

1 **Pre-departure psychological distress and associated factors among migrant**
2 **workers of Nepal**

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16 **Abstract**

17 ***Introduction***

18 Foreign employment is the most significant motivation for international migration in Nepal.
19 However, migrant workers are vulnerable to many exploitations that lead to psychological
20 distress during the pre-departure phase and at the destination. The study aimed to identify the
21 prevalence and associated factors for psychological distress among migrant workers during the
22 pre-departure phase.

23 ***Methods***

24 This was a cross-sectional study based on the representative sample of 445 migrant workers. A
25 21-item Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) and Pre-Departure Risk Factors Perception
26 Scale (PD-RFPS) at the workplace were self-administered to migrant workers selected randomly
27 attending the pre-departure orientation program. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression
28 was performed to identify the associated factors.

29 ***Results***

30 Prevalence of psychological distress (Depression, Anxiety and Stress) was identified as 20.9%
31 and female (AOR=2.02, p-value=0.041) and perception of bad working conditions (AOR=2.44,
32 p-value=0.046) were found significantly associated with pre-departure psychological distress.

33 ***Conclusion***

34 Data suggests the presence of symptoms of psychological distress among migrant workers
35 during the pre-departure phase and perception of risk factors at the workplace were found
36 significantly associated with pre-departure psychological distress. Concern bodies should

37 provide in-depth orientation on possible risk factors at the destination and coping skills for
38 psychological distress during the pre-departure orientation program.

39 **Introduction**

40 The number of international migration has continued to grow and estimated to around 272
41 million in 2019. Among these migrants, most of them were of the working age group (20-64
42 years of age) [1]. With the increase in the number of international migration, the global flow of
43 remittance had been increased in the recent decades [2]. In Nepal, foreign employment is the
44 most significant motivation for international migration. Although India is the popular destination
45 for Nepalese migrant workers, it has been decreasing with the rise of labor migration in Gulf
46 Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia in the last decades. Limited opportunities,
47 responsibilities towards family well-being, and attraction of Gulf countries are the major reasons
48 behind the migration towards GCC countries [3]. In Nepal, more than half of the migrant
49 workers acquired a permit to GCC countries and around thirty percent of permits were issued for
50 Malaysia during past decades [4].

51 Migrant workers face different kinds of challenges in personnel, family, and social life. These
52 workers go through different phases that include pre-departure, short-term and long-term
53 transient, destination situation, and return to a place of origin. In each phase, potential health risk
54 and protective factors exist that have a short-term or long-term impact on the well-being of
55 migrant workers [5]. Most of the Nepalese migrants work in semi-skilled and low skilled jobs,
56 which are often difficult, dangerous and degradable leading to poor mental health [6]. In Nepal,
57 607 deaths among male and 43 among female were reported due to suicide while working
58 abroad, during the period of 2008/2009 to 2016/2017 [4].

59 Pre-departure and in-service at the destination are the two major stages where migrant workers
60 are vulnerable to exploitation like manipulation of contract, hiring for non-existent jobs, poor
61 working conditions, wages below standard, health and safety risk, and prolonged debt period that
62 results in psychological distress [7]. Therefore, instead of focusing only on tertiary prevention,
63 targeting the pre-departure determinant of the problem would be the most appropriate approach
64 as primary prevention to improve the psychological well-being of the migrant workers. For that
65 reason, the objective of this study was to identify the prevalence of psychological distress and its
66 associated factors among migrant workers of Nepal departing to GCC countries.

67 **Methods**

68 This was a cross-sectional study conducted among migrant workers attending a pre-departure
69 orientation program. A total of 445 migrant workers were included from eight randomly selected
70 orientation-training institutes out of 112 institutes inside Kathmandu valley from July to August
71 2019. Random allocation of the migrant worker in the study was ensured by selecting the week
72 to visit institutes randomly. Thereafter, each randomly selected institutes were visited for one
73 week and all the eligible migrant workers were approached in the study. Those migrant workers
74 traveling to GCC countries were included in the selection criteria. Whereas, illiterate and non-
75 Nepali speaking migrant workers were excluded. The questionnaire was self-administered to all
76 the eligible consented migrant workers. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional
77 Review Committee - Patan Academy of Health Sciences with reference PHP1906281263.

78 Socio-demographic and foreign employment related factors were taken as independent variables
79 whereas psychological distress was taken as a dependent variable in the study. Socio-
80 demographic variables included age, sex, religion, ethnicity, education, marital status,

81 occupation, personnel behavior, and place of residence. Similarly, foreign employment related
82 variables included pre-departure related factors and perception of migrant workers on risk factor
83 at the workplace. Pre-departure related factors were frequency of travel, the reason for migration,
84 loan, pre-arranged accommodation at the destination, pre-arranged employment at the
85 destination, family network available at destination, the language proficiency of destination and
86 discussion with family. Likewise, PD-RFPS [8] was used to measure the perception of risk
87 factors in the workplace. Psychological distress was defined as combination of depression,
88 anxiety and stress and it was measured using DASS-21 scale. DASS-21 is, a globally validated
89 standard tool to measure depression, anxiety, stress and psychological distress. DASS-21
90 measures the severity of symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, containing seven questions
91 for each subscale [9]. DASS-21 has already been validated in the Nepali language among
92 Nepalese migrants residing in Hong Kong [10]. Besides, it has been validated among Nepali
93 migrant workers during the pre-departure phase from the pilot study, which has been reported
94 elsewhere [8].

95 Statistical analysis (Descriptive and analytical statistics) was performed using Stata 13 MP
96 version software. The prevalence of psychological distress was calculated by adding the DASS
97 total score, which indicates the overall index of negative effects [9]. The score was multiplied by
98 the factor of two to make comparable with DASS-42. A score of more than 40 was included to
99 calculate the prevalence of psychological distress indicating the symptoms of moderate or above
100 in the DASS total score. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression was performed to identify
101 the associated factors for psychological distress. Variables found with the p-value of less than
102 0.25 in the bivariate logistic regression were included in the final multivariate logistic regression
103 to see the independent effect of the variable on the symptoms of psychological distress.

104 **Results**

105 Symptoms of psychological distress were experienced by 20.9% of migrant workers during the
106 pre-departure phase. Symptoms of psychological distress were more prevalent among females
107 compared to males. Nearly one-fourth of younger age groups less than 25 years were found with
108 the symptoms of psychological distress, which was higher than the older age group migrant
109 workers. Similarly, it was high among those who had smoked in the last month compared to
110 those who had both smoked and consumed alcohol. Likewise, nearly one-third of unskilled
111 manual workers were found with symptoms of psychological distress and it was less among the
112 professional jobholders.

113 Psychological distress was high among those who were traveling for the second time compared
114 to the first time travelers. Those who were traveling due to poverty, family pressure, and to pay
115 back debt were found with a higher prevalence of symptoms. Similarly, it was high among those
116 who had not discussed with their family about foreign employment, had a loan, had not pre-
117 arranged for employment, had not pre-arranged accommodation, had no family member at the
118 destination, and who did not understand the language of the destination country.

119 Table 1: Prevalence of psychological distress among migrant workers by independent variables (n=445)

Variable	Number	Percentage (95% CI)	Variable	Number	Percentage (95% CI)
Total	93	20.9 (17.1 – 24.7)	Gender		
Age Group			Male	71	19.6 (15.5 – 23.7)
Less than 25	45	24.6 (18.3 – 30.9)	Female	22	27.2 (16.9 – 37.4)
25-34	40	18.5 (13.2 – 23.8)	Personnel Behavior		

35-44	7	16.3 (5.4 – 27.2)	Alcohol only	7	20.2 (7.7 – 32.6)
45 or More	1	23.1 (-15.0– 61.2)	Smoking only	12	25 (12.7 – 37.2)
Place of residence			Both	9	15.9 (6.3 – 25.4)
Urban	46	18.4 (13.5 – 23.3)	None	65	21.3 (16.6 – 25.9)
Rural	47	23.9 (18 – 29.9)	Frequency		
Ethnicity			First	38	19 (13.4 – 24.5)
Brahman	6	14.4 (3.3 – 25.5)	Twice	42	24.9 (18.4 – 31.4)
Chettri	24	23.4 (15.1 – 31.6)	More than two	13	16.9 (8.6 – 25.2)
Newar	4	16.3 (1.2 – 31.4)	Reason for travel		
Janajati	45	22.7 (16.8 – 28.6)	Family pressure	3	30.7 (2.6 – 58.8)
Dalit	10	20.5 (9.1 – 31.9)	Family conflict	2	62.5 (2.4 – 122.5)
Muslim	2	21.4 (-2.5 – 45.4)	lack of employment	43	18.1 (13.2 – 23.1)
Madhesi	2	8.6 (-3.9 – 21.3)	less paid at work	11	13.4 (5.8 – 21)
Religion			Low agriculture production	2	17.8 (-4.5 – 40.2)
Hindu	72	22.2 (17.6 – 26.8)	To payback debt	10	27.1 (12.2 – 42)
Buddhist	15	17.4 (9.3 – 25.5)	Poverty/Landlessness	19	33.1 (20.8 – 45.2)
Christian	2	13.3 (-5.8 – 32.4)	Present political condition	2	38.4 (-5.6 – 82.5)
Muslim	3	22.2 (0.9 – 43.6)	Others	1	15.3 (-17.3– 48.1)
Kirat	1	14.2 (-9.7 – 38.2)	Discussion with family		
Marital Status			Yes	90	20.7 (16.9 – 24.5)
Unmarried	36	21.2 (14.9 – 27.5)	No	3	28.5 (-2.4 – 59.5)
Married	56	20.7 (15.9 – 25.5)	Take loan		
Widow/Widower	1	40 (-48.1 – 128.1)	Yes	74	22.8 (18.2 – 27.4)
Education Level			No	19	15.7 (9.2 – 22.1)
Primary	11	20.9 (9.2 – 32.5)	Pre-arranged employment		
Secondary	54	23.9 (18.3 – 29.4)	Yes	76	20.4 (16.3 – 24.5)
Higher secondary	22	16.7 (10.2 – 23.1)	No	17	23.2 (13.4 – 32.9)

University	6	17.2 (4.6 – 29.9)	Pre-arranged accommodation		
Employment			Yes	75	20.5 (16.3 – 24.7)
Un-employed	38	22.6 (16.3 – 28.9)	No	18	22.5 (13.4 – 31.7)
Agriculture	26	26.6 (17.6 – 35.6)	Family/Relative network		
Unskilled manual	7	30.6 (10.6 – 50.6)	Yes	63	19.4 (15.1 – 23.8)
Skilled manual	13	15.1 (7.6 – 22.6)	No	30	24.3 (16.8 – 31.7)
Business	6	16.4 (4.3 – 28.5)	Language		
Professional/Job	3	8.6 (-1.5 – 18.9)	Yes	36	18.4 (12.9 – 23.9)
			No	57	22.8 (17.6 – 28.0)

120 CI = Confidence Interval

121 In bivariate logistic regression, none of the socio-demographic and foreign employment related
 122 variables were found associated with psychological distress except for the perception of a risk
 123 factor at the workplace. Perception of bad working condition (OR=4.28), not following contract
 124 properly (OR=3.21), poor safety measures at work (OR=3.15), not getting salary as contracted
 125 (OR=2.42), poor living place (OR=2.11), not getting leave (OR=1.99), food problem (OR=1.83)
 126 and not getting rest at work (OR=1.81) were significantly associated with psychological distress.
 127 Final multivariate analysis showed psychological distress significantly associated with the
 128 female (AOR=2.01) and perception of a bad working condition at work (AOR=2.44).

129 Table 2: Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression of psychological distress

Variable	OR	95% CI	p-value	AOR	95% CI	p-value
Gender						
Male	Reference			Reference		
Female	1.52	0.86 – 2.71	0.145	2.02	1.03 – 3.94	0.041
Employment						

Unemployed	3.07	0.82 – 11.43	0.094	3.50	0.75 – 16.37	0.112
Agriculture	3.81	0.99 – 14.62	0.051	3.65	0.74 – 17.97	0.112
Unskilled manual	4.63	0.97 – 22.08	0.054	2.77	0.44 – 17.27	0.275
Skilled manual	1.88	0.46 – 7.55	0.373	1.77	0.35 – 8.79	0.485
Business	2.07	0.44 – 9.57	0.352	2.04	0.35 – 11.99	0.431
Professional/Job	Reference			Reference		
Place of residence						
Urban	Reference			Reference		
Rural	1.39	0.88 – 2.20	0.155	1.31	0.77 – 2.20	0.312
Frequency of travel						
First	1.15	0.58 – 2.28	0.688	0.87	0.38 – 1.95	0.734
Twice	1.62	0.82 – 3.20	0.159	1.44	0.67 – 3.08	0.347
More than two	Reference			Reference		
Reason for Travel						
Family pressure	2.44	0.18 – 32.86	0.500	1.20	0.07 – 20.59	0.899
Family conflict	9.16	0.39 – 211.1	0.166	7.48	0.25 – 224.67	0.247
Lack of employment	1.22	0.12 – 12.18	0.863	0.61	0.05 – 7.17	0.698
Less paid at work	0.85	0.08 – 9.06	0.894	0.59	0.05 – 7.46	0.683
Low agriculture production	1.19	0.08 – 17.83	0.897	0.55	0.03 – 10.23	0.688
To payback debt	2.05	0.18 – 22.41	0.556	0.80	0.06 – 10.51	0.866
Poverty	2.71	0.26 – 28.19	0.402	1.45	0.12 – 17.44	0.771
Present political condition	3.43	0.20 – 58.33	0.393	4.45	0.21 – 93.36	0.336
Others	Reference			Reference		
Loan						
Yes	1.59	0.91 – 2.76	0.098	1.22	0.65 – 2.27	0.530
No	Reference			Reference		
Perception of risk factors at workplace						

Bad working condition	4.28	2.16 – 8.44	0.000	2.44	1.02 – 5.87	0.046
Poor safety measure	3.15	1.71 – 5.83	0.000	1.50	0.67 – 3.39	0.327
Work other than told	1.47	0.88 – 2.46	0.141	0.86	0.44 – 1.67	0.649
Work long hour	1.41	0.89 – 2.24	0.145	1.02	0.57 -1.83	0.942
Festival problem	1.38	0.87 – 2.20	0.164	1.09	0.59 – 1.99	0.780
Food problem	1.83	1.15 – 2.91	0.010	1.78	0.96 – 3.32	0.069
Unfavorable weather	1.36	0.85 – 2.18	0.194	1.22	0.69 – 2.14	0.484
Did not follow contract	3.21	1.79 – 5.78	0.000	2.03	0.92 – 4.36	0.080
Cannot change work	0.66	0.41 – 1.05	0.080	0.59	0.34 – 1.02	0.061
Did not get salary as contracted	2.42	1.39 – 4.19	0.002	1.63	0.75 – 3.56	0.221
Did not get leave	1.99	1.04 – 3.78	0.036	1.06	0.46 – 2.47	0.888
did not get paid leave	1.44	0.91 – 2.28	0.119	1.15	0.67 – 1.98	0.606
Get unnecessary problem	1.34	0.85 – 2.13	0.209	0.81	0.45 – 1.46	0.490
Did not get rest	1.81	1.12 – 2.94	0.016	1.35	0.74 – 2.46	0.331
Poor living place	2.11	1.17 – 3.82	0.013	0.89	0.41 – 1.96	0.783
Cannot send money on time	1.70	0.93 – 3.12	0.085	0.69	0.29 – 1.62	0.396

130 OR = Odds Ratio; AOR = Adjusted Odds Ratio; CI = Confidence Interval

131 Discussion

132 The objective of this study was to identify the prevalence of psychological distress and its
 133 associated factors among migrant workers of Nepal departing to GCC countries. Although the
 134 psychological distress among Nepali migrant workers was studied at the destination and after
 135 return, there is a dearth of evidence regarding the mental health of migrant workers during the
 136 pre-departure phase. Psychological distress had been found significant among migrant workers

137 during the pre-departure phase from this study. Besides, the perception of different risk factors at
138 the workplace were found significantly associated with pre-departure psychological distress.

139 This study showed symptoms of psychological distress (DASS total score > 40) among 20.9% of
140 migrant workers during the pre-departure phase. The prevalence of psychological distress in this
141 study was found higher than the prevalence reported in recent studies conducted among returnee
142 Nepalese migrant workers from India using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)
143 tool to measure psychological distress [11,12]. A recent study conducted by the International
144 Organization for Migration in Nepal had found psychological distress among 13.4% of returnee
145 migrant workers from India [12]. Similarly, psychological distress was also reported in high
146 number among Sri-Lankan aspiring migrant workers, which reported as 44.2% from GHQ-12
147 [13]. The difference in the stage of migration and tool to measure prevalence might be the reason
148 for the higher prevalence of psychological distress.

149 Present findings are found similar to the reported mental health problem among migrant workers
150 in different phases of migration in recent national and international studies [6,14]. Poor mental
151 health was reported by 23% of returnee migrant workers in Nepal [6]. Likewise, a 22% of non-
152 domestic migrant workers in Singapore were found at higher risk of psychological distress [14].
153 Psychological distress reported in this study was also found similar with the depression and
154 anxiety among migrant workers reported in the systematic analysis of the studies conducted
155 globally, which was 20% and 21% respectively [15].

156 From the multivariate analysis, females and those who had a perception of the bad working
157 condition were found twice at risk of getting symptoms of psychological distress compared to
158 males and those who had a perception of a good working condition at destination. Perception and

159 post-migration expectations were associated with the occurrence of stress during the pre-
160 migration phase [16]. A global review of literature on factor associated with common mental
161 disorder among migrant population also reported that women and migrants who had bad working
162 condition had higher mental health problems [17]. Similar to the present findings, Nepalese
163 returnee migrants who had perceived risk and bad working condition at destination had also
164 reported two times more mental health problems [6]. Other perceptions regarding working and
165 living environment at destination were found associated with pre-departure psychological
166 distress in bivariate analysis. These risk factors were also identified significantly associated with
167 different health and mental health related problems among migrant workers in different studies
168 [17–20]. Although Nepalese migrant workers are familiar with the risk associated with
169 employment at Gulf countries, limited opportunities and responsibilities of a family at the place
170 of origin are the reason behind simply accommodating these risks [3].

171 The limitation of the study was the exclusion of illiterate, non-Nepali speaking, and those who
172 were traveling to the countries other than the GCC countries, which lacks the representation of
173 all the migrant workers of Nepal.

174 **Conclusion**

175 Findings from the study indicate that migrant workers face significant challenges for poor mental
176 health in all phases of migration including the pre-departure. Different perceptions of work and
177 living environment at destination were found significantly associated with pre-departure
178 psychological distress indicating the need for in-depth orientation before departure to the
179 destination. Since females were found more at risk of getting symptoms of psychological
180 distress, further quantitative, as well as a qualitative study, are required to understand the causes

181 of psychological distress during the pre-departure phase. As well, migrant workers could be
182 provided with the coping skills for psychological distress during their pre-departure orientation
183 program.

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