

# SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND HEALTH VULNERABILITIES OF CROSS-BORDER MALE MIGRANTS IN SOUTH-ASIA: FINDINGS FROM BANGLADESH, INDIA AND NEPAL

Nearly half the migrants from developing countries reside in other developing countries, and almost 80 per cent of South-South migration takes place between countries with contiguous borders [1]. India shares its border with a number of developing countries. According to Census of India 2001\*, immigrants of Asian origin comprise more than 98 per cent of all the immigrants currently living in India; 61 per cent are of Bangladeshi origin and 10 per cent of Nepalese origin [2]. The nature of migration from Bangladesh and Nepal to India differs significantly. Nepalese and Indian citizens can move freely across the border without a passport or visa, live and work, own property and conduct trade or business in either country [3–5]. In contrast, India has a closed border with Bangladesh and citizens require visas to travel and permission to work in the two countries. Nonetheless, evidence from official and unofficial sources indicates that citizens cross over the porous border without much difficulty [4].

Although migration between Bangladesh, Nepal and India has been widely discussed, there is a lack of information on migrants' social and health vulnerabilities on both sides of the border. The Population Council in India and Bangladesh, and CREHPA in Nepal, undertook a multi-country study, with support from the Department for International Development (DFID), to assess the social and cultural integration, lifestyle, prevailing physical, sexual, and mental health status (both self-reported and using select biological measurements), and the health-seeking behaviours of male migrants in India, and returnee male migrants in their country of origin (Bangladesh and Nepal).



## STUDY METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional bio-behavioural survey was conducted in seven sites across three countries—India (Kolkata, Mumbai, and Delhi); Bangladesh (Jessore and Satkhira); and Nepal (Gulmi, Palpa, and Rolpa). Respondents in the destination country (India) comprised current male migrants from Nepal or Bangladesh working or residing in India, and respondents in the countries of origin (Bangladesh and Nepal) were male migrants who had returned from India. Current male migrants in India were natives of Bangladesh or Nepal, 18 years of age or older, had spent their adolescent years in their home country and were currently residing in India for at least 6 months. Returnee male migrants in Bangladesh and Nepal were 18 years of age or older, had spent at least six months in India for work related reasons and had returned to their country of origin (Bangladesh or Nepal) at least six months back. A total of 504 current Bangladeshi male migrants and 500 current Nepalese male migrants were surveyed in India between September–October, 2014. In the two countries of origin, 250 returnee male migrants were interviewed in Bangladesh and 270 returnee male migrants in Nepal, between October 2014–January, 2015.

\* Census 2011 detailed Migration Tables have not been released.

Structured interviews were conducted by trained researchers to explore the socio-demographic background, migration history, nature of economic activities, social integration, physical, sexual and mental health status and related behaviours of male migrants. Height, weight, blood pressure and haemoglobin level were measured. The study was approved by the Nepal Health Research Council and the Institutional Review Board of the Population Council.

## STUDY POPULATION

### *Current male migrants in India*

Current Bangladeshi migrants (BM) were significantly younger than the Nepalese migrants (NM) in India (median age: 30 years vs. 35 years;  $p<0.001$ ). Bangladeshi migrants were more likely to be single (27% vs. 14.2%;  $p<0.001$ ) and to live in shared

accommodation with friends from their country or workplace (41.3% vs. 28.8%;  $p<0.001$ ) compared to Nepalese migrants. Nepalese migrants were more likely to be educated and to have more years of schooling than their Bangladeshi counterparts ( $p<0.05$ ).

### *Returnee male migrants in their country of origin*

Returnee Bangladeshi male migrants were younger than their Nepalese counterparts (median age: 28 years vs. 46 years;  $p<0.001$ ) and more likely to be single (25.2% vs. 5.6%;  $p<0.001$ ). Returnee Nepalese migrants were significantly older than current Nepalese migrants living in India (46 years vs. 35 years;  $p<0.001$ ), while returnee Bangladeshi migrants were younger than current migrants living in India (28 years vs. 30 years;  $p<0.05$ ), indicating that Nepalese migrants returned after completing their working years in India while Bangladeshi migrants returned after shorter stays.

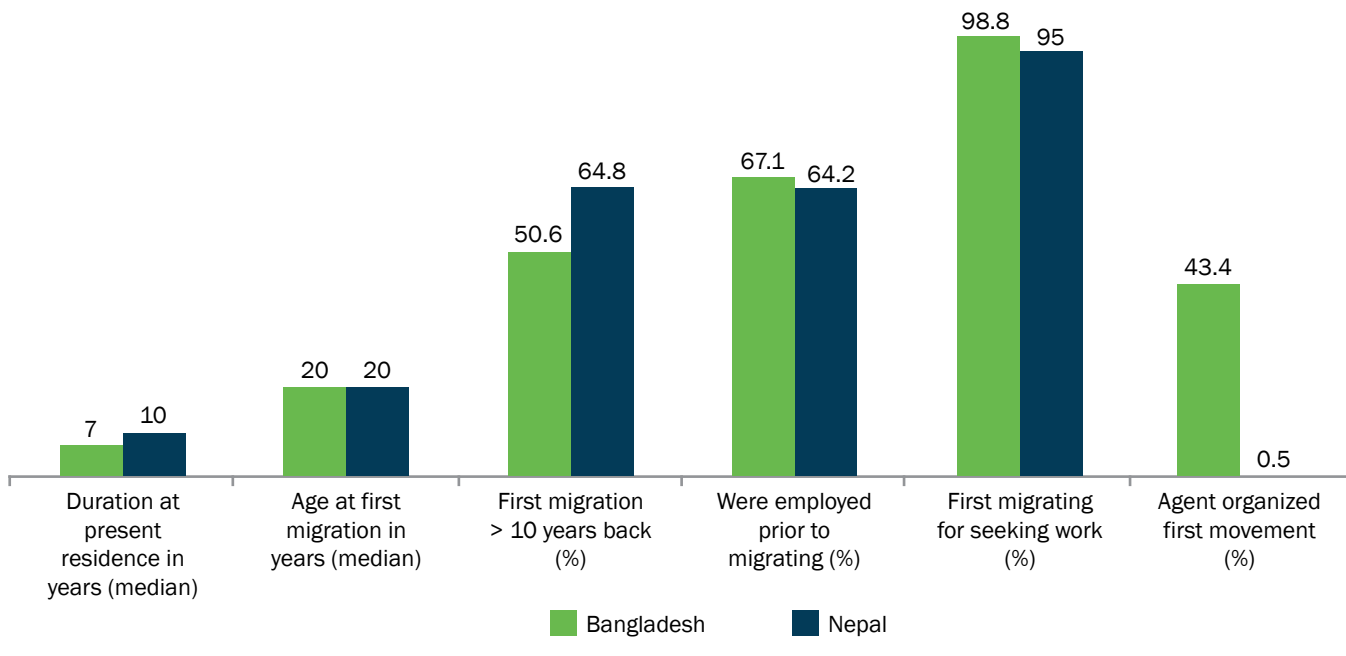
**TABLE 1: Socio-demographic background of current Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants in India, and returnee migrants in their country of origin**

Background characteristics of migrants	Bangladeshi migrants		Nepalese migrants	
	Currently in India	Returned to Bangladesh	Currently in India	Returned to Nepal
	%	%	%	%
Number of respondents	504	250	500	270
Age				
Median (IQR)	30 (24, 40)	28 (23, 37)	35 (26, 45)	46 (34, 56)
Education				
No education	35.1	26.8	31.4	30.0
Primary or below	23.4	16.8	18.2	23.3
Below secondary	34.3	49.6	40.2	36.7
Secondary or above	7.1	6.8	10.2	10.0
Marital status				
Currently married	71.6	73.2	83.0	91.1
Separated/divorced/ widowed	1.4	1.6	2.8	3.3
Never married	27.0	25.2	14.2	5.6
Religion				
Hindu	20.4	24.8	98.8	97.0
Muslim	79.6	74.8	-	-
Buddhist	-	-	0.8	1.5
Other	-	0.4	0.4	1.5
Currently living with				
Wife and children	46.2	72.8	48.0	89.6
Alone	2.0	0.4	11.4	1.5
Family/parents/relatives	10.5	26.8	11.8	8.5
Friends	41.3	-	28.8	0.4

## KEY FINDINGS

**Nepalese migration is mainly self-arranged while Bangladeshi migration is mostly through agents**

**Figure 1: Migration history of current Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants in India**



Nepalese migrants had been residing in India for longer periods than Bangladeshi migrants (median: 10 years vs. 7 years;  $p < 0.001$ ). Over 95% in both the groups migrated to India for seeking employment. Almost all the Nepalese migrants arranged their migration through friends/relatives or an informal network (99.5%). In contrast, 43.4% of the Bangladeshis came through agents or contractors who facilitated their movement across the border.

### **Poverty at home and better economic opportunities in India were the main reasons for migration**

The main factors driving migrants out of their country were poor financial status (BM: 79.0%; NM: 69.4%), unemployment (BM: 41.1%; NM: 81.6%), and low wages at home (BM: 32.1%; NM: 23.4%). Political instability and adverse environmental conditions were minimally cited. The most frequently cited factors that attracted current migrants to India were higher wages (BM: 83.7%; NM: 83.8%) and better work opportunities (BM: 77%; NM: 64.4%). Family movement (BM: 12.3%;

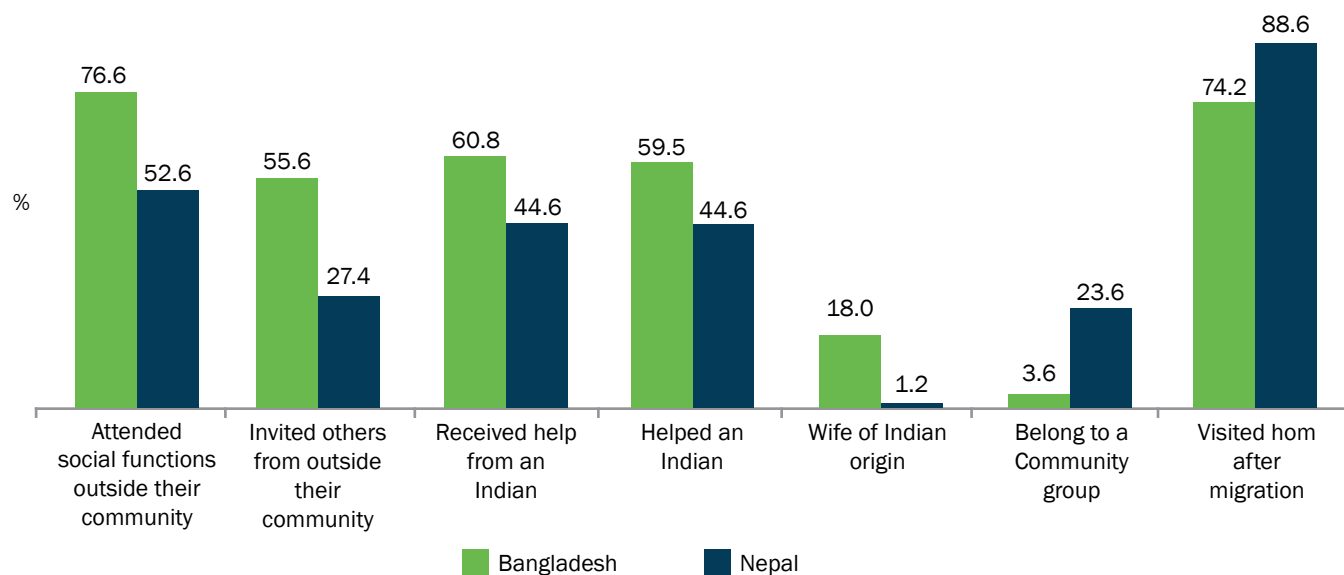
NM: 1.8%) and having well settled relatives in India (BM: 5%; NM: 8.8%) were less frequently cited.

### **Bangladeshi migrants were more socially integrated than Nepalese migrants**

Bangladeshi migrants were more likely than Nepalese migrants to attend social functions (BM: 76.6%; NM: 52.6%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and invite people from outside their community (BM: 55.6%; NM: 27.4%;  $p < 0.001$ ). A higher proportion of Bangladeshi migrants compared to Nepalese reported receiving help from local Indians (60.8% vs. 44.6%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and were also more likely than Nepalese migrants to report helping Indians in the locality, suggesting better integration into the community. Among the married migrants, 18 per cent of the Bangladeshis had Indian wives compared to their Nepalese counterparts (1.2%).

Nepalese migrants were more likely than Bangladeshi migrants to retain connections with their native place, visit their home country and be associated with community groups.

**Figure 2: Social integration and connectivity with their native place among current Bangladeshi and Nepalese male migrants in India**

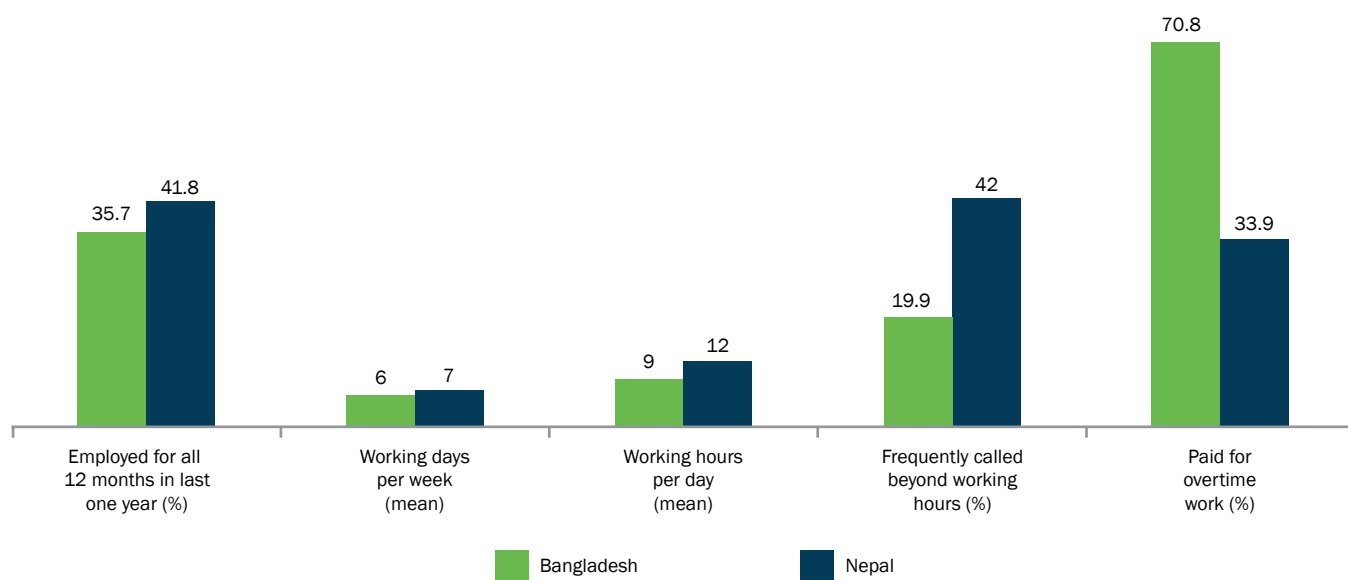


***Nepalese migrants were engaged in skilled work, had higher income and longer working hours than Bangladeshi migrants***

Nepalese migrants in India earned a higher monthly income (mean INR 8,250 vs. INR 7,649;  $p < 0.001$ ), worked more days per month (7 days vs. 6 days;

$p < 0.001$ ) and longer hours per day (12 hours vs. 9 hours;  $p < 0.001$ ) than Bangladeshi migrants. Many Nepalese worked as security guards (48.6%) or in restaurants (13.1%) while Bangladeshi migrants were mostly engaged in manual labour such as construction work (49.1%) or factory/dockyard work (23.5%).

**Figure 3: Economic activities of the current Bangladeshi and Nepalese male migrants in India**



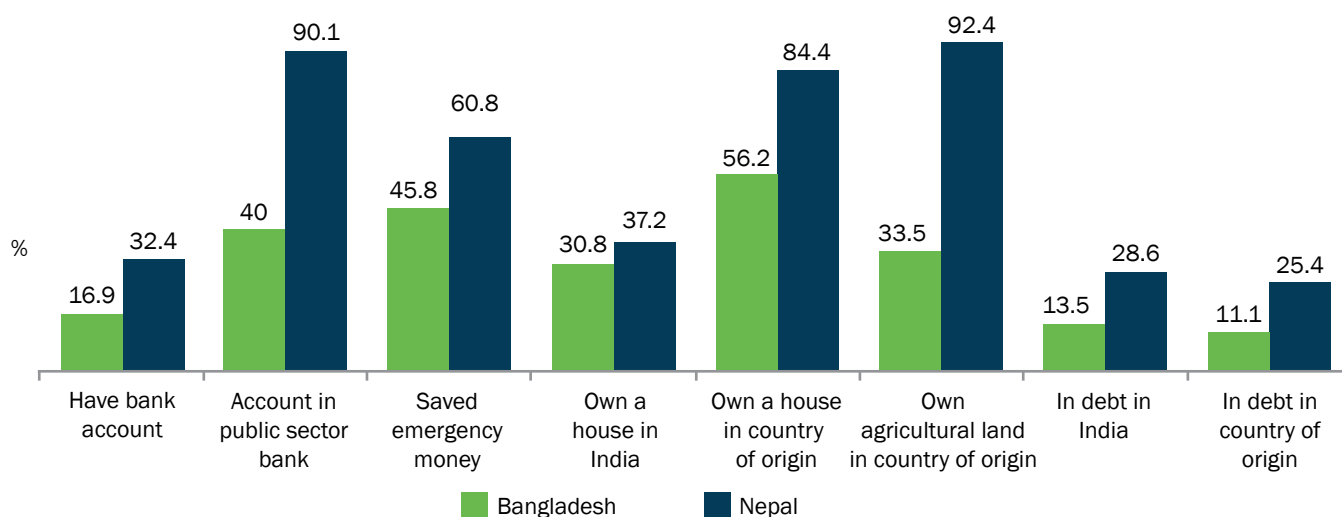
## Financial and social inclusion was more evident among Nepalese migrants

A higher proportion of Nepalese migrants in India had bank accounts (32.4% vs. 16.9%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and had set aside money for an emergency compared with their Bangladeshi counterparts (65.8% vs. 45.8%;  $p < 0.001$ ). More Nepalese migrants owned a house in India (37.2% vs. 30.8%;  $p < 0.001$ ); owned a house (84.4% vs. 56.2%,  $p < 0.001$ ) and an agricultural land (92.4% vs. 33.5%;  $p < 0.001$ ) in their home country. Despite being better off financially, more Nepalese migrants reported being in debt both in India (28.6%

vs. 13.5%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and in their home country (25.4% vs. 11.1%;  $p < 0.001$ ) compared with Bangladeshi migrants; possibly consequent to acquiring assets.

Over a quarter of both Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants reported access to social schemes and identity documents. More Bangladeshi migrants claimed to have an access to public distribution system through ration cards (28.2% vs. 24.4%) while a significantly higher proportion of Nepalese migrants had voter ID cards (34.4% vs. 27.6%) and Aadhar cards (49.2% vs. 26.8%).

**Figure 4: Financial inclusion of current Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants in India, 2014**



**Table 2: Frequency and mode of remitting money by the current Bangladeshi and Nepalese male migrants in India**

Number of respondents	Bangladesh (%)		Nepal (%)	
	504		500	
Send money to family at native place				
Yes	61.3		61.8	
No	38.7		38.2	
Frequency of sending money*				
Monthly/weekly	35.9		15.9	
Quarterly/annually	35.3		35.0	
No specific time	28.8		49.2	
Medium of sending money*				
Bank	12.6		41.7	
Friends/relatives	28.8		48.8	
Money transfer agency	1.9		0.6	
Local agents	42.1		0.6	
Carried it himself	3.6		8.1	
Other	11.0		-	

\* Among those who remit money

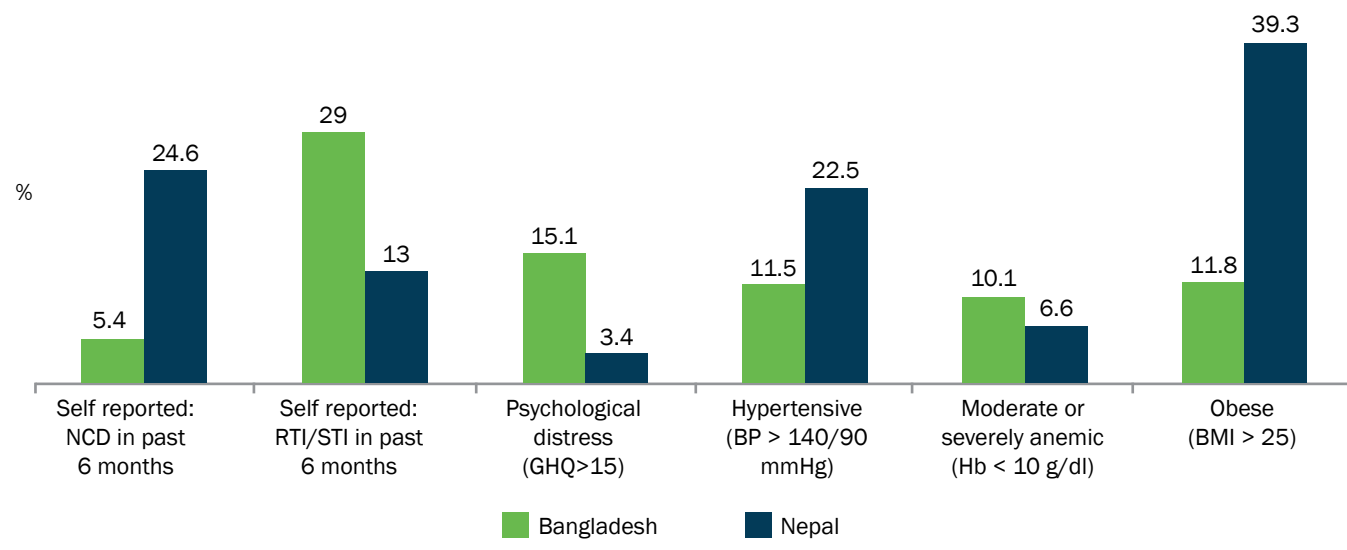
Over sixty per cent of the Nepalese and Bangladeshi migrants sent money back home (Table 2). Nepalese migrants mainly used friends/relatives (48.8%) and formal banking channels (41.7%) to send money home. Bangladeshi migrants, on the other hand, most frequently used local agents to remit money (42.1%), often paying high commission rates; they were also more likely to send money at regular intervals.

**The health status of Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants residing in India was significantly different**

The self-reported prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs: diabetes, hypertension, or heart disease) in the past six months was higher among

Nepalese migrants (24.6% vs. 5.4%;  $p < 0.001$ ). On the other hand, symptoms related to reproductive tract infections/sexually transmitted infections (RTI/STI), such as pain/burning during urination, genital ulcers, or abnormal penile discharge in the past six months, were more frequently reported by Bangladeshi males (24.6% vs. 5.4%;  $p < 0.001$ ). Evidence of psychological distress (15.1% vs. 3.4%;  $p < 0.001$ ), measured using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), and moderate/severe anaemia (10.1% vs. 6.6%;  $p < 0.001$ ) was more frequently observed among Bangladeshi migrants compared to Nepalese migrants. Nepalese migrants were more likely to be overweight (39.3% vs. 11.8%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and have blood pressure readings suggestive of hypertension (22.5% vs. 11.5%;  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Figure 5: Health status of current Bangladeshi and Nepalese male migrants in India**



**The primary reasons for returning to their country of origin were poor health for Bangladeshi migrants and family concerns for Nepalese migrants**

More than half of the Bangladeshi returnee migrants reported returning to Bangladesh due to poor health

(56.4%). In contrast, older Nepalese migrants returned home for family reasons (46.7%) while younger migrants returned to attempt migrating to another country (18.5%). More than half of the Bangladeshi (58% vs. 11.1%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and Nepalese (61.9% vs. 25.4%;  $p < 0.001$ ) returnee migrants reported being in debt compared to current migrants.



**Table 3: Reasons of return among returnee male migrants in Bangladesh and Nepal**

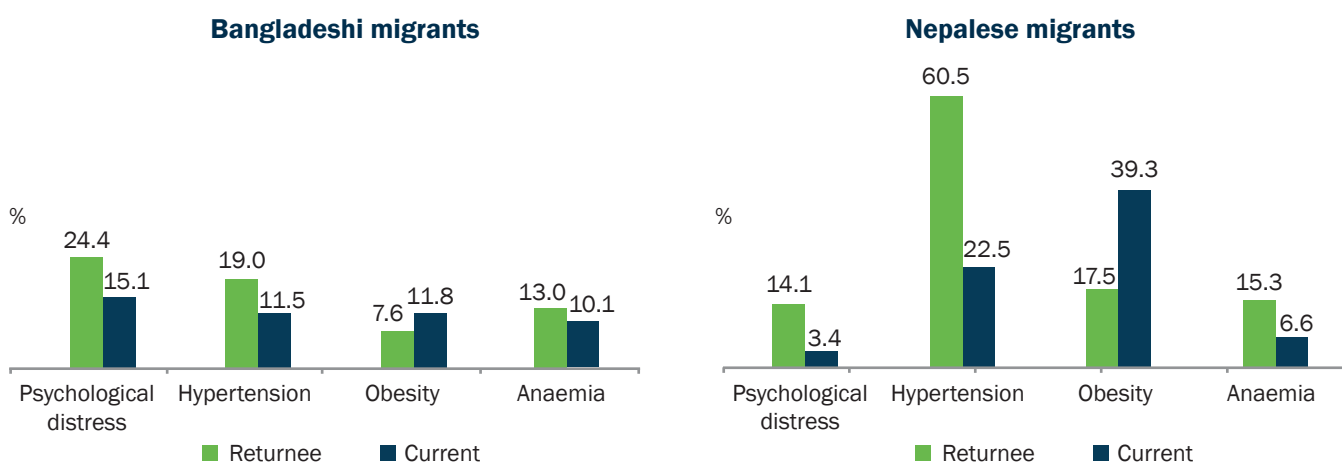
	Bangladeshi (%)	Nepalese (%)
Number of respondents	250	270
Completed contract	4.8	16.3
Health problems	56.4	9.3
Family problems	20.4	46.7
Financial Issues	1.2	5.6
Desire to migrate to another country	0.8	18.5
Other reasons	16.4	3.7

**Returnee migrants have poorer health than the migrants currently residing in India**

Returnee Bangladeshi migrants were more likely to exhibit psychological distress (24.4% vs. 15.1%;  $p < 0.001$ ), have blood pressure readings suggestive of hypertension (19% vs. 11.5%;  $p < 0.01$ ) and be underweight with BMI  $< 18.5$  (23.6% vs. 17.5%;  $p < 0.001$ ) compared to Bangladeshi migrants living

in India, indicating greater stress after returning to Bangladesh. Nepalese returnee migrants were also more likely to exhibit psychological distress (14.1% vs. 3.4%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and have blood pressure readings suggestive of hypertension (60.5% vs. 22.5%;  $p < 0.001$ ), but were less likely to be obese with BMI  $> 25$  (17.5% vs. 39.3%;  $p < 0.001$ ) compared to migrants living in India.

**Figure 6: Health status of returnee Bangladeshi and Nepalese male migrants compared with the migrants currently residing in India**



Note: Psychological distress: GHQ  $> 15$ ; Hypertension: blood pressure  $> 140/90$  mmHg; Obesity: BMI  $> 25$ ; Moderate to severe anaemia: haemoglobin  $< 10$  g/dl

**CONCLUSION**

This study explores the broader context within which migration to India from two neighbouring countries, Bangladesh and Nepal, takes place. It is one of the few studies that draw comparisons between current migrants working in India and returnee migrants who have returned to their country of origin.

Migration is largely driven by poverty and poor economic conditions in the country of origin and better

income and employment opportunities in India for both groups. In India, both Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants are engaged in low-paying jobs. Despite this, both Bangladeshi and Nepalese migrants earn higher incomes in India than in their countries of origin making migration attractive. The study highlights differences in the vulnerability of both groups.

Nepalese migrants appear to successfully navigate the migration trajectory, aided by the open border and their legal status in India. Migration is self-arranged,

their legal status precluding the need for agents, their higher educational levels enabling them to engage in skilled occupations and earn higher incomes than Bangladeshi migrants; they do however, work more days per month and longer hours per day, possibly a nature of the jobs that they undertake. Many access social schemes, banking services and obtain formal documentation available to local residents. Nepalese migrants stay and work in India for long durations during which they maintain contact with their families in their home country and make frequent home visits. Their legal status permits them to access formal financial services and remit money through formal channels, retaining the value of their remittance leading to acquiring/consolidating immovable assets. Return to their home country takes place when they are older and unable to earn any more, possibly a state of retirement. Interestingly, Nepalese migrants are less likely to integrate socially, possibly due to their status that allows them to retain their identity without the fear of identification/deportation faced by their Bangladeshi counterparts, their stronger community links that allow them to manage their affairs without assistance from the local community and lastly social discrimination by local residents that has been cited by other studies [4]. Nepalese migrants are more likely to self-report lifestyle diseases such as hypertension and heart disease, and are more likely to be obese and hypertensive, possibly due to change from a physically active life in rural Nepal to a more sedentary urban life in India.

Bangladeshi migrants appear to be more vulnerable compared to Nepalese migrants. Most migration takes place surreptitiously through agents at high cost to the migrant, a consequence of the closed border, and the lower educational levels and economic desperation of the migrants. Their stay in India, defined by their irregular status and lack of documentation, renders them vulnerable to exploitation by their agents in their entry into the work force, the duration of their stay in India and their visits home. In India, they are mostly engaged in informal, low-paying, manual labour that yields lower remuneration than that earned by their Nepalese counterparts; the hard life pushing many into a spiral of ill health, loss of work days and lack of income, forcing them to return prematurely. The vulnerability of Bangladeshi migrants is evident from

their poorer physical health status and higher levels of psychological stress while in India, and on their return to Bangladesh. The lack of documentation precludes access to the formal financial services, and the challenges of crossing the border limit their visits back home, forcing many to transfer money to their families through agents that lowers the value of their remittance, evident from the lack of assets in their home country. Social and cultural integration is much higher than that reported by Nepalese migrants, possibly driven by a need to integrate into the local community to prevent identification and their infrequent visits to and limited contact with families in their home country.

Overall, migration was found to be economically beneficial for those who succeed in the host labour market. However, it is associated with significant psychosocial and health vulnerabilities for most migrants in both communities. Further, migrants returning to their home countries with expectations of a better life, continue to be in debt and experience poor health, indicating that migration may not always alleviate economic distress, highlighting the need for financial guidance. Programs to improve awareness of health and social services in the host country, and support programs in their home countries to assist returnee migrants with financial investment and access to locally available social and health services are necessary.

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