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## Women migrant workers still working under unclear, unfair contracts, study finds, despite availability of best-practice templates

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Joint Press Release

### *For immediate release*

*Hundreds of thousands of women migrant workers are labouring under contracts they don't understand, in languages they cannot read, or that provide inadequate protection of their rights, a study has found. This problem persists despite the available of templates such [as the Standards Terms of Employment \(STOE\)](#). The findings were discussed at a stakeholder consultation in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 20 and 21 of December.*

**(Kathmandu, Nepal)** – Hundreds of thousands of women migrant workers in the Middle East have signed employment contracts that they do not understand or do not adequately protect them against discrimination and abuse, according to a recent study carried out by UN Women and the International Organization for Migration with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

Templates for standard contracts are available, and in some cases referenced in national legislation or bilateral labour agreements, but are often not applied effectively, it found.

“There is a colossal gap between the Standard Terms of Employment template (STOE) and the employment contracts that are used for female labour migration,” the study said. “Without addressing the gaps that exist in the current female labour migration, applying an idealistic contract template is not feasible.”

The study focussed on migration from South Asian countries to the Middle East, which has been booming since oil-generated wealth started growing in the region in the 1970s. At present, India is the largest sending country (at 747,000 workers), followed by Pakistan (623,000 workers), Nepal (454,000 workers), Bangladesh (409,000 workers) and Sri Lanka (282,000 workers). But with this increase have come associated vulnerabilities, exploitation and abuse of migrant workers, particularly women.

“While it is widely acknowledged that migration has made multi-dimensional positive contribution on socio-economic development of countries of origin and destination, migration also brings in associated potential risks of exploitation and abuse of migrant workers, and women migrant workers are the most vulnerable ones,” said Paul Norton, Chief of Mission of IOM Nepal in his remarks at Inaugural Session.

He went on to say, “In order to accelerate progress towards the protection and promotion of rights of women migrant workers, there is need to take into account the regional and local priorities and responses.”



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“Formalizing women’s roles with official contracts is a basic component to ensure their access to safe and fair labour migration,” said Sukanya Thongthumrong, Officer-in-Charge of Regional Migration and Women’s Economic Empowerment of UN Women Asia-Pacific in her remarks.

[“The guiding gender-responsive template developed by UN Women and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation \(SDC\) can help move towards the implementation of fair, transparent and gender-sensitive STOE’s, which are a powerful tool to promote the ethical recruitment of women,”](#) she added.

[The template](#) could also be used as a basis for bilateral labour agreements between South Asian sending countries and the Middle Eastern host countries, the study found. The countries’ respective Labour Attachés play a critical role in this process, it said.

Officials, diplomats, delegates from international organizations and representatives of civil society were in the Nepalese capital on 20 and 21 December to discuss the findings of the report, and how best to include gender-sensitive priorities in such bilateral agreements in future.

“While we talk about the multi-dimensional contributions made by the labour migrants, they continue to face problems in the entire migration cycle, in the countries of origin, transit and destination, which starts from the recruitment phase, in the workplace and during return. In addition

“It is the shared responsibility of all the stakeholders – the private sector recruiting agencies, employers, countries of origin, transit and destination and the international agencies to protect workers from all forms of exploitation, to ensure safety, security, health and well-being of the migrants,” Laxman Prasad Mainali, Secretary of the Nepal Ministry of Labour and Employment in his remarks.

“Women migrant workers must be able to make informed choices about their employment, they must be able to understand and consent to their contracts, and be confident that those contracts meet certain standards, and will be respected or enforced,” said Thongthumrong. “Only then will they be able to make the most of the opportunities for themselves, their families, their futures and for the communities that host them,” she added.

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#### **About UN Women:**

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) works to eliminate discrimination against women and girls, to empower women, and to achieve equality between women and men.



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**About IOM:**

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) - a related organization of the United Nations - is the leading intergovernmental organization in the field of migration. It works to meet the growing operational challenges of migration, advance understanding of migration issues, encourage social and economic development through migration and uphold the well-being and human rights of migrants.