors contribute to the stigma of mental illness?
- How do individuals define mental health? What leads them to these definitions? How is mental illness diagnosed?
- A study exploring notions of inevitability. What factors are at play? Religion? Education? Media?
- How does suicide affect the family and community of the victim?

PARTICIPANTS

Returnee Migrant Women

Sudha, Lebanon and Kuwait, November 9, 2015*

Gita, Malaysia, November 9, 2015*

Nirmala, trafficking victim, November 17, 2015*

Anonymous, Saudi Arabia, November 19, 2015

Pabitra, Qatar, November 20, 2015

Sarmila, UAE, November 20, 2015

Anonymous, Kuwait, November 21, 2015

Anonymous, UAE, November 23, 2015

*Some names have been changed to protect the identity of participants

Mental Health Professionals

Eline Van Arkel, Anicca, November 7, 2015

Vinita Adhikari, Antardristi, November 23, 2015

Krista Rajkarnikar, professional psychologist, November 26, 2015

NGO Affiliates

Anonymous, Asian Human Rights Forum, November 10, 2015

Manju Gurung, Pourakhi, November 17, 2015

Guma, Pourakhi, November 17, 2015

Anonymous, Foreign Employment Office, November 17, 2015

Khet Kumari Ghimire, Pourakhi, November 18, 2015

Jamuna Giri, Pourakhi, November 18, 2015

SOURCES

- BBC. (2015, August 9). Nepal women banned from Middle East over exploitation.
- Begum, R. (2015, October 16). Gulf states fail to protect domestic workers from serious violence. *Human Rights Watch*.
- Bhattarai, T. (2010). Poverty, inability to pay medical bills, leading cause of suicide in Nepal. *Global Press Institute*.
- Gautam, M. (2015, September 13). Significant rise in suicide after earthquake. *The Kathmandu Post*.
- Ghimire, A. B., Upreti, B.R., Gurung, G., & Adhikari, J. (2009). *Nepal Migration Year Book*. Nepal Institute of Development Studies.
- Hawthorne, K. (2000). Sex and suicide: Gender differences in suicidal behavior. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177. 484-485.
- Koirala, K.R. (2015, September 15). Nepali missions in labor destinations get more staff. *Republica*.
- LEADS Nepal. (2010). *Baseline Study Report*. Mental Health and Development Programme.
- Mahdawi, D. (2009, November 30). Nepal bans migration to Lebanon amid abuse fears. *The Daily Star*.
- Mental Health Foundation. (2015). *Friendship and Mental Health*.
- National Alliance on Mental Illness. (Accessed 2015, November 26). Risk of suicide: Risk factors for suicide.
- O'Neill, T. (2001). Selling girls in Kuwait: Domestic labour migration and trafficking discourse in Nepal. *Anthropologica*, 43(2). 154.
- Sharma, S., Pandey, S., Pathak, D., & Sijapati-Basnett, B. (2014). *State of migration in Nepal*. Kathmandu, Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility.
- Sedhai, R. (2014, April 27). Death, torture final fate of many migrants. *The Kathmandu Post*.
- Pradhan A, Poudel P, Thomas D, Barnett S. (2011). *A review of the evidence: suicide among women in Nepal*.
- Pradhan, A., Suvedi, B. K., Barnett, S. et al. (2009). *Nepal maternal mortality and morbidity study 2008/2009: Summary of preliminary findings*. Family Health Division, Department of Health services, Ministry of Health, Government of Nepal.
- Wilson, C., Deane, F., Marshall, K., & Dalley, A. (2010). Adolescents' suicidal thinking and reluctance to consult general medical practitioners. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.
- World Health Organization. (2014). Preventing suicide: A global imperative.
- World Bank. (2010). Nepal: Poverty headcount ratio (% of population)
- Department of Foreign Employment. (2014). *Labour migration for employment: A status report for Nepal*. Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Nepal.