

Supporting Returnee Migrants through Psychosocial Counselling

Forty-two-year old Geeta* from Bhadrapur, Jhapa had been working in Kuwait as a domestic helper for the last five years. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, Geeta lost her job leaving her stranded in Kuwait. Without valid documents to live in Kuwait, the police arrested her.

She shares, “When I was at the prison I developed anxiety, I could not eat and had many sleepless nights.” Luckily, Geeta received an amnesty from the Government of Kuwait on the conditions of returning to Nepal. She was finally able to return home on October 2020. However, returning to Nepal did not improve her mental health.

Geeta sought the support of psychosocial counselling that helped her cope with life. She says, “The psychosocial counselling support that I received was helpful. The simple physical exercises combined with breathing techniques helped me sleep at night and I also gained my appetite back.”

Geeta was among the 124,737 stranded migrant workers in destination countries who returned to Nepal since the start of Nepal Government’s repatriation scheme. These Nepali migrant workers received amnesty on the condition of returning home, a policy promoted in many Gulf countries as a measure to send undocumented workers home while controlling the spread of corona virus.

However, returning to Nepal was not easy. Many workers had to wait while some are still waiting in destination countries for months without a job or salary. Some had trouble in obtaining food and shelter while those who returned home faced stigmatization as spreaders of virus.



Returnee migrants receiving psychosocial counselling in a quarantine facility in Nepal

Similar case was of Meena* who was another returnee migrant. When Meena returned from Kuwait, she developed severe psychological problems due to the stigmatization in her community. Her family too had to face the stigmatization and their house was isolated from the rest of the community. She shares, “When I returned home after 14 days of quarantine, my neighbors nicknamed me as corona which added to my stress.” Meena then started receiving psychosocial counselling through the phone. After five counselling sessions, Meena has started to feel better. “I feel better these days and I no longer blame myself. My self-esteem has also increased,” says Meena.

The pandemic and the lockdown imposed in Nepal and destination countries has left many migrant workers stranded with unfavorable working and living condition. The prolonged separation from families and the challenging conditions upon return including quarantine and stigmatization have triggered psychological stress for migrants and their families. Meena and Geeta are among the 22,398 (8,572 men and 1,582 women) people who have received psychosocial support as “first aid” while in quarantine since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Safer Migration project, a bilateral initiative of the Government of Nepal and Switzerland with technical assistance from Helvetas has been experiencing an unprecedented surge in the

demand for psychosocial support. The project has adapted its approach as per the new needs by increasing its team of trained psychosocial counselors to deal with possible trauma. These counsellors are mobilized to visit and support returnee migrants in quarantine facilities managed by the provincial and local government adhering to health and safety protocols. In addition, psychosocial counsellors also conduct home visits to provide the necessary support.

Furthermore, to eliminate stigmatization and discrimination of returnee migrants in accessing services the project also developed and broadcasted Public Service Announcements (PSAs) through radio stations. The PSAs aims to raise awareness on the negative consequences of stigmatization as well as informing people about the existing supportive measures. The project also supports a radio program named *Desh Pradesh (about the country and abroad)* which informs people about the implications of COVID-19 for migrant workers while debunking the myths.