

How Long Can Nepal Blame Others for Its Woes?

By [Barbara Nimri Aziz](#)

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“Every family has someone outside.” Conversations about Nepal’s dysfunctional economy invariably lead to its four million citizens, mainly young men, working abroad. (Some say they number seven million– either way, a sizable slice in a population of 28 million.)

Those workers are migrants to Arab Gulf States, Malaysia and India. Their remittances, supporting millions of families at home, form the unhealthy backbone of [Nepal’s economy](#).

One hardly gets beyond the alarming statistic when a culprit is identified –“The Arabs”. Maybe a suppressed guilt is behind Nepalis’ litany of hardships which “Arabs” and by implication Muslims inflict on their four million compatriots. “Look how Nepali workers are mistreated!” “Someone should protect them.” “Hundreds arrive home in boxes!” “No human rights there.”

With no check on exaggerations and misinformation, prejudice continues unabated.

There’s abundant sympathy for exploited countrymen, while any suggestion that conditions within Nepal could be responsible for the exodus is absent. Don’t overseas remittances actually help workers’ families? There’s no acknowledgment of the benefits of employment, anywhere. Consider how many businesses, from rental properties to food services, are sustained by families receiving remittances. Kathmandu has hundreds of low cost private schools enrolling children of overseas workers seeking a better chance for the next generation. Where are the anecdotes of returned workers investing what they’ve saved to lift themselves out of an otherwise hopeless cycle of poverty?

All we hear are stale, decades-old, stories of “Arab exploitation”, stories that help conceal Nepal’s failure to take more responsibility for its citizens. Let’s be honest: workers look overseas for redress because of hopeless conditions at home.

Is it time for me to speak up? Having worked in Nepal for so long, I am viewed as a Tibetan-speaking American ‘friend’, not Arab or Muslim. Taking up the matter, finally, is not about defending Arabs or Islam; it’s about questioning this nation’s policies that allow prejudice against Arab people to distract from its responsibilities. As a ‘friend’, I call on Nepal to admit some liability for its hapless citizens. This country refuses to address fundamental structural problems, its neglect of industry, its shoddy public schools that even poor families are abandoning, its lack of agricultural support programs, its avoidable reliance on foreign aid.

Much of what we read about Arab state policies is indefensible. Their excesses are embarrassing for many like me who share Arab heritage and faith. Visiting homes in the Middle East, I myself feel embarrassed seeing how some overseas employees are treated (however mild and however much in common with domestic workers’ treatment in USA).

How can anyone defend workers toiling in extreme weather conditions without proper rest,

food, medical attention or protection from harm? How can one not demand action against abusive employers?

Fifteen years ago, with the collapse of an exploitative carpet manufacturing industry within Nepal (where nobody blamed Tibetan managers' treatment of child laborers) Malaysia and Arab Gulf countries became a market for Nepal's millions of jobless. Mainly young, poorly educated men, seeing overseas earnings as a solution to dim prospects at home, joined citizens from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan seeking work abroad. In desperation, they naively signed contracts that left them highly vulnerable and in debt.

Despite obstacles and fears, migrating is the easiest (sic) alternative to hopelessness at home. (This applies to educated Nepali professionals too.) Traveling to distant lands for work is an established pattern, with departures increasing by the month.

Ram is one of many who, working as drivers, cooks, carpenters, or plumbers earn as much as 150,000 Nepali rupees (about \$1,500) monthly. A few expatriates operate cafes catering to other workers. After 3-4 years they return to Nepal and purchase a car to hire out, or they invest in a business, usually with relatives (also returned migrants). Few resume agricultural work however. Abandoned fields met [Broughton Coburn](#) revisiting a Gurung village after three decades; it's a widespread phenomenon across Nepal, a result of villagers leaving for overseas. (Declining domestic production increases Nepal's unhealthy reliance on imports too.)

Yet, speaking with returned workers, I don't hear tales of despair. Indeed, they report they learned valuable work habits abroad and express pride in having bettered themselves. Past sufferings seem of less concern than the corruption they face at home when applying for licenses or finding an affordable school.

Migrants' positive experience is unarguably not 100%. Some recount heartbreaking stories: they were beset by thieves who stole their savings (cash transported in backpacks); they fell ill, exhausted savings, and returned empty-handed. Some die overseas—from heart attacks, in labor accidents or other mishaps, their bodies shipped back to a family burdened by debt. Some women experienced sexual abuse by employers or brokers. (To address this Nepal passed a law prohibiting women from working in Arab counties.)

My colleagues, [investigative journalist Devandra Bhattarai and filmmaker Kesang Tseten](#), were the first to report on the hardships of Nepal's overseas workers and mistreatment by Arab employers. Perhaps because of their exposés, difficulties of migrant workers were widely publicized and some checks were instituted. But anecdotal accounts of "Arab" malfeasance still define the public's view of Arabs and Muslims while Nepal itself avoids accountability for its people's hardships.

"Hundreds return in boxes every month" is how one colleague opens a discussion of his country's economy. My rejoinder about irresponsible government policies is met with silence.

Few Nepalis forget the [fate of twelve citizens working in Iraq in 2004](#); all were executed after being held hostage by extremists opposing the U.S. invasion. The shock those killings created in Nepal led to anti-Muslim riots; for weeks Nepali Muslims (a long-established minority in the country) feared leaving their homes. The nation had known nothing as cruel, even during their recent civil war. That image of massacred Nepalis feeds persistent anti-

Muslim feelings; it's the prism through which they view any story about migrants' hardships.

In contrast the public here retains its amnesia over the role of Nepali UN peacekeepers in the spread of cholera in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. The cholera strain, traced to Nepal through [Nepali peacekeepers stationed in Haiti, killed up to 9,000](#) and sickened tens of thousands. (When investigators confirmed the link, the United Nations denied victims compensation, while the Nepali press hardly covered the issue.)

Prejudice against Arabs festers despite more recent [investigative work by a leading Nepali news outlet](#). **The Nepali Times** has taken a more sobering look into [Nepal's migration crisis](#): first is joblessness at home; second, the government neither assists farmers to increase their yields nor helps develop markets for farm produce; third, policy planning does not include supporting manufacturing which would train and employ Nepal's least educated. Workers' problems, it notes, begin with officials demanding bribes for permits; applicants are next confronted by fraudulent Nepali labor brokers. Then, [Nepal's embassies](#) in Gulf States offer no help. **The Nepali Times** series also suggests that the government may seek to avoid unrest among jobless youths at home by encouraging their exodus.

Nepal's lack of accountability is endemic. Its avoidance of any responsibility is actually bolstered by a lenient and loyal foreign donor base. [China's disregard of Nepali ineptitude](#), noted in my recent article, is matched by other countries and aid agencies. Examples of failed programs due to corruption and incompetence on Nepal's side are abundant, and commonly overlooked. Perhaps overseas employment should therefore be viewed as Nepal's singularly successful aid program.

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Barbara Nimri Aziz is a New York based anthropologist and journalist. She is the author of "Tibetan Frontier Families" and numerous articles on Tibet and Nepal, has been working in Nepal in recent weeks. Find her work at www.RadioTahrir.org. She was a longtime producer at Pacifica-WBAI Radio in NY.

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