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The Plight of women workers abroad



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## The plight of women workers abroad

*It's been a long time since incidents of Nepalese workers being swindled abroad, including in Arab countries, started to come out in the open. More than men, women going overseas for employment have been cheated. This issue was not new to any government in the past. But, instead of working towards reducing such cases, time was spent on enacting laws and policies. Now, however, the democratic government, demonstrating great magnanimity, has announced the removal of all restrictions on women seeking foreign employment, through the budget for the current fiscal year. Even so, many a practical aspect remains as it was, with the Labour Ministry and the Foreign Ministry shirking responsibility and passing the buck to each other. Women in foreign lands are facing the brunt of it.*

✎ **By Amika Rajthala**

*After Arab nations began to be criticized at the international level, labour courts were set up for foreign workers. Workers are entitled to move the labour court if the house-owners have not paid them their salaries for three months. But, says Chanda, Nepalese women have not been able to derive much benefit from the court. Why? Chanda adds: "How can one go to the labour court when there is no environment to venture outdoors. Nepalese women do not have the capacity to go there."*

Kathmandu: Merely on the basis of the ordinary household chores they

have been doing, women going abroad are expected to prepare meals as a perfect cook. Women who go abroad without acquiring any training, or receiving training in name only, do not even know how to use modern gadgets. Incidents of them being beaten up by their employers as a result have been coming to public attention. Says Chanda Thapa, who returned home a few months ago after working for five years in Oman: "Not knowing the local language, one has to rely on gesticulation while working. Women hailing from villages spend three, four months crying over not knowing how to use modern gadgets like washing machine, oven, mixer and gas cooker."

Over the last few years, the government has been attempting to put foreign employment on the national priority list. As a result, in the fiscal year 2001/02, it adopted the policy to send at least 100,000 youths abroad for work.

To implement that policy of the government, at the initiative of the then National Women Commission and Employment Promotion Commission, women from conflict-hit regions were sent to Hong Kong, Israel and Dubai, among other countries. After the death of Kani Sherpa in a Gulf country in 2054 B.S., the then government had banned women from going to Gulf countries for employment. But there was widespread opposition to the ban. Later, in 2059 B.S., the ban was relaxed. Recently, the Nepal government completely removed restrictions on women seeking foreign employment as domestic helpers. There is no doubt that, in the present situation where women are determined to move forward, this decision by the government will further encourage women who aspire to foreign jobs.

According to Chanda Thapa, a former secretary of the Nepalese Society in Oman, Rupa Gurung (name changed) of Dharan committed suicide after her house-owner repeatedly tried to rape her. Likewise, Maiya Tamang (name changed), daughter of Kharpang Tamang of Lumsang VDC in Rasuwa, did not send home money for about six years after she left for Oman. Her house-owner did not give her money, Thapa says. The employer not only did not pay the salary but also gave her extreme torture when any object in the house was broken, says Thapa. Former secretary Thapa says her desire to return only after rescuing Tamang could not be fulfilled.

Over the last few years, there has been widespread protest against the torture of those going abroad for work. After Arab nations began to be criticized at the international level, labour courts were set up for foreign workers. Workers are entitled to move the labour court if the house-owners have not paid

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them their salaries for three months. But, says Chanda, Nepalese women have not been able to derive much benefit from the court. Why? Chanda adds: "How can one go to the labour court when there is no environment to venture outdoors. Nepalese women do not have the capacity to go there." However, some have received justice from the court, admits Chanda. According to Chanda, one Nepalese woman got a ticket to return home from her employer. But her employer did not pay her salary even until it was time for her to return. Right at that moment, she filed a petition at the labour court, and was thus able to receive her due.

In recent years, the Gulf countries have joined ranks to tackle rampant labour exploitation in the Gulf region. Three years ago, they issued a declaration with a commitment to ensuring the welfare of foreign workers, but it has not been effective, says Saru Joshi of UNIFEM.

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Anuradha Koirala, chairman of Maiti Nepal, says women working abroad are also suffering from sexual misconduct. She informs that lots of letters from such women drawing attention to their plight have been registered at Maiti Nepal. She points out the need for coordination between the Labour Ministry, which sends people to foreign employment, and the Foreign Ministry, which is responsible for diplomacy, in order to free every woman from violence.

The problem partly stems from the fact that the majority of women go abroad illegally, without receiving any training. Saru Johsi, of UNIFEM, says the tendency to go abroad for work

illegally should be stopped. She says: "A law should be enacted covering all aspects—before going abroad for employment, the working conditions and after returning home. Similarly, as the family of the individual going for foreign employment is also affected the decision, the law must also incorporate the rights of the family."

According to Joshi, the law must be of a type that is relevant for even the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. The Foreign Ministry and Labour Ministry should work in coordination with each other to help free Nepalese citizens working abroad from violence, swindling and pain. Likewise, in case there is no embassy in the country concerned, the services of a nearby embassy can be availed of by specifying its jurisdiction.

Economist Meena Acharya says that just because some women have suffered, a blanket regulation affecting all cannot be enforced. "Efforts should be made towards providing compensation to the victims, rescuing those in danger and making insurance provision," she says.

The annual budget speech for the fiscal year 2005/06 promises a foreign employment law and organizational reforms of the bodies concerned in order to making foreign employment dignified, organized and transparent.

As per this declaration, the Ministry for Labour and Transport Management is preparing to present a draft Foreign Employment Act in the parliament by mid-September. Similarly, a decision concerning the case of female domestic helpers will be taken by mid-February after consulting with the Foreign Ministry, says Dhurb Kumar Sharma, under-secretary at the ministry. He says the commitments made in the

current fiscal year's budget speech will be fulfilled by mid-April next year.

According to Under Secretary Sharma, the draft Act, with a view to making the foreign employment business dignified, organized and transparent, proposes allowing manpower companies to open branches in different places, reforming the structure of the Labour Department and decentralizing government services and facilities. Sharma informs that women will be sent abroad as domestic helpers only after investigating the organization demanding the workers through the embassy concerned, confirming the salary and making other such confirmations. But Bhagirath Basnet, officiating secretary at the Foreign

Ministry, said that without formal complaints, even the ministry cannot find out such details in all countries. The draft is in the process of being tabled in parliament. But if the two ministries continue to shirk their responsibility, Nepalese women abroad will continue to be left in a lurch. Hence it is necessary to pay attention to it in time.

The number of youths going abroad through informal channels is far greater than that of those taking the formal route. The population census of 2001 shows 83,000 women are abroad. Likewise, in 2004/05, of the 177,576 people that left the country for foreign employment on an institutional basis, 1071 were women.

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**Sancharika Samuha was established by a group of women communicator's in April 1996, with the primary aim of promotion of gender equality in Nepal. The Sancharika Feature Service incorporates monthly articles/features on the grave situation of women and children in our country, the social outlook towards them, the pain and agony that they have faced and the courageous steps that women have taken in this regard. We hope to fulfill the lack of news and articles on women and children to some extent through this feature service and we look forward to your kind support in publishing these articles in your respective newspapers. We would also like to request you to send us a copy of the published article and to mention 'Sancharika Feature Service' below the published article.**

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