



# Moving Stories

International Review of How Media Cover Migration



Ethical  
Journalism  
Network

EDITED BY AIDAN WHITE

## **Moving Stories**

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**FOREWORD**

# Beyond the headlines

» JAN EGELAND



**For years, the Norwegian Refugee Council and other humanitarian actors have called out – too often in vain – to the international community, to the media, the decision makers and the public opinion about the sufferings of millions of civilians fleeing war in Syria.**

As the conflict escalated, and the humanitarian disaster with it, creating the biggest refugee crisis in our generation, our appeals for wider media attention, with some notable exceptions, fell on deaf ears with an apparent lack of interest on the part of the vast majority of television and radio companies and major newspapers.

It was arguably only with the tragic death of Aylan Kurdi and the publication of pictures of his body on a beach in Turkey that Western public opinion and global media finally woke up. Immediately, media lenses focused sharply on the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and both politicians and ordinary people had to respond.

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**What about the many other humanitarian crises beyond the media's radar? Every two minutes another South Sudanese child becomes severely malnourished. But these stories are seldom told.**

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But this incident only raised another question. What about the many other humanitarian crises beyond the media's radar? In war-torn South Sudan, for example. This country is rarely in the limelight. In 2011, it gained independence from Sudan ending a generation of war. Two years later, the civil war broke out resulting in massive forced displacement and today the country is one of the world's impoverished places. Every two minutes another South Sudanese child becomes severely malnourished. But these stories are seldom told.

A South Sudanese colleague told me it was strange to see how things can change from one day to the other only because of international media attention.

“In Europe, it was that boy on the beach. Maybe we need a picture of a boy like that in South Sudan,” she said while preparing to go on a new mission to one of the world's hardest-to-reach areas where dropping food from World Food Programme airplanes is the only way to provide hungry people with something to eat.

Too often not even stories about children dying of starvation are enough to make headlines on the nine o'clock news. Humanitarian disasters that deserve our attention often go uncovered because there is no photographer or journalist on the ground to tell the story. Only a couple of conflicts receive our attention at any given time, while most dramas get none at all. Why is that?

The reasons are complex. It is not just a lack of humanity on the news agenda or a matter of luck or a matter of caring more about some people at the expense of others. We need a broader lens to see what really is going on.

In the Norwegian Refugee Council we annually publish a list of the world's 10 most neglected displacement crises. This year the Rohingyas have topped the list. This minority Muslim community under pressure in Myanmar is also found in neighbouring Bangladesh where hundreds of thousands have sought protection.

One criterion to be on the neglected crises list is a lack of media attention. Other factors include lack of funding, little humanitarian presence and difficult access to the victims of the conflict. Often, there is a strong correlation between the different factors: access problems can lead to lack of media attention, which again can lead to lack of donor concern, which again leads to even bigger access issues. This completes a vicious circle that is not easily broken.

But there is an important truth in all of this – decision makers pay attention to the media, and independent journalists reporting with care, humanity and professionalism have enormous power to tell stories that create a new path.

But, as this report reveals, mainstream media is currently under pressure with news companies struggling to adapt to a new reality with plummeting revenues and competition from new media. Often media will simply say they cannot afford to cover these stories.

But this should not be an excuse for adopting a herd mentality – where media follow each other to cover a small cluster of the most obvious stories. Media around the world are now reporting on the disastrous humanitarian consequences of the civil war in Syria and the exodus to Europe and they are going beyond the numbers story which has dominated news coverage so far.

Yet as the poignant human tragedies from Syria takes centre stage, where is the coverage of the second largest humanitarian crisis and war on our watch: in Yemen? Here, around 21 million people are in urgent need of emergency relief. They suffer from external and internal bombardment, blockade and totally inadequate assistance and protection.

Also the journalists themselves need to be protected to be able to report on the atrocities. For journalists reporting from conflict and war 2015 is another deadly year. Like humanitarian workers, journalists are not only at risk of becoming so-called collateral damage during military operations, they are also increasingly targeted.

It is therefore essential that the international community focus on the protection of journalists in armed conflicts to allow for less casualties in the imminent future.

In Europe we talk about a sharing of responsibility in terms of coping with the growing influx of migration. Maybe it is time to talk about a media “burden sharing” where media institutions, rather than chasing the same stories, divide the coverage of the human suffering so that children in grave risk in South Sudan or Gaza do not continue to stay in life-threatening situations without the world knowing.

This EJN report *Moving Stories* is a welcome step to allow journalists get an overview of the problem areas as well as promoting best practices when it comes to reporting on the wider migration story.

Without media attention, humanitarian crises, with their horrifying impacts, will continue to be learned by the outside world way too late.

**Jan Egeland** is the Secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council



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## INTRODUCTION

# Moving stories

» KIERAN COOKE AND AIDAN WHITE

**Migration is part of the human condition. Ever since humankind emerged out of East Africa it has been on the move – searching for a better climate, looking for supplies of food and water, finding security and safety.**

Migration has suddenly jumped to the top of the news agenda. During 2015 journalists reported the biggest mass movement of people around the world in recent history.

Television screens and newspapers have been filled with stories about the appalling loss of life and suffering of thousands of people escaping war in the Middle East or oppression and poverty in Africa and elsewhere.

Every day in 2015 seemed to bring a new migration tragedy: Syrian child refugees perish in the Mediterranean; groups of Rohingyas escaping persecution in Myanmar suffocate on boats in the South China Sea; children fleeing from gang warfare in Central America die of thirst in the desert as they try to enter the US.

In response to this crisis the Ethical Journalism Network commissioned *Moving Stories* – a review of how media in selected countries have reported on refugees and migrants in a tumultuous year. We asked writers and researchers to examine the quality of coverage and to highlight reporting problems as well as good work.



The conclusions from many different parts of the world are remarkably similar: journalism under pressure from a weakening media economy; political bias and opportunism that drives the news agenda; the dangers of hate-speech, stereotyping and social exclusion of refugees and migrants. But at the same time there have been inspiring examples of careful, sensitive and ethical journalism that have shown empathy for the victims.

In most countries the story has been dominated by two themes – numbers and emotions. Most of the time coverage is politically led with media often following an agenda dominated by loose language and talk of invasion and swarms. At other moments the story has been laced with humanity, empathy and a focus on the suffering of those involved.

What is unquestionable is that media everywhere play a vital role in bringing the world's attention to these events. This report, written by journalists from or in the countries concerned, relates how their media cover migration.

They tell very different stories. **Nepal** and the **Gambia** are exporters of labour. Thousands of migrants, mostly young men, flock from the mountain villages of Nepal to work in the heat of the Gulf and Malaysia: often the consequences are disastrous. People from the Gambia make the treacherous trip across the Sahara to Libya and then by boat to Europe: many have perished on the way – either in the desert or drowned in the Mediterranean.

In these countries reporting of the migration of large numbers of the young – in many ways the lifeblood of their nations – is limited and stories about the hardship migrants endure are rare. Censorship or a lack of resources – or a combination of both – are mainly to blame for the inadequacies of coverage. Self-censorship, where reporters do not want to offend either their media employer or the government, is also an issue.

The reports on migration in **China**, **India** and **Brazil** tell another story. Though large numbers of people migrate from each of these countries, the main focus is on internal migration, a global phenomenon often ignored by mainstream media that involves millions and dwarfs the international movement of people.

What's considered to be the biggest movement of people in history has taken place in China over the last 35 years. Cities are undergoing explosive growth, with several approaching 20 million inhabitants. Similar movements are happening in India and, to a lesser extent, in Brazil.

In Africa the headlines focus on people striving to leave the continent and heading north, but there is also migration between countries, with many people from the impoverished central regions heading for **South Africa** – a country where media also deal with problems of xenophobia and governmental pressure.

In Europe migration and refugee issues have shaken the tree of European unity with hundreds of thousands trekking by land and sea to escape war and poverty. The reports here reveal how for almost a year media have missed opportunities to sound the alarm to an imminent migration refugee crisis.

Media struggle to provide balanced coverage when political leaders respond with a mix of bigotry and panic – some announcing they will only take in Christian migrants while others plan to establish walls and razor wire fences. Much of the focus has been on countries in South Eastern Europe which has provide a key route for migrants and refugees on the march. In **Bulgaria**, as in much of the region, media have failed to play a responsible role and sensationalism has dominated news coverage.

In **Italy**, a frontline state where the Mediterranean refugee tragedy first unfolded, the threat of hate-speech is always present, though this is often counterbalanced by an ethical attachment of many in journalism to a purpose-built charter against discrimination. In **Britain** the story has also often been politically-driven and focused, sometimes without a sense of scale or balance: this has been particularly evident in reportage of the plight of refugees in Calais.

In **Turkey**, seen by many European politicians as a key country in stemming the onward rush of migrants, most media are under the thumb of a government that punishes dissident journalists, so the public debate is limited.

Like their Turkish colleagues, journalists in **Lebanon** live with the reality of millions of refugees from war-torn Syria within their borders which makes telling the story more complex and it is not helped by confused mixing of fact and opinion by many media.

At the same time in the **United States** media have helped make the migrant and refugee issue an explosive topic in debates between Republican Party candidates for the presidency. Media time has focused on heated and often racist exchanges. This has obscured much of the good reporting in some media that provides much-needed context. South of the border, in **Mexico** media also suffer from undue political pressure and self-censorship.



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**“Open the world more equitably so we all may walk freely. Or close the borders and let each one return to his house and see how much poorer and drearier and darker the world is when we all stay at home.” – Chibundu Onuzo**

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In **Australia** the media in a country built by migrants struggles to apply well-meaning codes of journalistic practice within a toxic political climate that has seen a rise in racism directed at new arrivals.

These reports cover only a handful of countries, but they are significant. The problems of scant and prejudicial coverage of migration issues exist everywhere. Even reporting of migration in the international media – with a few notable exceptions – tends to be overly simplistic.

Migrants are described as a threat. There is a tendency, both among many politicians and in sections of the mainstream media, to lump migrants together and present them as a seemingly endless tide of people who will steal jobs, become a burden on the state and ultimately threaten the native way of life.

Such reporting is not only wrong; it is also dishonest. Migrants often bring enormous benefits to their adopted countries.

How would California’s agricultural industry or the Texan oil fields survive without the presence of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Central

American workers, often labouring on minimal wages? How could the health service in the UK continue without the thousands of migrant nurses and doctors from the developing world? How would cities like Dubai, Doha or Singapore have been built without labourers from Nepal or Bangladesh – or how would they function without the armies of maids and helpers from the Philippines and Indonesia?

These reports underscore why media need to explain and reinforce a wider understanding that migration is a natural process. No amount of razor wire or no matter how high walls are built, desperate migrants will find a way through. People will still flock to the cities, drawn by the hope of a better life.

The migrant crisis is not going to go away: the impact of widespread climate change and growing inequality is likely to exacerbate it in the years ahead.

The inescapable conclusion is that there has never been a greater need for useful and reliable intelligence on the complexities of migration and for media coverage to be informed, accurate and laced with humanity. But if that is to be achieved we must strengthen the craft of journalism.

# RECOMMENDATIONS AND USEFUL LINKS

## 1. Ethical context

Migrants and refugees are a vulnerable minority who can quickly become scapegoats for the ills of society – social and economic decline, crime and unemployment, pressure on health and welfare services and lack of security.

Media can counter this threat and help people better understand the complex migration story by applying ethical principles, avoiding crude stereotypes, developing good newsroom practice and engaging with the audience. In particular, journalists should apply and respect the following five core principles of journalism in their work:

- ▷ Accuracy: fact-based reporting, analysis and commentary;
- ▷ Independence: journalism free from self-censorship and political pressure;
- ▷ Impartiality: fair reporting that tells all sides of the story;
- ▷ Humanity: sensitive and careful journalism that avoids doing undue harm;
- ▷ Accountability: media transparency and commitment to correct errors.

## 2. Newsroom practice

Media companies and journalists' unions and associations should prepare concise guides to best practices for the reporting on refugees and migrants. In addition, all media should examine their internal structures to make sure they are telling the story in the most effective way.

News organisations can:

- ▷ Appoint specialist reporters with good knowledge of the subject to the migration and refugee beat.
- ▷ Provide detailed information on the background of migrants and refugees and the consequences of migration. It is especially important to note that some major studies reveal how migration can strengthen national economies in the longer term, even where there are short-term challenges.
- ▷ Avoid political bias and challenge deceptive handling of the facts and incitement to hatred particularly by political, religious or other community leaders and public figures.
- ▷ Respect sources of information and grant anonymity to those who require it most, particularly

those who are vulnerable and most at risk.

- ▷ Establish transparent and accessible internal systems for dealing with complaints from the audience over coverage of migrant and refugee issues.
- ▷ Review employment policies to ensure newsroom diversity with reporters and editors from minority communities.
- ▷ Provide training for journalists and editors covering everything from international conventions and law to refugee rights and what terms to use while covering refugee stories.
- ▷ Monitor coverage regularly. Organise internal discussions on how to develop and improve the scope of migration coverage.
- ▷ Manage online comments and engage with the audience to ensure that migration stories are not used as a platform for abuse or intolerance.

Media associations and journalists' unions can also support national structures for independent regulation or self-regulation of journalism, such as press councils. Where there are industry-wide codes of conduct and guidelines dealing with non-discrimination these should cover reporting migration.

## 3. Engage with the media audience and connect with migrants

Refugee groups, activists and NGOs, many of which provide vital information for media, can be briefed on how best to communicate with journalists and media can explain to the audience their policies and editorial approach which may encourage readers, viewers and listeners to contribute useful additional information.

## 4. Challenge hate-speech

Hate-speech is widespread in the media. Often it can't be prevented when it comes out of the mouths of prominent public figures, but journalists should always remember that just because someone says something outrageous doesn't make it newsworthy. The Ethical Journalism Network has developed a 5-point text for hate-speech as a useful tool for newsrooms. (See below).

## 5. Demand access to information

Media cannot report without access to reliable information and facts. When access to information is restricted, such as not being allowed to enter

refugee camps, media and civil society groups should press the government both nationally and internationally to be more transparent. Media and journalists' unions should meet regularly with police and state authorities and agencies to ensure journalists have safe conditions in which to work and access to the information they need.

## Some Useful Links

### Glossaries

International Organization for Migration (IOM Key migration terms)

United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) Media Friendly Glossary for Migration

### Statistics

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Statistics and Operational Data

International Organization for Migration (IOM) World Migration Report

Internal Displacement Monitoring Center Global Estimates 2015

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) Resources Publications

### Sources

International Refugee Law – Everything you need to know from the UNHCR

Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM)

Refugee Studies Centre (RSC)

International Labour Organization (ILO)

Council of Europe (COE)

European Network Against Racism (ENAR)

European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)

Forced Migration Online

The Journal of International Migration and Integration (JIMI)

The Global Migration Centre (GMC)

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)

Red Cross Global Campaign on Migration

Middle East Migration Issues (Migration Policy Institute)

## Resources for journalists

Accountable Journalism Database

Africa's Media Silence over Migration Crisis

BBC: Migration in Figures

Climate News Network

Dart Centre Covering Migration Tips for Journalists

Ethical Journalism Network: Migrants or Refugees?

Ethical Journalism Network Five-Point Test for Hate-speech

Europe: The Migrant Files

Jean Paul Marthoz: "How to cover migration"

Getting the Facts Right: Ethnicity and Religion (ARTICLE 19)

Media Diversity Institute

Statewatch

UK NUJ Migration Reporting Guide for Journalists

Data-Based Study into Characteristics of Migration Coverage in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States – Summary report and Full presentation

Why Al Jazeera will not say Mediterranean Migrants

David Cameron: "Swarm" of Migrants crossing Mediterranean

Ten myths about migration

Guardian Special Report:

Hardline Australia, confused Scandinavia and tense Russia: The global immigration picture

Generation E – Data Driven Project Report on Youth Migration from Southern Europe

The Med: One final danger in a migrant's odyssey

The Arduous Journey of Colombian Migrants Headed for Chile

What crime have I committed to be held like this? Inside Yarl's Wood

Risking their lives to cross the border: Europe or Die

Jimmy Breslin: "The Short Sweet Dream of Eduardo Gutierrez"

Giovanna dell'Orto/Vicki Birchfield: "Reporting at the Southern Borders Journalism and Public Debates on Immigration in the U.S. and the E.U."

Peter Andreas/Kelly Greenhill: "Sex, Drugs and Body Counts"

Fabrizio Gatti: "Bilal"





## NEPAL

# Information gaps fail to keep track of a country on the move

» OM ASTHA RAI

**Migration is not a new phenomenon in Nepal – Nepalis have been migrating for centuries in search of a better life. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed weaker states with his own Gorkha kingdom and gave birth to modern Nepal, many migrated to India to evade exploitative land tax by the new ruler. In 1815, Nepal signed a treaty with the East India Company, allowing the British to recruit Nepali youths into their army.**

In more recent times there has been an upsurge in migration, driven by poverty, civil strife and war at home and the lure of jobs in the Gulf and in fast-growing economies such as Malaysia. This is a major story, affecting millions of people, but it gets little special attention in Nepali media.

In 1985, the Nepal government introduced a Foreign Employment Act to facilitate migration of workers. In 1990, after the end of the absolute monarchy and the restoration of multi-party democracy, the government adopted liberal economic policies, encouraging young, jobless people to migrate abroad and send home remittances.

In 1993, the first year official statistics on migration were compiled, 3,605 left for the Gulf. By 2006, the year a decade-long civil war ended in Nepal, that figure had jumped to more than 200,000.

The migration rate has continued to rise: according to official figures more than half a million migrated in 2014 – or nearly 1,500 per day. The government says that in total more than 3.4 million migrated through legal channels between 1993 and 2014:

Malaysia has received the highest number (1,144,859), followed by Qatar (910,204), Saudi Arabia (66,604), UAE (42,072), Kuwait (97,973), Bahrain (40,651), Oman (23,632), South Korea (22,131), Lebanon (11,432), Israel (7,937), Afghanistan (6,175), Japan (13,842).

However, these records do not give the full picture: the government does not record returnees. Many who left Nepal might have returned or died overseas. Also many, particularly women, migrate through illegal channels, often via India, and there are no figures for them. A large number are seasonal migrants,

going to India and returning for the planting and harvesting seasons. In 2010, the World Bank estimated that 867,000 Nepalis were in India but the figure could be much higher.

There are no exact numbers of migrant workers. But it is estimated that around four million are abroad, mainly in the Gulf countries and Malaysia. This estimate is based on the number who took out labour permits with the Department of Foreign Employment between 1993 and 2014, plus estimates of the number of undocumented workers who went abroad through informal channels.

While migration is widespread in all areas of Nepal eastern districts have seen the largest exodus over the past 20 years.

Most migrants are male: following reports of sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment of Nepali housemaids by employers, the government placed a ban on women going to several Arab countries, though many avoid the restrictions.

According to government statistics, at least 3,270 Nepalis died in Malaysia and the Gulf countries between 2009 and 2014, most of them men. The death rate is increasing year on year: in 2010, 418 were reported; in 2014 it was 842, or more than two a day.

Lack of job opportunities is the single biggest reason behind migration. “Jobs with decent incomes are rare in Nepal,” says Hari Krishna Neupane, who worked first in Israel and is now in Kuwait. “If you work in Nepal, you can survive but it is difficult to save any money to build your own house and send your children to English-medium schools.

“It is not that salaries are very attractive in foreign countries. Many unskilled Nepali workers earn about NRs 15,000 (about 150 US\$) a month. But they manage to save because they always keep in mind that they are there to earn.

“Youths are lured by manpower agents with lies about salaries and other factors. If they know they will have to work like slaves they will not go but once they land in the Gulf it is very difficult to return. They have no means to pay off a huge loan which they take to go abroad. In addition, most Arab countries practice the ‘Kafala’ system in which employers have charge of the workers’ passports.”

The number of migrants is likely to increase dramatically over the next few years as a result of the recent earthquakes. On 25 April, 2015, a 7.8 magnitude quake killed nearly 9,000 people and destroyed

hundreds of thousands of houses. The government has offered loans for rebuilding: many of the earthquake victims who borrow will have to migrate to pay them back.

Ram Hari Katwal, a 26-year-old from Melamchi village in Sidhuplachok, the district worst-affected by earthquake, had gone to Malaysia one year before to pay off a loan that he took to build a house. The earthquake not only destroyed it but also killed his wife and one-year-old son.

“I have not paid off my previous loan,” says Katwal. “I will now have to take out another to rebuild my house, and it is not possible to pay off these loans working in Nepal. I must go abroad again.”

Besides migration abroad, there has been a big surge in internal migration with large numbers moving from rural to urban areas, particularly during the civil war. Over the past 20 years, the population of the valley around Kathmandu, the capital, has nearly doubled.

## Migration and media: A poverty of reliable information

Migration in Nepal touches millions of families, but media coverage fails to give it any special focus or attention. Most reporters see the issue only as an extension of other newsbeats like business, the economy and foreign affairs. Television channels, radio and online news portals do not have specialist migration reporters.

“Any reporter who is free can do a migration story but someone else is likely to do it on another day,” says Govinda Pariyar, editor of *www.digitaldainik.com*, an online news portal. “Our reporters do not explore issues, they cover just incidents. For example, if some migrant workers are deported or swindled, it makes news. We do not have resources to do in-depth stories digging out reasons behind their misery.”

*Kantipur Daily*, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the country, was the first to have a reporter covering labour migration. *Kantipur* began publication in 1993 – the year the government started maintaining data about migrant workers: most stories were written in the context of job opportunities, or about labour agreements between Nepal and various Arab countries and the value of remittances and their contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Later, other newspapers started covering the subject. Most, like *Kantipur*, wrote from a mainly business perspective. This continues to be the case. At

*Nagarik Daily*, the foreign affairs reporter includes migration as part of his brief. In *Republica*, a sister publication of *Nagarik*, the reporter assigned to migration also covers gender issues, women's rights, children and culture.

"Migration-related stories are few and far between, as compared to other newsbeats like politics, crime and sports," says Shreejana Shrestha, who covers migration for *Republica*. It might look as though reporters have a plethora of migration issues to write about. But these issues are often the same – workers being swindled by manpower agents, difficulties in getting passports, or about labour permits and deportation from destination countries.

"When you write a couple of stories about migrant workers being swindled or deported, you do not feel like writing more because while the names of those involved might be different, the issues remain the same," he says.

One major handicap is access to reliable sources and good statistical data. Most comes from government officials, NGO activists, Kathmandu-based experts, manpower agents and some migrant workers on their way to or from foreign countries.

Due to a lack of financial resources, reporters rarely have the opportunity and means to look closely into the conditions migrants work under. Surendra Poudel, who covers migration for *Nagarik*, is essentially a foreign affairs reporter. He started covering migration after hearing, via Foreign Ministry officials, about Nepalis being exploited abroad. But he has never been able to visit countries where this occurred.

"I write just what I know from the Foreign Ministry officials," says Poudel. "Sometimes, I get lucky and talk to migrant workers abroad on the phone but that's it. I have never seen what their conditions are like. I do not know whether what they describe to me is real. Or maybe they are working in more deplorable situations than they are able to describe."

*Kantipur* is an exception. It has a bureau in Qatar which not only covers the Gulf region but also publishes a weekly newspaper in Qatar targeting Nepali migrant workers there. But it has not been able to cover many of the issues they experience.

According to the paper's Qatar bureau chief, Hom Karki, only two kinds of data about migrant workers can easily be found: the number who obtain labour permits to go abroad through legal channels and the number who die abroad. Other not-so-significant data, such as the number of registered



manpower agencies and institutions qualified to run pre-departure orientation programmes, is also available on the Nepal government website.

But it is not always reliable and only tells the official story. For example, due to illegal migration, the number obtaining work permits does not reflect the actual number working abroad. Financial data is also limited: while the Central Bank of Nepal is able to track remittances sent back through formal channels like banks and registered money-transfer companies, many workers use "Hundi", a traditional form of money transfer that does not pass through official bodies.

Karki says that even though he is based in the Gulf it is still difficult to get hold of reliable data. "We are forced to rely on our own government's agencies. We cannot go to Qatari government offices and ask. Two years ago, I wanted to get hold of more useful data such as the exact number of Nepalis working in Qatar and how many were in which sectors. I asked at the Nepali embassy: it wrote to Qatar's labour ministry but up till now there has been no response.

"The issue of migrant workers is so vast that with limited resources it is difficult to explore even from here. So how can we expect Kathmandu-based reporters to present the real picture?" he asks. "When I came here, I realised that the conditions are much worse than what I thought while reporting from Kathmandu."

Karki also finds that editors back home in Nepal do not understand these conditions. "I sent a story about migrant workers forced to sleep in congested rooms that have no air-conditioning but I was ridiculed by my editors for trying to make a mountain out of a molehill.

"They did not understand the difference between Nepal and Qatar. In Nepal, only well-off people

sleep in AC rooms. But in Qatar, AC is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Like you cannot live without oxygen, you cannot survive without AC in Qatar.

“Another time I wrote about how migrant workers have to walk to the embassy office here to lodge complaints about working conditions. Again, my editors in Kathmandu laughed it off because walking to the office is normal in Nepal. In the desert heat of Qatar, if you walk out on the streets, you might lose your life.”

Karki says the Nepali media have not been able to explore many migrant issues. “When workers go on strike and get arrested and deported back to Nepal, it makes big news,” he says. “But the media often fail to find out what circumstances led them to go on strike in a foreign country. Were they getting the wages they were promised? Were they getting their promised leave, their off-duty hours, their liveable rooms or potable water? The media does not bother to explore these nuances.”

The social impact of mass migration is also rarely reported. Many youths fall into drug addiction because their fathers live far away and come home only once in two or three years. In a patriarchal society such as Nepal, mothers alone cannot provide proper guidance. When a migrant worker dies abroad, his wife and children are left to fend for themselves.

After the recent earthquakes, it was reported that women in many areas faced difficulties in building shelters or rebuilding damaged houses in the absence of their husbands. Before the earthquake, that kind of reporting was rare. Every year disasters like floods and landslides hit villages and women are left to cope as best they can.

In the absence of proper in-depth, comprehensive and compelling reporting, there is little pressure on the government to act on some of the serious questions surrounding the export of labour. Man-power agencies within Nepal and in the Gulf states have been accused by workers of charging excessive fees and extracting bribes yet little has been done to curb their activities.

As many as 3,272 Nepali migrant workers died in the Gulf countries and Malaysia between 2009 and 2014, with 847 recorded as dying from heart failure. The question is, why do so many, most below the age of 40, suffer heart failure? Is it because of the extremely hot and unpleasant conditions? Or are there other factors at play?

Some deaths may be due to a sudden drop in body temperature: returning migrants report that workers, during breaks from the intense heat in the Gulf, often fall asleep in air-conditioned rooms, dying as their bodies fail to adapt to the sudden cold.



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**After the recent earthquakes, it was reported that women faced difficulties in building shelters or rebuilding damaged houses in the absence of their husbands. Before the earthquake, that kind of reporting was rare.**

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The government has not adequately investigated, and without its help – particularly in the Gulf countries where directly questioning the authorities is very difficult for reporters – the true picture is unlikely to emerge.

Comprehensive and compelling coverage of the lives of migrant workers is rare, with few journalists or media outlets having the resources, the imagination and enthusiasm to carry out the task.

Two years ago, a team from *Sajha Sawal* – translated as “Common Questions” – a popular television show produced by the BBC Nepali Trust, went to Qatar and interviewed migrant workers. It showed the often very difficult conditions and unmasked manpower agents who had misled workers about their contracts and salaries. This episode of *Sajha Sawal* is still considered one of the best examples of coverage of migrant issues.

In 2009, *Nepal Weekly*, a news magazine, ran a cover story about deaths abroad in another good piece of reporting which drew the government’s attention to the unusually high rate of deaths of migrant workers, particularly in Arab countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia. But the magazine failed to follow up and there was no effort by government to put diplomatic pressure on either Qatar or Saudi Arabia to protect Nepali workers, and the death rate among those in the Gulf continues to be high.

## **Bridging the information gap at home and abroad**

This lack of protection for migrant workers fails to recognise how migration plays a central role in Nepal’s economy. Remittances sent home have not only sustained local economic activity but also helped reduce poverty. In rural villages, many women are able to feed their children nutritious food and send them to school because their husbands earn money abroad.

Over the last two decades, Nepal has succeeded in bringing down the percentage of its people living below the poverty line. Without remittances the fight against poverty would be all the more difficult: in a 2013 report, the National Planning Commission said the incidence would jump to more than 33 per cent from the current 19 per cent if remittances stopped. It is difficult to imagine the impact this would have on the economy.

Like much other data related to migration, reliable figures on remittance are not available. In 2013,

Nepal Rashtra Bank, the country’s central regulatory bank, estimated that it represented 25.7 per cent of GDP.

The government has no plans to put an end to migration but seems to have adopted policies encouraging it. Setting up the Foreign Employment Promotion Board (FEPB) in 2007 showed that the government wanted to encourage Nepali youths to migrate.

Ganesh Gurung is Nepal’s foremost expert on labour migration and the remittance economy. “Migration should not be promoted but managed by the government,” he says. “Youths must be encouraged to stay by creating job opportunities within the country. But our government is not focused on creating job opportunities. In this situation, an end to migration does not look in sight. I think it will go on for the next couple of decades.”

Comprehensive coverage of migration is vital for the country and the media needs more resources and to be better trained.

One way to improve the situation is more migration-focused fellowships for journalists. Panos South Asia, a regional media organisation based in Kathmandu, is carrying out the first phase of a fellowship programme aimed at selecting journalists to go to the Gulf countries and cover migration.

Managing and releasing reliable data is also important. The government should track workers not only when they leave but also while they are abroad or when they return. It should also be more proactive in investigating allegations of abuse.

According to *Kantipur*’s Qatar bureau chief Karki, workers who complain about injustices are often ignored by their own authorities. “When they cannot take it (abuse) any more, they go to their embassy. But the embassy sends them back to Qatar’s labour department, which will never do them justice.”

Some groups in Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait have been running blog-like online news portals. These are not professionally produced but many are popular. Workers could be trained and encouraged to provide more information which could be used by Kathmandu-based journalists. However migrant blogging groups are wary of gaining too much publicity: they do not want to get into trouble with the authorities in the Gulf and elsewhere and endanger their work status and income.



## Migration: It's the same old story

'The enormous change in human conditions to which nearly all our present stresses are due, the abolition of distance and the stupendous increase in power, have flung together the population of the world so that a new way of living has become imperative ...

'The elaboration of methods and material has necessitated a vast development and refinement of espionage, and in addition the increasing difficulty of understanding what the warfare is really about has produced new submersive and demoralising activities of rumour-spreading, propaganda and the like, that complicate and lose contact at last with any rational objective ...

'The uprooting of millions of people who are driven into exile among strangers, who are forced to seek new homes, produces a peculiar exacerbation of the mental strain. Never have there been such crowds of migrating depressing people.

'They talk languages we do not understand ... they stimulate xenophobia without intention ... Their necessary discordance with the new populations they invade releases and intensifies the natural distrust and hostility of man for man – which it is the aim of all moral and social training to eliminate ...

'For the restoration and modernisation of human civilisation, this exaggerated outlawing of the fellow citizen who we see fit to suspect as a traitor or revolutionary and also of the stranger within our gates, has to be restrained and brought back within the scheme of human rights.

– H. G. Wells, *The Rights of Man* (1940)



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