

Cross-border mobility, inequality and migration intermediaries: Labour migration from Nepal to Malaysia

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Funding information

UK Research and Innovation; Global Challenges Research Fund

Abstract

This article aims to contribute to labour recruitment policy by demonstrating the relations between cross-border mobility and inequality through the lens of migration intermediaries. Drawing on thematic analysis of the MIDEQ project's in-depth interviews with Nepalese labour migrants ($n=20$) in Malaysia, this research reveals the range of migration intermediaries along the recruitment chain, and shows contradictory roles played by migration intermediaries: they help migrant workers access employment and other opportunities thus overcoming inequality in mobility, whilst simultaneously reproducing socio-economic inequalities and the unequal power relations experienced by migrants. Hence, we identify a “middle space effect” that links migration processes with migration outcomes, reconstructing socio-economic inequalities in mediated migration. We highlight the role of state policies regarding migration and labour in co-producing such inequalities, and the embeddedness of middle space intermediaries in unequal global power dynamics, and we offer policy suggestions on regulation of labour recruitment and employment.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development explicitly links the goal of reducing inequality between and within countries to the encouragement of orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration. However, inter-connections between migration processes and outcomes in producing inequality have been little studied (Sha & Bhuiyan, 2022). Contemporary migration is, more than ever before, intensively mediated by a range of intermediaries (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, 124) but existing empirical research on migration-related inequality focuses on the impacts of remittances on sending communities (Adams Jr, 2006; Koczan & Loyola, 2018; Taylor & Wyatt, 1996) and income/wealth distribution at local and global level (Kapur & Mchale, 2009), and has neglected the fundamental role of migration intermediaries. Although recent scholarship has pointed out that inequality is a multi-dimensional concept that extends beyond economic disparities to include socio-cultural dimensions (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, nationality) and access to power (Amelina, 2010; Black et al., 2006; Carmo et al., 2018; Crow et al., 2009; Faist, 2014), scholarship to date has mainly focused on the role of state border controls in creating differential and uneven mobility (Carmo & Hedberg, 2019; Skeggs, 2004) and has neglected the role of non-state actors. This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining how intermediaries construct or reproduce socio-economic inequalities in labour migration and offers policy recommendations regarding future recruitment policy.

Some recent studies of migration intermediaries have shown how the gatekeeping roles of private sector intermediaries are linked to gendered and racialized inequalities experienced by migrant domestic workers (Chau & Schwiter, 2021; Sha, 2021a; Sha & Bhuiyan, 2022). We broaden this discussion by demonstrating the ambivalent, dual roles of migration intermediaries and analysing socioeconomic and power dimensions of inequality in mediated migration. We argue that intermediaries play contradictory roles by helping migrant workers access employment and opportunities, thus overcoming inequalities in mobility, whilst simultaneously reproducing socio-economic inequalities, contributing to debt, immobility and the unequal power relations experienced by migrants.

This paper contributes to the academic understanding of migration whilst also aiming to inform regional policy-making. First, we seek to contribute to the discussion of cross-border mobility and inequality by highlighting the link between intermediaries' activities in migration processes and unequal outcomes of migration. This link, which has attracted little attention in policy debates, we call the 'middle space effect'. The recruitment process determines who migrates to what jobs under what terms and conditions, hence it is linked to migration outcomes. As a result of the disproportionate focus on migration origin and destination countries, there has been a gap in regulation and interventions in the 'middle-space', potentially enabling exploitative recruitment practices to continue 'under the radar'. Thus, insights into this 'middle space' open possibilities of more informed interventions targeting this recruitment chain to prevent negative migration outcomes while promoting positive outcomes. Second, we seek to contribute to migration intermediary studies. Rather than focusing on how migration is facilitated (Cranston et al., 2018; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sorensen, 2013; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), we explore the broader implications of mediated practice, which refer not only to migration itself but also to larger and overarching issues such as inequality. We also highlight the embeddedness of intermediaries' activities in broader global power dynamics, stressing that intermediaries form integral parts of global structures of socio-economic and political inequality in which state policies regarding cross-border mobility and labour regulation also play significant roles. Third, we bring perspectives from south-south migration. This fills a gap in global migration literature that has been dominated by north-south migration, which could better inform more context-relevant policy and practice recommendations for the region.

Migration intermediaries are variously described as brokers, *dalals*, *taikongs*, placement agencies, migration industry, people smugglers, human traffickers, coyotes or immigration consultancies. This article adopts the working definition proposed by Jones and Sha (2020):

An intermediary is an actor or institution that fosters, facilitates or sustains human mobility. The mediating or brokerage process is relational and often involves interactions of multiple actors operating within complex local-global, socio-economic, cultural and political environments. The practices of intermediaries often blur the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial, private and public, state and market, formal and informal, legal and illegal due to the complex nature and conditions in which this 'middle-space' exists.

We begin by reviewing literature on relations between intermediaries, mobility and inequality. We then introduce the context of Nepal-Malaysia migration and describe our research methods. Next, we demonstrate the role of migration intermediaries in helping migrants overcome inequality in mobility, before showing how migration costs and working conditions lead to new patterns of immobility and inequality for migrants in Malaysia. We then turn to positive outcomes of migration: remittances, new skills and aspirations, before offering concluding remarks and policy suggestions.

INTERMEDIARIES, CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY AND INEQUALITY

Existing scholarship highlights the role of state border controls in creating differential and uneven mobility. Scholars note that governance of migration is selective and stratified according to skills, capacities and other social categories including gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, community or sexuality (Hannam et al., 2006; Mau, 2010; Mosse, 2010; Owen, 2020; Simon-Kumar et al., 2020). Such differential mobility reflects and reinforces hierarchies of power and position (Carmona & Hedberg, 2019; Skeggs, 2004) and has been the main mechanism sustaining global inequality based on unequally distributed rights, capacities, and resources to transcend borders (Adey, 2006; Amelina & Vasilache, 2014; Beck, 2007; Boatcă, 2011; Mau, 2010; Owen, 2020). However, this body of literature has neglected the important roles of non-state actors, namely migration intermediaries, in influencing the mobility of migrant workers and related inequalities in mediated migration.

Research on migration intermediaries has pointed out that intermediaries (including migrant networks, brokers, recruiters, smugglers, etc.) are key actors in influencing how migration happens and in shaping international labour migration (Kuptsch, 2006; Martin, 2007, 2017). They play crucial roles in facilitating the movement of migrants from one country to another, shaping migrants' experience as well as developmental outcomes (Martin, 2007; Sha, 2021a). Recent scholarship also shows that intermediaries play gatekeeping and regulatory roles linked to uneven and stratified mobility (Chau & Schwiter, 2021; Jones, 2021; Sha, 2021a; Sha & Bhuiyan, 2022). This scholarship was influenced by the concept of migration infrastructure developed by Xiang and Lindquist (2014), which is key to understanding how migration is mediated. "Migration infrastructure" is defined "as the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility" (2014, p. 124). The term highlights the intersection of multiple dimensions and the interaction of various actors involved in mediation processes, emphasising the role of non-state actors in governing migration (see also Lindquist et al., 2012; Xiang, 2012). This approach has inspired migration intermediary scholars to recognise that the state is not the only regulatory body. Non-state-actors such as commercial intermediaries have become sites of regulation as 'government consciously attempted to govern migration through commercial infrastructure, turning companies into its functioning "arms"' (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. S137). The existing literature discussing the gatekeeper roles of migration intermediaries in relation to uneven mobility focuses mainly on gendered and racialized inequalities in migration processes involving domestic workers. We broaden this discussion by demonstrating the ambivalent, dual roles of migration intermediaries and highlighting the links between migration processes and outcomes of mediated migration which extend beyond migration itself and encompass broader implications in regard to socioeconomic inequalities. Below, we highlight these links by taking an overview of the literature on the roles of migration intermediaries.

Intermediaries play key roles in helping migrant workers from poorer nations overcome inequalities in a world in which mobility is reserved for the rich (Alpes, 2017; Jones & Sha, 2020; Sanchez, 2014; Sha, 2021a; Spener, 2009). Research shows intermediaries may influence whether, where and how people migrate (Cranston et al., 2018; Jones & Sha, 2020; Sha, 2021a, 2021b; Spaan & Naerssen, 2018; Xiang & Lindquist, 2018). They help migrants navigate complex bureaucratic, time-consuming, costly and often corrupt processes (Castles et al., 2009; Cranston et al., 2018; Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015). Given the tightening of immigration controls in advanced economies and frequent changes in regulations, intermediaries possess the experience and professional knowledge as well as the infrastructure and facilities to enable the mobility of migrants (Cranston et al., 2018; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sorensen, 2013; Krissman, 2005; Lindquist, 2017).

Intermediaries may also significantly affect the social position and life chances of migrants as well as developmental outcomes in countries of origin (Kuptsch, 2006; Martin, 2017; Sha, 2021a). Existing research suggests that territorial access could offer new opportunities for migrants: migrating to rich countries not only increases migrants' income but also their social status (Boatcă, 2011). Moreover, remittance sent by migrants have a significant impact on development and status in sending communities (Black et al., 2006; Julca, 2007; Martin, 2006, 2007; Mckenzie & Rapoport, 2007). Yet, the roles of migration intermediaries are crucial. They inspire migration by increasing awareness of overseas opportunities while alerting aspiring migrants to the resources and infrastructure that make this possible (Martin, 2007; Xiang & Lindquist, 2018). They utilise their professional knowledge to direct migrants to one destination over another (Cranston et al., 2018; Spaan & Naerssen, 2018). They offer information and financial support, facilitating transport, accommodation and employment (Jones & Sha, 2020; Martin, 2017; Massey et al., 1987; Spaan & Naerssen, 2018). They indirectly enable migrants to contribute to their families' schooling, housing, and general welfare through remittances (for a review see Sha, 2021a). Intermediaries hence serve to expand the life-choices and economic opportunities of people living in situations of poverty and income inequality at home (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015), improve socio-economic status, and indirectly impact development of sending communities (Martin, 2007, 2017; Sha, 2021a).

However, intermediaries are not always benign and their activities may reproduce inequalities. Intermediaries control access to information and resources which can disadvantage migrants (Martin, 2017; Mcdowell, 2008; Salt & Stein, 1997; Sha, 2021a). They charge high fees, which often put migrants in debt and, combined with precarious and temporary employment and strict migration policies, can constrain the mobility and freedom of migrant workers, locking them into vulnerable positions and often abusive power relations (Davidson, 2013; Kemp & Rajiman, 2014; Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015; Sha, 2021a). Some scholars call this 'immobility in mobility' (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020), whereas others have highlighted that migrant workers often lack rights, opportunities and protection in host societies, experiencing exclusion, exploitation and downward social mobility (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Constable, 2007; Deshingkar et al., 2019; Liang, 2011; Sha & Bhuiyan, 2022). Hence, some scholars argue that intermediaries are central to an exploitative global system of temporary labour (Awumbila et al., 2019; Sha, 2021a).

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS: NEPAL-MALAYSIA CORRIDOR

Nepalese workers are the third-largest migrant population in Malaysia after Indonesians and Bangladeshis. According to the Immigration Department of Malaysia (2020), Nepalese workers make up 15.6 per cent of the 1.5 million migrant population. The number of Nepalese female workers in Malaysia is relatively small compared to males. Five years of official statistics from the Department of Foreign Employment in Nepal and the Malaysia Department of Immigration in 2020 on the Nepal-Malaysia corridor revealed that nine out of ten documented Nepalese workers are male.

Malaysia's shift from a primarily agricultural economy to manufacturing and services in the 1990s encouraged an inflow of migrant labour into the country. Under the Malaysia Foreign Worker Hiring Policy of 1992, migrant workers are mainly hired at levels that are not classified as professionals, managers, executives or technicians

under the Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations or MASCO (Kassim, 2014, p. 27). According to the socio-economic impact survey from Institute of Labour Market Information and Analysis in Malaysia (2020, p. 20) and Immigration Department of Malaysia (2020) 75% of Nepalese workers in Malaysia work in the manufacturing sector; 25% in the services sector; 4% in the agriculture and plantation sector, 2% in construction and less than 1% in mining and domestic work.

This study is part of MIDEQ South–South Migration Project, which explores the relationships between migration, development and inequality.¹ Our data are primarily based on in-depth interviews with male migrants, who form the overwhelming majority of migrants from Nepal to Malaysia (Table 1). We conducted 20 in-depth online interviews between June and October in 2020 (Table 1) in Klang Valley, Malaysia.

These informants are from farming backgrounds with limited income in rural parts of Nepal. They are aged 24–47 years and most have only completed secondary education, from 9th to 12th grades. They are primarily ‘blue-collar workers’ (Lyon, 2010, p. 389) in manufacturing, construction, agriculture and the service sector, working in the areas of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The length of their stay in Malaysia varies from four to 16 years. Among these men, 65% are married with at least one child, whilst the single men come from large families with at least three siblings. All are breadwinners, aiming to improve their families’ living standards, children’s education or healthcare, all of which have been impacted by poverty, lack of employment opportunities and low earnings in Nepal.

Informants were recruited through existing networks of researchers with connections to Nepali community leaders who were based at Malaysia and appointed as translators for this study. Our main sampling strategies are convenience and snowball sampling through online interviewing. These strategies were adopted by the authors due to the Covid-19 travel restrictions imposed by the government of Malaysia. The strategy sought to achieve an adequate sample size whilst minimising the risk of informants being detained by authorities during the restriction periods. Informants consented to providing basic personal information before the interview session. The interview questions covered key themes: employment status and income before migration; reasons for migration and the choice of Malaysia as a destination; who helped with migration and migration costs; recruitment processes; migration journeys; working and living conditions in Malaysia; family contacts and visits; work and life during Covid-19; outcomes of migration; and future plans. The online interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h scheduled for a convenient time on informant’s rest days. One of the authors of this paper, who is also an interviewer, received risk assessment training (due diligence in human rights) from the government of the Netherlands. This interviewer was also experienced in research into trafficking in persons (TIP) and smuggling of migrants (SOM) for a local think tank and parliamentarians in Malaysia.

All data were translated and recorded in transcriptions and thematic data analysis was applied manually. This analytic process followed the six-phase method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, familiarising ourselves with interview data: transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. Second, generating initial codes and collating data relevant to each code. Third, searching for themes: collating codes into potential themes. These themes include migration motivations and decision-making, migration processes and the role of intermediaries, employment condition/relations, living in Malaysia, social support and family contacts, outcomes of migration, Covid-19 and repatriation, and future plans. This collation is followed by reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes and drafting the paper. At the time of data collection, physical fieldwork procedures for public universities and private institutions were subjected to Covid-19 travel restrictions by the National Security Council of Malaysia (Malaysian Standard Operation Procedure, 2020). The authors also conformed to internal university research protocols from Australia.

Labour migration from Nepal to Malaysia is subject to strict regulation. In Malaysia, an employer must register through an online platform to hire migrant workers. Registration is followed by a mandatory interview at a One-Stop Centre (OSC) managed by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) in collaboration with the Department of Labour (JTK) from the Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) to secure labour quota approval. Regulation aims to ensure that employers abide by Malaysian labour laws and immigration regulations and that employers meet the

TABLE 1 Informants basic profile.

Interviewee code	Nepal			Current employment in Malaysia			
	Age	Gender	Education level	Present district	Year ^a	Position	Sector
NMW5.1	25	Male	10th grade	Makwanpur	2015	Production Operator	Manufacturing
NMW5.2	24	Male	10th grade	Bara	2013	Forklift Driver	Manufacturing
NMW5.3	33	Male	12th grade	Nawalparasi	2011	Sales coordinator	Service (Distribution)
NMW5.4	32	Male	10th grade	Syangja	2013	Production Operator Assistance	Manufacturing
NMW5.5	35	Male	10th grade	Syangja	2017	Forklift Driver	Manufacturing
NMW5.6	27	Male	10th grade	Kanchanpur	2013	Production Operator	Manufacturing
NMW5.7	28	Male	10th grade	Kathmandu	2018	Security guard	Services (Security guard)
NMW5.8	38	Male	10th grade	Khotang	2010	Security guard	Services (Security guard)
NMW5.9	30	Male	12th grade	Udaypur	2016	Housekeeper	Services (Hotel)
NMW5.10	27	Male	10th grade	Terhathum	2014	Supervisor	Services (Food & Beverage)
NMW5.11	33	Male	10th grade	Khotang	2012	Supervisor	Services (Food & Beverage)
NMW5.12	26	Male	12th grade	Kabhrepalanchok	2014	General Worker	Manufacturing
NMW5.13	34	Male	10th grade	Syangja	2013	Forklift Driver	Manufacturing
NMW5.14	28	Male	10th grade	Bara	2013	Cleaner	Services (Car Park)
NMW5.15	27	Male	12th grade	Mahottari	2010	Production Operator Assistance	Manufacturing
NMW5.16	26	Male	10th grade	Okhaldhunga	2013	Production Operator	Manufacturing
NMW5.17	41	Male	10th grade	Pachthar	2010	Sales & Marketing	Services (Remittance)
NMW5.18	47	Male	10th grade	Nawalparasi	2006	Sales & Marketing	Services (Remittance)
NMW5.19	39	Male	9th grade	Nawalparasi	2011	Salesman	Services (Garment Retail)
NMW5.20	40	Male	10th grade	Udaypur	2017	Supervisor & Waiter	Services (Food & Beverage)

^aRefer to the interviewee who was first employed in Malaysia.

Source: MIDEQ Malaysia, 2022.

requirements and criteria set by the respective ministries. Migrant worker applicants must be aged between 18 and 45 years at the time of application. They must obtain a certified pass title for Immigration Security Clearance (ISC) in the source country where they must be certified as fit and healthy by an approved medical centre and must not be listed as prohibited from entering Malaysia under Section 8(3) of the Immigration Act 1959/1963. Due to the complex bureaucracy involved, many migrant workers rely on intermediaries. In the following section, we analyse who these intermediaries are and how they help migrant workers overcome inequality in mobility to access employment opportunities in Malaysia.

THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES IN OVERCOMING INEQUALITY IN MOBILITY

Not everyone has equal access to mobility and international labour markets. Kaufmann et al. (2004, p. 750) suggest that such access is 'constrained by options and conditions' and depends upon 'mobility capital', which refers to unevenly distributed capacities and competences, within specific contexts of physical, social, and political affordances for movement. More specifically, inequality in access to mobility is determined, at the micro-level, by individual capacities and resources, including the acquisition of knowledge, skills, socio-economic agency (i.e., purchasing power, social status, etc.) and resources. At the meso-level, access is related to social networks and migration infrastructures that enable mobility. At the macro level, access depends on national social and geopolitical policies, in particular border control and governance of migration (Kaufmann et al., 2004). In the Nepal-Malaysia context, migrant workers are from rural backgrounds with limited education and income. Facing tightening immigration controls and complex bureaucracy in Malaysia, these migrant workers are unable to navigate procedures, which are time-consuming, costly and beyond their capability to negotiate (Jones & Sha, 2020). Moreover, frequent changes in regulations in both destination and origin countries make it difficult for migrants to keep up (Krissman, 2005; Žabko et al., 2018). Under such circumstances, they are disadvantaged compared to more affluent 'high skilled' migrants. Consequently, the migrant workers we studied were able to move to Malaysia primarily through the assistance of intermediaries. Based on empirical data, we identify three major forms of intermediaries: social networks (including kin, friendship and locality); village brokers or sub-agents; and recruitment agencies. By exploring who helps with what and how, we highlight interconnections (Jones & Sha, 2020; Lindquist et al., 2012; Sha, 2021b; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014) and trust (Lindquist, 2017) among these actors, which are key in enabling migration and overcoming inequality in mobility.

Social networks: Kinship, friendship and locality

Social networks constitute the social infrastructure of migration (Lindquist, 2017; Massey et al., 1987; Sha, 2021b; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Many of our informants had friends, family members or neighbours who work or have worked in Malaysia. These networks play key roles in inspiring migration and influencing decision-making by offering information about job opportunities, migration processes and life in Malaysia.

NMW5.9: Many people who I know very well are all in Malaysia, and they asked me to come to Malaysia. This is the best country for us, they said.... That's why I was inspired by my friends and came to Malaysia....

NMW5.18: all my family members work in International Money Express because the chairman of that company is from Nepal, so they asked me to come to Malaysia.

Family members and friends assist migrants with their journey and connect them to brokers, agencies and employment opportunities in Malaysia. Some are themselves brokers or work for an agency, blurring the boundary between informal and formal intermediaries (Jones & Sha, 2020; Lindquist et al., 2012; Sha, 2021b). Some work in factories in Malaysia, and they recommend the agency they used and the factory in which they work to new migrant workers.

NMW5.7: Actually, I was supported by my family members. My uncle was already working as an agent. Uncle said it is a good company. If I go (to Malaysia), then three years contracts and when I finish and return, then I will have money. My uncle is only an agent, but he doesn't have a manpower company.

NMW5.16: Some of my friends are already working in the factory, but they are in the different departments of this factory....and they gave me an instruction to go through that agency and applied for this company. So, I followed my friends and with this agency, and I reached here.

Village brokers (sub-agents)

Sub-agents or village brokers are mostly unlicensed and are employed by recruitment agencies in Kathmandu, constituting the bridge between migrant workers and agencies. As they are from the same or neighbouring villages, they are trusted by villagers and their knowledge is influential in inspiring villagers to migrate. Their roles range from channelling migrant workers to a recruitment agency to assisting with paperwork. They are particularly significant to those who have no family members or friends abroad but even those who have such contacts still need assistance from local brokers in preparing documents. Many agencies do not accept migrant workers without introductions from sub-agents. Sub-agents are paid for their services by a recruitment agency and sometimes by villagers too. Below, an informant describes how brokers work.

NMW5.6: Normally, in the countryside, there are lots of local agents. They know about the manpower agency in the capital city of Kathmandu. They don't have any kind of proper license, which is from the agency or from the government, because they just roam around walking around and go to the village and go to the very well-known person, talk about the job, talk about their visa, talk about this and that. They know information on some other countries who provide the quota and discuss it with the young people. They approach them personally or with the family; after that, the family will decide to give him some money. They bring the particular person and come to Kathmandu and submit him to a favourable agency in Kathmandu.

Recruitment agency (manpower)

Recruitment agencies or manpower companies are key actors channelling migrant workers to Malaysia. Agencies in Nepal collaborate with agencies in Malaysia which connect them to employers in need of labour. Nepali agencies are responsible for the entire process of migration until the workers are delivered to a Malaysian company or agency. They interview and select candidates and sign contracts, making them the 'gatekeepers' of migration with governance roles (Goss & Lindquist, 1995; Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015). Sometimes, representatives from Malaysian companies join the interview session or sign contracts alongside Nepalese agencies.

Once migrant workers are selected, the recruitment agency helps them with paperwork, including medical certificates, passports and visa applications and with tickets and travel arrangements. They usually offer free orientation training before departure which provides basic information on how to work and live in Malaysia.

Once processing is completed in Nepal, migrant workers are flown to Malaysia. Upon arrival, they are picked up by a Malaysian company or agency. Most migrant workers describe the journey as smooth. Some waited only 30–40 min, some between 2 and 4 h to be collected by company staff. Only a few experienced longer waiting times, from 14 to 18 h.

Brokering in Nepal-Malaysia labour migration, therefore, involves multiple actors who not only provide specific services to migrant workers, but who also build the connections and trust that enable cross border migration (Lindquist, 2017). This finding is consistent with the findings of migration infrastructure literature that migration intermediaries include various actors and that they influence whether, where and how people migrate and help people overcome inequalities in mobility.

MIGRATION COSTS, WORKING CONDITIONS AND IMMOBILITY

Although intermediaries help aspiring migrants overcome inequality in mobility, they also contribute to new patterns of immobility and socio-economic inequality experienced by migrant workers through high migration costs and channelling to 'blue-collar jobs'² with poor working conditions as we show below.

Migration costs

Both Nepal and Malaysia allow recruitment fees to be imposed. In Malaysia, under the 2nd Schedule of Private Employment Agencies Act 2017 (PEA) (Act 246), total fees should not exceed USD 267–307 (RM 1200–1500). In Nepal, under the Foreign Employment Act (FEA), recruitment fees should be no more than USD82 (NPR 10,000). The 2018 bilateral agreement between Nepal and Malaysia set the recruitment fees at USD 130–145 (RM 550–600). In practice, migrants are charged much more than this.

According to our informants, migrant workers pay an average USD 480 (NPR 60,000) to USD 3200 (NPR 400,000) in fees, varying across different agencies and different times of migration. Migrants complain that these fees are too high, even when the broker is a friend. Although there is an agreement between Nepal and Malaysia that all recruitment expenses are covered by companies according to the 'zero-cost migration' policy, Nepalese migrants have little knowledge of such agreements and the legal process of migration. Thus, they follow the instructions of brokers and agencies. According to informants, some agency fees claim to include all costs, but they are still charged extra for work visas and other items including the migrant worker levy: a tax paid by the employer to the Malaysian government.

To pay migration fees, many take loans from a local development bank or other creditors; some borrow from friends or relatives. Many already have debts related to family matters before they migrate, so migration costs add to existing debts.

Some migrants also have to pay for expensive accommodation and food while staying in Kathmandu to meet agencies or go through migration procedures. The involvement of multiple actors is a key reason for high migration costs (Xiang, 2017). Many agencies do not take migrant workers without the introduction of brokers. Yet, the cost of migration has increased significantly compared to the past.

Channelling to 'blue-collar jobs'

Although they are paying high migration fees, migrant workers in Malaysia are only permitted to work in select sectors such as manufacturing, construction, plantations, agriculture and services. Recruitment agencies conform to the needs of state and employers in recruiting migrant workers to these jobs (Findlay et al., 2013; Mccollum &

Findlay, 2015). For instance, among 20 Nepalese workers, nine work in the manufacturing sector, and 11 work in the non-manufacturing sector including retail, hotels, food and beverages and as security guards.

The average wage ranges from USD 330 (RM 1500) to USD 960 (RM 4200) per month. But sometimes, migrant workers may earn less for reasons ranging from health concerns to discrimination. For instance, NMW5.8 has worked in Malaysia three times. The first and second periods were for the same employer doing the same work and on the second occasion, he was offered the same wage as he had received for the first: USD 113 (RM 480). After checking with migrant workmates in the factory, he learned that their wage at that time (before the Minimum Wage 2012) was USD 125 (RM 526) and that the employer was trying to underpay him.

In the case of those migrant workers who are employed by a staffing agency, their workplace pays their salary to an agency that deducts a charge before passing the salary to the worker. Situated in unequal power relations, migrant workers cannot do anything but complain:

NMW5.11: Malaysian government is also OK, but there is the problem of workers not directly under the company. The company pay 2,000 (Malaysia ringgit), then they (the recruitment agency) pay the staff 1,200 to 1,300. We (workers) work very hard but don't get the money. The company send it to the agency, and the agency sends it to workers. If they (the company) pay directly to them (workers), they will be happy. This is a bad practice in Malaysia. Each agent takes 500; one takes 200, and one takes 200; do you know how much already? Sometimes they (workers) have an accident, they call the agent, but the agent doesn't pick up the phone, and some say I am busy; some bosses also reply to workers go and ask your agent. The Malaysia agent is no good. If the Malaysian government charges on a passport, we can pay..., but the sub-contract worker system must be stopped. It is making big money from this system.

In Malaysia, Nepalese migrant workers often work long hours to earn more. Although most migrants we interviewed were informed about salary and working hours before departure, they accepted the conditions and decided to migrate to Malaysia due to the lack of employment opportunities in Nepal, and because the minimum wage in Malaysia is much higher than in Nepal. In 2022, according to the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources, migrant workers in greater urban areas in Malaysia are entitled to a minimum wage of at least USD 338 (RM 1500). In Nepal, the monthly minimum wage in 2021 was 13,450 Nepali rupees or approximately USD 112 (RM 450), which was revised to 15,000 Nepali rupees, or approximately USD 125 (RM 530) in February 2022 (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2021).

As from 2022, migrant labour in Malaysia has entailed working 7.5 h per day or 45 h within six working days. Most migrant workers are also offered overtime hours and pay by employers in their employment contracts. Many informants revealed that they are willing to work up to 10–12 h per day to earn more money. Income inequalities between the two countries, then, are not just the driving force behind migration but also affect working conditions and relations in destination countries. Another motivation for Nepalese migrant workers to work long hours is the high cost of living in Malaysia. Although some feel they are earning more compared to other countries they have been to, they also complain that they spend more, which limits their capacity to remit.

Long working hours and limited leave constrains migrants' freedom and mobility, but the greatest challenge comes from the limitation of their family visits. According to informants, migrant workers normally only visit home after ending a three-year employment contract because they occupy positions in production and operations, which are irreplaceable for short or long-term absences. Companies provide only one one-way ticket within 3 years enabling migrants to visit home, in which case they must purchase their own return ticket. Some companies allow workers to use their annual leave to visit home but require them to pay a security deposit to cover the cost of the migrant worker levy. Some companies ask migrant workers to provide guarantors, such as friends at the factory. If they don't return to complete their contract, the company will deduct the costs from their friend's

salary. Such restrictions discourage many from visiting their families in Nepal, as travel costs are also high. In this case, mediated migration leads to 'immobility in mobility' (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020).

Long-term separation from family members has emotional costs for migrants. Although they keep in touch with their families on a daily basis, most feel lonely and isolated in Malaysia. There is a strong desire for changes in conditions, which would allow them to visit their families more frequently. As one informant expressed:

NMW5.5: If there is a kind of different contract, type of contract with the Malaysia government and Nepal government that made it easier and that might be good for the migrant workers, he said every year if I like if I want to go to see my family visit my family I can go, and I can come back again after a month if they give us the type of facility from the company or government that might be OK for us because then the contract three years so after three years only then I can go for my holiday and go for my *cuti* (holiday) otherwise they won't allow unless there's some kind of emergency comes up then they will leave otherwise they won't give us to go in between. After the three years only, we can go.

To sum up, our empirical data echo previous findings that state migration and employment policies play significant roles in creating stratified mobility through quotas, which limit mobility, choice and income generating capacity for many migrants. Yet, our data suggest that non-state actors, namely migration intermediaries, are also key actors in reproducing and reconstructing social inequalities experienced by migrant workers. They 'capitalise(s) on transnational inequalities' between originating and destination countries (Chau & Schwiter, 2021, 734), relying on their professional knowledge which serves to maintain unequal power relations with migrant workers, facilitating economic manipulation through high migration costs and the channelling of migrants into blue-collar jobs in Malaysia. This, combined with the temporary employment status of migrant workers and strict migration policies, regulations and workplace norms, reproduce immobility and social inequalities. These findings extend existing migration literature on spatial mobility and downward social position to highlight the role of migration intermediaries and the link between migration process and outcomes: the 'middle-space effect'. We also add to migration infrastructure literature by highlighting the embeddedness of migration intermediaries in unequal global socio-economic and political structures and power dynamics.

REMITTANCES, NEW SKILLS AND ASPIRATIONS

In this section, we explore positive outcomes of mediated migration that enable migrants to achieve both financial and social remittances, enabling them to learn new skills, which have the potential to change the lives of both their generation and the next.

Despite low wages, most migrant workers save and remit money home. According to our research, the average worker remits from USD 120 to USD 1400 during a contract. Consistent with migration studies in other contexts, remittances help lift families out of poverty and increase the income and living standards of migrant households. People are able to purchase more land, build houses and send their children to international schools.

NMW5.19: I saved up 2 to 3 months and remitted back to Nepal (each month, save up about RM 1,400). My family use it to buy land in Nepal. The wife will manage the household expenses and the usage of the money.

NMW5.18: As a man, I cannot do anything in this life. But I support my children and all (first daughter, the second son and third daughter again). I manage to put them and finish the SLC (School Leaving Certificate) from the boarding school, a private school. They are all now in college or university. I am

able to do that. My first daughter is already married. My second son is also preparing to go for the studying overseas in Norway or Sweden. And the third daughter is also applying to go to the army. I able to make my family happy, and as long they are educated, that is my duty and I able to do that.

The outcomes of migration are not just financial but also include self-development and the learning of new skills beyond migrants' existing agricultural knowledge.

NMW5.6: my job is in the production line; besides the production, I can do the repairing and assembling the parts of the engine and also that's the kind of skill which is very related with automobile and motorbike and also anyway I can sustain anywhere I can use my skill, and I can survive myself.

These new skills form a major 'social remittance' (Faist, 2016; Platt et al., 2017; Sørensen & Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013) and lay the foundation for new aspirations for migrant workers. Many consider starting a small business after returning home – despite having no concrete plan, and some have plans to re-migrate using their newly learned skills. Only a small minority are sceptical that they can use these skills due to the lack of industry in Nepal.

Some have plans to renew their contract so that they can continue to earn money and support their families. Their aspirations are not just for their own future but for their children's future. They want to break the migration cycle, hoping that their children could do other types of jobs or migrate to better jobs in other countries, as many perceive Nepal as having no job opportunities, meaning that even those with higher education degrees are unable to use their skills at home.

NMW5.11: I want to go back and open a business – like chemical. I want to open a soap (*sabun*) factory because my area needs one day to travel out to town. No, that is why I want to go back and open a business. I want my children to have better education and a good language; then they can go to other countries, not Malaysia. If success is OK, if not a success, then I will come back to Malaysia.

In short, although remittances increase the economic capacity of households, new skills empower migrant workers and have the potential to change their own future and that of the next generation. Migration experience has the potential to shape their future paths and mobilities – both spatial and social. Such outcomes cannot be separated from the key role played by intermediaries who inspired migration by increasing awareness of overseas opportunities, alerting them to the resources and infrastructure of migration, assisting and facilitating migration processes, and channeling them to employments in Malaysia. Hence, we extend the insights of existing literature in which the analysis of the results of migration shows only new opportunities, changes in social status and development in countries of origin, but takes no account of the role of migration intermediaries who are key middle-space actors that link migration processes to outcomes, and significantly affect the social position and life chances of migrants.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has explored the roles played by intermediaries in socio-economic inequality in the context of Nepal-Malaysian labour migration: an example of south-south migration. We conclude that intermediaries are crucial actors in a "middle space" who facilitate migration and enable Nepalese migrant workers to overcome inequalities in mobility and access jobs and opportunities in Malaysia. The outcomes of migration contribute to local development through remittances and the birth of new aspirations, which have the potential to contribute to personal and local development and change the future of their children. However, intermediaries also contribute to high migration costs, debt, immobility and inequalities experienced by Nepalese migrant workers both in the migration process and in Malaysia. By highlighting these contradictory roles of intermediaries, we contribute to studies of cross-border mobility and inequality. We have shown that the 'middle space effect' that links migration

processes with migration outcomes, ultimately reconstructs socio-economic inequalities through mediated migration. Furthermore, we have extended the study of migration intermediaries by developing a nuanced perspective which illuminates various dimensions of inequality through empirical study based on south–south migration. We point out that the activities of intermediaries are embedded in global structures of socio-economic and political inequality and unequal power relations (Sha, 2021a). Fundamentally it is unequal development within the region, poverty in the originating country and a neoliberal economic model that leave workers no choice but to migrate, rely on intermediaries and accept disadvantaged working conditions and unequal power relations with recruitment agencies and employers, which, in turn, become mechanisms to maintain the inequalities in the migration cycle. Although the privatisation and deregulation of migration creates space for the emergence of recruitment agencies, the lack of effective monitoring and regulation of this middle space has become another source of costs, debt, unequal power relations and inequalities experienced by migrant workers. Therefore, state policy on migration and the labour market is at the core of the problem.

We suggest that the initial focus should be on effective regulation of the activities of recruitment agencies and employers. First, policies need to be developed in a transparent manner to inform aspiring migrants of their rights and the expenses that they should, and should not, have to pay. Information about the streamlining of the bureaucratic process which may enable migrants to negotiate paperwork without dependence on intermediaries would be a significant step towards reducing costs and risks.

Secondly, the current policy of restricting foreign migrants to work in certain sectors constitutes part of the 'stratified mobility' and 'stratified employment' through which state governance limits migrant workers' rights and opportunities and maintains a system of segmentation and transnational inequality (Mau, 2010). Given that migration contributes to development in both Nepal and Malaysia, we suggest that the Malaysian government should review migrant worker experiences with intermediaries in Nepal and Malaysia (Khor, 2023). The bilateral agreement on the Nepal-Malaysia corridor could be further improved to increase flexibility, allowing Nepali migrants to work in diverse sectors so that they are able to improve their incomes. Flexibility also assists migration intermediaries in match-making allowing them to fit the existing skills and knowledge of migrant workers to the needs of employers.

Finally, migrant well-being is crucial. The current norm of limiting workers' mobility to visit their families until their three-year contract ends is certainly not helpful from the human perspective. Hence, we suggest that a more favourable policy is needed to uphold the rights of migrant workers in the workplace. Considering that the UN Declaration on Human Rights guarantees the right to a family life, policies should ensure that migrant workers are free to visit their families in their home country. Migrant workers are defined as having equal rights to those of local workers in Malaysia. Therefore, they should also be entitled to the same paid leave. For example, allowing migrant workers to take paternity leave to visit their new-born child and wife and to take compassionate leave for funerals of family members would be a significant improvement. In practical terms, this means not only allowing travel but also helping to reduce travel costs by allowing leave-taking to be planned early enough to secure cheap flights.

As for the limits of this study, we are not able to incorporate data on migrant women due to space limits and the fact that we were unable to collect data on migrant intermediaries due to restrictions on mobility during the Covid-19 pandemic, when there was no mediating activity. Future research could potentially fill these gaps. Comparative studies of gender differences in perceptions of inequality in migration processes and outcomes could be illuminating, as could research into the perspectives of different stakeholders involved in mediated migration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported through The UKRI GCRF South to South Migration, Inequality and Development Hub or MIDEQ, which is a five-year research project funded by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1] and unpacks the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between migration and inequality in the context of Global South. We would

like to thank Prof. Monder Ram and Dr Eva Kasperova from Aston University for their helpful comments on early draft and two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments throughout the revision process. We also would like to thank the MIDEQ project and colleagues from MIDEQ who enriched our knowledge on migration intermediaries in many ways through interactions and conversations during collaboration with the MIDEQ project.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13232>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Our data collection process gained ethics approval from Monash University Malaysia (Project ID Number 22210) and Coventry University (Project Reference Number P91814).

GEOLOCATION INFORMATION

Nepal-Malaysia, Asia, South-South migration.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For more information on MIDEQ, please check <https://www.mideq.org/en/>; Yeoh, n.d., Malaysia Brief, MIDEQ, <https://www.mideq.org/en/resources-index-page/malaysia-brief/>.

² In this paper, blue-collar jobs or workers define as worker in manual jobs and labours. We believe the term 'low-skilled' or 'low-paid jobs', could not explain well the jobs that migrant workers are hired and use blue-collar jobs throughout the paper.

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How to cite this article: Sha, H. & Khor, Y. (2024) Cross-border mobility, inequality and migration intermediaries: Labour migration from Nepal to Malaysia. *International Migration*, 00, 1–17. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13232>