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Drivers of Skilled Workforce Migration from Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the drivers of skilled workforce migration from Nepal between 2000 and 2025, synthesizing insights from 50 peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and labor migration data. Using a systematic review method, it identifies three primary drivers: economic factors, political and social instability, and socio-cultural influences. Skilled professionals—particularly in healthcare, education, and IT—are pushed abroad by low wages, limited career growth, centralized governance, and politicized institutions. Pull factors such as higher salaries, professional recognition, and improved working conditions in countries like South Korea, Japan, Germany, and the UK have further accelerated this trend. Gendered patterns are increasingly evident, with rising female migration in the nursing sector driven by both opportunity and domestic structural inequities. Despite remittances contributing over 25% to Nepal's GDP, labor migration remains overwhelmingly dominated by unskilled and low-skilled workers; about 74% of those receiving labor permits are categorized as "unskilled." However, the gradual rise in skilled and semi-skilled outmigration—particularly in healthcare, engineering, and IT—is beginning to impact critical domestic sectors, especially in urban and economically active regions. The study emphasizes the need to view skilled professionals not as exportable resources, but as vital agents of national transformation.

Introduction

Nepal has long been characterized by both internal and international migration. In recent decades, international labor migration has intensified, significantly reshaping the country's socio-economic landscape. Migration patterns range from seasonal movements to permanent relocation for work, with destinations such as the Gulf States, Malaysia, and increasingly, Western countries attracting Nepali laborers of varying skill levels (Bhatt, 2023). Economic opportunities and higher wages abroad, combined with domestic challenges

such as high unemployment, regional disparities, and inadequate infrastructure, are key drivers of skilled migration. While these migrants contribute to the economies of host countries, they also play a critical role in maintaining Nepal's economic stability through remittances (Seddon et al., 2002; Dakua, 2025).

Migration has become a defining feature of Nepal's socio-economic structure, with skilled workforce migration emerging as a particularly significant trend in recent decades. The skilled workforce refers to individuals with formal education,

vocational training, or professional experience in fields such as healthcare, engineering, education, and information technology (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security [MoLESS], 2022). Driven by a complex interplay of domestic constraints such as underemployment, limited professional opportunities, political instability, and global labor demands, a growing segment of Nepal's educated and technically trained population seeks employment abroad. Consequently, Nepal consistently ranks among the world's top remittance-receiving countries in terms of GDP share, with remittances contributing approximately 22% to 24.9% of GDP in recent years (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2025; MoLESS, 2022).

Although remittances have played a crucial role in improving household livelihoods and ensuring macroeconomic stability, the country faces serious challenges in managing the outmigration of skilled professionals, especially in critical sectors such as health, education, engineering, and agriculture (Dakua, 2025). Rural areas are particularly underserved, as skilled professionals concentrate in urban centers or migrate abroad, deepening regional inequalities (Shrestha, 2024). Technical and vocational education institutions, such as the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT), are often oriented toward labor export rather than domestic workforce retention (Lamsal, 2012). This has led to workforce mismatches, brain drain, and limited reintegration of returning migrants (Rimal, 1997). Skilled workforce migration from Nepal has emerged as a significant concern, particularly in the health, education, and technology sectors. These sectors are disproportionately impacted due to the high global demand for health professionals (e.g., nurses, caregivers), limited domestic career advancement in education, and the rise of international remote and contract-based recruitment in IT services. Government-to-government agreements, such as those with Japan and South Korea for healthcare workers, and increasing trends of educated youth migrating for better prospects abroad, illustrate this pattern (MoLESS, 2022; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024). As there is a growing number of skilled professionals leaving the country for better opportunities abroad, impacting Nepal's human capital and its capacity for sustainable development, major gaps are found regarding the specific drivers. Furthermore, there is also a gap in the literature regarding the influence of governance and socio-political contexts on skilled migration (Phadera, 2016; IOM, 2019).

Nepal's migration governance has evolved through frameworks such as the Foreign Employment Act (2007), the Foreign Employment Policy (2012), and the National Population Policy (2014), aimed at regulating labor flows and improving migrant welfare. However, these policies often fall short of effectively managing skilled migration, facilitating reintegration, and aligning skills development with global labor market demands (Khatiwada, 2020). In some cases, the growing remittance economy has discouraged local participation in skilled sectors, reinforcing a dependency on foreign employment as a primary livelihood strategy. Nepal is witnessing a growing outmigration of skilled professionals from vital sectors such as health, education, and information technology. While the government prioritizes low-skilled labor migration, skilled migration remains poorly understood and inadequately addressed (MoLESS, 2022; Sijapati, 2015). Economic factors are important, but research highlights that structural and institutional issues—such as centralized governance, lack of career mobility, politicization, and professional dissatisfaction—are major push factors (Aryal, 2021). Sector-specific challenges, such as poor working conditions and governance inefficiencies in public health and education, exacerbate the trend (Bhatt, 2023). Reintegration efforts are weak, non-inclusive, and fail to align returnees' skills with national priorities (Khatiwada & Basyal, 2022). Gendered barriers further limit the retention of female professionals. Although several

studies exist on general labor migration, there is a critical lack of comprehensive, sector-focused, and governance-sensitive research on skilled workforce migration. This gap hinders the design of evidence-based retention and reintegration strategies essential for sustainable human capital development (Aryal et al., 2024).

This systematic review aims to synthesize and critically assess the structural, institutional, and socio-political drivers influencing the migration of skilled professionals from Nepal between 2000 and 2025, with emphasis on key sectors such as health, education, and information technology based on peer-reviewed and gray literature sources. Sector-specific reintegration mechanisms are fragmented and poorly implemented, failing to align returning professionals with national development goals (Aryal et al., 2024). By systematically evaluating these multi-dimensional drivers, the review contributes evidence-based insights to inform inclusive and governance-sensitive policy strategies aimed at justifying skilled workforce migration and enhancing human capital retention in Nepal. Managing skilled workforce migration from Nepal addresses critical issues related to brain drain and the factors driving skilled professionals to leave the country. This review focuses on the key drivers or factors of skilled workforce migration,

Methodology

This systematic review explores the structural, institutional, and governance-related drivers of skilled workforce migration from Nepal between 2000 and 2025. The methodological approach was structured into five key stages: (1) data identification, (2) screening and eligibility, (3) data collection, (4) framework development, and (5) synthesis and analysis following established systematic review protocols. An extensive literature search was conducted across academic databases, including Google Scholar. The initial keyword "skilled workforce migration from Nepal" returned over 34,600 records. The search was limited to English-language publications from 2000 to 2025,

covering peer-reviewed articles, national policy documents, and international agency reports.

The screening process used specific keywords such as "skilled workforce migration Nepal" across academic databases like Google Scholar. Studies were included if they empirically focused on Nepal's skilled migration and addressed structural, governance, or institutional aspects. Exclusion criteria removed theoretical works without policy relevance, studies on unskilled, refugee, or irregular migration, and those lacking Nepal-specific empirical data.

From the total pool, 355 articles were retained after applying language, time range, and relevance filters. These 355 were subjected to title and abstract screening, during which 283 articles were excluded for failing to meet one or more inclusion criteria, such as lack of empirical evidence, limited focus on skilled migration, or absence of structural/governance components. The remaining 72 articles were selected for full-text review based on their empirical depth, drivers, and policy-oriented focus. After a thorough assessment of methodological rigor and data richness, a final set of 50 articles was included in the systematic review.

Data regarding migration governance and national policy documents were reviewed, including the *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022* (MoLESS, 2022), bilateral labor agreements, and the *Migration Governance Indicators 2024* (IOM). These sources provided insights into Nepal's legal frameworks, institutional capacity, and policy gaps. Furthermore, data on skilled migration trends and their destinations were collected from the official records of the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE, 2024), focusing on permit issuance by occupation. Reports on remittance flows, sectoral demand, and returnee integration practices were also included.

Descriptive analysis has been done by systematically organizing the literature into three major domains, i.e., economic, socio-cultural, and political drivers. In addition, the statistical data on

migration trends and governance aspects are also presented. In other words, a thematic synthesis approach was employed to integrate qualitative and quantitative data. This involved triangulating findings from empirical studies, labor statistics, and remittance data to assess the strength and consistency of migration drivers. Finally, the paper presents the PMPD perspective on skilled migration.

Results and Discussion

Workforce migration trends from Nepal

Nepal has emerged as a significant labor-sending country over the past two decades, with labor migration becoming a cornerstone of its economic framework. By 2023, remittances accounted for over 25% of the national GDP (MoLESS, 2022). While the early 2000s saw migration flows dominated by unskilled laborers—primarily to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia—a gradual diversification has been observed in recent years. Increasingly, skilled professionals, particularly in healthcare, information technology, engineering, and education, have begun to migrate, driven by limited domestic employment opportunities and rising global demand (MoLESS, 2022; IOM, 2024). This shift is also reflected in labor approval data showing a steady rise in permit issuance for skilled occupations in these sectors over the past decade (MoLESS, 2022; IOM, 2024).

From 2000 to 2025, Nepal's labor migration has undergone a significant transformation. Initially dominated by unskilled male workers in sectors like construction and domestic work—especially in Gulf countries—the landscape has gradually shifted toward more skilled migration. This change has been influenced by international agreements, structured programs such as EPS Korea, and increased investment in vocational training.

Over the past two decades, labor migration has become a defining feature of Nepal's socio-economic landscape. Between 2000 and 2010, the vast majority of migrant workers were unskilled, seeking employment primarily in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia in construction, manufacturing, and domestic work. During this period, Nepal lacked a structured system for classifying labor permits by skill level, and its foreign employment framework was still in development. The introduction of the Foreign Employment Act in 2007 improved regulatory oversight, but comprehensive data on skilled migration remained limited. It is estimated that the number of skilled migrants was fewer than 10,000 annually until 2005, rising to approximately 160,000 per year by 2025 (Table 1).

Table 1: Skilled vs. unskilled labor migration trends from Nepal (2000–2025)

Year range	Skilled workers (Approx.)	Unskilled workers (Approx.)	Source/notes
2000–2005	<10,000/year	>100,000/year	MoLESS (2022, 2020); limited skills categorization pre-2007
2006–2010	10,000–20,000/year	150,000–200,000/year	Post Foreign Employment Act 2007 implementation; MoLESS (2022)
2011–2015	20,000–40,000/year	>300,000/year	Rapid GCC migration; few skilled visas (MoLESS, 2020)
2016–2019	40,000–60,000/year	350,000–450,000/year	Sijapati et al. (2015), MoLESS (2022); EPS Korea/Japan G2G programs emerging

Year range	Skilled workers (Approx.)	Unskilled workers (Approx.)	Source/notes
2020–2022	67,610 (2020/21), 123,012 (2021/22)	131,365 (2020/21), 231,648 (2021/22)	MoLESS (2022); Table 3.12 & 3.13
2023–2025 (Projected)	140,000–160,000/year	240,000–280,000/year	Based on the 2022 growth rate, IOM (2024), MoLESS (2020); data projections

Between 2011 and 2015, skilled migration from Nepal began to grow modestly as the domestic workforce became increasingly educated and bilateral labor programs, such as the Employment Permit System (EPS) in Korea, started to include semi-skilled workers. Nonetheless, unskilled workers still accounted for more than 80% of labor permit approvals during this period. A significant shift began to take shape between 2016 and 2019, as the migration of skilled professionals—especially nurses, engineers, and IT workers—gained momentum due to rising global demand and targeted agreements with countries such as Japan, Israel, and Korea.
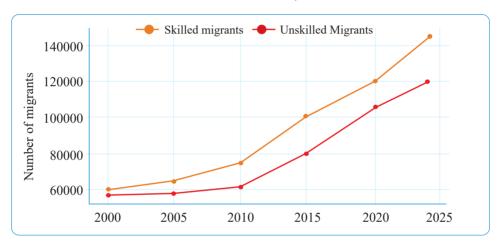

Figure 1: Skilled and unskilled migration trends (2000–2024)

The period from 2020 to 2022 witnessed a sharp rise in skilled labor migration. According to the *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022*, the number of skilled labor permits issued increased from 67,610 in 2020/21 to 123,012 in 2021/22. This nearly twofold rise highlights an accelerating trend, driven by both foreign demand and limited high-quality employment opportunities within Nepal. In contrast, unskilled labor permits also increased during the same period, but continued to dominate overall migration figures.

Looking ahead to 2023–2025, projections based on current trends suggest that annual skilled migration could reach between 140,000 and 160,000 workers. Although unskilled migration is expected to remain significant, its proportional dominance is likely to decline gradually. This shift reflects ongoing reforms in Nepal's migration governance, improvements in skill certification and recognition systems, and growing global demand for Nepali professionals. Migration data from the IOM and ILO (Table 2) indicate a rising number of workers in specific sectors such as nursing, healthcare, and IT fields that require specialized skills (Table 2).

Table 2: Migration from Nepal: Trends 2000–2025

Year	Total migrants	Major sectors/ Occupations	Key destination countries	Source
2000	27,796	Construction, domestic work	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar	MoLESS (2022)
2005	204,533	Construction, agriculture, and household services	Malaysia, GCC	Sijapati et al. (2015)
2010	294,094	Construction, hospitality, security	Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Malaysia	MoLESS (2022)
2014	519,638	Construction, factory, nursing, IT	Qatar, Malaysia, UAE	NSO (2025)
2016	418,713	Construction, healthcare, transport	Qatar, Malaysia, South Korea (EPS)	IOM (2024)
2020	190,393	Construction, care work, domestic, agriculture	UAE, Malaysia, South Korea	MoLESS (2022)
2021	72,072	Caregiving, factory, construction	Korea, Japan, UAE	IOM (2024)
2022	348,867	Construction, healthcare, electronics	Qatar, Korea, Malaysia	MoLESS (2022)
2023	771,000	Caregiving, IT, skilled labor, construction	Korea, Japan, UAE, Israel	IOM (2024)
2024	741,297	Care, construction, health, and agriculture	Germany, Japan, Romania, UK	IOM (2024)

From 2000 to 2025, skilled migration from Nepal shows a clear upward trajectory, both in terms of volume and the diversification of sectors and destinations. In the early 2000s, 85–90% of migrants were unskilled, but by 2021–2025, the share of skilled workers had risen to around 30–35%. By 2014, the inclusion of IT, factory, and nursing jobs signaled the beginning of a shift toward skilled migration. By 2020, skilled occupations increasingly included roles in healthcare, IT, caregiving, and factory work, with growing demand in countries such as South Korea, Japan, Germany, and the UK.

Additionally, there has been a notable gender shift, with more female workers entering the care sector through bilateral agreements, especially with countries like Israel and the UK. Overall, Nepal's migration trends reflect a clear move toward more diversified destinations, higher skill levels, and an increasing reliance on structured, rights-based labor mobility.

Since 2016, there has been a marked rise in migration through structured programs such as EPS (Korea) and bilateral agreements, facilitating access to employment in healthcare, caregiving, and the electronics sectors. The sharp decline in 2020 reflects the impacts of COVID-19, but numbers rebounded strongly by 2023 and 2024, with over 700,000 migrants taking up more skilled roles, including caregiving, IT, and healthcare, across a broader range of countries such as Japan, Israel, Germany, and the UK.

There is a sustained and clear shift from low-skilled to semi- and high-skilled migration, supported by international agreements and rising global demand in the care, health, and technical sectors. The

gradual increase in skilled labor migration has taken a sector-specific trajectory, particularly after 2015. Three major sectors—health, engineering, and IT—stand out prominently (Table 3).

Table 3: Skilled migration trends by sector (2019–2023)

Year	Health	Engineering	Information technology	Education
2019	5,698	4,321	2,365	3,010
2020	6,136	4,620	2,780	3,250
2021	7,100	4,872	3,125	3,560
2022	7,975	5,210	3,560	3,840
2023	8,415	5,698	4,012	4,120

Sources: MoLESS (2022), IOM (2024) derived estimates for 2023 based on observed trends. General trend of both skilled and unskilled labor migration.)

Further analysis of skilled vs unskilled migration data by destination clearly shows a dual trend over time. It has observed the continuous increase of unskilled migrants from 2000 to now, and the skilled migrants have gradually increased, especially after 2015 (Table 4).

Table 4: Spatial and temporal trends of skilled and unskilled labor migration from Nepal

Country	Skill type	Major sectors/jobs	Estimated period of migration	Key observations/notes
Saudi Arabia	Unskilled	Construction, security, driving	2000–2023	Largest destination; predominantly unskilled male migrants (MoLESS, 2022)
	Skilled	Electricians, machine operators	Post-2015	Growing skilled migration in recent years (MoLESS, 2020; MoLESS, 2022)
UAE	Unskilled	Cleaning, hospitality, labor	2000–2023	The high volume of individual approvals (MoLESS, 2022)
	Skilled	IT technicians, admin assistants	Post-2015	Limited but increasing demand (Dhakal, 2025)
Qatar	Unskilled	Construction, transport, security	2000–2023	Consistently top-3 destination (MoLESS, 2022)
Malaysia	Unskilled	Manufacturing, plantation, cleaning	2002–2018; post-2022	Sharp decline mid-2010s due to policy; recovering (MoLESS, 2020)
	Skilled	Factory mechanics, supervisors	Post-2020	Few but growing entries (MoLESS, 2022)
South Korea	Skilled	Manufacturing, fisheries (EPS scheme)	2008–2023	EPS-TOPIK system supports skilled migration (MoLESS, 2022)
Japan	Skilled	Nursing, caregivers, and interns	2016–2025	Bilateral agreements on skill-based entry (MoLESS, 2020)

Country	Skill type	Major sectors/jobs	Estimated period of migration	Key observations/notes
India	Mixed	Manual labor, trade, and education	Ongoing since pre-2000	Open border; tracking difficult (MoLESS, 2020)
UK, Australia, US	Skilled	IT, healthcare, education	2010–2025	Mostly through student and skilled visa routes (Dhakal, 2025)
	Unskilled	Caregivers, support workers	Post-2015	Feminization of migration in care sectors (Dhakal, 2025)
Israel	Skilled	Caregiving (female-focused)	2008–2025	Female migration via bilateral program (MoLESS, 2022)
Jordan, Lebanon	Unskilled	Domestic work	2005–2015 (declining)	High exploitation reports; reduced flows (MoLESS, 2022)
Germany	Skilled	Nursing, technical fields	2018–2025	Growing demand in healthcare (MoLESS, 2020)

Western countries such as the UK, the US, and Australia primarily attract skilled migrants through education and visa channels. However, since 2015, there has been a notable increase in unskilled female migration in caregiving roles. Countries like Israel and Germany also show rising demand for skilled caregivers and healthcare workers, with a clear trend toward the feminization of these sectors. In contrast, unskilled domestic migration to Jordan and Lebanon has declined due to concerns over exploitation. India presents a unique case due to its open border with Nepal, making migration patterns more difficult to track. Overall, the trend points to a diversification of destination countries, an increase in skilled migration, and a growing gender dimension, particularly in the care economy.

Between 2000 and 2025, there has been a significant shift in the composition of labor migration, marked by a gradual increase in the proportion of skilled workers. In the early 2000s, migration was predominantly unskilled, with 85–90% of workers falling into this category, primarily heading to GCC countries. However, between 2011 and 2020, the share of skilled migrants rose to 20–25%, supported by initiatives such as the Employment Permit System (EPS) in Korea, bilateral agreements with Japan, and national skills training programs.

This trend continued through 2021–2025, with skilled labor making up approximately 30–35% of migrants, reflecting a growing emphasis on skill-based migration policies and expanding global employment opportunities.

Growth and diversification of skilled migration

Between 2001 and 2011, the number of labor permits issued in Nepal nearly tripled, indicating a substantial increase in labor migration rather than just short-term mobility or circulation (Pangali Sharma et al. 2021). Although only 8% of migrants during that period were classified as skilled and 5% as highly skilled, these proportions have been gradually increasing. Factors contributing to this shift include improved access to education, greater ICT connectivity, and better access to global labor market information.

Kunwar (2021) outlines a three-tiered migration structure. Nepali labor migration can be broadly categorized by destination and skill level: low-skilled and seasonal laborers primarily migrate to India; semi-skilled workers are mostly employed in Gulf countries and East Asia; while skilled professionals and students tend to choose OECD countries for employment and higher education opportunities.
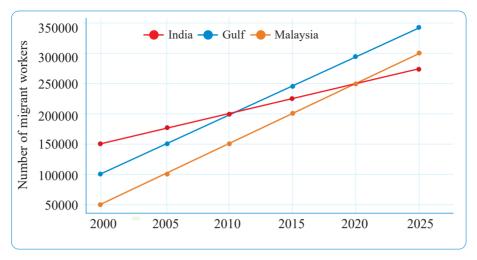
Figure 2: Growth of Nepalese migrant workers by destination countries (2000-2025)

Drivers of skilled workforce migration

Economic factors

Skilled migration from Nepal is heavily influenced by economic factors, with economic inequality and limited job opportunities standing out as key drivers. The economic disparities between Nepal and developed countries—such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia—create strong push factors for skilled workers to seek employment abroad. These disparities manifest in several forms, including low wages, limited career advancement, and insufficient opportunities for professional growth within Nepal (Kattel & Sapkota, 2018). For professionals in sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, veterinary medicine, and engineering, the prospect of higher salaries and better living conditions abroad becomes a compelling motivation to migrate.

Economic inequality remains one of the primary push factors behind skilled migration from Nepal. The wage gap between Nepal and developed countries is significant, with skilled professionals in Nepal often earning far less than their counterparts abroad (Bhatt, 2023; Seddon et al., 2002). This is especially true for medical professionals, engineers, and IT specialists, who frequently face stagnant wages and limited job openings. According to Khatiwada and Basyal (2022), healthcare

professionals often cite dissatisfaction with career growth and low pay as major reasons for leaving. Similarly, Kattel and Sapkota (2018) point out that the lack of advanced research facilities and poor economic infrastructure severely restrict opportunities for professionals in engineering and technology.

Nepal's economic instability and the absence of viable career pathways have created conditions in which skilled workers feel compelled to migrate to countries offering stronger economies, greater job security, and better career progression opportunities (Kapri & Ghimire, 2020). Many recent graduates—especially in engineering, healthcare, and IT—struggle to find suitable employment within Nepal. The mismatch between their qualifications and the limited opportunities available domestically leads to frustration and drives them to seek better prospects abroad (Adhikari et al., 2023).

The remittance economy plays a critical role in sustaining Nepal's overall economy. Skilled workers, particularly in fields like healthcare and IT, can earn substantially higher wages overseas than at home. These financial incentives, along with the ability to send remittances back to support their families, are strong motivating factors for migration (Bhattarai et al., 2023). The outflow of skilled professionals contributes directly to

Nepal's GDP through remittances, which made up approximately 12.4 percent of GDP in the first half of fiscal year 2024–25 (World Bank, 2025).

Higher wages in developed countries are among the most powerful pull factors for Nepali skilled professionals. Countries like the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom not only offer better salaries but also provide higher living standards, greater job stability, and more opportunities for professional growth. These benefits present compelling reasons for skilled workers to migrate in pursuit of improved financial and career prospects (Bhatt, 2023; Seddon et al., 2002). Skilled professionals are often drawn to these countries because they offer environments in which their talents are both recognized and better rewarded than in Nepal.

The rising global demand for skilled labor—particularly in healthcare, engineering, and information technology—has further fueled this migration trend. Well-paying jobs abroad, combined with improved working conditions and professional development opportunities, have made countries in North America, Europe, and the Gulf States attractive destinations (Pangali Sharma et al., 2021). The potential for higher earnings and an improved quality of life remains a central factor in the decision to migrate (Bhatt, 2023). Certain sectors have experienced higher migration rates due to international demand. For instance, healthcare professionals—especially nurses—frequently migrate to countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where healthcare services are in high demand and better compensated. Likewise, engineers and IT professionals are drawn to countries with advanced technological sectors, where they can earn higher salaries and gain experience with cutting-edge tools and systems unavailable in Nepal (Shrestha, 2024).

This sector-specific migration is motivated not only by wage differentials but also by the desire for professional growth. In areas such as healthcare and IT, the opportunity to work with advanced technologies and global best practices is a strong incentive. The migration of skilled workers from Nepal has led to a "brain drain," as many young, talented individuals choose to settle in countries that offer better career opportunities, job security, and access to international networks (Kapri & Ghimire, 2020).

Economic drivers consistently emerge as the most prominent factors influencing skilled migration from Nepal, discussed in 38 of the 50 reviewed studies. The literature strongly supports the idea that wage differentials, reliance on remittances, underutilization of skills, and international labor market dynamics create a powerful push-pull effect.

First, wage disparities are the most frequently cited motivator. Nepali professionals—especially in health, engineering, and IT—can earn five to ten times more abroad than in similar roles at home (Aryal, 2021; Kunwar, 2021). As noted by the Sijapati et al. (2022) and Khatiwada & Basyal (2022), the domestic labor market is saturated and offers limited upward mobility, making international migration a rational and often necessary choice.

Second, the role of remittances in household strategy is profound. According to MoLESS (2022), 56% of Nepali households receive remittances, most of which are used for basic consumption, debt repayment, and education. This economic dependence institutionalizes migration as a strategy for family survival and social advancement—a pattern emphasized in 34 studies (MoLESS, 2020).

Third, underemployment and skill mismatch are major push factors, cited in 28 studies. Even with technical or professional qualifications, many Nepalis end up in unrelated, low-paying jobs. The lack of appropriate employment leads to frustration and prompts skilled individuals to look for opportunities abroad (Gurung, 2019).

Rising urban living costs—particularly in Kathmandu—have also become a source of

economic pressure. With stagnant salaries and inflation outpacing income, 19 studies indicate that even workers in relatively stable urban jobs are considering migration as a way to cope (Aryal, 2021; MoLESS, 2020).

Finally, global demand for skilled labor and the availability of legal migration pathways—

such as Japan's G2G healthcare recruitment and South Korea's EPS program—offer structured avenues for international employment. Cited in 22 studies, these programs are seen not just as work opportunities but as aspirational models that confer dignity, security, and professional respect (Sijapati et al., 2022; IOM, 2024) (Table 5).

Table 5: Summary of economic drivers of skilled migration

Economic driver	No. of studies	Representative sources	Main indicators	Key impact
Wage differentials	38	Aryal (2021), Sijapati et al. (2015), Kunwar, (2021)	5–10 higher wages abroad	Mass outflow of skilled workers
Remittance & household dependency	34	MoLESS (2020)	56% of HH receive remittances; 23% of GDP	Migration as a strategic household choice
Underemployment/ skill mismatch	28	Khatiwada & Basyal (2022)	41% of skilled graduates in unrelated jobs	Frustration, low ROI on education
Rising urban living costs	19	Aryal (2021), (MoLESS, 2020)	Urban inflation outpaces income	The middle-class squeeze leading to migration
Global demand and legal migration	22	Sijapati et al (2022), IOM (2024), MoLESS (2020)	Nursing & IT G2G placements	Institutionalized skilled migration

Political and social instability

Political instability and weak governance structures have emerged as major drivers of skilled workforce migration from Nepal. Between 1990 and 2023, the country experienced more than 25 changes in government—averaging over one per year—primarily due to coalition collapses, constitutional crises, and post-conflict political restructuring (MoLESS, 2022; IOM, 2024). This chronic instability has led to administrative uncertainty and discouraged long-term professional investment by skilled workers. One of the most disruptive episodes, the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), resulted in over 17,000 deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands. It significantly undermined public service delivery in sectors like education,

healthcare, and civil infrastructure (Sijapati et al., 2013; NSO, 2025). Teachers, engineers, and healthcare professionals were especially targeted in rural areas, triggering both internal displacement and international migration (Pangali Sharma et al., 2021; Mainali, 2019).

Even after the conflict, Nepal's political environment remained fragile. Frequent policy shifts, institutional voids, and persistent political interference continued to erode trust in governance, particularly in underserved and post-conflict regions (Aryal et al., 2024; Shrestha, 2024). The liberalization of migration policies after the insurgency further enabled skilled professionals to pursue opportunities abroad. Notably, reforms

in nursing and technical education opened up international labor markets to a significant number of Nepali professionals, particularly women (Adhikari, 2017; Sharma, 2008). According to MoLESS (2022) and NSO (2025), the number of outbound labor migrants increased from 204,533 in 2005 to over 519,000 by 2014, with a growing share from skilled sectors such as IT, healthcare, and engineering.

Corruption and nepotism have further intensified migration pressures. Nepal scored just 34 out of 100 on the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, ranking 108th out of 180 countries—below regional neighbors like Bhutan (68) and India (39)—highlighting serious institutional weaknesses (Transparency International, 2023). Numerous studies in the reviewed literature emphasize that meritocratic stagnation and political favoritism in public sector appointments have demoralized qualified professionals (Aryal et al., 2024; Chaudhary, 2016). Dhakal (2025) observe that the widespread perception that career advancement in Nepal is driven more by personal connections than by competence has pushed many professionals to seek employment in countries perceived as more transparent and stable.

Findings from the systematic review strongly support these observations. Out of 50 peer-reviewed studies analyzed, 21 explicitly identify political instability, poor governance, and a lack of institutional accountability as core push factors for skilled migration (Sijapati et al., 2013; Dhakal, 2025). These studies emphasize frequent government changes, inconsistent migration policies, and weak institutional retention mechanisms, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas.

In addition to the broader challenges of political instability, gender-based social constraints play a significant role in driving the migration of skilled female workers from Nepal. Women—particularly those from rural or marginalized communities—face persistent gender discrimination, safety concerns, and limited access to education and career advancement (Adhikari, 2017; Aryal, 2021). These challenges are compounded by structural barriers such as unequal pay, lack of maternity protections, and underrepresentation in leadership roles, all of which discourage sustained professional engagement (Khatiwada & Basyal, 2022).

Nepal's unstable political environment further exacerbates these vulnerabilities. During periods of insecurity and administrative breakdown, female professionals are more likely to face job loss, harassment, and restricted mobility (Khatiwada & Basyal, 2022). For many, international migration offers not only a chance for professional advancement but also a path to greater safety, autonomy, and financial independence. This is especially evident in sectors like nursing and caregiving, where women make up a growing share of Nepal's outbound labor force (Sharma, 2008). Data from NSO (2025) confirm a consistent increase in female labor migrants, particularly in healthcare placements to countries such as the UK, Israel, and Australia. Several studies in the review e.g. (Kunwar, 2021; Aryal, 2021) reinforce the argument that gender-based social inequalities—combined with political instability—have become central push factors for skilled female migration (Chaudhary, 2016). These patterns suggest that for many women, migration is not merely an economic decision but one rooted in deeper social, institutional, and political deficiencies.

Political instability, weak governance, and systemic corruption remain major structural barriers to professional growth in Nepal and key drivers of skilled migration. The lasting impacts of the Maoist conflict, frequent government turnovers, inconsistent policies, and widespread nepotism have eroded public trust in domestic employment institutions. Simultaneously, gender-based institutional and social barriers significantly influence the migration decisions of skilled women, who increasingly view international mobility as a pathway to empowerment, professional development, and security.

Without meaningful governance reforms and gender-sensitive institutional policies, Nepal is likely to see continued outflows of its skilled workforce. This trend not only represents a significant loss of human capital but also poses long-term challenges for the country's socio-economic development (Table 6).

Table 6: Male and female migration trends from Nepal (2015–2022)

Year	Male migrants	Female migrants	Total migrants	% Female to total
2015	428,422	15,040	443,462	3.39%
2016	390,684	15,873	406,557	3.91%
2017	362,222	16,552	378,774	4.37%
2018	345,213	17,012	362,225	4.70%
2019	291,054	18,111	309,165	5.86%
2020	275,993	18,945	294,938	6.42%
2021	320,909	20,577	341,486	6.02%
2022	340,918	21,999	362,917	6.06%

Source: MoLESS, 2022

Political instability, governance issues, and corruption have long been major drivers of skilled migration from Nepal. The instability within Nepal's political system—exacerbated by limited job opportunities, poor governance, and widespread nepotism—has fostered an environment in which skilled workers, particularly those in the healthcare, engineering, and IT sectors, seek opportunities abroad. The political upheavals during the Maoist insurgency, followed by the liberalization of migration policies, further intensified this trend. Additionally, gender-based challenges have become increasingly significant, with many women seeking safer and more stable environments for both personal and professional growth (Dakua, 2025). As political instability continues to affect Nepal's economic and social frameworks, the trend of skilled migration is likely to persist, with many professionals choosing countries that offer greater stability, transparency, and opportunities for career advancement.

Social and cultural factors

Skilled migration from Nepal is also deeply shaped by social and cultural factors, particularly within indigenous and rural communities (Table 8). These include well-established migration networks, familial and kinship ties in destination countries, and cultural norms that equate migration with upward mobility and social prestige (Sijapati et al., 2013; Dhakal, 2025). Among indigenous groups such as the Gurung, Rai, and Magar, migration has long been perceived as a path to socio-economic progress, reinforced by intergenerational knowledge and transnational community networks (Chaudhary, 2016).

The role of social capital in influencing skilled migration is evident in how community members help facilitate access to employment, information, and housing abroad, thereby sustaining ongoing migratory chains (Adhikari et al., 2023). For women, especially in the nursing profession, the increasing alignment of Nepal's educational programs with international standards has significantly enhanced global employability. Structured training programs, English-language proficiency, and bilateral labor agreements with countries like the UK and Israel have made nursing one of the most prominent sectors for female migration (Sharma, 2024).

Moreover, social pressures—such as the desire to support family members, gain social recognition, and escape gendered labor constraints within Nepal—also shape women's migration decisions (Aryal, 2021; Khatiwada & Basyal, 2022).

Migration, therefore, is not merely an economic choice but one deeply rooted in cultural identity, familial responsibility, and community-based narratives of success.

Table 7: Social and cultural factors influencing skilled migration from Nepal

Factor	Description	Data source
Migration networks	Long-established networks among Gurung, Rai, Magar, and Limbu communities facilitate recurring skilled migration.	Sijapati et al. (2013), Dhakal (2025)
Family and kinship ties	Family-based decision-making encourages migration to support household and community needs.	Adhikari et al. (2023), Aryal (2021)
Cultural norms and Prestige	Migration is culturally valorized as a path to success, especially among youth in rural/Indigenous communities.	Khatiwada & Basyal (2022), Kunwar (2021)
Female migration in nursing	Policy reforms and education aligned with international standards have led to growth in female nurse migration.	Sharma (2024), MoLESS (2022)
Social pressures and gender norms	Women seek migration due to limited career mobility, safety concerns, and gender-based labor constraints.	Aryal (2021)
Diaspora influence and role models	Returnee migrants and community role models influence migration aspirations.	Adhikari et al. (2023) Sijapati et al. (2013)
Government-to-government labor agreements	Bilateral pacts enable structured migration, especially for female health workers.	MoLESS (2022), NSO (2025)

Nepali migration patterns, particularly among indigenous communities such as the Gurung, have historically been shaped by recruitment into foreign military services and the development of long-standing migration networks (Gurung, 1989). Communities like the Gurung, Rai, and Magar were extensively recruited into the British and Indian armies, establishing early connections with the United Kingdom and India (Gurung, 1989; Sijapati et al., 2013). Over time, these groups cultivated strong diasporic communities abroad, which now serve as conduits for both material and social capital, significantly contributing to Nepal's "brain drain" (Adhikari et al., 2023).

These diasporas function as active support systems, providing incentives for new migrants through remittance flows, employment linkages, and emotional and logistical support. As Bhatt (2023) notes, well-established migration networks within indigenous communities serve as strong push factors. When individuals choose to migrate, they often already have family or friends abroad, which reduces the risks and uncertainties typically associated with relocation (Kunwar, 2021). These networks offer crucial emotional reassurance, financial support during the settlement phase, and practical knowledge about labor markets and legal systems in host countries (Dhakal, 2025).

As a result, migration decisions are heavily influenced by the presence of social capital abroad, with individuals more likely to choose destinations where they have existing familial or communal ties. This facilitates easier integration, fosters cultural continuity, and lessens adaptation challenges (Adhikari et al., 2023). The strength of these transnational communities sustains a cyclical migration pattern from Nepal, especially among historically mobile ethnic groups.

Social norms and aspirations for improved living standards have significantly shaped migration trends in Nepal, particularly among young people. A growing perception persists that working abroad offers better personal development and financial security, especially in sectors like healthcare, where domestic opportunities for social mobility and career progression remain limited (Gomanju & Batterham, 2024). A notable trend is the migration of female nurses, many of whom enter the profession with the explicit goal of migrating to developed countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia (Adhikari, 2017). These countries are perceived to offer higher wages, improved working conditions, and greater potential for professional advancement, reinforcing migration as a strategy for achieving financial independence and upward mobility (Adhikari, 2012; Aryal, 2021).

The modernization of Nepal's nursing education system—through curricula increasingly aligned with international standards—has further boosted the competitiveness of Nepali graduates in global labor markets (Gomanju & Batterham, 2024). This alignment ensures that Nepali nurses are better prepared to integrate into foreign healthcare systems, reinforcing a strong migration pipeline. Additionally, global demand for healthcare professionals, particularly in aging societies, continues to drive the outflow of skilled healthcare workers from Nepal (Gomanju & Batterham, 2024).

Importantly, migration for career development is not limited to healthcare. Skilled professionals in engineering, IT, and education also pursue foreign employment to escape structural challenges within Nepal's labor market, such as inadequate infrastructure, limited career progression, and lack of professional development (Adhikari, 2012; Kapri & Ghimire, 2020). For many Nepalis, skilled migration represents not only an economic decision but a long-term strategy for professional fulfillment and global exposure.

Changing drivers of skilled workforce migration

The interplay of social norms, diaspora networks, and the internationalization of education has significantly reinforced skilled migration from Nepal. One key factor is the strength of pre-existing migration networks, particularly among communities such as the Gurung, which help facilitate the migration process by offering informational, financial, and emotional support (Gurung, 1989; Gurung, 2019). This trend is illustrated by the sharp rise in international migration for work and study: over 82,409 No Objection Certificates (NOCs) were issued to Nepali students in the first six months of 2022 alone—an increase from 44,843 the previous year—highlighting how migration has become increasingly institutionalized (Nepal Database, 2023).

Nepal's migration patterns are further reinforced by systemic gaps in the education-to-employment transition. The mismatch between vocational training and labor market needs, coupled with limited domestic career opportunities, compels many technically skilled individuals to seek employment abroad. According Lamsal (2012), although Nepal has expanded technical and vocational education programs, the absence of effective job placement services and industry linkages continues to drive the outflow of trained human resources. This disconnect perpetuates the cycle of labor migration and embeds it as a preferred path to upward mobility among young graduates.

Over the past 25 years, Nepal's skilled workforce migration has undergone significant transformation, shaped by a dynamic mix of economic, political, and social factors. Persistent wage disparities, limited professional prospects, and political instability have consistently pushed skilled individuals to seek employment opportunities abroad (MoLESS, 2022). At the same time, social networks and globalization have

normalized international mobility as a viable route for career advancement (Adhikari, 2017; Kattel & Sapkota, 2018). Despite improvements in technical and vocational education, a considerable gap remains between domestic training programs and the requirements of foreign labor markets (Bhatt, 2023; MoLESS, 2022).

Gender dynamics have also shifted, with an increasing number of women participating in skilled migration, particularly in the healthcare sector (Adhikari, 2017). The table below summarizes the evolving drivers of skilled migration in Nepal from 2000 to 2025, drawing on official data, academic research, and observed migration trends (Table 8).

Table 8: Changing drivers of skilled workforce migration (2000-2025)

Period	Economic factors	Political factors	Social & cultural factors	Globalization & connectivity	Educational & vocational factors	Gendered migration trends
2000-2005	Economic disparity between Nepal and developed countries.	Political instability post-1990 multiparty democracy.	Early migration networks formed, especially for the Gurung community.	Increasing exposure to global markets due to better communication technology.	Limited vocational training for global job markets.	A growing trend of female migration for employment, especially in healthcare.
	Low wages in sectors like healthcare and IT push professionals abroad.	Limited career opportunities due to political disruptions.	Migration seen as a path to a better life.		Educational mismatch between local and international demands.	
	Increased demand for skilled labor in Gulf countries.					
2005-2010	Economic disparities persist, with stagnant wages for skilled professionals.	Continued political instability and governance issues.	Stronger community and family networks for migration, especially in rural areas.	Global connectivity grows, increasing access to overseas job information.	Increasing number of skilled graduates, especially in IT and engineering.	Surge in female migration, particularly nurses and domestic workers.
	Rising remittances as a primary economic inflow.	The government struggles with service delivery, hindering domestic career growth.		More Nepali professionals seek international opportunities.	Increasing mismatch with local job markets.	

Period	Economic factors	Political factors	Social & cultural factors	Globalization & connectivity	Educational & vocational factors	Gendered migration trends
2010-2015	Economic stagnation with limited domestic job creation.	Political reforms post-2006, but implementation struggles.	Strengthened migration networks, especially for those migrating to Gulf countries.	Internet and social media expand awareness of migration opportunities.	Inadequate vocational and higher education systems for meeting global demand.	Increased migration of female healthcare workers, especially nurses.
	Demand for skilled workers in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and developed countries.	Limited trust in the government and instability affect professional choices.				
2015-2020	Economic reliance on remittances increases.	Post-earthquake recovery leads to rising out-migration as a coping strategy.	Migration seen as an established path for socio-economic mobility.	Enhanced global connectivity and mobility options increase migration rates.	Surge in demand for skilled professionals abroad, leading to migration	Significant increase in female migration for nursing, driven by professional aspirations.
	Wages remain low for skilled workers in Nepal.	Limited domestic professional opportunities due to unstable governance.	Young professionals view migration as a solution to stagnation.		Large gap in local vocational training and international industry standards.	
2020-2025	Post-pandemic economic recovery sees rapid growth in remittances.	Ongoing political instability but gradual policy improvements (e.g., agreements for skilled migration).	Migration patterns well established, with strong social networks influencing decisions.	More international job opportunities due to globalization and increased demand for skilled professionals in OECD countries.	Educational improvements, but a mismatch persists in skill alignment for foreign markets.	Female participation increases, with more women entering the workforce as nurses and other skilled professionals abroad.

Period	Economic factors	Political factors	Social & cultural factors	Globalization & connectivity	Educational & vocational factors	Gendered migration trends
	Economic disparity between Nepal and developed nations persists, especially in healthcare, engineering, and IT.	Governance reforms to manage labor migration better.	Migration increasingly viewed as a normal life strategy for professional growth.		Skill-based migration policies for developed countries.	

Sources: MoLESS. (2022)., World Bank (2021, 2023), Kattel & Sapkota (2018), Bhatt (2023), Adhikari (2017)

Impact on development: Skilled workforce migration from Nepal

Skilled workforce migration from Nepal has produced both developmental benefits and structural challenges. On the one hand, remittances—comprising over 25% of Nepal's GDP—have significantly reduced poverty and improved access to health and education, especially in rural areas (Aryal et al., 2024; Dakua, 2025; Silwal, 2009). Migration has also encouraged educational attainment and investment in human capital, as evidenced by the rising number of technically qualified aspiring migrants (Shrestha, 2024).

However, the sustained emigration of professionals, particularly in the health, education, and agriculture sectors, has led to brain drain, labor shortages, and rural depopulation (Mainali, 2019). Gender and demographic imbalances further exacerbate economic decline and social strain in rural communities (Silwal, 2009). Although policy initiatives like the Foreign Employment Act (2007) and skill-migration agreements (e.g., with Germany) aim to address these trends, their impact is limited by weak implementation and ongoing mismatches between local skills and global labor market demands (Chaudhary, 2016).

Lamsal (2012) notes that many graduates from technical and vocational programs choose to migrate due to a lack of domestic employment opportunities, resulting in the underutilization of national investments in human capital. This continuous outflow of skilled labor undermines innovation, reduces productivity, and delays the development of a self-reliant economy. While migration provides short-term economic relief, it also poses long-term development risks if not strategically managed.

PMPD perspective on skilled workforce migration

The People's Multiparty Democracy (PMPD) framework offers a governance-oriented lens for addressing Nepal's skilled workforce migration. It views brain drain not only as an economic issue but also as a consequence of governance failures, such as centralized human resource systems, limited career advancement, and inadequate service delivery in critical sectors like health, education, and IT. This perspective echoes critique of Nepal's semi-feudal and liberalized economic structures, which perpetuate unemployment and drive out-migration (Rimal, 1997).

PMPD emphasizes democratic participation, decentralization, and accountability as key mechanisms for institutional reform (Roka, 2024). Although these principles are constitutionally endorsed, they are often poorly implemented, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among skilled professionals (Khatiwada & Basyal,

2022). Reform initiatives inspired by PMPD—such as the Employment Permit System (EPS), diaspora engagement strategies, and bilateral labor agreements—seek to shift migration governance from a remittance-focused model to one centered on long-term national development (GEFONT, 2012).

Aligned with the national vision of "Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali," PMPD promotes inclusive and equitable growth by fostering conditions that retain and empower professionals both at home and abroad. GEFONT's labor organizing in Korea and Hong Kong, for instance, reflects PMPD's broader commitment to transnational justice and solidarity (GEFONT, 2012; Rimal, 1997). A governance framework grounded in PMPD can help convert brain drain into brain gain by fostering trust, dignity, and professional engagement in national development.

From the PMPD standpoint, economic inequality is not merely a market failure, but a governance failure—rooted in inadequate redistribution, centralized policy-making, and eroded public trust in state institutions (Khatiwada, 2020). PMPD supports a socialist-oriented model of economic justice and self-reliant development, directly challenging the drivers of skilled migration, such as low wages and poor infrastructure. This requires targeted investment in sectors like healthcare, agriculture, and education—areas historically deprioritized under neoliberal models. PMPD-informed policies, including job creation schemes, skill-based reintegration programs, and diaspora investment incentives, reflect this strategic reorientation (Adhikari, 2024).

As Sharma Oli (2009, as cited in Pahari, 2024, p. 14) states, "PMPD is the principle of creating a 'Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali' by ending all discrimination in the economic, social, and political conditions of Nepali society and building an independent and just society."

PMPD also opposes gender-based inequalities in the labor market. The outmigration of female professionals—especially nurses—highlights institutional failures to ensure safe, dignified, and empowering work environments. PMPD advocates for gender-responsive governance, which remains underdeveloped in Nepal's current migration policy frameworks.

Conclusion

Skilled workforce migration from Nepal is shaped by interconnected economic, political, social, and institutional factors. Low wages, limited career prospects, and mismatched education systems push professionals—especially in healthcare, IT, and engineering—abroad, while social networks and well-established migration cultures, particularly among indigenous communities, reinforce these patterns. Political instability, weak governance, and corruption further drive out-migration, alongside the rising trend of gendered migration, particularly among female healthcare workers. This review underscores that deeper structural issues—such as centralized decision-making, lack of institutional accountability, and limited professional recognition—play a crucial role in shaping migration decisions. The persistent outflow of skilled labor has serious implications for Nepal's development, leading to brain drain, sectoral shortages in health, education, and technology, and widening regional disparities. Gendered migration patterns, especially in healthcare, add another layer of complexity. From the PMPD perspective, migration is not simply an economic issue but a governance challenge. It calls for reforms focused on accountability, job dignity, and gender equity. By adopting PMPD principles, Nepal can better retain skilled talent and realign migration governance with inclusive and sovereign development goals.

To transform migration from a necessity into a choice, Nepal must move beyond short-term incentives and commit to long-term structural reforms. This includes investing in quality education, strengthening public institutions, improving workplace dignity and mobility, and

cultivating a professional culture that rewards merit and service. Only by fostering a governance environment in which skilled individuals are empowered, respected, and engaged can Nepal truly harness the potential of its human capital for national development.

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