

Oct 22 2015

## The Aftershocks: Migrant Workers Vulnerable to Exploitation in Post-earthquake Nepal

Ethan Geringer-Sameth

*Laura McManus is an ethical supply chain consultant specializing in modern slavery in Nepal. She is currently completing research for a joint project with photographer [Monica Jane Frisell](#) that examines the lives of Nepali domestic workers.*

*Sam McCormack is a researcher at the [Walk Free Foundation](#). Her work on government responses to modern slavery in the Middle East and Northern Africa can be found in the [Global Slavery Index](#).*

[Click here for all blog posts in this series](#)

On 25 April 2015, a devastating earthquake struck mid-northern Nepal killing more than 9,000 people and injuring a further 23,000. Thousands of families from the 14 most affected districts, many of whom were in a precarious economic position prior to the disaster, remain displaced after their homes and livelihoods were destroyed by the quake.

The same day, unaware of the chaos unfolding back home, 23-year-old Nepali domestic worker Kamala\* was struck her own devastating blow. Having travelled to Qatar one week earlier, she faced the daunting task of ironing her employer's *thwab* (an ankle-length white cotton shirt commonly worn by Qatari men). Kamala, from a remote village on the outskirts of Nache where there is no electricity, had never seen nor used an iron. After she accidentally burned a small hole in the cotton, her enraged employer taught Kamala a swift and lasting lesson – holding the scorching iron to her upper arm, he melted her skin.

Kamala is one of the many thousands of women from Nepal who travel to the Middle East and North Africa (M.E.N.A.) each year for employment in food services and the retail trade, and in private homes as housekeepers, caregivers and nannies. These roles, generally rejected by the local population for being dirty, dangerous or difficult, contribute to the transmission of billions of dollars in remittances to Nepal, equating to a staggeringly high 30% of GDP.

While remittances are largely used to improve the lives of dependent families, too often this comes at a risk to the welfare of migrant workers like Kamala, who routinely face exploitative working and living conditions. In some cases, their experiences amount to human trafficking and forced labor.

There are growing fears of a spike in outbound migration and potential cases of human trafficking in the aftermath of this natural disaster in Nepal, as was seen in post-2010 earthquake-stricken Haiti. It seems many of the affected households are either encouraging their family members to stay abroad, or planning on sending a family member overseas to financially support the enormous task of rebuilding their lives and homes.



*Hundreds of thousands of Haitians were displaced by the 2010 earthquake.*

And it is easy to see why. A [rapid assessment](#) conducted by the Centre for Study of Labour and Mobility one month after the earthquake, examined the resilience of remittance-receiving households during and post-earthquake. While the research found no correlation between remittances and preparedness for natural disasters, it found that migrant households' ability to cope based on socio-economic factors was better than that of average households, and much better still compared to households with internal migrants. There are around 200,000 domestic workers in Nepal, the majority of whom are female and have relocated to the major urban centres in search of work. In the aftermath of the earthquake this [unregistered migration](#) coupled with limited tenancy rights meant that a vast number were not able to access government relief packages. The vulnerability of domestic workers was further compounded by job losses in the weeks immediately after the quake.



*Former child laborer, Reshma, is preparing for her second trip to the Middle East for domestic work.  
Photograph by Monica Jane Frisell*

The choice to risk their own security in pursuit of employment in the Middle East is harrowing for Nepali women facing the pressure of providing necessities for their families. Unfortunately it is one they are compelled to make.

Aside from the earthquake, ongoing social and political pressure may drive women to make the move to M.E.N.A. [Current unrest](#) in the southern Terai region and with neighboring India over the promulgation of the [new constitution](#) is further destabilizing Nepal and its [economy](#). As rule of law weakens and economic opportunities stagnate, many more women may feel unable to refuse lucrative, but at times deceptive, offers of employment abroad.

One woman facing this choice is Reshma. As the eldest female among four she was responsible for looking after her siblings until, at age ten, she was sent from her home to labor as a domestic child worker. For the next seven years she worked from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. on outdoor chores such as cattle grazing, grass cutting and dung removal. She was not allowed to eat during work hours and never received payment. Rather, her family received seven quintal of rice per year (700 kg), less than the recommended daily intake for a family of six. Sometimes they went to bed without food.

Reshma entered into an arranged marriage at 17, where her situation became even more desperate. Her husband, an alcoholic, beat her over a period of years and then started beating their two young sons. Unable to guarantee her children's safety, Reshma sent her eldest son to a family in Kathmandu where he completes domestic work to cover his board and school fees, and left her youngest child with her sister.

Reshma moved from home to home around Nepal, surviving. She did not earn enough to save but was grateful her children were out of harm's way. At 27, a recruiter with an offer of work in Kuwait approached her. Seeing this as the only opportunity to break her family's cycle of poverty, Reshma accepted. Despite regulations on [compulsory pre-departure training](#), Reshma, like many migrant workers, was sent to Kuwait unprepared. "I was really scared before and during the process. I was afraid that my boss might beat me up or not give me some food because I heard from other people earlier that this was their experience," she explains. Fortunately the children Reshma was sent to care for welcomed her into the family, but she was required to be available 24 hours a day. After five years she returned to Nepal with 12 lakh rupees, or £7,600. That is a daily rate of roughly 650 rupees or £4.15. Reshma used this money to purchase a plot of land in her hometown. This October she plans on going to Dubai and hopes she will be lucky with her next employer.

Migrant work is not a fundamentally bad thing. It provides opportunities for people like Reshma to break intergenerational cycles of poverty. But when conducted through informal channels and in countries with poor regulations, it creates the conditions where vulnerability to exploitation thrives. International organizations and local N.G.O.s delivering programs to assist families in rebuilding their lives must be vigilant to the red flags of deceptive migration. At the same time, they must educate on the risks associated with the rewards of work in the Middle East.

\* Kamala's name has been changed to protect her privacy.



*This piece was published as part of the Anti-slavery Series, October 2015.*

This entry was posted in [The Anti-slavery Series](#) and tagged [domestic labor](#), [migration](#), [modern slavery](#), [poverty](#), [women's rights](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).