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POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Tracing the impacts of the COVID pandemic on Australia's fastest-growing migrant group

6 MINUTE READ

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As the pandemic-related shutdown intensified across Australia from March 2020, temporary and undocumented migrants and their advocates [warned of devastating impacts on migrant workers and international students](#) who were simultaneously losing their incomes while being excluded from social security benefits.

Since then, [research](#) indicates that the pandemic has deepened inequality for temporary and undocumented migrant workers, who are disproportionately employed in precarious and insecure work.

In early 2021, media appetite for COVID-related stories of economic hardship has seemingly given way to news of vaccines, economic recovery, and Australia's (to date) comparatively effective containment. Yet we must continue to ask questions about the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, and to address inequality and insecure employment if promises of "national economic recovery" are to be sustained.

Nepal-born workers were employed in one of the highest-risk settings – aged care – as predominantly casual employees, or were working in insecure hospitality and cleaning roles well below the minimum wage.

The outbreaks in the aged care and cleaning sectors in NSW and Victoria during 2020 highlight the transmission of the virus in workplaces by precarious workers – who often must work across multiple jobs and locations to make ends meet.

In Australia, as in much of the world, women migrants and migrants of colours are more likely to be in low-paid, feminised and precarious work. Those working in essential industries such as healthcare, aged care, childcare, cleaning, horticulture, agriculture and food production are at higher risk of exposure to COVID-19, as they're unable to work from home due to the hands-on nature of their job.

They're also less likely to miss work because they cannot afford the lost wages, or to have a financial safety net allowing them to isolate and practise safe social distancing.

Similarly, those in the precarious service sector, particularly the shut-down hospitality and retail industries, [were the first to lose their jobs](#).

International students in these industries experience [endemic levels of wage theft by employers](#), leaving them with little savings due to stolen wages and super.

There is indeed a cruel irony to the fact that our most essential workers are amongst our most underpaid and casualised. They are essential, yet (apparently) dispensable.

In contrast, researchers have shown that professionals who are able to work from home earn on average [24% more than essential workers](#), and are more likely to be in salaried positions and thus have access to paid sick leave.

These predominantly white-collar workers are privileged in two senses – they're able to insulate themselves from the risk of contracting COVID-19 by practising safe social distancing, while maintaining their source of income during periods of restrictions. The inequality in health outcomes between those in secure and insecure work thus reflects their income inequality.

Compounding the unequal impacts of their concentration into precarious roles, temporary and undocumented migrants have been excluded from JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments.

This has left hundreds of thousands of the [estimated 2.17 million temporary visa holders](#) in Australia with no income or support beyond [under-resourced migrant services](#).

An additional, unquantified group of “informal” migrants who do not have visas, likely [numbering in the tens of thousands](#), have been potentially left with no support of any kind.

All this despite the often underpaid labour of temporary and undocumented migrants structurally upholding key sectors of the Australian economy, including the [horticultural sector in certain regional areas](#), as well as sections of the [hospitality sector in metropolitan areas](#).

The Nepali migrant experience

Nepali temporary migrants have been [acutely affected by the pandemic](#), due to their concentration in casualised, precarious work in the healthcare, hospitality and services industries.

For more than a decade now, migration from Nepal to Australia has increased significantly. Between 2006 and 2016, Nepal-born residents represented the [fastest-growing overseas-born group in the country](#). The numbers are staggering – between 2006 and 2011, the Nepal-born population quadrupled in number from 4567 to 24,635, and then more than doubled to 54,757 in 2016.



Nepal's ongoing political-economic instability is a key factor driving the country's middle-class youth to pursue [student migration as a livelihood strategy](#) – but why is Australia so attractive to them?

Australia has two standout advantages over comparable countries with cheaper education, such as Canada and the UK.

Firstly, there's the [promise of being able to find a job](#) to pay education fees and cover living expenses. Few Nepali students are able to pay for their degrees without finding work in their host countries, and often it's the prospect of earning an income rather than the cost of education that guides students' decisions.

Unfortunately, as we're reminded time and again, jobs for international students and temporary migrants in Australia are predominantly [in industries with endemic – and open – levels of wage theft](#).

Secondly, Australia's skilled and student visa system attracts international students with the [promise of permanent residency](#), a deliberate dangling carrot built into the system to give Australia's higher education sector a competitive advantage globally.

In aged care, Nepal-born migrants are more likely to be employed as casual and contract workers compared to the Australian-born workforce.

The prospect of permanent residency comes at a substantial cost, however, including expensive higher education and visa fees. The [pervasive labour exploitation of temporary student migrants](#) is predicated on the financial pressures that significant education-related debt creates.

Reflecting this great financial pressure, Nepali migrants (most of whom arrive as international students or their spouses) had the [highest employment rates of any migrant group](#) – even higher than those born in Australia – in the 2016 census.

In 2016, the [top industry of employment for the Nepal-born population](#) was aged care, followed by hospitality and cleaning. Nepal-born workers were disproportionately employed across all three categories, compared to the overall overseas-born population and the Australia-born population.

In aged care, Nepal-born migrants are more likely to be [employed as casual and contract workers](#) compared to the Australian-born workforce. At the start of the pandemic, then, Nepal-born workers were employed in one of the highest-risk settings – aged care – as predominantly casual employees, or were working in insecure hospitality and cleaning roles well below the minimum wage.

Given this concentration of precarious work, the pandemic has greatly impacted employment and income rates for Nepalis.

Research conducted last year with temporary visa holders found that 75% of Nepali nationals surveyed had lost their job or most of their hours after 1 March, 2020, by far the largest fall among all nationalities surveyed, and compared with an average of 33% for all nationalities combined.

While these numbers are indicative only, they point to significant socio-economic hardship and [intensifying mental health strain](#) among Nepali temporary migrants.

In order to dive into the stories behind the numbers, we're planning a qualitative research project with Nepali temporary migrant women in particular, to understand how women are managing the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on their everyday lives.

This will contribute to community and scholarly understandings of the gendered and racial impacts of the pandemic. Importantly, it will also strengthen our efforts to advocate for public health responses to pandemics that don't rely on the exploited labour of temporary and undocumented migrants in precarious, risky and essential work to ensure the safety and security of the country's permanent residents and citizens.

NEPAL

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COVID-19

CORONAVIRUS

CASUAL WORK

TEMPORARY VISA HOLDERS

MIGRANT WORKERS

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**Rosi Aryal Lees**

PhD Candidate, Anthropology, School of Social Sciences

**Sara Niner**

Lecturer, Anthropology, School of Social Sciences

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