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What Drives Nepali Returnees to Re-migrate? A Cross-Country Study of Nepal and South Korea*

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Abstract

Objective: This study explores the determinants of re-migration among Nepali labor migrants through a comparative analysis with South Korea. Although both countries began as labor-exporting nations in the 1960s, their migration paths have diverged markedly over time. South Korea transformed into a labor-importing country by the 1990s through strategic industrialization and institutional reform. Nepal continues to experience rising out-migration due to persistent unemployment, low wages, and inadequate reintegration support. **Method:** Using a qualitative comparative case study approach, this research draws on secondary data, government reports, and survey findings from returnee programs such as South Korea's K-HaMi initiative. **Finding:** Results indicate that more than 60 percent of Nepali returnees express intentions to re-migrate, citing structural barriers including limited job opportunities and poor recognition of skills acquired abroad. In contrast, Korea's policy framework, featuring wage parity, skills recognition, and entrepreneurship support, has enabled effective return integration. **Conclusion:** Nepal should adopt a comprehensive reintegration strategy aligned with its domestic context, incorporating wage standardization, skill certification, and localized support centers. Lessons from Korea's migration governance model offer valuable insights for turning return migration into a pathway for sustainable development.

Keywords: Migration, Re-migrate, Returnees, Nepal, Korea

JEL Classification Code: F22, J61, P52

1. Introduction

Migration has a deep and wide-ranging impact on the economy. Immigrants play a vital role in today's world economy by significantly boosting productivity, filling critical labor shortages, and driving innovation (OECD, 2021). The history of international emigration began to expand massively in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, driven by industrialization, colonial expansion, and labor demand, resulting in large-scale population movements that reshaped global demographics, transferred skills across borders, and deeply influenced both origin and destination

countries' economic and social structures (De Haas et al., 2019). Approximately 304 million people worldwide were international migrants as of mid-2024, representing about 3.7 percent of the global population, a figure that has nearly doubled since 1990, when it stood at roughly 2.9 percent. This translates to roughly one in 27 people globally living in a country other than their country of birth. Despite the rise in absolute numbers from about 154 million in 1990 to 304 million in 2024, the migrant share of the world's population has remained relatively stable (UN DESA, 2025).

International migration from Nepal has surged markedly in the past two decades, evolving into a critical

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socioeconomic phenomenon. While early movements were largely informal, such as seasonal migration to neighboring India or British-colonial military recruitment, modern labor migration shifted significantly after the 1990s toward countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia, with over 85 percent of labor permits issued directed there by 2022/23 (Thapa Magar et al., 2024). Since fiscal year 2023/24, Nepal has issued more than 741,000 foreign employment permits, mostly to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and increasingly to new destinations in Europe, including Poland, Romania, Croatia, Cyprus, France, and South Korea (Department of Foreign Employment, 2024). According to a 2024 joint ILO-ADB Institute-OECD report, Nepal experienced the highest percentage increase in outbound labor migration among Asian countries from 2019 to 2023, with migrant outflows growing by 102 percent (Asian Development Bank Institute [ADBI], OECD, & ILO, 2024). Today, remittance inflows amounting to over USD 11 billion in 2023 account for about 26–27 percent of Nepal's GDP, positioning the country among the world's highest recipients relative to GDP (Thapa Magar et al., 2024). These shifts are driven by economic push factors: high domestic unemployment, low wages, and agrarian stagnation, and pull factors such as significantly higher earnings abroad, along with expanding policy frameworks facilitating labor outflows (Shrestha, 2017). Emerging destination diversification, increasing migrant skill levels, and rising student mobility further characterize the evolving trend, underscoring both opportunities and complex policy challenges for Nepal's development (Khatiwada, 2023).

Emigrants' return refers to the process whereby individuals or families move back to their country of origin after a period abroad. This may be voluntary or involuntary, temporary or permanent, and is shaped by economic conditions, family ties, and migration trends (Bruzeliuss & Reiss, 2025). Research highlights that those motivations for return are highly varied: economic growth and reverse brain drain offer attractive prospects, while social obligations, family reunification, and cultural embeddedness play a powerful role, especially illustrated in Nepalese migrants whose aspirations to return are rooted in filial responsibility and emotional care (Limbu & Yu, 2023). At the same time, reintegration is often difficult, as returnees frequently encounter high levels of unemployment, underemployment, skill mismatches, social stigma, and mental health challenges. As a result, many re-migrate after returning, temporarily or permanently, thus becoming trapped in a prolonged "migration loop" in which individuals leave their home country to work abroad, return home after a period, and may subsequently migrate again. This cyclical movement is influenced by economic opportunities, social conditions, and personal circumstances in both the home and

host countries (Oklikah, 2024). Further complicating the picture, policy responses differ: some governments proactively seek to attract descendants or expatriates back through economic incentives or retention strategies, yet such policies show limited impact unless backed by broader socioeconomic reforms (Bruzeliuss & Reiss, 2025).

Beginning in the 1960s, South Korea was a net exporter of labor, dispatching workers abroad to oil-rich Middle Eastern countries, Germany, and the United States as part of its export-driven industrial expansion. However, by the 1990s, demographic shifts, including declining birth rates and rising labor costs, triggered a reversal: the country began importing foreign labor, especially in so-called "3D" sectors (dirty, dangerous, and difficult jobs) that domestic workers increasingly avoided. To address increasing labor shortages and regulate the foreign workers, the government introduced the Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2004. The policy allowed low-skilled migrant workers from select Asian countries to fill critical labor gaps; under EPS, migration quotas surged from approximately 34,000 workers in 1994 to over 100,000 by 2004, and have continued growing in line with tightening labor supply. (Yim, 2024). According to the OECD's International Migration Outlook (2024), foreign residents accounted for 3.8 % of South Korea's population in 2023, with foreign-born workers comprising about one million people, approximately 3 percent of the total workforce, with both temporary and permanent visa holders fueling diverse economic sectors. Today, South Korea has shifted to a labor-importing orientation: foreign workers now underpin key industries, and immigration policy has become central to confronting the country's demographic and economic challenges.

Recent research has identified several factors that drive outward migration from Nepal, particularly among rural households. According to Sijapati and Limbu (2012), the Maoist insurgency played a significant role in driving Nepalese citizens to migrate abroad. Before the conflict, just over 3,000 labor permits had been issued. However, by the end of the Maoist insurgency in 2005/06, this number had surged to 165,103. The trend of foreign labor migration continued to rise even after the conflict concluded. Additionally, Outward migration from Nepal is primarily driven by a combination of economic hardship, political instability, and underdevelopment, as highlighted in recent studies. Push factors such as unemployment, low wages, limited job opportunities, and declining agricultural productivity compel individuals to seek opportunities abroad (Gautam & Adhikari, 2025; Shrestha & Raya, 2024). Furthermore, the ineffective labor policies and a lack of industrial infrastructure further worsen migration pressures (Acharya, 2024; Aryal, 2021). Instead, pull factors such as comparatively higher wages, rising labor demand in Gulf

and Southeast Asian countries like South Korea, and prospects for upward mobility and professional growth overseas continue to attract Nepali workers (Kunwar, 2021). A study by Shrestha (2017) highlighted the role of income shocks, caused by rainfall inconsistency, in driving migration decisions. A study by Thapa Magar et al. (2024) found that households with higher levels of education, access to credit, and established migration networks are more likely to engage in overseas labor migration. These dynamic forces have led to a sustained and increasing pattern of labor movement from Nepal.

Recent research shows that economic improvements such as higher income, better jobs, and public services can reverse emigration flows by encouraging return migration. Returnees bring skills and resources that contribute to local development, proving that targeted economic growth can reduce long-term emigration (Bucheli & Fontenla, 2025). However, Amanzadeh, Kermani, and McQuade (2024) analyze skilled return migrants across 180 countries and conclude that labor-market rebounds and industry expansion in origin countries materially correlate with return flows, especially among highly skilled nationals. Irudaya and Arcand's (2023) modeling of post-COVID return migration in South and Southeast Asia shows that when returned workers re-entered local economies, manufacturing and services became more dynamic, benefiting skilled labor in particular, suggesting structured economic reintegration can mitigate outward migration.

South Korea's transformation through its Employment Permit System (EPS) and structured returnee reintegration programs offers valuable lessons for Nepal's policy frameworks. A comprehensive survey of 1,441 Nepali returnees under South Korea's K-HaMi returnee support initiative reveals that many returnees used their Korean-earned skills, capital, and entrepreneurial mindset to launch small businesses, particularly in agriculture and tourism, thus contributing to local economies in Nepal (Baniya et al., 2024). Moreover, South Korea's EPS model, designed to provide transparent and fair access for low-skilled migration, offers a structured template for Nepal's labor-export-oriented system, as evidenced in contrastive analyses of Nepali migration to Korea and Japan (Yamanaka, 2021). These studies illustrate how clear regulation, wage parity, and reintegration support not only improve migrants' experiences abroad but also facilitate productive return flows that can accelerate human capital development and entrepreneurship in Nepal.

Nepal has experienced a substantial rise in its absent population over the past two census periods. The 2001 Population and Housing Census recorded 762,181 individuals as "absent," referring to those not residing in the country. This figure more than doubled by 2011, reaching 1,921,494 (CBS, 2012), and further increased to 2,190,592

by 2021 (National Statistics Office, 2023). Nepal's macroeconomic structure is heavily reliant on remittances, which constitute a significant portion of the country's GDP. This dependence has led to a consumption-driven growth model, characterized by high import levels and limited industrial development. Experts argue that this remittance-based growth trap hinders long-term economic stability and development, as it discourages domestic investment and industrialization. In this context, this research paper explores empirical evidence on whether the stable macroeconomic drivers support the emigrants' return. This study employs South Korea as a case study, drawing on its migration experience to inform policy interventions aimed at encouraging Nepalese emigrants to return.

The rest of this study is designed as follows: Section 2 summarizes the theoretical context and reviews relevant empirical literature. Section 3 presents the research methodology and macroeconomic data analysis. Section 4 discusses the key findings and policy recommendations. Finally, Section 5 concludes the study.

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of international migration and its reversal can be understood through two foundational economic models: the Push-Pull Framework and the Harris-Todaro Model. These theoretical lenses provide the basis for analyzing why individuals choose to leave their home countries and, more importantly for this study, what factors influence their decision to return.

The Push-Pull model, first formalized by Lee (1966), conceptualizes migration as the outcome of competing forces that either push individuals away from their place of origin or pull them toward a destination. The push factors include poverty, inequality, unemployment, political instability, war, and natural disasters in the origin country, while pull factors encompass better employment opportunities, comparatively higher wage rates, political stability, social security, and better living standards in the destination country. Researchers have widely applied this model to analyze both internal and cross-border migration. (De Haas, 2010).

According to Dustmann and Kirchkamp (2002), return migration is influenced both by consumption preferences and the intention to participate in productive economic activities after returning. In this context, migrants generate income abroad and channel it into self-employment or entrepreneurial ventures upon returning home. Consequently, the timing of return is determined by how quickly migrants accumulate capital and the projected profitability of investing in their country of origin.

Dustmann (2003) presents a dynamic model where

migrants initially choose to work in a higher-wage country to generate income, intending to return home once they have achieved their savings goals. The duration of migration, in this context, is endogenous and depends on key factors such as wage differentials, individual preferences for consumption across locations, and discount rates. A central assumption of this model is that migrants derive higher utility from consuming in their home country, making return migration an integral part of their original plan.

When examining return migration, this model can be adapted to explain the reverse flow. Migrants may return due to the erosion of pull factors in host countries (e.g., job loss, discrimination, visa restrictions) or due to strengthened pull factors in the origin country, such as improved economic prospects, family reunification, or favorable reintegration policies (Cassarino, 2013). In the South Korean case, return migration was facilitated by rapid economic development, increased domestic labor demand, and rising wages, which shifted previous push factors into pull ones (Kim, 2017). By contrast, Nepal continues to experience a sustained outflow of labor migrants due to underemployment, stagnant wages, and limited reintegration infrastructure, although improvements in political stability or diaspora engagement policies may gradually strengthen return incentives (Sijapati & Limbu, 2012).

The K-HaMi project survey (2023) covering 1,441 Nepali returnees under the Employment Permit System, revealed that difficulties experienced in South Korea (e.g., contract limits, limited upward mobility, cultural alienation) eroded pull factors, while a combination of social reintegration support, entrepreneurship training, and subsidized loans implemented post-return enhanced pull factors back home (Baniya et al., 2024). Media reporting from mid-2025 highlights returnees like Suresh Chhetri, who leveraged capital and skills acquired in Korea to develop agro-tourism ventures in Nepal, typical of how improved origin country opportunities incentivize return (New Spotlight Online, 2024). These success stories reinforce the push-pull model's prediction: return migration becomes more feasible when domestic economic prospects improve and host-country attractions weaken.

The Harris-Todaro model (Harris & Todaro, 1970), initially designed to explain rural-to-urban migration in developing economies, posits that migration decisions are based not on actual income differences but on expected income differentials, a function of wage levels and employment probabilities in both origin and destination regions. Even in the face of high unemployment in urban (or foreign) labor markets, migration may occur if the expected income surpasses that of the rural (or home) region.

This theoretical framework is also useful in understanding return migration. If expected gains from remaining abroad decline, due to stricter immigration

controls, reduced remittances, declining job security, or rising living costs, while perceived opportunities at home improve, return becomes a rational choice (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007). For instance, South Korea's successful transition into a high-income economy provided returning migrants with stable employment, better public services, and enhanced quality of life, thereby influencing return decisions positively. In contrast, for Nepal, the large expected income gap between foreign employment and domestic opportunities, especially in rural areas, continues to discourage return migration (Seddon et al., 2002).

Nepali workers in South Korea expected returns to decline when contract renewals were uncertain or employment conditions stagnated. Simultaneously, reintegration support programs (e.g., business startup assistance under K-HaMi) raised expected income prospects back in Nepal, even accounting for lower average wages, making return a rational decision for many (Baniya et al., 2024).

Furthermore, South Korea's reverse brain drain policies, which actively motivated the return of highly skilled professionals from overseas, demonstrate how state intervention can restructure perceptions of high-return opportunities in the home country. By facilitating the reintegration of returnees through support for entrepreneurship, start-up, and professional advancement, these policies allowed the transfer of knowledge, skills, and global networks to drive national development (Yoon, 1992).

Hence, the theoretical insights of the Push-Pull and Harris-Todaro models are well-suited for analyzing return migration dynamics in both Nepal and South Korea. They allow researchers to link macroeconomic indicators (e.g., wage differentials, labor market conditions, policy and strategy regimes) with micro-level decision-making processes, offering a comprehensive framework to estimate what motivates emigrants to return home.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts the conceptual foundation outlined in Dustmann (2003) and Carrion-Flores (2018). The model states that A migrant moves abroad to earn more income, saves money, and then returns home. Migration is not permanent; the goal is to accumulate savings to improve living standards back home. The return decision (Remigration Intention) depends on wage differential, skills acquired abroad, participation in reintegration training, reemployment opportunities, and engagement in business.

The research design follows a qualitative cross-country comparative study method, combining document analysis,

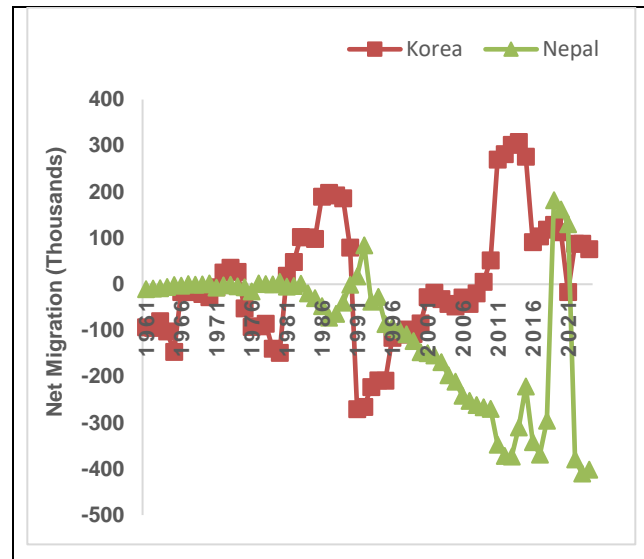
case example, and secondary data evaluation. The document analysis draws on most notably the survey reports; the K-HaMi returnee program survey (2023), which covered 1,441 Nepali returnees from South Korea, and published research articles (particularly: Kim, 2017; Yoon, 1992). The study includes a case example from the IOM–UNDP (2023), which portrays the reintegration experiences of two returnees after working abroad for several years. The secondary data sources consist of country-specific migration statistics, such as World Bank indicators and government labor statistics. The analytical process employed a conceptual comparison using a range of indicators such as wage difference, skill acquired abroad, participation in reintegration training, government support policy, engagement in business, reemployment opportunity, and remigration intention.

Both South Korea and Nepal share a historical legacy as labor-exporting countries overseas and have experienced democratic shifts, establishing a meaningful foundation for comparative analysis (Baniya et al., 2024). However, since the 1990s, their developmental paths have diverged significantly in economic as well as institutional structure. South Korea adopted an export-driven industrial strategy, accompanied by the implementation of functional labor flexibility and comprehensive institutional reforms. Reforms that fundamentally reshaped its labor relations system (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013). On the other hand, Nepal's labor landscape has remained largely stagnant, hindered by ongoing political instability, poor enforcement of labor regulations, and deeply entrenched politicized unionism (Sharma et al., 2021). This distinct divergence makes South Korea an instructive point of comparison in examining Nepal's migration relations

First, the study investigates country-specific patterns and paths of overseas migration. Secondly, utilizes a range of comparative indicators to frame and interpret the structural differences between Nepal and South Korea. Finally, the analysis delves into the primary outcomes, identifies the root causes and wider implications, and offers evidence-based policy recommendations.

4. Results and Discussion

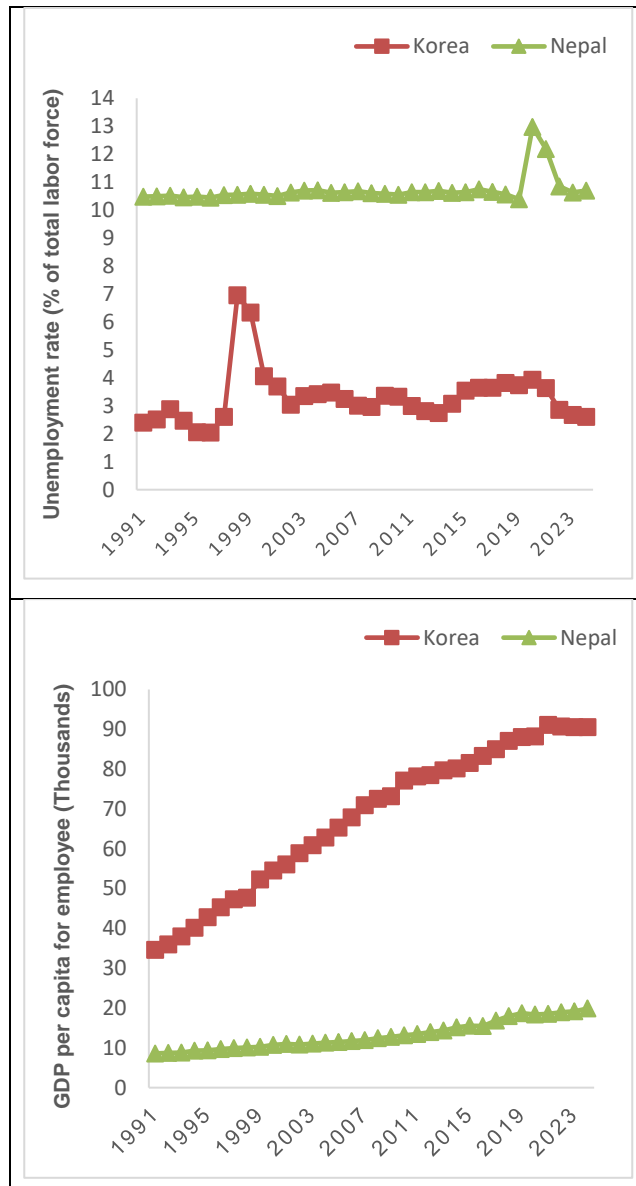
Historically, both South Korea and Nepal began as labor-exporting countries. In 1961, South Korea recorded a net outflow of approximately 93,179 people, while Nepal saw a smaller but still significant net out-migration of around 10,601 individuals (World Bank, 2025). These figures reflect their shared early-stage development conditions, characterized by agrarian economies, political instability, and limited industrial capacity, which prompted citizens to seek employment opportunities abroad.



Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank, (2025)

Figure 1: Net Migration Trend (1961 - 2024)

However, the socio-economic trajectories of the two countries began to diverge significantly from the 1980s onward. South Korea, through strategic state-led industrialization and export-oriented growth policies, transitioned into a high-income economy. By the early 1990s, Korea's economic transformation had begun reducing outward labor migration. Instead, the country gradually evolved into a labor-importing nation, attracting foreign workers to fill labor shortages in manufacturing, construction, caregiving, and agriculture. Between 2014 and 2023, Korea maintained a low unemployment rate, fluctuating between 2.7 percent and 3.9 percent, and its GDP per worker (constant 2021 PPP) increased from \$80,170 to \$90,534. These indicators reflect the economy's strong labor market and high productivity. Net migration remained consistently positive during this period, indicating sustained inflows of foreign labor (World Bank, 2025).



Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank, (2025)

Figure 2: Unemployment rate and GDP per capita for employee Trend (1991 – 2024)

Conversely, Nepal has continued to be a labor-exporting country. Despite the transition to democratic governance and some progress in infrastructure development, the country has struggled to create adequate employment opportunities at home. The unemployment rate remained persistently high, ranging from 10.3 percent to 13 percent between 2014 and 2023. During the same period, GDP per worker grew modestly from \$15,128 to \$19,171 (World Bank, 2025). Labor migration has remained central to Nepal's socio-economic structure. While 528,000 labor

permits were issued in 2014, this number declined during the COVID-19 pandemic to 131,000 in FY 2020/21 but rebounded sharply to approximately 494,000 in 2023 (World Bank, 2025). More critically, net migration in Nepal has remained continuously negative since the 1980s, suggesting a growing trend in the number of citizens leaving the country for employment abroad (World Bank, 2025).

The contrast between the two countries underscores a significant divergence in development outcomes. South Korea's transformation from a labor-sending to a labor-receiving country highlights the success of coordinated industrial policy, education, and job creation. In contrast, Nepal's continued dependence on foreign employment and remittances reflects structural weaknesses in its labor market and economic planning. These divergent migration patterns, positive net migration in Korea and persistently negative net migration in Nepal, mirror broader differences in institutional capacity, economic diversification, and policy effectiveness.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis for returnee-employee

Indicators	South Korea	Nepal
Wage Difference	Low	High
Skill Acquired Abroad	High Relevant	Less Relevant
Reintegration Training	High Participation rate	Less Participation Rate
Government Support Policy	Extensive	Nominal
Engagement in Business	High	Less
Re-employment Opportunity	High	Less
Re-migration Intention	No	Yes

Source: Baniya et.al. (2024); Kim (2017); Yoon (1992)

The comparative analysis identifies that a significant proportion of Nepali returnees, despite initial reintegration, express strong intentions to re-migrate due to persistent structural barriers within the domestic economy. Survey data from Baniya et al. (2024) shows that over 62% of returnees under South Korea's EPS program considered migrating again within a year of return, citing limited employment opportunities, underutilization of skills, and bureaucratic obstacles to entrepreneurship. In contrast, South Korea's historical shift from labor exporter to importer was marked by deliberate state intervention, primarily through policy instruments such as wage regulation, vocational upskilling, and business incubation programs that successfully absorbed returning workers into domestic sectors (Yoon, 1992; Kim, 2017). The lack of such structured reintegration mechanisms in Nepal has contributed to a "migration loop," where return becomes a temporary interlude rather than a permanent settlement. Moreover, the mismatch between skills acquired abroad and

the demands of the Nepali labor market, particularly in rural areas, exacerbates returnees' economic isolation, prompting repeat migration (Oklikah et al., 2024; Bruzelius & Reiss, 2025). These findings underscore the urgency for Nepal to institutionalize a comprehensive reintegration framework that addresses wage parity, skill recognition, and entrepreneurship facilitation, drawing on Korea's model as a contextual benchmark.

The case study of IOM-UNDP (2023) provides a concrete illustration of how reintegration outcomes in Nepal are shaped by institutional support and community engagement. Their cases demonstrate that when local governments and community institutions facilitate access to small-scale enterprise development, such as agriculture and household-based businesses, returnees are more likely to achieve sustainable livelihoods. At the same time, the case highlights persistent structural constraints, including the limited scalability of such initiatives, which continue to drive many returnees to consider re-migration. This example reinforces the argument that Nepal's reintegration policies must go beyond ad hoc support and adopt a comprehensive framework similar to South Korea's institutional model.

Based on the empirical evidence outlined above, Nepal should adopt comprehensive strategies to reduce wage disparities, mitigate skill mismatches, and strengthen its entrepreneurial ecosystem. The following five pillars outline a contextualized reintegration strategy grounded in global best practices and Nepal's socio-economic realities:

Nepali returnees often experience a sharp wage decline upon re-entry into the domestic labor market, discouraging sustained reintegration. To mitigate this, Nepal should institutionalize sector-specific wage standards linked to international benchmarks and skill levels acquired abroad (Bucheli & Fontenla, 2025).

The government could provide wage subsidies or tax incentives to businesses employing certified returnees, drawing from South Korea's principle of wage parity under EPS, which guarantees equal pay for foreign and local workers performing similar roles (OECD, 2024). Public-private partnerships (PPPs) should be leveraged to create decent employment in high-return districts, targeting sectors such as construction, agribusiness, and hospitality (Baniya et al., 2024).

Returnees from Korea under EPS often acquire valuable technical and soft skills, which go unrecognized in Nepal's informal economy. A National Skills Recognition and Certification System (NSRCS) should be established to evaluate and certify these competencies, modeled after similar initiatives in South Korea and ASEAN countries (ILO, ADBI, & OECD, 2024).

The NSRCS should align with the Nepal National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and establish bilateral recognition protocols with South Korea to institutionalize

credit for skills gained abroad (Baniya et al., 2024). Establishing Migration Skills Validation Centers (MSVCs) at the provincial level would enable returnees to obtain formal certifications, enhancing their re-employment prospects and entrepreneurial readiness (Gautam & Adhikari, 2025).

Many returnees express entrepreneurial aspirations but face financial, institutional, and market access constraints (Bruzelius & Reiss, 2025). Inspired by South Korea's returnee programs offering subsidized loans and agricultural business training, Nepal should design comprehensive start-up packages for returnees, including grants, concessional credit, and business incubation services (Kim, 2017). Entrepreneurship training should be tailored to Nepal's competitive sectors, such as agrotourism, green enterprises, and digital services, with programs coordinated by agencies such as the National Youth Council and the Ministry of Industry. These initiatives should also promote diaspora-investment linkages, supporting returnees in scaling operations and building sustainable livelihoods.

To localize reintegration, the government should establish Returnee Support and Resource Centers (RSRCs) in key migrant-sending districts. These centers would provide services such as business advisory, job placement, psychosocial counseling, and legal support (Oklikah et al., 2024).

Functioning as one-stop reintegration platforms, RSRCs could be embedded within local government structures (e.g., Gaunpalika and Nagarpalika offices), enhancing coordination and accountability. South Korea's model of Multicultural Centers, which foster social cohesion and integration for migrants and returnees alike, provides a relevant reference point for Nepal (Yoon, 1992). Effective reintegration demands strong institutional coordination. A National Council for Return Migration and Reintegration, housed within the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS), should oversee inter-agency alignment and policy delivery (Acharya, 2024).

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks should include longitudinal returnee tracking systems and impact assessments of reintegration programs, using Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) and Department of Foreign Employment datasets (Thapa Magar et al., 2024). Bilateral policy dialogues with South Korea, building on the EPS framework, should focus on updating skills transfer pathways, return preparation programs, and mutual certification of training and experience (Yamanaka, 2021).

A structured reintegration framework that ensures wage parity, recognizes overseas-acquired skills, and fosters entrepreneurship is essential to convert return migration into a development opportunity. While South Korea's EPS and returnee reintegration efforts provide a useful template,

Nepal must tailor these practices to its decentralized governance, rural labor base, and high youth unemployment. Institutionalizing such a system will not only support sustainable livelihoods but also reduce the cycle of repeat migration. Also, Nepal should adopt policies that prioritize sustainable and inclusive development to strengthen the economy (Shah, 2024; Shah & Yoon, 2024).

5. Conclusions

This study observed the different paths of labor migration between Nepal and South Korea. Particularly, focus on what drives Nepali returnees to re-migrate. Historically, both countries began as labor-exporting countries during the 1960s, but while South Korea successfully transitioned into a labor-importing country by the 1990s, Nepal remains heavily reliant on labor exporting. Applying a cross-country comparative approach, the study exposes that South Korea's transformation was supported by deliberate industrialization, human capital development, and well-structured labor and migration policies. In contrast, Nepal continues to experience persistent out-migration due to high unemployment, comparatively low domestic wages, and limited reintegration opportunities.

Empirical evidence from Thapa Magar et al. (2024) underscores that Nepali households with higher education, better access to credit, and established migration networks are more likely to participate in foreign labor migration. Yet, the lack of institutional support on return, particularly in skill recognition, entrepreneurship facilitation, and wage standardization, creates a cycle of repeat migration. Findings from Baniya et al. (2024) further indicate that over 60 percent of returnees from South Korea consider re-migration due to structural constraints in the domestic labor market.

Drawing on South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS) and its reintegration support models, the study suggests a contextualized reintegration framework for Nepal. This includes establishing wage parity mechanisms, formal systems for recognizing skills acquired abroad, targeted entrepreneurship support, and localized returnee service centers. Crucially, successful reintegration in Nepal requires inter-agency coordination, long-term tracking of returnees, and bilateral cooperation with labor-receiving countries like Korea.

Finally, converting return migration into a development opportunity for Nepal hinges not only on economic progress but also on institutional reforms. As migration patterns become more complex, the future of sustainable return migration in Nepal depends on policies that bridge the gap between migration as a survival strategy and reintegration as a pathway to national development.

Declarations: Opinions and facts expressed in this article are solely our statements. We are responsible for all the contents, such as the accuracy of the facts, opinions, citations, and such a kind.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

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