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المرسلة والمستقبلة للعمال
Abu Dhabi Dialogue among the Asian
Labour-Sending and Receiving Countries

Women, Climate Change and Labour Mobility in the Asia-GCC corridor

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Executive Summary

Climate change and global skills shortages are reshaping labour markets worldwide, including across South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. This report connects these two challenges and proposes a practical, gender-responsive solution: a skills mobility partnership that equips women in climate-sensitive livelihoods with the skills needed to obtain decent work in high-demand sectors, while helping both origin and destination countries address persistent labour gaps.

Across South Asia, climate change is already disrupting livelihoods. Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are among the world's most climate-vulnerable countries, facing sea-level rise, frequent disasters, extreme heat, and declining agricultural productivity.

Women are disproportionately affected because they have fewer assets, less decision-making power, and limited access to land, credit, and training. Their work in agriculture, aquaculture, and tea plantations is highly climate-sensitive and offers few pathways for adaptation. As risks intensify, more women migrate internally and internationally to cope, often through irregular and unsafe migration channels that increase the risk of exploitation and long-term economic insecurity.

At the same time, many destination countries are experiencing acute skills shortages. Ageing workforces, rapid technological change, and shifting labour market demands have created structural gaps across sectors. In the GCC region, demand is rising for skilled workers in hospitality, tourism, and fast-growing green and digital industries.

A skills mobility partnership aligns these two trends. Skills mobility partnership are structured agreements between labour-sending and labour-receiving countries that provide training, skills recognition, and safe migration pathways. When designed effectively – with fair recruitment, recognised skills, and safe working conditions – they generate a 'quadruple win' for workers, employers, destination countries, and origin countries.

This report proposes a skills mobility partnership focused on women from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka entering the hospitality sector in the GCC and at home. Hospitality offers structured roles, safer conditions than domestic work, and clear career pathways. The sector is rapidly evolving due to sustainability imperatives and technological innovation, creating demand for green competencies and digital literacy.

Drawing on IOM's partnership with the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, the report highlights practical lessons and ways that a partnership in the hospitality sector can be tailored for women from South Asia.

The report concludes that a climate-smart, gender-responsive skills mobility partnership can reduce women's exposure to irregular migration risks, enhance climate-resilient livelihoods, and help employers fill workforce shortages. It offers governments in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the GCC a concrete, mutually beneficial pathway to advance economic resilience, gender equality, and well-governed labour mobility.

1. Introduction

This report examines two important global trends. The first is the loss of livelihoods from the intensifying impacts of climate change, particularly in South Asia. Sectors as diverse as farming, tourism, and construction are already being transformed due to shifting weather patterns and rising sea levels. Those who cannot adapt will face the greatest economic losses, which is particularly concerning for women in lower-income countries since they often rely on climate-sensitive livelihoods yet have fewer resources, less protection, and more limited options to mitigate risks.¹

The second trend is the global skills shortage. There is a widening mismatch in many countries between the skills available in the workforce and those needed by employers. An aging workforce, rapid technological advancements, and changing market demands have created skills gaps that undermine performance and profits.

This report brings the two trends together and considers how a skills mobility partnership may offer a joint solution. A skills mobility partnership is an agreement between countries to train and move workers. It aims to achieve a 'quadruple win': workers acquire new skills; employers access a new pool of skilled workers; the destination country benefits from economic growth; and the origin country benefits from remittances and returning skilled workers.

This report proposes that a skills mobility partnership can create new employment pathways for women in climate-sensitive livelihoods and simultaneously address skills shortages. It demonstrates how this may be achieved – and is urgently needed – in the case of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. It focuses on the migration corridor between South Asia and the GCC region, one of the world's largest labour migration routes.

Already, women across South Asia are migrating for work due to livelihood disruptions caused by climate change.² However, a lack of transferable skills, limited financial resources, and unreliable information flows often pushes them into unsafe and irregular pathways and lower-skilled work, which increases the potential for exploitation and abuse.³

A skills mobility partnership offers a way to:

- mitigate protection risks by equipping women for higher-skilled work in better regulated fields;
- empower women to strengthen their family's resilience to climate change through remittances and new skills; and
- expand the pool of workers available to fill in-demand jobs.

This report begins by mapping the impact of climate change on women's livelihoods in South Asia. It then considers how a skills mobility partnership could provide a new income pathway, help families build climate resilience, and address skills shortages. It presents a case study of the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance as an example of how such a skills mobility partnership may work. Finally, the report closes with recommendations for governments in both sending countries in South Asia and receiving countries in the GCC region.

¹ Nursey-Bray, M. 2015. Gender, Governance, and Climate Change Adaptation. In: *Handbook of Climate Change Adaptation* (W. L. Filho, Ed.). Springer-Verlag, Berlin, 1077-1090.

² Dannecker, P. 2005. Transnational migration and the transformation of gender relations: The case of Bangladeshi labour migrants. *Current Sociology* 53(4): 655–674.

³ Sultana, H. and Ambreen, F. 2017. Factors influencing migration of female workers: a case of Bangladesh. *IZAA Journal of Migration and Development*, 7(1): 1-17.

2. Research objectives and methodology

This research paper aims to support the development of climate-smart, gender-responsive policies that enhance cooperation between labour-sending countries and labour-receiving countries. Specifically, it will:

1. Assess the impacts of climate change on women's livelihoods in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka;
2. Explore how skills mobility partnerships could lead to increased employment of women migrant workers in the hospitality sector in the GCC region, considering also how green skills and digitalisation will be integrated;
3. Identify case studies that offer practical guidance and insights; and
4. Recommend policy interventions to support women's economic resilience and well-governed labour mobility in the face of climate change.

The report draws on a comprehensive desk review of academic, policy, and grey literature. Interviews were conducted in November and December 2025 with twelve IOM staff based in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, as well as two IOM technical specialists, and a representative of the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance.

3. Climate change impacts in South Asia

Although climate change is a global problem, it affects some regions more than others. Higher exposure to climatic risks, deeper pre-existing structural vulnerabilities, and comparatively lower adaptive capacity create 'hotspots,' several of which are in South Asia.

Asia is heating up at twice the average global rate.⁴ This is causing significant ecological shifts such as changes in growing seasons, loss of habitats, and an increase in invasive species. In South Asia, the impact of these changes is heightened because of socio-economic factors: the large population, urban density, heavy reliance on climate-sensitive livelihoods, and a high incidence of poverty and food insecurity.

Rising sea levels threaten the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people who live in low-elevation coast zones across South Asia.⁵ Many of these areas are agricultural heartlands and vital for food security.

Asia-Pacific is also the world's most disaster-hit region.⁶ Floods, storm surges, cyclones, and heavy rain are devastating for livelihoods and cause widespread damage and displacement, as well as food and water insecurity.⁷ Disasters are responsible for the internal displacement of millions of people, detailed below.

Internal displacement due to disaster events, between 2008 and 2022		
Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
Average of 1.1 million internal displacements each year (floods, landslides, cyclones) ⁸	4.6 million internal displacements (earthquakes, floods) ⁹	Over 3.4 million internal displacements from 339 disaster events (floods, landslides, and cyclones) ¹⁰

⁴ World Meteorological Organization. 2025. Rising temperature and extreme weather hit Asia hard. 23 June.

⁵ Cosby, A. G. et al. 2024. Accelerating growth of human coastal populations at the global and continent levels: *Scientific Reports* 14, 22489.

⁶ World Meteorological Organization. 2025. Rising temperature and extreme weather hit Asia hard. 23 June.

⁷ Maharjan et al. 2020. Migration and Household Adaptation in Climate-Sensitive Hotspots in South Asia, *Current Climate Change Reports* 6:1–16.

⁸ IOM and IDMC. March 2024. Disaster displacement indicators: Supporting government leadership on preparedness, response, recovery and resilience.

⁹ Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkley, n.d. Introduction to Nepal, in *Climate crisis, displacement, and the right to stay*.

¹⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Country Profile: Sri Lanka.

Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are already experiencing disruptions due to climate change, from both rapid-onset climate hazards and slow-onset climate hazards.

Rapid-onset climate hazards		
Bangladesh ¹¹	Nepal ¹²	Sri Lanka ¹³
Cyclones, floods, landslides	Glacier melt, landslides, floods	Cyclones, floods, landslides

Slow-onset climate hazards		
Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
Sea-level rise, changing rainfall patterns and extreme precipitation, drought, extreme heat	Drought, soil erosion, heatwaves	Sea-level rise, drought, extreme heat, changing rainfall patterns and extreme precipitation

All three countries fall within the top 'Red Zone' countries identified by the Climate Finance Vulnerability Index. This means they are at high risk of climate hazards but lack the resources needed to prevent, recover from, and rebuild after climate impacts.¹⁴ All three countries – but particularly Bangladesh – are also considered highly vulnerable to climate hazards with a pressing need for investment to improve readiness by the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN).¹⁵

Comparative climate vulnerability		
Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
136 of 188 on the Climate Finance Vulnerability Index	141 of 188 on the Climate Finance Vulnerability Index	135 of 188 on the Climate Finance Vulnerability Index
176 of 187 ¹⁶ on the Notre Dame Index	126 of 187 ¹⁷ on the Notre Dame Index	110 of 187 ¹⁸ on the Notre Dame Index

¹¹ The World Bank Group. 2024. Climate Risk Profile: Bangladesh.

¹² The World Bank Group. 2024. Climate Risk Profile: Nepal.

¹³ The World Bank Group. 2024. Climate Risk Profile: Sri Lanka.

¹⁴ The Climate Finance Vulnerability Index, published in 2025, identifies countries at highest risk of climate hazards (such as cyclones, floods, droughts, earthquakes) but which are unable to take adequate prevention, recovery, and rebuilding actions due to a lack of access to finance. See: <https://clifvi.org/>

¹⁵ The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) uses 45 indicators to summarize the vulnerability and readiness of countries to climate disruption.

¹⁶ Bangladesh is the 18th most vulnerable country and the 171st most ready country.

¹⁷ Nepal is the 54th most vulnerable country and the 117th most ready country.

¹⁸ Sri Lanka is the 63rd most vulnerable country and the 105th most ready country.

4. Climate change and livelihoods in South Asia

Climate change is predicted to cause significant loss of livelihoods across Asia, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. Coastal communities and workers dependent on agriculture and fisheries are disproportionately affected. The economic cost of disasters is particularly high in Bangladesh and Nepal, according to the Global Climate Risk Index, which ranks Bangladesh as seventh and Nepal as tenth in the world in terms of the economic cost of disasters.¹⁹

Agriculture is the sector most vulnerable to climate impacts. Across South Asia, more than 58 percent of agricultural areas are affected by multiple climate hazards.²⁰ These hazards – such as heat, salinization, irregular rainfall, and disasters – stop people from working, devastate the land, and damage infrastructure. This lowers crop productivity and triggers both economic losses and livelihood instability. Falling agricultural production also drives food prices up, threatening the region's future food security.

Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka all rely heavily on agriculture, and all three economies are expected to shrink by 2050 due to climate-driven losses. Losses are predicted to be strongest in Sri Lanka, (3.86 per cent decline in GDP), followed by Bangladesh (3.6 per cent decline in GDP) and Nepal (2.23 per cent decline in GDP).²¹

The main cause of agricultural decline is heat stress, which reduces workers' productivity. Crop damage from extreme heat and declining land quality due to rising sea levels also contribute.

Estimated crop productivity changes, sea level rise impacts and labour productivity changes ²²					
Region	% change in crop productivity			% change in land productivity due to sea level rise	% change in labour productivity
	Maize	Wheat	Rice		
Bangladesh	-5.00%	-5.20%	-2.60%	-0.0005	-11.12%
Nepal	-4.50%	-5.40%	-2.70%	0.0000	-3.53%
Sri Lanka	-7.00%	-4.40%	-2.20%	-0.0041	-17.23%
Global average	-5.37%	-5.05%	-2.53%	-0.0542	-8.74%

Smallholder farmers often have low capacity to adapt to rising climate risks because they rely heavily on natural resources and have limited financial and physical assets. Their situation becomes even more difficult when sudden hazards destroy crops. Limited access to credit and high input costs trap farmers in debt, and this cycle of climate vulnerability and financial hardship prevents them from investing in adaptation strategies like drought-resistant crops or modern technologies, threatening food security and livelihoods.²³

¹⁹ For the period 2000-2019. Between 2000 and 2019, Nepal experienced 191 extreme weather events and Bangladesh experienced 185. See: Eckstein, D., Künzel, V. and Schäfer, L. 2021. Global Climate Risk Index 2021. Who suffers Most from Extreme Weather Events? Weather-related Loss Events in 2019 and 2000-2019. Briefing Paper, Germanwatch, Bonn.

²⁰ Amarnath, G.; Alahacoon, N.; Smakhtin, V.; Aggarwal, P. 2017. Mapping multiple climate-related hazards in South Asia. Research Report 170. International Water Management Institute: Colombo.

²¹ These figures were calculated using a global CGE model known as the GTAP-E, which is an energy-environment extension of the base model Global Trade Analysis Project (GTAP). All GDP projections, outputs, prices and consumption are reported as a percentage deviation from the 2015 baseline scenario. These modelled scenarios may vary depending on mitigation/adaptation efforts. See:

Abeysekara, W.C.S.M., Siriwardana, M. & Meng, S. 2024. Economic consequences of climate change impacts on South Asian agriculture: A computable general equilibrium analysis. *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 68, 77–100.

²² Abeysekara, W.C.S.M., Siriwardana, M. & Meng, S. 2024. Economic consequences of climate change impacts on South Asian agriculture: A computable general equilibrium analysis. *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 68, 77–100.

²³ Bhatta, G. D., Aggarwal, P. K., Poudel, S., & Belgrave, D. A. 2015. Climate-induced migration in South Asia: Migration decisions and the gender dimensions of adverse climatic events. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 10(4): 1-23.

Other climate-sensitive livelihoods will also experience losses due to climate change:

- **Capture fisheries and aquaculture** in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka will face losses due to saltwater intrusion, loss of mangroves, wetlands, and nursey grounds, growth of new invasive species, damage to infrastructure by disasters, and increased cost of inputs.²⁴
- **Tea plantations** face existential threat due to erratic weather, increased pests and diseases, and shrinking growing areas, as well as reduced yields and tea leaf quality.²⁵
- **Handicraft production** is also affected by extreme weather events, as they disrupt natural supply chains for traditional materials and make it difficult for artisans to access and process raw resources like natural fibres and dyes.²⁶

5. Impacts on women's livelihoods in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka

Climate change affects some groups more severely than others and is particularly acute for people who already lack resources, face discrimination, or have little influence over decisions. In this way climate change acts as a crisis multiplier, deepening existing social and economic inequalities. Across South Asia, women are especially vulnerable due to unequal gender norms and practices that limit their access to resources and constrain their ability to reduce risk.²⁷ Recognising these inequalities is the first step toward addressing them.

Agriculture

Women make up a large share of agricultural labour across South Asia, and agriculture is often their main source of employment. As of 2023, 60 per cent of all economically active women across South Asia were engaged in the agricultural sector, including farming, forestry, and fishing. In Nepal, this figure rises to 73 per cent of all economically active women, versus 53 per cent in Bangladesh and 26 per cent in Sri Lanka.²⁸

Women's involvement in farming across South Asia has increased in recent decades. As younger men migrate to cities or overseas in search of better work, rural communities are left with fewer male labourers, contributing to the feminisation of agriculture.²⁹ Women who once held mainly supportive roles are now taking on more active responsibilities to sustain their households.

Most women working in agriculture do so in the informal sector, meaning they typically lack social protection, insurance, and legal safeguards.³⁰ Limited access to land, resources, and opportunities leaves them with fewer ways to cope with shocks and increases their risk of poverty.³¹ Because most women in the three focus countries do not own land, they are often excluded from credit and government subsidies.³² Women also juggle farming with family responsibilities and face safety concerns after dark, making it harder for them to adjust their work hours to account for climate change.³³ This increases their exposure to risks such as heat stress.

²⁴ Sriskanthan, G. & Funge-Smith, S. J. 2011. The potential impact of climate change on fisheries and aquaculture in the Asian region. FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Thailand. RAP Publication 2011/16.

²⁵ Chang, K. and Brattlof, M. 2015. Socio-economic implications of climate change for tea producing countries. FAO, Rome.

²⁶ The British Council and Fashion Revolution India. 2023. Craft in the Age of Climate Crisis: Climate Resilience through Craft in India: A Path to Sustainability.

²⁷ Sangwan, G., Brahmachari, D. 2023. Climate Change Disasters and Impact on Women in South Asia. In: Singh, A. (eds) *International Handbook of Disaster Research*. Springer, Singapore.

²⁸ WorldBank Group, 2023, based on [ILO Modelled Estimates database](#) (ILOEST), International Labour Organization (ILO).

²⁹ Southard, E. and Randell, H. 2022. Climate change, agrarian distress, and the feminization of agriculture in South Asia. *Rural Sociology*. 87(3): 873-900.

³⁰ Estimates suggest around 75% of women's work is informal in some regions. See: Asian Development Bank and International Labour Organization. 2023. Where women work in Asia and the Pacific: Implications for policies, equity and inclusive growth.

³¹ Barua et al, 2024. Women's livelihood vulnerabilities in the light of climate change effects in the coastal areas of Bangladesh.

³² Sharma, A. 2016. Climate Change Instability and Gender Vulnerability in Nepal: A Case Study on the Himalayan Region. *International Development, Community and Environment*. 37.

³³ Interview with IOM staff.

Fishing and Aquaculture

While men typically dominate fish catching or harvesting, women often outnumber men in the non-catch sector links of the supply chain, and are active in post-harvest, processing, marketing, cleaning, sorting, and drying. The number of women in the workforce is substantial.³⁴ In Bangladesh, 60 per cent of the aquaculture workforce and 10 per cent of those employed in fisheries are women, and in rural and coastal areas, 30 per cent of all women are directly or indirectly engaged in small-scale fisheries.³⁵ In Sri Lanka, women make up approximately 7 per cent of the marine fishing sector and 5 per cent of the labour in aquaculture.³⁶

However, women in the fishing and aquaculture sectors struggle to secure their rights as workers because their role is often unrecognized. They have limited or no access to social security, capital and credit, and face hardships in securing land rights and access to fishery resources.³⁷ For example, in Bangladesh, only 4 per cent of women hold official fisher ID cards, compared with 96 per cent of men. That means many institutional benefits, subsidies, disaster compensation, or resource allocation tied to 'fisher identity' exclude women.³⁸ Without support to upskill or a safety net to rely on, women's exposure to risk skyrockets.

Tea plantations

South Asia is a major hub for tea production, and the tea sector provides direct and indirect employment to millions of workers. Women constitute at least 50 per cent of the tea plantation workforce in South Asia. The labor-intensive plucking of tea is chiefly undertaken by women workers, while men dominate factory work and supervisory positions.³⁹

The tea sector is highly sensitive to climate change. The nature of tea plants and plantations means there is lengthy pre-harvesting periods and limited opportunities for crop switching.⁴⁰ In addition, workers – especially those who pluck tea – are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Earnings for tea pluckers are a complex combination of daily rates and productivity-based payments.⁴¹ Workers (almost all of whom are women) are penalised with pay cuts if they fail to meet daily quotas. This applies even on days of extreme heat when outdoor work carries serious health risks, or when the weight of tea leaves has decreased due to drought.⁴²

Tea plantation work is marked by low pay and poor conditions,⁴³ and plantation workers typically come from marginalized backgrounds such as the Dalits of Indian Tamil descent.⁴⁴ With few alternative livelihoods, women tea pluckers are especially vulnerable to climate impacts. By 2050, changes in rainfall are expected to cut labour demand by about 1.17 million person-days per year in Sri Lanka's tea sector, with significant social and welfare implications for the Indian Tamil women who make up most of the workforce.⁴⁵

³⁴ WorldFish, 2016. Why Gender Equality Matters in Fisheries and Aquaculture.

³⁵ Munir, M.M.H. 2020. Bangladesh: Making women in fishing visible. *International Collective in Support of Fishworkers*, Yemaya Newsletter, Issue 62. December.

³⁶ Dahlan, M.F., Reji, S., Javid, J. 2024. Empowering women in Sri Lankan fisheries and aquaculture: Unlocking opportunities for growth. *Aqua* 2024.

³⁷ Correa, M. 2015. Women play a crucial role in marine environments and fisheries economies. UN Women Asia and the Pacific.

³⁸ TBS Report. 2024. Call for recognition, policy inclusion of women in fisheries. *The Business Standard*. 3 July.

³⁹ Sharma, A. 2016. Female Labour in Tea Plantations: Labour Process and Labour Control. In Fernandez, B., Gopal, M., and Ruthven, O. *Land, Labour and Livelihoods. Indian Women's Perspectives*. 111–131. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴⁰ Gunathilaka, R.P.D., Smart, J.C.R., Fleming, C.M. and Hasan, S. 2018. The impact of climate change on labour demand in the plantation sector: the case of tea production in Sri Lanka. *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 62: 480-500.

⁴¹ Siegmann, K. A. 2022. Harvesting consent: South Asian tea plantation workers' experience of Fairtrade certification. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 50(5), 2050–2074.

⁴² Rizwie, R., Dhar, A. 2025. As the global tea demand booms, South Asian workers fight climate change. *Asian Dispatch*. July.

⁴³ Shrestha, S., Dhar, S., Prabakaran, S., 2022. South Asia Report: Plight of tea plantation workers and smallholder farmers. South Asia Alliance for Poverty (SAAPE).

⁴⁴ International Dalit Solidarity Network. N.d. Tea Plantation workers in Sri Lanka.

⁴⁵ Gunathilaka, R.P.D., Smart, J.C.R., Fleming, C.M. and Hasan, S. 2018. The impact of climate change on labour demand in the plantation sector: the case of tea production in Sri Lanka. *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 62: 480-500.

6. Migration as an adaptation strategy

Migration becomes an adaptation strategy for households affected by climate change when it lowers climate risk and improves well-being. Labour migration contributes to climate resilience in two main ways: through remittances, which boost household resources, reduce economic vulnerability, and diversify income; and via skills development, when migrants return with new skills or knowledge that can enhance resilience.

It is difficult to isolate climate change as the cause of labour migration globally, and even more so in South Asia. Labour mobility has been an adaptation strategy in South Asia for centuries, offering a way to diversify income beyond agriculture and fishing.⁴⁶ This makes it difficult to distinguish new patterns from old. In addition, while disasters and slow-onset events may influence migration, they occur alongside economic, social, and political factors that also compel people to move. As such, there is no easy way to identify how many people have migrated under the influence of climate change or to predict how many may migrate in future.

Despite these complexities, there is growing evidence that climate change is contributing to migration, as people across South Asia move in search of new income as traditional, climate-sensitive livelihoods become harder to sustain. More affluent households generally choose permanent migration, whereas households with lower income are more likely to undertake short-term migration.⁴⁷

Climate-related labour mobility is driven by both gradual environmental changes and rapid-onset disasters. Rural-to-urban and coastal migration are also accelerating, and women are forming a growing share of those who move. The following sections examine these trends in more detail.

Slow-onset climate hazards and disaster-induced migration

- Both slow-onset and rapid-onset climate hazards are influencing households in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka to use migration as an adaptation strategy.
- Slow-onset hazards, including drought and sea-level rise, gradually erode livelihoods like farming, making them difficult or impossible to sustain.
- Rapid-onset disasters, including cyclones and landslides, can wipe out income sources overnight; when these shocks occur repeatedly, families may choose to migrate, temporarily or permanently, in search of stability, safety, and work.⁴⁸

Rural to urban migration

- Rural households across all focus countries are increasingly relying on a mix of farm and non-farm work as they diversify their income sources.
- Rural to urban migration is reshaping rural economies, with employment gradually shifting from agriculture toward non-farm activities. Much of this transition happens within rural areas themselves, especially those near cities, rather than through large-scale permanent moves to urban centres.⁴⁹
- Climate impacts such as droughts, floods, and irregular rainfall are reducing agricultural productivity and undermining ecosystem-based livelihoods, driving this shift.⁵⁰
- Specific pressures – including crop failure, rising sea levels, salinisation, and land loss due to erosion and flooding – are making it harder to sustain farming, pushing people to seek alternative work elsewhere.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Maharjan et al. 2020. Migration and Household Adaptation in Climate-Sensitive Hotspots in South Asia, *Current Climate Change Reports* 6:1–16.

⁴⁷ Kumar, K. S. K., & Viswanathan, B. 2012. Weather variability and agriculture: Implications for long and short-term migration in India. Working Paper No. 220. Delhi, India: Delhi School of Economics.

⁴⁸ Anderson T, Shamsuddoha MD, Dixit A. 2016. Climate change knows no borders: an analysis of climate-induced migration, protection gaps and need for solidarity in South Asia. Action Aid.

⁴⁹ Sen, B., Dorosh, P., Ahmed, M. 2021. Moving out of agriculture in Bangladesh: The role of farm, non-farm and mixed households, *World Development*, 144, 105479.

⁵⁰ Maharjan et al. 2020. Migration and Household Adaptation in Climate-Sensitive Hotspots in South Asia, *Current Climate Change Reports* 6:1–16.

⁵¹ ActionAid, 2018. Climate change knows no borders: an analysis of climate-induced migration, protection gaps, and need for solidarity.

Coastal migration

- In Bangladesh, coastal districts are among the highest out-migration zones. This includes women from coastal and fishing families who have lost their livelihoods due to declining fish stocks and the salinisation of ponds.⁵²
- In Sri Lanka, the Bureau of Foreign Employment reports that a significant share of female migrant workers originate from coastal districts that serve as major fishing hubs, such as Puttalam, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Galle.
- In Nepal, some women migrants come from agriculture- or aquaculture-dependent districts where climate variability and pond failure have reduced income, such as Chitwan, Rupandeshi, Sundari, and Nawalparasi.

Women and international labour migration

In most cases, it is men who migrate internationally. However, there is a significant cohort of new migrant women migrating for work each year.

Number of new women labour migrants in 2022 ⁵³		
Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
105,466 women	49,128 women	41,154 women

% of all international labour migrants		
Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
Women accounted for 5% of all officially registered migrant workers in 2024.	Women accounted for 8.5% of all officially registered migrant workers in 2019. ⁵⁴	Women accounted for 40% of all officially registered migrant workers in 2022. ⁵⁵

The same pattern appears in all three countries: women are migrating in greater numbers.

Women labour migration trends		
Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
From 2004 to 2017, the number of women migrating annually for work increased by 260%. ⁵⁶ Registration of new women migrant workers doubled from 2023 to 2024: from 2.8% to 4.8%. ⁵⁷	From 2011 to 2015, work permits for women migrants increased by 106%, compared to an increase of only 39% for men. ⁵⁸	From the 1990s to 2008, women accounted for more than 70% of the total number of migrant workers. From 2008, the number of women migrant workers decreased due to various policies, to around 40% overall. ⁵⁹

⁵² Mostafa A.R. Hossain, Munir Ahmed, Elena Ojea, Jose A. Fernandes, 2018. Impacts and responses to environmental change in coastal livelihoods of south-west Bangladesh, *Science of The Total Environment*, 637–638, pp 954-970; Sagar, H. 2025. Tides of struggle: The unseen burden of climate change on coastal workers in Bangladesh. *Friendrich Ebert Stiftung*. 30 June.

⁵³ Salsabeel, N., Leera, F.U. 2025. The Irregular Landscape of Migration and Gender in South Asia: Historical and Contemporary Patterns. In: Ullah, A.A. (eds) *Handbook of Migration, International Relations and Security in Asia*. Springer, Singapore.

⁵⁴ Data source is the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, quoted in: Salsabeel, N., Leera, F.U. 2025. The Irregular Landscape of Migration and Gender in South Asia: Historical and Contemporary Patterns. In: Ullah, A.A. (eds) *Handbook of Migration, International Relations and Security in Asia*. Springer, Singapore.

⁵⁵ 124,091 of 311,056 total, according to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment – in Salsabeel, N., Leera, F.U. 2025. The Irregular Landscape of Migration and Gender in South Asia: Historical and Contemporary Patterns. In: Ullah, A.A. (eds) *Handbook of Migration, International Relations and Security in Asia*. Springer, Singapore.

⁵⁶ Shamim, I. 2018. Women and Migration in Bangladesh. UN Women

⁵⁷ Staff correspondent, 2025. BD's migration falls, female workforce soars in 2024: Report. 6 February.

⁵⁸ Data source is Government of Nepal, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, in UN Women, 2018, Returning home: Challenges and opportunities for women migrant workers in the Nepali labour market.

⁵⁹ Weerasinghe, T., Wijewantha, P., 2023. Female migrant domestic workers: Challenges and prospects in Sri Lankan perspective. *Standing Committee on Applied Research and Knowledge Centre*.

7. Factors that shape migration decisions

Decisions around migration are influenced by a range of economic, cultural, and social factors. Understanding how these factors enable or constrain migration is key to facilitating women's dignified movement. The factors below reflect common trends across Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, with differences noted.

Household risk strategy

In much of the global South, migration decisions are made at the family level, not by individuals.⁶⁰ High costs make international migration a long-term household investment, used to share risk and diversify income. International migration is extraordinarily costly, especially for poorer families, and is treated as a long-term household investment, used to share risk and diversify income.⁶¹ Families determine who migrates and weigh domestic and international options based on expected costs, risks, and returns.

Patriarchal norms and gendered roles mean that men usually make major household decisions. Women's voices, especially in rural areas, may be limited in choices about migration or work. Even so, women can and do influence these decisions. Their level of influence depends on factors such as their family position, marital status, poverty level of the household, and access to household resources.⁶²

Social norms and gendered roles mean women must rely more on family support when they migrate. They are usually responsible for childcare and other caregiving, so alternatives must be arranged not only for the migration period but also for the many trips needed for a passport, recruitment, and training. Culturally imposed movement restrictions and limited familiarity with these systems also mean women often need family help to obtain a passport and register with a recruitment agency.⁶³

Social expectations

Across South Asia, women are often expected to keep their social and economic activities close to the home and have limited opportunities to earn independently.⁶⁴ Heavy caregiving duties restrict their mobility even more – not just for migration, but also for attending skills training. These norms also fuel stigma towards women who migrate.⁶⁵

Yet gender norms are not static: they can and do change. Providing information to correct misconceptions about the nature of the job and the workplace, for example, can improve short-term attitudes towards women's employment, while opportunities and empowerment may lead to longer-term shifts in norms and values. The Bangladeshi ready-made garments industry is a case in point: it created formal employment for millions of women with limited education and, in the process, has improved societal attitudes towards women working outside the home.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Fischer P., Reiner, M., Straubhaar, T. 1997. Chapter 3: Should I stay or should I go? In: Hammar T, et al., eds. *International Migration, Immobility and Development*. Oxford: Berg Press.

⁶¹ Clemens, M., Ogden, T. 2014. Migration as a strategy for household finance. Center for Global Development, Working Paper, February.

⁶² Afsar, R. 2011. Contextualizing Gender and Migration in South Asia: Critical Insights: Critical Insights. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 15(3), 389-410.

⁶³ Interviews with IOM staff across Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, based on staff experience in community engagement.

⁶⁴ Action Aid, 2021. Invisible women: A gender analysis of climate-induced migration in South Asia.

⁶⁵ Bélanger, D., & Rahman, M. 2013. Migrating against all the odds: International labour migration of Bangladeshi women. *Current Sociology*, 61(3), 356-373.

⁶⁶ Rahman, S., Khan, W. R., Shahrier, S., & Akbar, S. W. 2023. Study on the decline of women workers in the textile industry in Bangladesh. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Social norms can also vary between regions in a single country. For example:

- In Bangladesh, women's migration rates are higher in the Barisal and Khulna divisions of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta. Loss of local livelihoods and repeated climate disasters are pushing women to move, while growing acceptance of women pursuing work or education is making migration more possible.⁶⁷
- In Sri Lanka, women from regions with more conservative cultural norms such as the North Central Province find it more difficult to work in the hospitality industry. Conversely, regions with more diverse cultural makeups, such as the Eastern Province, show more progressive attitudes.⁶⁸
- In Nepal, Karnali and Sudurpashchim provinces are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts such as water scarcity, floods, and food insecurity, which has influenced these regions to become key sources of migration.⁶⁹

Economic pressures

Women migrant workers from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka usually come from poor families, even more so than migrant men. Most do not own land, rely on a single earning member, and have lower family incomes overall.⁷⁰ These patterns reflect cultural norms that position men as breadwinners and women as homemakers, meaning women who migrate often do so out of deep financial need.⁷¹ Across all three countries, women commonly cite financial pressure as the main reason for migrating.⁷²

Economic pressures have shaken up cultural norms that confine women to the home, as seen in the expansion of the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh.⁷³ The industry employs around 4 million workers, most of whom are rural-to-urban women migrants and come from areas where floods, drought, storms, and erosion have undermined agricultural livelihoods.⁷⁴

Skills gap

Women are excluded from many employment opportunities in South Asia due to cultural and social norms. When agriculture becomes unviable, they are often pushed into precarious informal work. Migration can create new opportunities, but most women migrating from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka end up in low-skilled domestic or care roles due to limited recognised skills.

Upskilling remains difficult, especially for women from poorer families. Training centres are mostly located in urban areas, while social restrictions and caregiving duties limit women's mobility. Rural training facilities also often lack the digital and technical resources and training courses needed for meaningful skills development.

Prospects on return

For migration to serve as a true adaptation strategy, what happens after return must be considered. The cycle of return and re-migration can erode the economic gains of migration. In all three focus countries, many women are unemployed when they come home.

⁶⁷ Maharjan et al, Migration and Household Adaptation in Climate-Sensitive Hotspots in South Asia, Current Climate Change Reports (2020) 6:1–16.

⁶⁸ Perera., P., Wasantha, H., Lakshan, P., Bandara, W. 2024. Barriers to female participation in Sri Lanka's hotel industry: A qualitative exploration of cultural, social, and organizational challenges. *International Journal on Recent Trends in Business and Tourism*. 8(4).

⁶⁹ IOM, 2024. *Research on human security-centred and gender-responsive migration, environment and climate change in Nepal*. IOM, Kathmandu.

⁷⁰ Afsar, R., 2009. Unravelling the vicious cycle of recruitment: labour migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf States. ILO Working Papers, International Labour Organization.

⁷¹ Heintz, J., Kabeer, N., & Mahmud, S. 2018. Cultural norms, economic incentives and women's labour market behaviour: empirical insights from Bangladesh. *Oxford Development Studies*, 46(2), 266–289.

⁷² Afsar, R. 2011. Contextualizing Gender and Migration in South Asia: Critical Insights: Critical Insights. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 15(3), 389-410.

⁷³ Jones, G. W. 2020. New patterns of female migration in South Asia. *Asian Population Studies*, 16(1), 1-4.

⁷⁴ Plowman, A. 2016. Climate change, women and Bangladesh's disaster capitalism. *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres*.

Percentage of women migrants unemployed on return		
Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka
60% of women migrants are unemployed on return. ⁷⁵	82% of women migrants are unemployed upon return ⁷⁶	At least 30% of women migrants are unemployed upon return. ⁷⁷

In all three countries, women are less likely than men to find work when they return. They face greater barriers to re-entering local labour markets due to caregiving responsibilities, limited decent work options, and difficulty accessing support services such as employment programmes or concessional loans. The lack of internationally recognized certifications also restricts their ability to obtain better-paid jobs abroad, keeping many in a cycle of low wages.

Women may also face stigma at home, especially if they are seen as having broken cultural norms. This stigma is even stronger for those who return early because of exploitation or abuse.⁷⁸

8. What solutions does a skills mobility partnership offer?

Climate change is disrupting women's livelihoods and may push them to accept forms of labour that are exploitative and risky. Creating regular job pathways and investing in women's skills can improve access to decent work and reduce the risks of abuse, forced labour, and trafficking. One way to achieve this is through a skills mobility partnership. The design of such a partnership is vital, since a poorly designed scheme may create risks or unintended negative outcomes.

A skills mobility partnership is a formal agreement between two or more countries that creates a framework for training and moving skilled workers.⁷⁹ It has three core components:

- 1) **Skills development and recognition:** migrants gain new skills or upgrade existing ones, building on prior experience and training.
- 2) **Structured mobility:** movement is arranged through legal migration channels, with training and matching costs shared by destination countries and/or employers. These partnerships are usually established through bilateral agreements linking training, skills recognition, and mobility.
- 3) **Mutual benefit:** creating a "quadruple win" for origin countries, destination countries, employers, and workers.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Uddin, A. 2023. Rehabilitation and reintegration of Bangladeshi migrant workers in post-COVID-19 pandemic situation: Process and challenges. GOALS, ILO, ASEA, MUC-BC.

⁷⁶ Goals, SDC, UN Women. 2023. Women migrant workers from Nepal: Key statistics.

⁷⁷ Siriwardhane, D., De Silva, I, De Silva, R. 2024. Post-return Economic Reintegration of Temporary Contract Labour Migrants: The Case of Sri Lanka.

⁷⁸ Evertsen, K. F., & van der Geest, K. 2020. Gender, environment and migration in Bangladesh. *Climate and Development*, 12(1), 12-22.

⁷⁹ IOM, n.d. Skills mobility partnerships: Towards a global approach to skills development and labour mobility.

⁸⁰ Gagnon, J. (2024). Integrating development objectives into skills mobility partnerships. OECD Development Centre, 7th Abu Dhabi Dialogue Ministerial Consultation, 10-11 February 2024.

Each stakeholder plays a key role in making the partnership effective.

Workers	Employers & Industry Bodies	Origin countries	Destination countries
Responsibilities	Responsibilities	Responsibilities	Responsibilities
• Participate in training • Uphold contractual obligations • Bring new skills and experiences back to their communities	• Identify skill gaps and workforce needs • Co-invest in training and certification aligned with industry standards • Offer jobs, apprenticeships, on-the-job training • Ensure ethical recruitment practices	• Invest in training and skills development • Negotiate agreements to protect workers' rights abroad • Facilitate reintegration and recognition of skills when workers return	• Provide fair and transparent migration pathways • Ensure recognition of qualifications • Safeguard decent work conditions and labour rights • Co-invest in training programs
Benefits	Benefits	Benefits	Benefits
• Access to decent jobs abroad • Higher wages • Professional development • Improved career prospects at home and abroad	• Reliable supply of work-ready employees • Reduced training costs at destination • Higher retention and lower turnover • Stronger corporate reputation through ethical hiring	• Reduced unemployment • Increased household income through remittances • Skills transfer and improved human capital • More climate-resilient households	• Access to workers with the skills required to fill shortages • Strengthened bilateral relations • Reduced irregular migration pressures

9. Skills mobility partnership and the hospitality sector

IOM and ILO have published a range of guidance materials on skills mobility partnerships.⁸¹ This section identifies ways to tailor those materials to a skills mobility partnership in the hospitality sector, specific to women from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka whose households were previously engaged in climate-sensitive livelihoods such as farming. These considerations apply to both hotels in the countries of origin (Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and hotels in migrant-receiving countries in the GCC region.

⁸¹ Key documents include: IOM, 2023. Skills Mobility Partnerships: Recommendations and Guidance for Policymakers and Practitioners. IOM, Geneva; and ILO, 2020. Guidelines for skills partnerships for migration; and IOM, 2020. IRIS Ethical Recruitment Training.

Demand for hospitality workers and employer buy-in

For a skills mobility partnership to succeed, there must be real employer demand and a genuine commitment to hiring from overseas. Public attitudes and political backing help too. Hospitality is one sector where these conditions align:

- There is a strong demand for hospitality workers in the GCC region: tourism is expanding fast, and Middle East travel-tourism is expected to support 7.7m jobs in 2025 and contribute a GDP of \$367 billion.⁸²
- The hospitality sector is also strong and growing in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. In 2021, the hospitality sector employed more than 74 million workers in Asia and the Pacific, a nearly four-fold increase from 1991, with women accounting for 55 per cent of total employment.⁸³
- In all countries, the hospitality sector is well established and there is multi-year demand certainty, which is ideal for long-term cohorts and employer co-investment.
- There is also employer readiness to offer predictable contracts and structured training, as demonstrated by existing labour migration patterns and networks such as the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance.

When designing a skills mobility partnership, mapping which occupations are in demand is essential for long-term sustainability and scalability. Hospitality covers a wide range of jobs, but this report focuses on common entry-level roles in housekeeping, guest services, and food and beverage:

<i>Housekeeping</i>	<i>Lobby and Guest Services</i>	<i>Food and Beverage</i>
• Room attendant • Laundry attendant • Housekeeping supervisor	• Front desk agent • Night auditor • Front desk supervisor	• Restaurant server • Food operations manager

A forward-looking partnership should also consider how demand for these roles might shift over time, including the impact of technology and sustainability, discuss further below.

Candidate suitability

A second factor for success is candidate suitability. This includes skill-matching, but it also means understanding the social realities of employment and mobility. What type of migration policies support women's plans and aspirations? How does gender shape experiences, preferences and plans? For women from agricultural households in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, this means a skills mobility partnership should consider:

- **Willingness to migrate:** A skills mobility partnership should create opportunities for women to access decent work both abroad and within their own countries (through rural-urban mobility).
- **Flexible eligibility criteria for inclusion in a labour mobility program:** Migration decisions are made at the household level, and families may be more comfortable supporting the migration of an adult daughter who has more education, some exposure to urban life, or greater willingness to leave the land rather than a female head of household directly engaged in farming.⁸⁴ Her remittances would still benefit the whole household and strengthen its climate resilience.
- **Addressing gendered barriers to migration:** Barriers to migration faced by women should be recognized and addressed throughout the migration cycle. For example, offering childcare, transport, and accommodation during training; providing clear terms of reference; community education to address stigma; and support to apply to recruitment agencies or to obtain a passport.

⁸² World Travel and Tourism Council, 2025. International traveller spend in the UAE to reach a record AED 228BN this year, reveals WTTC.

⁸³ International Labor Organization, 2022. Asia-Pacific Sectoral Labour Market Profile: Accommodation and food service activities.

⁸⁴ Interviews with IOM staff across Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, based on staff experience in community engagement.

Training and skills recognition

Training and skills recognition are a central component of a skills mobility partnership. For women from South Asia migrating to urban centres within their countries of origin or internationally to the GCC for jobs in the hospitality sector, key issues to consider include:

- **Embedding skills development across the migration cycle:** before recruitment, pre-departure, on arrival, during employment, and on return. For women new to hospitality, practical, hands-on training similar to an apprenticeship would add real value and create clear job expectations.⁸⁵
- **Emphasizing soft skills:** Communication, customer interaction, teamwork, and punctuality are often as important to employers as technical skills. Emphasizing soft skills – particularly for women transitioning from informal rural livelihoods – can support successful integration into formal service-sector roles.
- **Bringing employers into the design process:** There are employers that have existing training programs, for example the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, that offer a blend of theoretical and practical training in the hospitality sector. If employers help shape the training, they can be confident that new hires will have the skills they actually need.
- **Engaging women migrants in the design process:** Understanding migrant perspective will help ensure that training also addresses migrant needs and concerns.
- **Strengthening local vocational systems:** Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka all offer hospitality training, but quality varies. Targeted investment could improve availability, raise standards, and align training with destination-country expectations.
- **Harmonising standards and recognition:** Training should meet both sending-country vocational training requirements and receiving-country industry standards so qualifications are recognised in both labour markets. All countries have vocational training bodies and qualification frameworks that offer a pathway for mutual recognition of courses.
- **Supporting women migrants to have their skills formally assessed:** Skill assessment is very important for workers' welfare. It provides them certification of their skills which improves their bargaining power with employers. Yet despite provisions for skills testing and the tremendous benefits it accrues, many migrant workers do not have their skills assessed or certified.⁸⁶ Women from agricultural background are even more likely to fall into this cohort due to lack of knowledge around skills assessment processes.

⁸⁵ Interviews with IOM staff across Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal based on staff experience with labour migration training programs.

⁸⁶ IOM Nepal, 2023. Migration and Skills Development: Policy Brief.

Ensuring safe and dignified work

Compared to domestic work, hospitality roles provide safer, formalised and better paid options with clearer career pathways. Hospitality offers on-site teams, HR systems, and public-facing workplaces, which reduce isolation compared to domestic work, if recruitment is ethical and employment is compliant.⁸⁷ Even so, mitigating protection risks remains vital. Some key considerations whether employment is pursued in a domestic or international context include:

- **Supporting migration governance in sending countries:** Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka each have systems and practices around ethical recruitment and migrant workers' protection. Engaging and strengthening these systems is vital for ensuring safe and dignified work.
- **Upholding ethical recruitment standards:** This could be achieved through government-led regulation; provision of training to employers; incentives to employers; guidance to migrants during orientation training on how to make use of support systems and grievance mechanisms in the country of destination.⁸⁸ While this is important for all labour migration, a project that targets economically vulnerable households who have not migrated before must be particularly mindful.
- **Ensuring clarity on employer obligations:** This includes issues such as wages, housing provisions, onboarding and mentoring, career progression, and safe workplaces and grievance procedures. A clear understanding of work conditions is important not only for migrant protection, but also to address community stigma against women who migrate independently.⁸⁹
- **Providing migrant women with access to mental health and social support networks:** Women's associations, migrant groups, and peer mentors can function as informal protection systems and help to identify and address exploitation, harassment and social isolation and help build resilience.⁹⁰

Learning and adaptation

The proposed model targets women who face barriers to migration and heightened socio-economic vulnerability, and it is designed to deliver a specific outcome: stronger climate resilience at the household level. This makes it critical to track what works, for whom, and under what conditions. The program can then adapt as it goes. Monitoring options may include:

- **Feedback loops:** Capturing women's experiences across the migration cycle, as well as employer perspectives via interviews, surveys, or focus group discussions. Community insights are also important to understand how remittances are used and whether stigma or social pressures are emerging.
- **Performance indicators:** Tracking completion rates, job retention, wage progression, and the incidence of grievances.

Long-term pathways and return benefits

A well-designed skills mobility partnership must consider long-term prospects for migrant women. We know that women struggle to re-enter the workforce after return in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, and often face stigma linked to migration. Important considerations include:

- **Ensuring portability of skills and credentials:** Training and qualifications should be formally recognised in home-country and destination country labour markets, so that returning women can access better jobs, start small businesses, or move into supervisory roles.
- **Creating opportunities for further upskilling:** Structured pathways for additional training would allow women to advance within the hospitality sector on return.
- **Supporting development of the domestic hospitality industry:** Returning workers bring back new technical skills, service standards, and workplace practices and can help raise quality in local hospitality businesses. However, capturing these skills requires intentional action since returned migrants often do not continue in the same field: in Nepal, for example, only 15 per cent of returnees work in the same occupation in Nepal as they did abroad.⁹¹
- **Supporting governments to capture skills of returnee migrant workers:** Digital records of returnee skills would provide vital data to support reintegration and more targeted industry engagement.⁹²

⁸⁷ Shivakoti, R., Henderson, S. & Withers, M. 2021. The migration ban policy cycle: a comparative analysis of restrictions on the emigration of women domestic workers. *CMS* 9, 36.

⁸⁸ IOM, 2023. Skills Mobility Partnerships: Recommendations and Guidance for Policymakers and Practitioners. IOM, Geneva.

⁸⁹ Interviews with IOM staff across Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, based on staff experience in community engagement.

⁹⁰ UN Women, 2023. Action Brief: Peer networks empower women migrant workers.

⁹¹ IOM Nepal, 2021. Macro level supply and demand analysis of skills of Nepalese migrants.

⁹² IOM Nepal, 2023. Migration and Skills Development: Policy Brief.

10. Integrating green skills and digital technology to the hospitality industry

Sustainability and artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping economies globally. In the GCC region alone, green projects are expected to add up to USD 2 trillion to GDP and create more than one million jobs by 2030. At the same time, the GCC region's AI market is projected to reach USD 15.4 billion, growing at nearly 30 per cent annually.⁹³ These trends present both opportunities and challenges. Businesses need workers with the right skills to stay competitive, and workers must upgrade their skills to keep pace. Green and digital skills have become essential for both employers and employees.

In the hospitality sector, these skills matter at every level. Even workers in lower-skilled roles, while not directly shaping workplace policies, play a critical part in sustainability and efficiency through their daily tasks. All workers – regardless of qualification – need the competencies that allow them to support greener practices and use digital tools effectively.⁹⁴

Upskilling for green competencies in the hospitality industry

The global tourism industry has a substantial environmental footprint that it is actively trying to address. In 2023, travel and tourism accounted for 6.5 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, down from 7.8 per cent in 2019, and during the same period, the sector's reliance on fossil fuel energy sources (oil, coal, and natural gas) dropped to 88.2 per cent from 90 per cent.⁹⁵ With the growing awareness of climate change and environmental degradation, interest in sustainable hospitality practices has increased. In response, the hospitality sector is beginning to integrate sustainability into its daily operations.⁹⁶

Sustainability skills – or 'green' skills – are 'the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society'.⁹⁷ In the hotel industry, this includes:

- **Green hotel practices:** Environmentally friendly practices that hotels can adopt to reduce their environmental impact and promote sustainability, such as reducing energy and water consumption, using renewable sources, recycling waste, and sourcing locally.
- **Green jobs:** Jobs that contribute to preserving or restoring the environment. These positions work to implement green practices, such as waste reduction, water conservation, energy efficiency, and sourcing sustainable products, to reduce the environmental impact of hospitality operations.

Upskilling for green competencies means developing the capacity of the workforce to practice sustainability. In the hospitality sector, this includes:

- Train staff in resource efficiency (energy and water conservation), waste management and circular practices, and eco-friendly operational practices to support environmental sustainability and reduce costs;
- Develop programs to help staff understand their environmental impact;
- Create mentorship opportunities where sustainability champions guide colleagues; and
- Establish clear career pathways for employees interested in green specialisation

⁹³ Fominova, S. 2025. Green upskilling in the GCC: Building a workforce for AI-powered sustainability. Net0. 9 January.

⁹⁴ Wettstein, F. 2024. Green and digital skills for hospitality and tourism: From industry trends to competencies within TVET. UNESCO.

⁹⁵ World Trade and Tourism Council, 2023. WTTC reveals significant decrease in travel and tourism's climate footprint emissions.

⁹⁶ Shanti, J., & Joshi, G. 2022. Examining the impact of environmentally sustainable practices on hotel brand equity: a case of Bangalore hotels. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 24(4), 5764–5782.

⁹⁷ The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, n.d. What are green skills.

Upskilling for digital competencies in the hospitality industry

Technology has reshaped how we work and live, as well as how businesses operate. In tourism and hospitality, information technology is now integral, making digital skills essential. Employers across the sector consistently highlight a shortage of these skills in the local labour market, which limits their ability to adopt new technologies.⁹⁸

The rise of AI and automation is accelerating this shift. Lower-paid, lower-skilled frontline roles are most affected, particularly jobs involving repetitive or face-to-face tasks such as check-in, reservations, room-service delivery, and basic food service. While luxury and high-touch hospitality are likely to preserve, and even expand, opportunities for personal interaction, budget and mass-market hotels are expected to automate more rapidly.

Digital transformation brings both risks and opportunities. Workers who cannot adapt or reskill may be left behind, while those who build digital literacy and strong soft skills can access better roles. For lower-skilled employees, the following competencies are increasingly critical:

- **Basic digital literacy** – ability to operate AI systems, kiosks, and data-based applications, and to troubleshoot simple errors;
- **Human-centered service skills** – in the era of AI, the importance of soft skills such as emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to maintain human competitiveness;
- **Communication skills** – proactive engagement, conversational skills;
- **Creative service design** – improvisation, proactive problem-solving, flexibility in ambiguous situations; and
- **Resilience and positive mindset** – coping with uncertainty, maintaining morale, and adapting to continuous technological change.⁹⁹

Digital transformation is also a critical partner in 'greening' the hotel industry. AI offers an array of tools that can help to implement, monitor, and accomplish more sustainable practices. For example, digital measuring equipment such as smart building management systems can identify areas to improve energy efficiency, reduce emissions, or address environmental impacts such as food waste.

⁹⁸ Nine in ten businesses raised this concern. World Economic Forum, 2018. *The future of jobs report*. WEF: Geneva

⁹⁹ Shin, H., Ryu, J., & Jo, Y. 2025. Navigating artificial intelligence adoption in hospitality and tourism: managerial insights, workforce transformation, and a future research agenda. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 128, Article 104187.

11. Skills mobility partnership in hospitality with the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance

A partnership with the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance offers a model skills mobility partnership for the hospitality sector. The case study below outlines how the proposed partnership could work.

What is the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance?

The World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance is an independent charity committed to creating a prosperous and responsible hospitality sector that has a positive impact on the environment, society, and the economy. Founded in 1992, today its membership includes over 35 world-leading hotel companies – such as Accor, Hilton, Marriot, and Jumeirah – with a combined reach of over 66,000 properties.¹⁰⁰ It connects hospitality companies with strategic partners such as the World Travel & Tourism Council, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, UN Tourism, and IOM.

The Alliance develops practical tools, resources and programmes to enable every hotel to operate responsibly and grow sustainably. Over the last three decades, it has launched a series of initiatives to address key social and environmental challenges, one of which is the Global Employability Programme.

Global Employability Programme

The Alliance's Global Employability Programme is an apprentice-style training program that equips disadvantaged young people to embark on a career in the hospitality industry. The programme has been active for 15 years, with over 8,500 people trained in 10 countries, 75 per cent of whom are women.

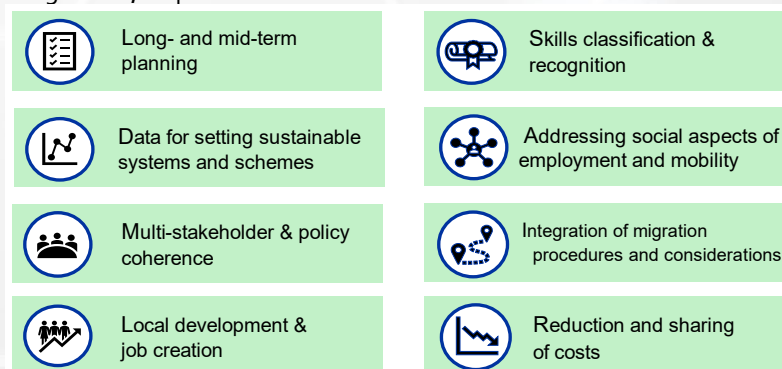
The Employability Programme consists of a 12-week training program. The first 4 weeks are delivered in a classroom, and candidates then complete 8 weeks of practical training in a member hotel. A stipend is provided throughout the full training period. The phases are described in more detail below.

Completion of the Employability Programme does not guarantee ongoing employment; however, it does guarantee interviews with member hotels. 85 per cent of graduates obtain employment in a member hotel.



Model skills mobility partnership with the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance

A successful skills mobility partnership must address eight essential criteria, outlined below. The Alliance's global network, Employability Programme, and collaborative approach provide a strong framework to address these criteria and connect Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka with countries in the GCC.



¹⁰⁰ World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, n.d. What we do.

Alliance member hotels are located across 100 countries, which opens two employment pathways for graduates of the Employability Programme: in their country of origin (Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and in the GCC region. This dual pathway offers greater diversity and choice of working conditions for women to better reflect the social aspects of employment and mobility. It also strengthens local development and job creation and offers a way to share costs with the private sector.

Key stakeholders

Partnering with the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance offers a strong foundation for collaboration between sending and receiving countries as well as the private sector. Ethical recruitment standards and national migration policy expectations can be integrated via the partnership framework.

The Employability Programme has a long history of working closely with member hotels, local training partners, non-profit organizations and governments to create locally-grounded training in hospitality that encourages investment in local training entities including TVET centres and domestic organizations. The stakeholders and their roles in a skills mobility partnership will vary according to the national context, but a typical consortium will include the roles and responsibilities outlined in the table below.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)	
• Convene all stakeholders in a skills mobility partnership • Provide guidance and tools to stakeholders to support a successful skills mobility partnership • Clarify roles and responsibilities amongst stakeholders • Deliver capacity-building on request, or other forms of support as required	

Local NGO	Alliance	Hotels	Governments
Profile	Profile	Profile	Profile
• Works with target communities • Existing network with government and community stakeholders	• Led from the Alliance Headquarters, with local representation as required	• Member hotels in country of origin (Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka) and destination countries (GCC region)	• Relevant Ministries in the country of origin • Relevant Ministries in the country of destination
Responsibilities	Responsibilities	Responsibilities	Responsibilities
• Outreach to communities and support to apply • Identify candidates • Support trainees with CV, interviews • Monitor trainee progress • Deliver core skills training – this could also be provided by a local TVET organisation	• Mobilize hotel chains for participation • Convene government, hotels, partners, industry bodies • Conduct curriculum induction workshops with local trainers • Deliver sustainability training	• Host trainees for orientation visits • Deliver 2-month practical training • Provide staff to mentor trainees • Interview graduates and confirm jobs offers • Provide stipends, meals & uniforms	<i>Country of origin</i> • Help identify candidates • Ensure compliance with national migration protocols <i>Country of destination</i> • Ensure compliance with national migration protocols

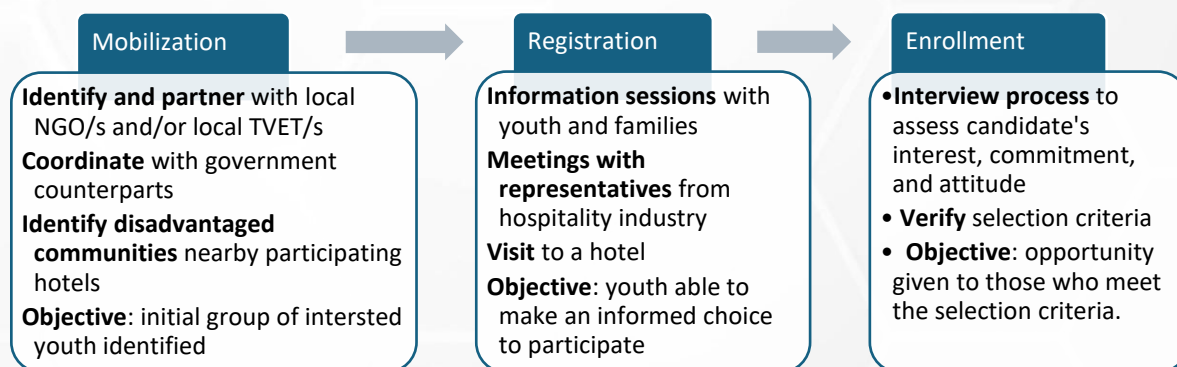
Candidate selection criteria

The Alliance's Global Employability Programme is flexible enough to tailor the selection criteria to specific policy goals and local needs. Standard criteria can be adjusted to focus on women who have lost their livelihood due to climate change. Selection criteria could include, for example:

- **Gender:** Women.
- **Household with livelihood affected by climate change:** identified through government registration; local NGO outreach; or other means
- **Age:** typically under 35
- **Unemployed or in informal employment:** preference to climate-sensitive livelihoods
- **Primary education:** candidates must have basic reading and writing ability
- **Low socio-economic background:** defined in local terms
- **Language skills:** Basic English is required for front of house positions (e.g. housekeeping, food & beverage), whereas back of house positions (e.g. kitchen, laundry) do not require English.
- **Reasonable distance from training:** Candidates should live within 1.5 hours commute to the training venue and training hotel. If a longer commute is required, accommodation may be explored but local candidates are preferred. Households who have displaced from agricultural to urban settlements due to climate change may therefore be an appropriate target.
- **Functional bank account:** candidate can be supported by the NGO to open a bank account
- **Interest, attitude, and commitment to work:** genuine interest in hospitality and willingness to migrate either internationally or domestically (from rural to urban locations)

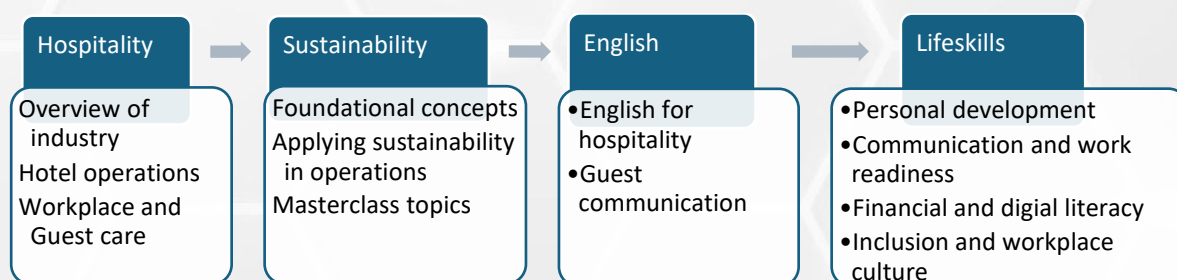
Phase 1 – Candidate selection and Mobilization

Phase 1 involves finding the right young people through networks and community-based organisations, shortlisting for registration, and enrolment through interviews.



Phase 2 – Training

Phase 2 is training, which consists of four weeks of class learning and eight weeks of practical training in a member hotel. Candidates can nominate their preferred area for practical training, based on their profile and interests. The class training covers four areas:



Candidates will receive practical training in green skills and digital skills relevant to the hospitality sector and will then practice these skills in a real hotel environment. Alliance hotel members have a strong focus on building the green and digital skills of their workforce and greening the hospitality sector in general, through efforts to measure the carbon footprint of their hotels as well as water consumption and energy consumption and integrating programs to recycle and track and avoid food waste.

Phase 3 – Employment

Phase 3 is employment. Graduates of the Alliance's Global Employability Programme are not guaranteed a job – but they are guaranteed interviews with Alliance member hotels. On average, 85 per cent of graduates obtain jobs with member hotels. The proposed model offers two employment pathways: in the country of origin (Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and in countries in the GCC region.

For those who do not take up employment with a member hotel, completion of the Employability Programme may help them obtain other employment in the hospitality industry, including in small establishments closer to home. The transferability of the Employability Programme certificate would be strengthened if it were formally recognized by the country of origin.

Mobility arrangements

Hotel chains are typically franchised, which means that hotels from the same chain in Bangladesh and Qatar conduct their own recruitment – there is no centralised system of talent. Therefore, a candidate who completes their 8-week training in a hotel in Bangladesh will need to undergo an interview with a hotel from the same chain in the GCC region if they wish to migrate internationally. The recruiting hotel in the GCC would likely utilise a recruitment agency – which offers an important opportunity to address ethical recruitment.

A partner organisation in the country of origin would be responsible for supporting candidates to apply for a passport and visa, and to conduct pre-departure orientation.

Return of migrant workers

Finally, a skills mobility partnership with the World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance as partner offers valuable opportunities for returning migrants to continue and grow their career in the hospitality industry. Alliance hotel chains have hotels across the GCC region and in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, which provides potential job pathways for returning migrants.

12 . Policy recommendations

Climate change is accelerating livelihood loss across South Asia, especially for women whose work is concentrated in climate-sensitive sectors and who face structural barriers to adaptation. At the same time, demand for hospitality workers in the GCC region continues to grow, particularly in roles requiring green and digital skills. The key conclusion of this report is that a well-designed skills mobility partnership can bridge these challenges by creating safe, regulated job pathways that protect women, strengthen climate resilience, and address labour shortages.

Recommendations to take this proposal forward are outlined below, structured around four priority areas.

12.1 Labour Mobility Pathways

Sending & Receiving

Consider how a skills mobility partnership can contribute to gender-responsive, climate-smart migration pathways. There is a compelling need to pursue new migration pathways that specifically target women from households engaged in climate-sensitive livelihoods. A skills mobility partnership can reduce women's exposure to irregular migration risks, enhance climate-resilient livelihoods, and help employers fill workforce shortages. It offers governments in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the GCC a concrete, mutually beneficial pathway to advance economic resilience, gender equality, and well-governed labour mobility.

Sending & Receiving

Expand or create bilateral agreements that address pathways for women in climate-sensitive livelihoods. Sending and receiving states should jointly establish or update agreements that facilitate movement into sectors such as hospitality. This will provide a framework to encourage ethical recruitment, safe and dignified migration, and decent work – all of which are particularly important when targeting a population that is economically vulnerable.

Sending country

Set flexible eligibility criteria that reflects social realities in South Asia. Eligibility criteria for inclusion in a labour migration program should be flexible enough to enable household decision-making, allowing families to nominate the most suitable household member (such as those with higher education or urban exposure) rather than requiring direct involvement in farming or other climate-sensitive livelihoods. Another example is that recurrent migration should not exclude a household from participating since low- or semi-skilled labour migration is often evidence of economic vulnerability.

Sending country

Develop clear criteria for candidate suitability that encompasses social and cultural criteria. Government agencies that work closely with climate-affected communities can help identify suitable candidates, including target locations and vulnerability indicators. Beyond economic and climate risks, selection should consider social and cultural factors such as familiarity with urban life, family support for migration, and interest in hospitality. This helps match women to roles that fit their aspirations and realistic job prospects. Households that have migrated to urban areas or informal settlements in peri-urban areas should be considered as a potential target.

Sending country

Barriers to migration faced by women should be recognized and addressed throughout the migration cycle. For example, offering childcare, transport, and accommodation during training; providing clear terms of reference; community education to address stigma; and support to apply to recruitment agencies or to obtain a passport. As part of the recruitment process, information should be provided on job expectations, workplace norms, living conditions, savings and remittance planning, return planning, grievance pathways, and gender-specific protection considerations.

Sending country

Address social stigma surrounding migration. Targeted awareness campaigns should correct misconceptions about hospitality roles, address stigma around women's migration, and provide households with clear information on the job description, workplace conditions, accommodation, costs, timelines, and support systems.

Sending country

Embed return planning and reintegration support. Labour mobility schemes must include pathways for skills recognition upon return, links to domestic employers, access to financial literacy programmes, psychosocial support, and mechanisms to reintegrate women into green and digital sectors at home.

12.2 Public-Private Partnerships and Investment

Sending & Receiving

Engage employers early and substantively. Hotel groups, tourism operators, and industry bodies should co-design curricula, identify role requirements, and co-invest in training infrastructure. Their involvement increases job matching accuracy and ensures training aligns with real labour market needs.

Sending & Receiving

Embed employer-led apprenticeships and on-the-job learning. Employers should offer structured apprenticeships, internships, and supervised training placements, to reduce skills gaps of new recruits and strengthen long-term employability.

Sending country

Support technology transfer and TVET capacity-building in origin countries. Through public-private partnerships, GCC and South Asian governments should collaborate with industry to integrate green technologies, AI tools, and updated hospitality systems into TVET centres. This will raise training quality and sustain outcomes beyond individual migration cycles.

12.3 Skills Development and Recognition

Sending country

Increase women's access to training. Flexible training schedules, childcare provision, transportation stipends, and gender-sensitive outreach are essential to increase women's participation in vocational training. Rural training centres should be equipped to deliver digital and green-skills modules, not only basic hospitality courses.

Sending & Receiving

Develop joint green and digital skills frameworks. Sending and receiving countries should collaborate to define the green competencies and digital literacy standards required for hospitality roles across the GCC. These frameworks should guide curriculum design and assessment methods.

Sending & Receiving

Promote skills portability across ADD countries. Mutual recognition of skills and qualifications would reduce re-training costs, enable labour mobility across GCC states, and increase women's opportunities.

Sending country

Recognise skills gained abroad and support women to have their skills assessed. Returning migrants should have clear pathways to convert overseas experience into formal qualifications at home, enabling re-entry into domestic labour markets and reducing the cycle of return migration into low-paid roles.

Sending country

Create opportunities for returning women migrants to upskill and strengthen the domestic hospitality sector. Countries should leverage the technical skills and service standards these workers bring back, through formal skills recognition, clear job pathways, and structured training for career advancement. Digital records of returnee skills can support reintegration and targeted industry engagement.

12.4 Governance and Standards

Sending & Receiving

Mainstream gender, climate resilience, and sustainability into labour governance. This means considering how existing jobs, workplaces, and migration practices affect women, or interact with climate factors. The goal is to make labour governance more responsive to the needs of women, and to consider how climate-sensitive practices can be integrated into all aspects of migration.

Sending & Receiving

Strengthen protections through ethical recruitment and employer accountability, utilizing resources such as IRIS standards on Ethical Recruitment. Governments should adopt and enforce the “employer pays” principle, prohibit recruitment fees, and require due diligence on all intermediaries and subcontractors. Monitoring mechanisms should verify that no recruitment or placement costs are shifted to workers. Incentives should be developed to encourage ethical recruitment and inclusive hiring practices.

Sending & Receiving

Ensure safe working and living conditions. Hospitality employers both internationally and domestically should be required to provide transparent job descriptions, contracts in accessible languages, standardised accommodation guidelines, access to grievance mechanisms, and uninterrupted possession of personal documents.

Sending & Receiving

Build multi-stakeholder oversight systems to understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions. Local authorities, recruitment agencies, employers, unions, and NGOs should jointly identify risks in recruitment and employment, conduct audits, monitor compliance, and respond to grievances. Regular data sharing and feedback loops – particularly from returned workers – should inform policy adjustments.

Sending & Receiving

Expand opportunities outside historically risky sectors such as domestic work and strengthen existing protections in those sectors. While domestic work will remain a major employer, countries should both strengthen protections in domestic work and expand opportunities in better-regulated sectors like hospitality, where clearer standards and career pathways exist.