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Visa freeze puts women labourers in lurch

Given unemployment at home, Hong Kong was a secure employment market for many Nepalese women. But the Immigration Department of Hong Kong put restrictions on visa a few months ago, without giving any reason. Neither the government nor entrepreneurs are showing interest in this visa problem. All the burdens are on women.

By Dambarkrishna Shrestha

Shantila Rai, 25, of Kirtipur Morang, has been working in Hong Kong for the past three years. Rai, who had gone to Hong Kong to work as a domestic helper, came to Nepal four months ago to meet with her family. However, she is unable to return to her work. Her daily bread has been snatched after the Immigration Department of Hong Kong ceased issuing visa to Nepalese workers and student since 6 June 2005. The Nepalese women workers are enduring the direct brunt of the new visa policy that disfavours Nepalese workers. Every year nearly 500 Nepalese used to go to Hong Kong where there are plenty of opportunities for those who have competence and skill.

Rai says her financial status improved dramatically when she was working in Hong Kong for a long time, but she laments that the new policy has taken away women's employment opportunities. "Women who have been working in Hong Kong can work there as long as they find work there. But the path of new aspiring workers have been blocked," she says. She, too, has become a victim of the new policy. It stands as an impediment to returning to her workplace, for she came back to Nepal while she was working there. "If allowed, I will go. There are many jobs for women in Hong Kong," she says.

Kamaladevi Limbu (Adhikari), who hails from Angsarang-6 of Panchthar, has bought some land in Dharan from her earnings as a domestic helper in Hong Kong. The 32-year-old Limbu, who came back to Nepal after working in Hong Kong for four years, says she wants to go there again, but the visa has been frozen. She even spent Rs 500,000, a portion of her income from Hong Kong, to send her husband to Korea two years. "Our present financial status is unmistakably different from what it was in the past. I attributed this to all the income I made there," she says. Spending Rs 65,000 a few years ago, she went to Hong Kong to work as a domestic worker.

Sons and daughters of ex-British Gurkha soldiers can stay and work there by virtue of their birth in Hong Kong. Apart from that, many Nepalese are working there as domestic helpers on visa. Nepalese women have found plenty of jobs in houses, restaurants, elderly people's homes and nursing homes.

Even an ordinary domestic worker earns Rs 35,000 (HK\$3660) per month. Nepalese working in ID Holder construction companies get anything from Rs 40,000 to Rs 200,000. According to non-governmental organisations, around 50,000 Nepalese live in Hong Kong. But the Nepalese Consulate's Office puts the figure at 30,000.

Hong Kong can absorb instantly 100,000 competent Nepalese, says President of the Nepalese Employment Association Hong Kong Govinda Subba. "There is a huge demand for Nepalese workers in Hong Kong, but lack of basic skills and competence have come in the way of fulfilling it. Now with the stoppage of visa, Nepalese are incurring financial losses," he says. Recently an organisation has been formed to provide Nepalese women with work. But now visa is denied.

A training programme run by the government for incoming workers is still in place in Hong Kong. The Association has already arranged training programmes in Hong Kong. In response to Hong Kong's new immigration policy, the Federation of Hong Kong Nepalese says, diplomatic initiative must be taken. The Nepalese foreign and labour ministries have already submitted a memorandum to the Immigration Department.

"The Nepalese government should take up the task of determining the quality of workers who go to Hong Kong. If the government cannot do this, it should give us this responsibility. We have given recommendations in this line. But neither the government did it itself nor allowed us to do so. That is why this decision was made," says General Secretary of the Association Chetnath Chaulagain.

The Philippines and Indonesia, which have been sending domestic workers to Hong Kong for years, have given such responsibility to such associations in Hong Kong. That is why their workers are qualified. General Secretary Chaulagain blames the Nepalese government for not doing anything in this regard. An established domestic employment association based in Hong Kong also attributed the new visa restrictions to Nepalese diplomatic failure. It has also asked the Hong Kong government to withdraw the policy.

Acting Royal Nepalese Consulate Hemlal Bhattarai says diplomatic efforts are on to solve the problem. He says Nepal has no labour agreement with any country, except Qatar. Nepalese, who made it to Hong Kong, are working there on “understanding.”

Because of the lack of good training and knowledge of language, many women had to come back, but today there are projects to enhance their competence, says Pradeep Thapa Magar of the Managanga International Enterprises. “Those who boast about bringing employment quotas from Hong Kong to Nepal have badly affected the quality of domestic helpers. If the government takes the initiative to give training, 100,000 Nepalese could have got employment immediately.”

Saru Joshi, the UNIFEM’s programme co-ordinator of foreign employment of South Asia, says the closure of a safe labour market like Hong Kong for women has affected labourers, their families and the nation as a whole. She draws the attention of the authorities concerned to an increase in human trafficking in the Gulf region. Remittance from Hong Kong has also declined.

The assistant foreign minister of China says the new policy will not be enforced for long. He has accused that criminals from third countries have entered Hong Kong using Nepalese passports. But Hong Kong has not given specific reasons for visa restrictions imposed on Nepalese. The Immigration Department says the new policy is part of occasional revisions. The Nepalese government has not done anything to lift the restrictions imposed on visa.

There is a negative attitude towards untrained Nepalese domestic workers who went to Hong Kong on their own or through the help of relatives, says Manju Gurung of Paurakhi, an association of returning Nepalese workers. Nirmal Gurung, president of the Nepalese Foreign Employment Association, says there is a need for diplomatic effort at the government level. Nepalese workers, training agencies, civil society and entrepreneurs should share the blame for the closure of Hong Kong market, says UNIFEM’s Saru Joshi.

BREAKER

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Mothers' group roll up their sleeves to bring in tourists

The village has neither a hotel nor a restaurant. But there is nothing that cannot be done if one has skills. The women of Ghalegaon bring tourists into their houses and earn an income. With the money thus raised, they form a group, build roads and temples.

By Basudev Timilsina

Khimkumari and her husband have a difficult time providing for their four sons and two daughters. As they are inhabitants of highlands, their agricultural production is not sufficient. The produce of their land is enough to feed Khimkumari's family for barely six months.

Khimkumari's family is not alone in facing difficulties to make ends meet; all the families of Ghalegaon in Lamjung face the same problem. That is why women like Khimkumari have joined hands to bring tourists into the village. Although it is poor economically, Ghalegaon is very rich in nature and culture. It is considered the mine of Gurung culture. It is equally rich in natural beauty. The Mount Manaslu looks majestic from Ghalegaon. In fact, the village is considered to be the best place for a view of Manaslu. From the Annapurna mountain range to Ganesh and Lamjung, other half a dozen peaks are equally lovely. Some 13 hilly districts including Kaski, Syangja, Tanahun, Gorkha, Palpa, Makawanpur, Chitwan and Nawalparasi can be viewed from the village.

Therefore the mothers of the village are engrossed in bringing tourists into the village. All the 106 houses in the Gurung settlement constituting Ghalegaon look clean and attractive. Thanks to the initiatives of the mothers' group, the entire village has become clean. The mothers are also at the forefront of building rest houses, roads, platforms under trees for people to rest and temples. Gambling has come to a complete standstill in the village. Admitting that the village has seen many reforms and improvements at the initiative of the mothers' group, Chitra Bahadur Gurung, a local, said: "The mothers' group is doing a really good job. They have also played an important role in developing this village as a rural tourism spot."

As soon as they get wind of the arrival of tourists in the village, all the members of the mothers' group appear on the street to welcome the visitors with floral garlands. The tourists, who arrive in the village panting after hours-long trek, are delighted without exception to be greeted with garlands. Said Maria Brosle, a Swiss tourist who was at Ghalegaon for the first time: "I was greatly impressed by their style of welcome. We love it."

The village does not have a separate tourist hotel. They entertain tourists visiting the village as paying guests in their own houses, at the rate of two tourists per house. A menu has been made for the convenience of the tourists. Everything available in the village, from sisnu (plant used also as spinach) to dindho (corn/millet porridge), is on the menu.

The charge is the same in all the houses—Rs 30 per night. Fifteen houses have a solar heater for tourists.

They usually assemble at the conference hall built at the centre of the village after dinner. Mesmerised by the singing and dancing by members of the mothers' group, the guests lose track of time even as the night progresses. The members perform a variety of dances from Krishna Charitra to Ghatu Nach in a lively way. The songs and dances performed by the mothers' group not only thrill the tourists but also help preserve the Gurung community's culture. The mothers' group spends the money given by tourists during the performances on building platforms under trees, roads and temples, among others. Says Khimkumari of the mothers' group: "If tourists keep coming to the village, we will change the face of the village." Four tourists—two each on two occasions—have so far stayed at her house as paying guests. The mothers' groups of Lamjung's Ghanpokara and Kaski's Pakhrekot, both of which are deprived of the basic infrastructure like roads and electricity, are also chalking out plans to bring in tourists. Pakhrekot is one of the most remote village of Kaski district. But it is rich in Gurung culture. Says Ashkumari Gurung, chairwoman of the mothers' group of Parkhrekot: "We are poor economically but rich in Gurung culture. That's why we are discussing how we can bring tourists into the village." All the members of the mothers' group meet at Ashkumari's place every fortnight.

Encouraged by tourism entrepreneurs' naming of the trekking route from Pakhrikot through Pasgaon and Ghapokhara to Ghalegaon the Gurung Cultural Trek, the mothers of these Gurung villages are now busy discussing how to make tourists visiting the villages happy.

Tourists who have been welcomed by the mothers of Pasgaon can never forget it. Says Yogdevi Gurung, secretary of the mothers' group: "We pay special attention to the welcoming of tourists so that they re-visit the village again and again."

It takes three days on foot to reach Ghalegaon from Pakhrikot, which is a one-day trek from Pokhara. The mothers' group has built more than a dozen platforms under trees from Pakhrikot to Ghalegaon. At its initiative, stones have been laid on the road for the convenience of trekkers.

Impressed by the desire and enthusiasm of these women of remote villages to bring in tourists, Swiss tourist Brosle says: "Even though they are deprived of the basic facilities that the state should provide them with, they know and understand a lot about development."

The mothers' groups of Ghalegaon, Ghanpokhara, Pasgaon and Pakhrikot, given their initiative at building roads, platforms under trees and temples and bringing in tourists, could be an example for those who talk about big things in the star hotels of the capital.

BREAKER

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Blind girls see society through their hearts' eyes

When her sisters got married, but her marriage could not be solemnized since she is born blind, Bhagwata Gautam deeply grieved for the first time in her life. Hatred from family and society encouraged her to do some work. These days, she is engaged in unifying blind people. Her busyness has helped her forget social scorn.

By Rekhakusum Regmi

First off, women are considered second class citizens in our society. Bring in the blind women. They are taken as a burden and subject of humiliation. With a view to breaking down such outlook and practices, the blind women of Dang district are assisting every economic, social and practical affair so that not only themselves, but also their whole family and society can be self-reliant. Yesterday they were confined to a corner of the house. Today the blind women talk about income-generating activities, skill, occupation, emceeding, awareness, education, savings and so on.

When her sisters got married, but her marriage could not be solemnized since she is born blind, Bhagwata Gautam deeply grieved for the first time in her life. She had to depend completely on a person to move around; she had to eat whatever others gave, and had to silently suffer scorn exhibited by her family and society. A resident of Hapur-8 Bagiya, Gautam started receiving a little bit of love after she spent her earnings on buying household essentials such as matches and soaps. This aided her to forget her difficulties. She is trained in marking plastic vases, and earns some rupees by making such vases.

A year ago, Gautam formed the 15-member Hatemalo Blind Self-reliant Group in Tulsipur at the initiative of the Blind and Partially Blind Association Rehabilitation Programme. Gautam, who is providing her family with modest financial help by making vases and bags, is generating awareness about the physically challenged people's responsibility towards society and providing them with skill-oriented training. "I began such a programme to prove that the physically challenged people can do something for

society, provided they have opportunities,” says Gautam happily. “We collect Rs10 every month from every Group member for the future,” she adds.

The collected money, which amounts to Rs 3500, has been mobilized among the group members. The Group levies two percent interest rate on loans. Regular meetings of the group set up for the blind discuss problems confronted by the blind people, and their successes, and takes decisions.

Besides Gautam's group, there are 16 groups of the blind supported by the Rehabilitation Programme in Dang. There are altogether 150 members of such groups. More than 50 women like Gautam talk about women's savings, earnings, self-reliance, solve practical problems and go to the authorities concerned to fight for their rights. They collect money from various places and run programmes for the blind by asking for funds allocated by the center to the district development and village development committees.

Gautam's Group has collected nearly Rs 40,000 and has already laid the foundation of a building. “Idleness will not bring in help. So we have collected land, wood and some money,” the 25-year-old Gautam said.

The 23-year-old Manakumari Oli of Dhikpur-6 is also blind. Not only is she involved in advocating the rights of the physically challenged and opportunities offered, she is also running a grocery shop with the loaned but interest-free money of Rs 15,000 to change her financial status. As a challenge to the blind that are invariably made a subject of vulnerability, hatred and humiliation, Oli has been selling incense sticks in her shop for the past two years. Manakumari, who stays in the shop with the help of her mother, does accounting herself. “I keep a trustworthy person who can see beside me. But I manage the goods and keep accounts myself,” she says.

Although she does not have outward eyes to see the colourful world, she works through her heart's eyes to keep her four-member family afloat. She earns Rs 3000 per month. When she was two years old, her father went to India to make both ends meet, but he never returned. Therefore she is shouldering the financial burden of her family.

Shanti Chaudhary, 16, who received awareness of fighting for one's right from such groups, also works for the 14-member Chaulahi Blind Self-reliant Group. She studies, too.

Reshma Chaudhary lost her eyesight two years ago; she is now 23 years old. Earlier, shame and shyness kept her indoors. But now in her capacity as Treasurer of the Ambikeshwori Blind Self-reliant Group she teaches accounts to blind people. She is entrusted with the responsibility of keeping the accounts of the Group's monthly contribution and other finances. Without any inhibition, Reshma, a mere literate, earns around Rs 5000 by making woolen bags and plastic vases. She assists her family financially.

Heema Oli, 24, a resident of Manpur-7 Bankatta, is running her four-member household with earnings from cattle farming. Heema attributes her blindness to the will of the fate. "Although we do not have outward eyes, we can do all sorts of work through our mind. That is why I have started cattle farming."

Aastha Ale, another blind woman of Dharan, is working for the blind by setting up a Blind Women's Committee in Dang district. She says her committee is mainly concerned with imparting skill-oriented knowledge to make blind, illiterate women self-reliant. It also teaches girls at a local hostel for the blind. In every group, a person with eyesight is made secretary or joint secretary who helps the group members to write.

In Dang district, 573 blind people have organized themselves to fight for their rights in order to be independent through various programmes such as training in income-generating activities, eye camps and fundraising, says Kiran Poudel, regional director of the Rehabilitation Programme. He says the programme has been providing the groups with financial and technical assistance.

BREAKER

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Pregnant women face an insecure future

Even now many women do not get to see a health facility. Says Shri Krishna Bhatta, chief senior public health officer at the District Public Health Office of Kailali: "Many women have lost their lives prematurely by not getting the services of health workers during pregnancy."

By Karna Shah

Last year Sita Chaudhari, 19, of Joshipur, Kailali district died moments after being taken to hospital. Health workers told her family that the cause of her death was delay in taking her to hospital after she started to have labor pains. Financially weak, Sita died because of failure to rush her to hospital during her very first pregnancy. Likewise, Shova

Bishwakarma, also of Kailali, died when she was not taken to hospital for three days after she went into labor. It was her fourth pregnancy. After three days of efforts to effect the delivery at home failed, she was taken to hospital. She died on the way. The delay in taking her to hospital was due to opposition by family members as her husband was not at home. Bishwakarma, 37, of Patharaiya-7, Kailali has three daughters.

Mina Chaudhari of Khailad also died last year during her second pregnancy. She lost her life when the help of a village midwife was sought for delivery. Twenty-one-year-old Mina could not see a hospital even when she was in what doctors call a critical condition.

Sita, Shova and Mina are but a few examples. Many women die because they are not taken to hospital on time during pregnancy. There is no data on the number of women in Kailali who lost their lives prematurely during pregnancy, but health workers say the figure is high.

According to the District Public Health Office in Kailali, in the last fiscal year 2004/2005, only 16 percent of women in the district delivered babies with the aid of health workers. In the period, some 24,000 women were estimated to have been pregnant.

“Even now, many women do not get to see a health facility,” says Shri Krishna Bhatta, chief senior public health officer at the District Public Health Office in Kailali. “Many women are losing their lives prematurely by not getting the services of health workers during pregnancy.”

No doubt, the practice of having health checkups during pregnancy and delivering babies with the help of health workers is increasing as compared to the past. But the pace is extremely slow. The proportion of women undergoing health worker-assisted delivery was 11.42 per cent in the fiscal year 2002/2003.

Senior public health officer Bhatta says women are in high mortal danger because pregnant women are not taken to health clinics but made to deliver babies at home in the traditional way, often with the assistance of incompetent midwives, and even if they are taken to health facilities, it is usually too late.

Superintendent at the Seti Zonal Hospital in Dhangadhi Dr Ganesh Bahadur Singh says maternal mortality is high because pregnant women from rural areas are brought to the hospital only at the last moment after traditional methods of delivery have failed. “First they use traditional methods of delivery and then call a midwife,” says Dr Singh, a gynecologist. “They come to the hospital only after that too fails. Cases where women are brought to the hospital on time have been successful.”

According to the District Public Health Office, in the fiscal year 2004/2005, nine percent of the pregnant women delivered babies with the aid of unqualified midwives. The Public Health Office claims that even now over 150 midwives are active in Kailali district. During the period, 50 percent of pregnant women had health checkups from health

workers four times. But still the trend of opting for health worker-assisted delivery is very low.

In particular, women's lack of decision-making power poses difficulties for them to go to health clinics, say health workers. Indeed, men's monopoly over resources in society has become a challenge for safe motherhood.

Senior public health assistant Bhatta attributes women's poor access to health clinics to the need to obtain the permission of their family in that regard, and lack of cooperation of the family as well as lack of quality service at health clinics.

Hem Raj Ojha, president of the Nepal Red Cross Society's Kailali branch, which conducted a programme on safe motherhood until sometime ago, says men's apathy about the problems faced by women has become a challenge to safe motherhood. According to president Ojha, despite all the awareness-promotion activities, the desired outcome has remained elusive, as the target group (women/mothers) is not able to take decisions on matters concerning itself.

BREAKER

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