

# The dynamic of stepwise migrations of Nepalese high-skilled migrants via the Middle East

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of Nepalese highly skilled migrants who use temporary migration to the Gulf region as a stepping-stone to further migration to developed countries outside the region. Furthermore, we explore the factors that influence migrants' trajectories by applying the aspiration–ability model to understand various migratory steps of the Nepalese stepwise migrations. Here, we distinguish between migrants' aspirations, abilities and structural forces – in South Asia, the Gulf and outside the region – that can either enable or restrict their agency. We find that the countries in the Middle East have emerged as important destinations for Nepalese migrants. It is also argued that the receiving countries in the Gulf are not the most popular destinations for skilled migrants from Nepal. However, for many aspiring skilled migrants, these countries appear to be the most affordable or only available destination at a certain stage of their migration trajectories and professional careers.

## KEYWORDS

Labour migrations; Middle East; Nepalese migrants; stepwise migrations

For decades, the oil-rich countries in the Middle East have been the major destination for temporary labour migrants from large emigration countries in South Asia. More than half of migrations from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have been funnelled to the GCC countries,<sup>1</sup> with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait as the largest receivers (Bruslé 2009; Limbu 2022; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017; Sapkota 2018). However, for years, Nepalese migrations went in another direction: to India. This may be explained by the countries' cultural, social and historical ties, geographical proximity and the fact that since the 1950s, the two countries had an open-border policy, allowing the free movement of people. This trend has changed in recent years, with the countries in the GCC and the Global North gradually emerging as an important destination for Nepalese migrants (IOM 2019; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017; Sapkota 2018).

Previous studies have shown that migrations to the GCC are temporary and often include multiple migrations, temporary returns and remigrations (Parreñas et al. 2019; Parreñas 2021; Valenta 2022a). It has also been maintained that migrations to the region are dominated by low-skilled migrations from large countries in South Asia, including India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Valenta and Jakobsen 2016, 2017). In the current article, we do not focus on these prevalent migrant streams but instead on *stepwise migrations* of Nepalese highly skilled labour migrants, which is an under-researched feature of these movements (Limbu 2022). The concept of stepwise migrations suggests that migrants' multiple migrations can be seen as a series of consecutive steps in a hierarchy of receiving countries (Paul 2011; Valenta 2022a). In this process, migrants start their trajectories in less-preferred, but

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easier-to-enter, low-tier countries. Later, they 'step up' to countries that offer better wages and more satisfactory conditions and rights (Paul 2011, 2015).

Most studies exploring Nepalese migrations to the GCC focus on the hardships of Nepalese employed in blue collar jobs in the region (Adhikary et al. 2017; Bruslé 2009; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017), but to the best of our knowledge, this is the first mapping of the stepwise migrations of Nepalese high-skilled migrants in the region. Several studies have explored Nepalese labour migration to the GCC (IOM 2019; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017; Sapkota 2015). However, Nepalese experiences of stepwise migration have been absent in most of these studies.<sup>2</sup> The current study fills this knowledge gap, contributing with Nepalese cases to debates on the dynamics and drivers of stepwise migrations to the GCC region and elsewhere (Carlos 2013; Montagna, della Puppa, and Kofman 2021; Paul and Yeoh 2020; Takenaka 2007; Valenta 2022a).

We explore the following research questions: What are the main characteristics of stepwise migrations of Nepalese skilled migrants transitioning through the Middle East? Which aspirations, abilities and drivers perpetuate these migrations? Can we discern some common trends and nuances in the experiences, motivations and obstacles they face and resources they deploy to overcome them?

The present article consists of several interrelated parts. In the first part, we present relevant previous research on Nepalese migrations, migrations to the GCC and stepwise migrations. Based on these studies, we outline our analytical approach and discuss the hierarchies of Nepalese destination countries among those that have received large numbers of Nepalese migrants. Here, we draw from the aspiration-ability model (Carling and Schewel 2018) to explore stepwise migrations, which, to the best of our knowledge, have not been explored previously within this analytic frame. Thereafter, we present our methodological approach, sampling procedures and subsegments of the sample. In the empirical part, we outline the migration trajectories of the migrants we interviewed. Furthermore, we present selected cases and migrants' narratives to analyse in more depth the dynamic of these trajectories to capture the lived experiences, motivations, aspirations and strategies of Nepalese stepwise migrants.

## Literature review

The current article builds on two compatible perspectives investigating international migration, both of which are well-established approaches in the sociology of migrations. The first explores a phenomenon of stepwise migrations (Kalir 2013; Montagna, della Puppa, and Kofman 2021; Paul and Yeoh 2020). The second distinguishes between *aspirations* to migrate and *abilities* to migrate (Carling and Schewel 2018).

An increasing number of scholars have suggested that sizeable numbers of migrants may transition through several host countries during their life cycles (Paul and Yeoh 2020; Zufferey 2019). Several recent studies also focus on onward migrations of South-Asian high-skilled migrants and their multiple migrations within the EU (Mapril 2021; Montagna, della Puppa, and Kofman 2021). However, it is evident that migrants may also engage in multiple migrations prior to their arrival to the Global North (Valenta 2022a). In this article, we show that a residence in the Middle East is an important intermediary stage of these multiple migrations.

Most studies on migrants in the Gulf have explored low-skilled Asian labour migrants in the Gulf, focusing on the hardships they experience in the region (Bruslé 2009; Kamrava and Babar 2012; Parreñas et al. 2019). Low-skilled migrants from South Asia dominate the migrant flows to the region, which may explain why there is a large interest among researchers in these migrations (Kamrava and Babar 2012).

Studies focusing on the experiences of Nepalese mobility and Nepalese migrants in different receiving countries are also relevant to this article (Gellner and Hausner 2018; IOM 2019; Limbu 2022; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017; Sharma 2013; 2021). Here, we may distinguish between studies on Nepalese international migrants in India and other neighbouring countries and those on

Nepalese in developed countries (Gellner and Hausner 2018; Limbu 2022; Sapkota 2018; Sharma 2013). These studies explore different categories of Nepalese regular and irregular migrants, high-skilled and low-skilled migrants, *inter alia*, seasonal migrants, domestic workers, nurses, soldiers, international students, family migrants and highly skilled professionals (Adhikari 2013; Ghimire 2020; Kharel 2022; Limbu 2022; Low 2015; Pyakurel 2018). These studies are relevant to this article as they convey variations in experiences depending on the receiving country and the background of the migrants themselves, which may be related to the realities of Nepalese migrants in the GCC (Gellner and Hausner 2018; Limbu 2022; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017).

It is pertinent to stress that studies on Nepalese migrants in the Gulf focus primarily on migrants working in blue-collar jobs (Adhikary et al. 2017; Bruslé 2009; Sapkota 2015).<sup>3</sup> There are good reasons for this prevailing trend since these migrants dominate Nepalese migrations to the GCC. Nepalese migrants working in blue-collar jobs are also more exposed to exploitation, injury and maltreatment (Adhikary et al. 2017; Pyakurel 2018; Sapkota 2015).<sup>4</sup> However, because of the selectivity in the research focus, the other categories of Nepalese migrants have often been overlooked in the debates on labour migrations in the region (Limbu 2022; Valenta 2022a).

An increasing number of studies on other migrant groups that have investigated multiple migrations of skilled migrants may be of significance for our analysis (Ali 2011; Carlos 2013; Paul and Yeoh 2020; Zijlstra 2020). Studies reveal that high-skilled migrants from the Global South also experience hardships and migration barriers (Carlos 2013; Ekanayake and Amirthalingam 2021; Valenta 2022a; Wee and Yeoh 2021; Zijlstra 2020). Therefore, some researchers describe them as 'middling migrants' (Wee and Yeoh 2021), whose migration is not entirely a free choice (Ekanayake and Amirthalingam 2021) and who occupy space between highly mobile cosmopolitan elites and low-skilled temporary labour migrants engaged in serial migration and forced transnationalism (Parreñas et al. 2019; Piper and Withers 2018).

Most studies exploring the migrations of highly skilled Nepalese migrants focus on the experiences of Nepalese professionals and international students in the developed countries of the Global North (Adhikari 2013; Ang 2022; Bohra-Mishra 2011; Gurung 2015). Several of these studies show that Nepalese migrants with higher education may also be considered 'middling migrants,' as some experience a decline in their socio-economic position. They end up working in working-class or service industry positions and face various challenges related to their residency status (Ang 2022; Gurung 2015). However, it should be noted that the experiences of stepwise migrations have usually been omitted in studies on high-skilled Nepalese migrants, both of those residing in the Global North, and elsewhere.

Against this background, we can ask whether some more recent and unexplored groups of labour migrants in the GCC region, such as Nepalese highly skilled migrants, engage in stepwise migrations, as the most recent studies suggest (Limbu 2022; Valenta 2022a). Furthermore, it is relevant to investigate which trajectories, motivations, hierarchies of place, obstacles and strategies may be discerned and observed among these migrants. The notion of stepwise migrations suggests that migrants who are successful in upward stepwise migrations can acquire the required resources and skills or migration capital during their intermediary migratory steps. Thus, they will move from country to country before they migrate to one of their more desirable countries (Carlos 2013; Paul 2011, 2015).

In line with the above-mentioned perspectives, we discuss Nepalese migrations. The following question emerges: Which countries would be at the bottom and top of the above-mentioned hierarchies of place? In what follows, we discuss the hierarchies of place among Nepalese migrants to contextualise the migrants' narratives, which are presented later in the current article.

### ***Hierarchies of place among Nepalese migrants***

Previous studies on Nepalese migrants and international students have shown that their 'imaginative geographies' of mobility and place are influenced by the marketing strategies employed by international educational consultants, brokerage and recruitment agencies, as well as online social

media platforms and their transnational networks (Kölbel 2020; Shrestha 2018). It is also indicated that the general hierarchies of place in Nepal correspond to socio-economic hierarchies that structure people's lives in the country (Kölbel 2020). According to these imaginative geographies, the Nepalese perceive the Gulf countries as destinations for poor and uneducated Nepalese labourers, while the countries in the Global North are considered proper destinations for the Nepalese with higher levels of education (Kölbel 2020; Valenta 2022a). It is important to note, however, that despite these imaginaries, there are still high-skilled Nepalese migrants who choose to migrate to the Gulf region. The central question for this article is to explore the motivations and drivers behind these migrations.

Previous studies on Nepalese international migrations indicate that economic motives are a major driver of Nepalese migrations; thus, it is not surprising that the migration flows from Nepal aim at reaching wealthier countries (IOM 2019; Limbu 2022; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017).<sup>5</sup> Against that background, we start categorising the largest destinations for Nepalese migrants in tiers according to their economy, wages and costs of migration.<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 outlines Nepalese migrations to the major receiving countries based on their GDP, while Figure 2 indicates wages and the costs of migration.<sup>7</sup>

In 2019, Nepal's GDP per capita was half of India's, the country with the lowest GDP per capita of all the receiving countries in the figure. On the opposite side are the large receivers of Nepalese migrants in the GCC, such as Qatar, which has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world. However, for most Nepalese migrants, the GCC countries can hardly be considered top-tier countries because most Nepalese migrants in Qatar and other countries in the region are low-skilled migrants recruited in poorly paid, demanding and sometimes dangerous jobs (Adhikary et al. 2017; IOM 2019; Kölbel 2020; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017).

An important motivation for the Nepalese who work in high-skilled positions in the GCC are good salaries (Malla and Rosenbaum 2017; Valenta 2022a). Studies on the migration of professionals from other countries in the Global South indeed show that the major motivations for migration to the GCC are higher wages and the relatively low costs of migration compared with countries in the Global North (Ekanayake and Amirthalingam 2021; Valenta and Jakobsen 2016). However, studies also

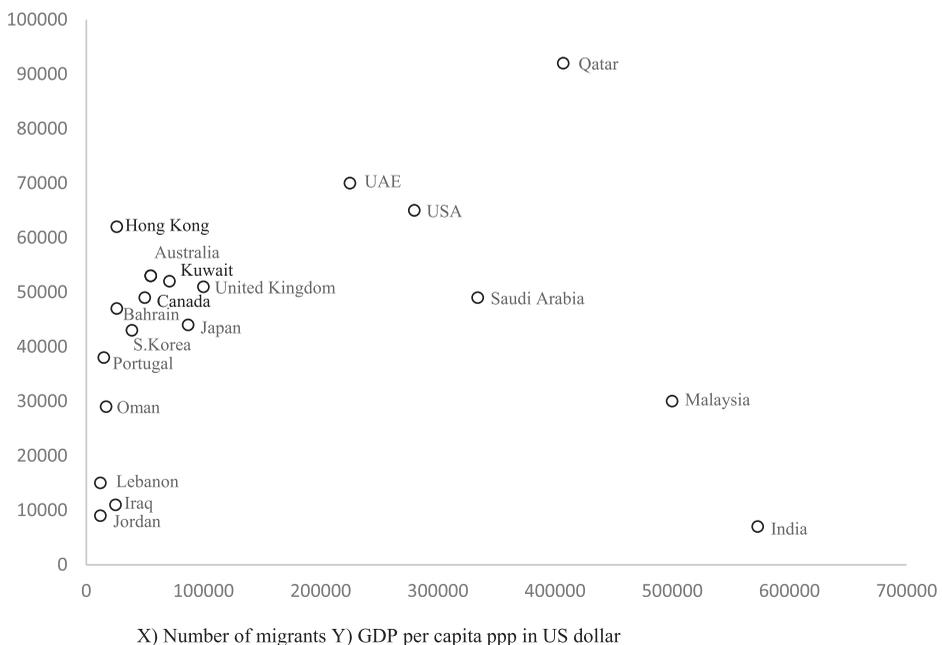
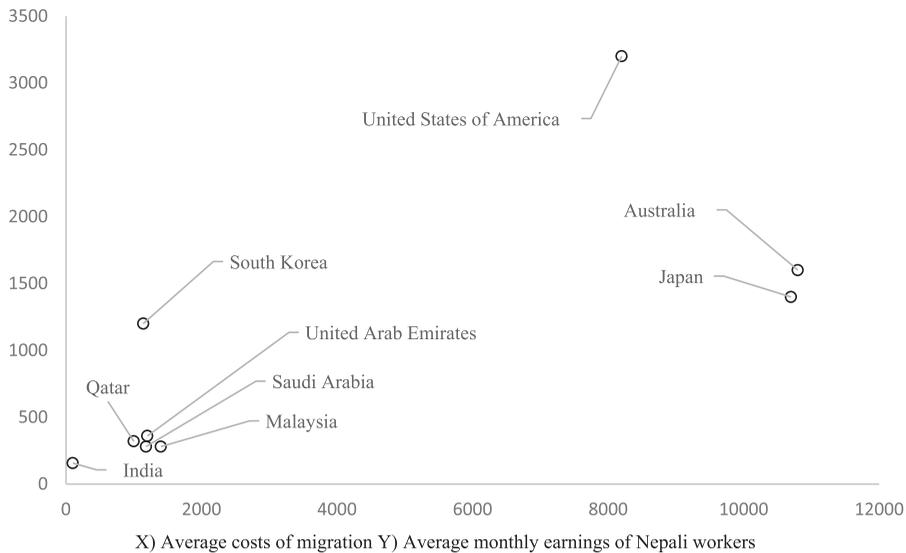


Figure 1. Nepalese migrants in the largest destinations according to their GDP.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 2.** Costs of migration and earnings of Nepalese migrants.<sup>9</sup>

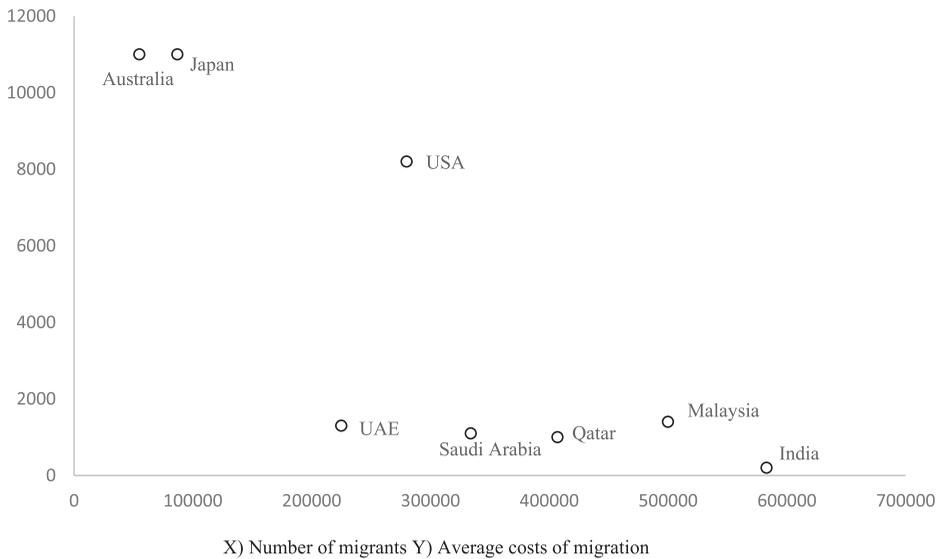
show that migrants' perceptions of various receiving countries are also influenced by concerns regarding discrimination, safety, integration opportunities, stability and the general impression of different receiving countries (Ekanayake and Amirthalingam 2021; Montagna, della Puppa, and Kofman 2021; Ossman 2004; Paul and Yeoh 2020; Wee and Yeoh 2021).

It is also suggested that the 'hierarchies of place' should be related to 'transnational skills regimes' (Collins 2021), where some countries function as the gateways for getting into other countries. Several studies on migration in the GCC are in line with this argument, showing that the countries in the region are the gateway to the Global North for Asian migrants with certain skills and within certain professions (Carlos 2013; Collins 2021; Paul 2011; Valenta 2022a).

It is also shown that both high- and low-skilled migrants in the GCC engage in multiple migrations, but that the migrations of the migrants with lower skills are of a smaller range, meaning that they are predominantly restricted to circular and serial migrations within the region (Parreñas 2021; Paul and Yeoh 2020; Valenta 2022a). The GCC countries allow the legal immigration of large numbers of labour migrants of all skill levels, but further migration to the Global North is hampered because of the various costs and restrictions that developed countries impose on the immigration of low-skilled foreign labour (Parreñas 2021; Valenta 2022a; Valenta and Jakobsen 2016). Figure 2 shows the average costs of migration and the monthly earnings of Nepalese workers in the selected countries.

As shown in the figure, Nepalese workers in India have the lowest average monthly wages (IOM 219; Valenta 2022a). On average, those in the GCC earn twice as much as Nepalese workers in India, while Nepalese migrants outside the region who are in wealthy developed countries such as Japan, Australia, the USA and South Korea, earn many times more than those in the GCC. However, the relatively low average wages among Nepalese migrants in the GCC may be explained by the fact that most are low-skilled workers (IOM 2019). By contrast, countries such as the USA, Australia and Canada primarily accept generally Nepalese migrants with a certain level of resources and/or educational background – typically highly skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, which is reflected in the average earnings of Nepalese in these countries (Adhikary et al. 2017; Malla and Rosenbaum 2017). Figure 3 shows the number of Nepalese migrants according to the costs of migration.

The figures indicate that most Nepalese migrants are in easy-to-enter countries, which provide low wages to large numbers of predominantly low-skilled migrants. India is at the bottom of the



**Figure 3.** Costs of migration to the largest receiving countries.<sup>10</sup>

hierarchy, providing ‘the cheapest to enter’ option and the lowest wages. The GCC countries and Malaysia represent the second tier, while wealthy industrialised countries are the top-tier countries. Among them are the USA, Canada, South Korea, Australia, Japan and the UK. The USA is the largest receiver of Nepalese migrants in the Global North. As a high-income, English-speaking country and the largest economy in the world, the USA attracts foreign talent and labour migrants, not only from Nepal but from the whole world (Bohra-Mishra 2011; IOM 2019; Takenaka 2007). Many Nepalese migrants have also migrated to the USA as refugees and via various humanitarian and diversity visa programmes.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Hierarchy of place and Nepalese stepwise migrations within an aspiration-ability model***

As we will soon see, the stepwise migrations of highly skilled migrants in our study also occurred within the above-outlined hierarchy of receiving countries. However, their migrations encompass a variety of intermediary steps that are driven by different aspirations and abilities – or a lack of them – which we discuss in more detail on the next pages (Carling and Schewel 2018; Carlos 2013). Carling and Schewel distinguish between migratory potential and migration ability in their aspiration-ability model of international migrations. According to the model, aspiration and ability are simultaneously influenced from both above and below by migrants’ resources and the macro-level context of obstacles and opportunities, referred to in the model as the immigration interface (Carling and Schewel 2018, 3).

The model aims to explain the tension that arises from individuals’ desire to migrate while facing the inability to do so within the global system, which imposes restrictions on migrations from the global South to the global North (Carling and Schewel 2018). We contribute to the field by utilising the aspiration-ability model to examine stepwise migrations as a process through which migrants attempt to navigate the aforementioned migration interfaces via multiple migrations, which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been explored previously.

According to the model, the aspiration to migrate emerges within a specific environment, ‘encompassing the social, economic and political context in which particular social constructions of migration exist’ (Carling and Schewel 2018, 2). The figures above focus solely on economic factors, such as the costs of migration and wage levels. As we discuss below, the narratives of the

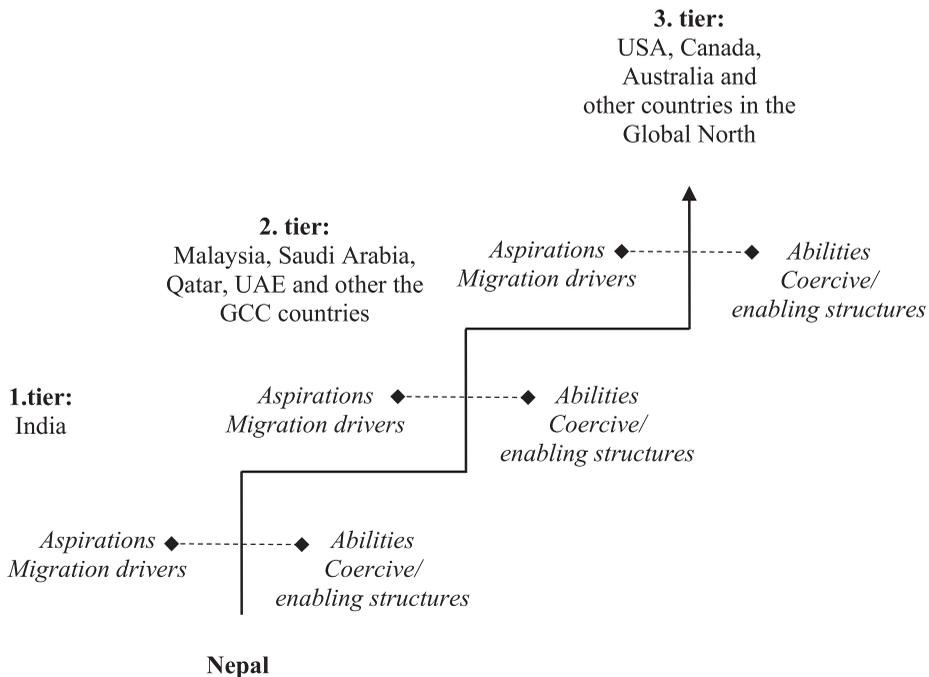
migrants in our study confirm that economic concerns are important aspects of stepwise migrations. However, applying our version of the aspiration–ability model, we could also identify other factors driving multiple migrations, which sometimes urge high skilled Nepalese to migrate onwards even to the detriment of the socioeconomic position achieved in the GCC. Our analytical approach is illustrated in [Figure 4](#).

In what follows, we apply the aspiration–ability model to understand each migratory step of the Nepalese stepwise migrations. As illustrated, we scrutinised the abilities, aspirations and social structures of relevance for migration at various stages of stepwise migration. Here, the aspiration–ability distinction is centred on interactions between the migration interfaces and people’s agency, motivations and human capital, while socioeconomic factors and migration and integration policies emphasise a structural dimension to the aspiration–ability model.

## Methodology

Several previous studies have identified challenges that researchers within the field of multinational migration may encounter (Paul and Yeoh 2020; Parreñas 2021; Valenta 2022a). Paul and Yeoh (2020) argue that these studies face practical methodological challenges that are linked to the inherent characteristics of multinational migrations. Among these are their extended temporality, multispecialty and complexity, meaning that they often last multiple years and include residence in different countries. Furthermore, researchers exploring recurrent multination migrations must discern between a variety of experiences and capture the dynamic changes in migration decisions and the contexts of migration (Paul and Yeoh 2020).

Coping with the above-mentioned challenges, we interviewed 72 Nepalese migrants of various skill levels, professional backgrounds, residencies in different countries and at different stages of their migration trajectories, professional careers and life phases. Among them were construction workers, security guards, delivery drivers, accountants, managers, engineers, international students



**Figure 4.** Aspiration-ability model applied to Nepalese stepwise migrations.

and their family dependents. Most of the informants have lived, worked or studied in the GCC region, that is, in the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. More than half resided in these countries at the time of interview, while others were former residents. We can also divide the sample according to the informants' education: 30 informants were higher-skilled migrants, meaning that they had university degrees, and 42 were lower-skilled, having maximum primary or secondary school education. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the informants.

The migrants were both men and women of different ages and from various backgrounds and skill levels, but the current study relies primarily on in-depth interviews and narratives of one specific segment of this sample – high-skilled Nepalese migrants with university education who lived in the GCC and who moved or aspired to move onwards to Canada, the US, the UK, Australia or other countries in the Global North. Distinctions relating to whether or not Nepalese migrants have higher education seem to be pertinent for the article, as a university degree, especially within STEM disciplines, provides better mobility opportunities.

We conducted most interviews between 2018 and 2022. All the interviews focused on the migrants' migratory aspirations, resources and reasons for migration.<sup>12</sup> We combined the snowball method and strategic sampling in a flexible manner, adjusting our selective sampling, interview guides and focus to emerging analytic categories. In the early stages, we recruited both lower- and higher-skilled Nepalese migrants who lived in the GCC, focusing primarily on their reasons for migration and migration strategies. Finding out that multiple migrations were an intrinsic part of their strategies, we started to strategically select those who were in different stages of their migration trajectories, including those who lived in countries outside the region but who were former GCC residents. Because the high-skilled migrants prevailed in this category, we devoted the latest stages of the sampling to this subsegment of Nepalese migrants, investigating their motivations, experiences and strategies.

Most informants were male in their 30s.<sup>13</sup> The youngest informant was 25 years old and the oldest was 52 years old (see also [Table 2](#)). The other informants may be divided into two general categories: (1) higher-skilled migrants who migrated, in a serial, stepwise or direct manner to the developed countries in the Global North without detours in the GCC and (2) lower-skilled migrants who live or have lived in the GCC.

Educational levels of Nepalese migrants in the Gulf seem to correspond to caste divisions found in Nepal and elsewhere in the Nepalese diaspora (Bruslé 2009; Gellner and Hausner 2018; Sharma 2021). High-skilled migrants in this study tended to originate from higher castes. However, it should also be stressed that high-skilled migrants in the current study do not represent the socio-economic and political elites and extended families which could facilitate their direct migration to the Global North. Compared to low-skilled Nepalese migrants, they are privileged in the sense that they have managed to achieve higher education either in India or Nepal, which is an important resource in the migration process. They also managed eventually to migrate further to the top-tier countries, while the low-skilled Nepalese migrants in the Gulf were primarily engaged in recurrent migrations to the region.

It should be noted that several lower-skilled informants who lived in the GCC were also multinational migrants, but their serial migrations were restricted to the GCC region, India and Malaysia. Their experiences and perspectives are of indirect relevance for our analysis because they provided pertinent contextual information and experiences contrasting those of the skilled stepwise migrants.

**Table 1.** Overview of the informants by current residence, skill levels and gender.

Current residence	Higher skilled	Lower skilled	Male	Female	Total
Residing in the GCC at the time of interview	5	36	40	1	41
Residing in the developed countries, lived earlier in the GCC	16	4	17	3	20
Residing in developed countries, without prior residence in the GCC	9	2	8	3	11
Total	30	42	65	7	72

**Table 2.** Migration trajectories and aspirations of selected migrants.

Informant	Age	Migration path/Revealed migration ability	Migratory aspirations
Shiva	48	Nepal – UAE (6) – Nepal (0.6) – Singapore (5) – Nepal (3) – Portugal (7) – Canada (0.3) – Norway (0.2)	Plans to stay in Norway or Portugal
Manoj	27	Nepal – UAE (5) – Nepal (1) – Australia (3)	Plans to stay in Aust.
Bishal	34	Nepal – India (7) – Nepal (0.3) – UAE (2) – Nepal (0.3) – France (3) – Nepal (0.2) – Netherlands (4)	Undetermined
Krish	25	Nepal – Qatar (2) – Nepal (2) – Japan (2)	Plans to stay in Japan
Ramesh	37	Nepal – UAE (3) – Belgium (1)	Plans to stay in Belgium
Suresh	52	Nepal – Qatar (2) – Nepal (0.3) – Saudi Arabia (10) – Nepal (0.2) – USA (2)	Plans to retire in Nepal
Bindu	45	Nepal – UAE (9) – Canada (0.2) – UAE (6) – UK (5)	Plans to stay in UK
Mohan	39	Nepal – Kuwait (3) – Nepal (0.6) – Canada (0.4) – Nepal (0.8) – Canada (8)	Plans to retire in Nepal
Rajesh	26	Nepal – UAE (3)	Plans to migrate to USA
Hom	36	Nepal – Qatar (1) – Nepal (6) – USA (4)	Plans to return to Nepal
Sarita	40	Nepal – UAE (10) – USA (m/d) – UAE (4) – USA (2)	Plans to stay in USA
Haribansha	28	Nepal – Australia (2) – Nepal (1) – UAE (3)	Plans to migrate to Aust.
Dayahang	32	Nepal – Qatar (4) – Germany (3)	Undetermined
Kedar	31	Nepal – Qatar (2) – Nepal (6) – Canada (2)	Plans to stay in Canada
Sunita	36	Nepal – UAE (5) – Nepal (0.1) – Canada (7)	Plans to stay in Canada
Rajendra	30	Nepal – UAE (2) – Nepal (0.5) – Australia (3)	Plans to return to Nepal
Dryshia	39	Nepal – Kuwait (7) – Canada (6)	Plans to stay in Canada

m/d = missing data; numbers in parenthesis indicate years spent in different countries

Comparing experiences, we identified which abilities were required to ascend to higher tier countries. In this way, we could address in more detail the challenges of ‘complexity’ and identify the changing dynamics of migration aspirations and abilities of highly skilled stepwise Nepalese migrants. Interviews with the Nepalese migrants have been supplemented with recurrent visits to the Middle East, Nepal and South Asia, discussions with migration specialists in the regions and interviews with migrants from other countries who live or have lived in the GCC.<sup>14</sup>

## Findings: dynamic of stepwise migrations via the Middle East

In this section, we present several cases that illustrate the different facets of stepwise migrations of the interviewed Nepalese migrants. We start by mapping the core characteristics of their trajectories. Most had the GCC as their first destination before they migrated to the Global North. Furthermore, stepwise migration usually did not happen via direct migratory steps from one receiving country to another. Instead, as Table 2 shows, the country changes were often combined with temporary returns to Nepal.

Applying the aspiration–ability perspective to stepwise migrations in the table, we can distinguish between different categories of multiple migrants. On the one hand, we find those like Shiva, Manoj or Bishal, who revealed their migration ability and moved stepwise, and on the other hand, we find those like Rajesh, who is still in the GCC but who aspires to migrate to the Global North. We can also see from the table that the length of stay in different countries differs a lot, which also may be partly related to variations in the migrants’ aspirations and abilities to migrate. Some stepwise migrants, such as Bishal and Ramesh, spent a relatively short time in the GCC and had short temporary returns to Nepal before they migrated to Europe or the USA. Others, such as Suresh and Bindu, were long-term residents in the GCC before eventually migrating to the Global North. As we will soon see, these variations may be related to differences in their experiences in different countries, *inter alia* a lack of opportunities or aspirations to migrate to third countries.

Most migrants were in the GCC before they migrated to the USA, Australia, Canada and countries in Europe. Some migrants were dissatisfied with their situation in the GCC and Nepal but had to wait for years for proper migration opportunities. Others were satisfied with their jobs and wages in the GCC, and they spent many years there without seriously considering leaving the region. However, at a certain stage of their life, they followed their aspirations, and using their enhanced migration abilities, they managed to move further.

The above-introduced cases and trajectories clearly illustrate variations in the revealed migration ability and aspirations for stepwise migrations. We should also note that in addition to the migrants in the table who were in the GCC and migrated to the Global North – or aspired to do so – we also met those who did not have such aspirations. For example, Ravi had been working in Qatar for nine years at the time of the interview. When asked if he planned on moving to Europe or elsewhere, he said his friends often suggested he should move to a ‘better’ country, but he had never considered it seriously. Being satisfied with his high wage and other amenities provided by the company, he did not have any clear plans to move. Yet it is not a foregone conclusion that Ravi would fail to get such aspirations at a later stage of his migration career and family life, as other cases have revealed. We discuss these processes in more detail later, but before this, we identify the reasons why our informants were moving to the GCC in the first place.

### **Coercive and enabling structures and affordable and desirable destinations**

Previous studies suggest that we should distinguish between desirable and affordable destinations and how migrants position themselves, with their migratory aspirations and acquired migration abilities, towards structures that may hinder or enable their ascending in the hierarchy of potential receiving countries (Carlos 2013; Paul 2011; Valenta 2022a). Our findings confirm those from previous studies showing that the GCC is not the most desirable destination for Nepalese skilled migrants. The most desirable destinations were developed countries in the Global North (Kölbel 2020; Valenta 2022a). However, many did not manage to reach these destinations directly and instead moved to the GCC, where they worked, studied or both before migrating further to Canada or other countries in the Global North. In the context of the restrictions and requirements these countries imposed on migrations from the Global South, the attractiveness of the GCC as the destination is connected to its affordability. Indeed, it was often pointed out by the informants that migration to the GCC was easy to accomplish, or even free of any costs. As Ravi pointed out:

... What sold it for me was that they said the company in Qatar was going to pay for the visa, as well as the tickets. That helped me decide because I would not be able to pay for everything myself. ... I completed a diploma course in civil engineering and started working on a construction project in a rural district of Nepal. I was unsatisfied with the money I was making and wanted better wages for myself. (Ravi, 31 years old)

It seems that the GCC can appear as a viable first destination, especially for young people who were at the beginning of their professional careers, who were experiencing unemployment or who aspired to better wages and better job opportunities than those offered in Nepal. As shown above, Ravi migrated to Qatar because of the affordability of migration and hopes for higher wages. He was contacted by a colleague about a job opportunity in Qatar. The colleague informed Ravi that the costs of migration would be covered by the employer, and this influenced Ravi’s decision to migrate to Qatar.

Similar accounts were provided by other informants. Mohan was 39 years old, and at the time of the interview, he had been living in Canada for eight years, working as a computer specialist. However, as a young man, he migrated first to the Middle East – to Kuwait – which he did almost right after he completed his masters in Nepal. He was in search of some jobs in his field, both in Nepal and elsewhere, but the search was not fruitful. Then, he got a job in a café in Kuwait through a recruitment agency. He was overqualified for the job, but he was offered attractive wages. All the travel expenses were covered by the employer in Kuwait, which also influenced his decision to migrate to the country.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the migrants fulfilled the requirements to migrate directly to the Global North, such as having relevant education and extensive work experience. However, their experience was that it took too long to get their visa application processed or they experienced several rejections. They did not want to spend more time waiting in Nepal for an opportunity to migrate to the Global North. It could take years before such an opportunity emerged. Therefore, when the opportunity for well-paid jobs or postgraduate studies was offered by international educational consultants

and recruitment agencies, they went for them. Bishal's case is illustrative in this regard.<sup>16</sup> After finishing high school in Nepal, Bishal moved to Gujarat, India, to pursue his undergraduate studies in IT engineering. During his final year, many local IT companies approached his university to hire students, and he was eventually employed by one of these Indian companies. After he finished his undergraduate degree, Bishal moved to Bangalore, India, to start his job. Bishal worked in the IT sector in Bangalore for three years. During that time, he was also applying for graduate degree programmes, primarily in the U.S. When one of the universities in the U.S. offered him admission, Bishal terminated his job contract in India and returned to Nepal to apply for a U.S. visa. However, his visa application was rejected three times. He shared the following:

I was heartbroken and lost when my application was rejected multiple times. All of my documents were valid, but for some reason, they rejected the application. It is said that one should not apply for a U.S. visa more than three times in one year because it affects your record in the long run. So I decided to quit this plan. (Bishal, 34 years old)

Although Bishal was looking for jobs in his home country, he also applied for jobs and master's studies in other countries. He eventually received an admission offer from a university in Abu Dhabi. One of his friends had mentioned this university to him and Bishal sent his application to the university. This was a fully funded course, and the university also provided an apartment and generous scholarship. Furthermore, the university collaborated with U.S. universities, which meant he could increase his chances of migrating to the USA. Hence, Bishal moved to Abu Dhabi to pursue his postgraduate studies in IT engineering. While studying and working in the UAE, he applied to Ph.D. programmes at different universities in the USA, but his long-term plan to migrate to the USA was never realised.

Bishal was among the most resourceful migrants in the study. He was eventually admitted to a Ph.D. programme in France, and after finishing his Ph.D., he got a job in the Netherlands, where he resettled permanently. Yet his narrative clearly contradicts the idea that multinational migrations among high-skilled migrants are frictionless and enjoyed by privileged elites pursuing their professional careers (Ang 2022). Indeed, the general impression is that the migrations of high-skilled Nepalese like Bishal, Mohan and most others in the study were not free-choice migration. Their stories look close to those of the aspiring 'middle category of migrant' (Carlos 2013; Paul 2011) or 'middling migrants' (Wee and Yeoh 2021), for whom the GCC was not seen as a first-choice destination but as the most affordable or only available destination at certain stages of their professional careers.

Nepalese migrants in this study do not represent privileged elites. Yet, it should be noted that they had better mobility options than domestic workers and other low-skilled migrants from Nepal and other South-Asian countries (Pyakurel 2018; Valenta 2022a, 2022b). Previous studies indicate that Nepalese irregular migrants are compelled to pay exorbitant sums of money to unscrupulous brokers and smugglers, which in turn plunges them into significant financial burdens (Pyakurel 2018; Zharkevich 2021). Unlike them, highly skilled migrants like Bishal, Ravi, and others in this study used affordable legal migration channels to the GCC facilitated by their social networks and the recruitment agencies operating in Nepal (Kern and Müller-Böker 2015; Shrestha 2018). The migration process to the Gulf for these individuals was relatively inexpensive or fully covered by their employers. Thereafter, they further utilised legal channels to move onwards to the USA, Canada, Australia, and the EU (Limbu 2022; Valenta 2022a, 2022b). However, these migrations required larger resources. As we will indicate in the following pages, their subsequent migrations to the Global North were typically financed by the savings they accumulated from working in the Gulf.<sup>17</sup>

### **Aspirations and migration drivers: motivations to leave the GCC and migrate onwards**

In our material, we could clearly distinguish between those migrants who were dissatisfied with their life circumstances in the GCC and those who enjoyed being there and who liked their jobs but who

nevertheless eventually decided to migrate out of the region. Regarding their reasons for dissatisfaction, we can discern among job-related reasons, sociocultural reasons and long-term expectations for stability and integration. For example, Mohan did not like the working environment, and he did not enjoy life in Kuwait. He disliked the strict rules and regulations in Kuwait and that the jobs he worked at did not develop him professionally.

Bishal also mentioned personal development and sociocultural environments as a reason for onwards stepwise migrations. When asked why he did not stay in the GCC and look for jobs or Ph.D. courses there, he shared the following:

The IT sector was not that big in Abu Dhabi or the other GCC countries back then, so I felt like my professional growth would not be as expected if I stayed here. I also wanted to start my Ph.D. as soon as possible, and when the university in France offered me a Ph.D., I knew I wanted to take it. ... There were also other factors that made me want to move from there. The UAE is a great country, and I was living a great life there, but I felt like it was very artificial at times. As Nepali, we are used to a lot of nature around us, and when I was in the UAE, I missed the nature aspect. I also felt a little uncomfortable because of society's restrictions. I never faced any issues personally as such, but it is an Islamic country, so their way of life is different than what I am used to. (Bishal, 34 years old)

Bishal's account summarises some of the major reasons for out-migration also mentioned by other Nepalese in the current study. We met other professionals like him in the region who also felt that they were 'living a great life' and were satisfied with their studies, jobs, high wages and other amenities that the companies in the region provided. Nevertheless, they decided to move. For example, Suresh first migrated to Qatar.<sup>18</sup> He shared that after he finished his education in Nepal, he applied to multiple places, both for work and for postgraduate studies, before hearing back from a university in Qatar, where he was admitted to postgraduate studies in accounting. Suresh was informed by a recruitment agency that his expenses would be covered if he was willing to work in a local company for a few hours during his studies.

After finishing his education in Qatar, Suresh got a job in Saudi Arabia and worked in the same finance company for 10 years in high-skilled positions. He was satisfied with his job. He had a high salary, and his trips back home were paid for by the company. This included flights, accommodations and all other expenses, so he visited Nepal frequently. Nevertheless, Suresh eventually migrated to the USA.<sup>19</sup> For Suresh, migration to the USA was prompted by the wish to secure permanent residence and citizenship in the country. He shared that he felt insecure in Saudi Arabia because he lived in the country as a temporary resident.<sup>20</sup>

Several recent studies on multiple migrations of highly skilled migrants from South Asia in Europe show that their onward migration was motivated by a search for economic stability, and to provide better academic prospects for their children.<sup>21</sup> For example, these motivations prompted naturalised Bangladeshis to move from Portugal and Italy to the UK (Mapril 2021; Montagna, della Puppa, and Kofman 2021). Our material includes narratives of multiple migrations both within Middle Eastern and European context and they partly resemble findings in these studies. Our Nepalese in the GCC also moved onwards to the Global North searching for stability and to improve future opportunities for their children. For many of them, the costs of bringing families to the GCC are very significant, due to high wage requirements, high costs of visa renewals, as well as school and tuition fees. Furthermore, the GCC countries do not provide avenues to permanent residence, which produces concerns among parents about their children and their future. Indeed, the general impression is that a lack of proper opportunity for long-term integration, stability and citizenship was among the major drivers of out-migration from the GCC. Therefore, utterances such as 'there was no future for me there' or 'we wanted to provide a stable future to our children' appeared often in our material. These findings are also in line with Limbu's study on Nepalese migrants in Qatar, which points out that onwards migration is a part of an 'ongoing inter-generational family project' (Limbu 2022, 6).

## Changing abilities and aspirations

Previous studies have suggested that changing abilities, aspirations and enabling and coercive structures propel different migratory steps (Carlos 2013; Montagna, della Puppa, and Kofman 2021; Parreñas et al. 2019; Wee and Yeoh 2021). As Wee and Yeoh (2021) point out, stepwise migrations evolve both in opposition and in line with specific counteracting forces and with varying degrees of freedom and agency. The changing dynamic of stepwise migration was also confirmed in narratives of our informants. Yet, their narratives display even larger complexity and variations in dynamic of migration than those found in the above-mentioned studies. They show interesting nuances and idiosyncrasies regarding their aspirations and abilities. In some stages, their further migrations were prompted by aspirations to achieve higher wages or reunite with family members, while in others, they were driven by various push factors or the search for stability and predictability. For example, Shiva, a 48-year-old Nepalese migrant who lived in Norway at the time of the interview, also had a complex migration trajectory, aspiring to higher earnings, permanent residence and a European passport. He migrated through a recruitment agency, initially to the UAE, with his Nepalese bachelor's degree in business studies. He worked in Dubai as a clerk for six years. Thereafter, Shiva returned to Nepal, married and migrated with his wife to Singapore, where he earned better than he did in Dubai, even though he worked as a temporary, semi-skilled worker in a restaurant. However, after five years, the couple had to return to Nepal because they did not manage to renew their residence permits in Singapore.

Shiva spent three years in Nepal trying to develop agri-business in rural Nepal. Still, it proved unsustainable, and he migrated to Portugal on a visitor visa, which he overstayed, working as a low-skilled irregular worker. This was hard and underpaid work, but Shiva pointed out that he had been well informed by people in his social network about the hardships he had to face. He shared that he was prepared to sacrifice a few years in such a position because Portugal provided possibilities of advancing to regular status, permanent residence and even opportunities of acquiring Portuguese citizenship. Shiva's endeavours paid off. He eventually regularised his status, and, building on his experiences from restaurants in Singapore, he advanced to become a professional chef in a hotel. His family joined him with a later permanent residence, while Shiva eventually acquired Portuguese citizenship. However, their earnings were still relatively low. The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the situation, driving him to migrate again to a better paying job. After seven years in Portugal, Shiva moved to Canada. However, without finding viable, lasting job opportunities in Canada, he went to Norway, where he eventually got a well-paid position as a skilled chef in a restaurant. His Portuguese passport has proven to be important in these endeavours.

Shiva's case shows us that stepwise migrations may be lengthy endeavours comprising many steps, and that 'ascending' requires persistence and sacrifice. Furthermore, it demonstrates that onward migration from the GCC and onward migrations within the European context are motivated by different factors and facilitated by various resources. His case, along with the narratives of other informants, also suggest that permanent residence and citizenship in the Global North are a major motivation for Nepalese migrants to leave the GCC region, a motivation they share with other skilled migrants from the Global South who have left the region (Carlos 2013; Valenta 2022a).<sup>22</sup>

The paramount motivation for Nepalese families was the wish to achieve stability for themselves and their children. In most cases, migration to the Global North also improved the migrants' socio-economic life circumstances. However, in some cases, migration to the Global North required sacrifices, aggravating their socioeconomic position (Gurung 2015), as Shiva's case illustrates. Depri- vation in professional and socioeconomic status was also reported by several other Nepalese in our study. For example, when asked how he felt about his life in the U.S., Suresh shared the following:

... It is not how I expected it would be. I always assumed that as soon as I move to the USA, I will get great jobs based on my educational degree, but this was not the case. All my educational degrees are worthless here, and I am struggling with menial jobs. (Suresh, 52 years old)

Suresh has changed several jobs since arriving in the USA, and he is constantly trying to find better opportunities. However, he felt he was happier while working back in Saudi Arabia because of all the facilities that were provided. He also earned almost double the money in Saudi Arabia that he is making in the USA. Nevertheless, Suresh and several other migrants in the present study stressed that they migrated onwards because of their children. Even if the migration to the Global North resulted in a temporary or permanent decline in professional status and downward social mobility, the permanent residence status and citizenship in the top-tier countries was seen as worthy long-term investment.<sup>23</sup>

### **Abilities for stepwise migrations to the Global North: strategies and migratory channels**

It is also often suggested that the major forces that reduce the ability to migrate are restrictive immigration policies targeting those unskilled migrants who want to migrate from poorer to wealthier countries (Carling and Schewel 2018). Compared with the GCC, countries in the Global North are much more selective, allowing primarily the immigration of skilled migrants with certain resources and professions (Carlos 2013; Parreñas 2021; Valenta 2022a; Valenta and Jakobsen 2016, 2017). However, we have shown that the highly skilled migrants in our study also experienced a mismatch between their aspirations and desires to move to the Global North. Being without the ability to do so in the foreseeable future funnelled them to the GCC. The experiences of these stepwise migrants differ from the experiences of the Nepalese migrants who had the resources to migrate directly to top-tier countries in the Global North. Their trajectories also contrast with the experiences of migrants in the region who did not have the ability to migrate from the intermediate tiers and who instead tried to prolong their temporary residence using a combination of circular and serial migrations within the GCC and other strategies.

A pertinent question arises: which abilities, resources, strategies and migratory channels have been used by Nepalese migrants who managed to migrate out of the region? It seems that for some, the major resource used for climbing to the top-tier countries in the Global North was the money they earned and saved during their stay in the GCC. Shiva used savings from the GCC in the first stages of his migration trajectory to move to Singapore, while his accumulated human capital and acquired European passport facilitated the latest stepwise migrations. Others also combined accumulated economic resources with their human capital and other abilities they had enhanced in the region, such as education, working experience and language proficiency, which later helped them migrate to the Global North via various programmes for entrepreneurs, high-skilled migrants and international students.

Bindu, a 45-year-old Nepalese woman who lived in the UAE for 15 years before her resettlement in the UK, fits in the entrepreneur category because she migrated to the UK on an entrepreneur visa. Bindu was the owner of three hair salons in Dubai. However, the worry of not having a stable future in the UAE was bothering her. She was required to invest at least 200,000 pounds and register a new company within six months that would employ two new full-time positions for local workers. Bindu shared that she met the requirements for an entrepreneur visa in UK because of the profits from the businesses she had established in the UAE. In contrast, Bishal did not need large economic capital to migrate stepwise because his migration steps were fuelled by his academic talents and facilitated by different scholarships. Bishal went first to India to take undergraduate studies, then to Qatar to take his masters and finally to France as a Ph.D. student before settling permanently in the Netherlands.

Other migrants had to combine human capital and substantial savings from the GCC to move. Sunita – a 36-year-old Nepalese woman – moved with her husband and children from the UAE to Canada. She aspired to migrate to the Global North during their whole stay in the GCC. She and her husband had already applied for resettlement as newcomers in the UAE, but it took them four years to obtain the necessary permissions and resources. They also had to pay a considerable fee to the manpower company.

Sunita shared that if she and her husband had not worked in the Gulf, accumulated savings and had international work experience, it would have been difficult for them to meet the criteria for the resettlement application. In the process of applying for residence in Canada, they had to collect points that were given for language skills, education and work experience, along with proof of funds. She stressed that work experience played a major role in collecting the points. Sunita's husband was working as an executive manager in a retail company in the UAE, and his portfolio made their application strong enough to be qualified to get residence in Canada.<sup>24</sup>

Mohan shared a similar experience. He also applied for permanent residency in Canada as a high-skilled worker. He emphasised that his academic qualifications as a computer specialist from Nepal, along with his savings and language proficiency he had developed in Kuwait, helped him achieve a higher score on the language test. This ultimately led to obtaining a residence permit in Canada. In sum, the general impression is that the high-skilled migrants used a combination of resources and education acquired before and during their stay in the GCC. Thereafter, these resources were combined with the information and help from supportive networks in the intermediate countries to climb to top-tier destinations in the Global North.

It should be stressed that, if used alone, the resources acquired in the GCC were sometimes not enough to launch migrants onwards to the Global North. These resources had to be combined with those they had back home. For example, Sunita shared that their savings from the GCC were insufficient to cover the cost of migration to Canada. Therefore, they also sold a piece of land in Nepal that had been gifted by their parents. There are also stepwise migrants in our study who would not manage to migrate onwards if they relied only on the economic resources that they acquired in the GCC. Therefore, they took a loan in Nepal like Sunita and her husband, while others combined resources acquired in the GCC with the human capital and educational credential of their spouses (Ghimire 2020; Limbu 2022). The family strategy is discussed in more detail in the next section.

### **Joint ventures, complementary aspirations and interchanging abilities**

Being a migrant in the GCC may help the migrant marry a spouse with a social background and specific qualities that otherwise would be out of reach for them. Several informants implied that the resources acquired in the GCC were relevant factors in the process of arranged marriage. They not only enhanced their socioeconomic status, but also their potential migration abilities. In these cases, the migrants married spouses with whom they could combine complementary migration abilities to move to top-tier destinations. For example, Manoj, Krish and Rajendra worked first in the GCC. Then, they returned to Nepal and married Nepalese women with higher education, and shortly after, the couples migrated out of the region. Manoj lived in Qatar before his resettlement in Australia. He shared that he always aspired to move to some developed country but was unable to do that because of his low educational qualifications. However, with his wife's educational background, the couple could migrate to Australia. His wife fulfilled the criteria for a student visa in the country, while Manoj was admitted as a dependent to his wife. For the application process in Australia, a lot of funds were needed. Therefore, Manoj used all the savings he had from Qatar for their migration to Australia.<sup>25</sup>

Several recent studies also indicate that it has been more common for the husbands of Nepalese female international students to accompany them as dependents (Ghimire 2020; Limbu 2022). For example, Ghimire (2020) points out that:

... It is crucial to understand that it is only a recent socially accepted phenomenon that a Nepalese woman will be the primary visa holder and that her male partner (almost always their husband) accompanies her as a dependent on her visa. In the cases where a young female is not married prior to intended migration, a marriage usually occurs immediately before departure to facilitate outward migration. (Ghimire 2020, 175)

Nepalese couples in our study aspired to move to the Global North, which was easier to accomplish if they combined each other's resources and migration abilities. Manoj, Krish and Rajendra

economically facilitated the migration to Australia with their savings from the GCC, but their wives were the primary visa holders, as in Ghimire's study. We also met several Nepalese couples who managed to acquire student status in the Global North who combined their compatible abilities hoping to achieve more permanent residence. They alternated between being international post-graduate students and dependents, which allowed them to extend their temporary stay in Europe. During this time, they explored opportunities for obtaining permanent residency within the Global North.<sup>26</sup> We also met international Nepalese students who returned to Nepal, married and thereafter remigrated, but this time as the family dependents of their spouse who gained temporary residence as international students. Consequently, the couples could extend their residence in the receiving country or engage in multiple migrations, interchanging their statuses while aspiring to a permanent residence in desired destinations in the Global North.<sup>27</sup>

Interconnections between stepwise migrations and international student migrations have been explored in other studies (Zijlstra 2020). However, to the best of our knowledge, the above-described family strategies of Nepalese international students in the Global North and the 'temporary returnees' from the GCC have not been described earlier. These 'joint ventures' add a new dimension to the debates on the role of resource conversions and arranged marriage in the processes of stepwise migrations from the Global South. However, it is unclear how common they are and how they are experienced by the involved parties. Therefore, we end our analysis with encouragement to other researchers to explore in more detail the nexus of stepwise migrations, family strategies and the above-mentioned capital conversions.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

The dominant perspective in the debates on multinational migrations is that stepwise migration is most likely to happen among 'the middle category of migrants' who do not have the resources to migrate directly to desirable countries. The middle category of migrants is usually not primarily associated with high-skilled migrants because they are expected to have considerably better migration abilities than low-skilled migrants. It is acknowledged that many highly skilled migrants from the Global South manage to migrate directly to the Global North. Nevertheless, the present study contributes to the body of research arguing that highly skilled migrants from the Global South are not hypermobile professionals with education that provide almost frictionless free-choice mobility. More generally, this study contributes to the field using the aspiration-ability model to scrutinise each step of stepwise migrations. To the best of our knowledge, no study on stepwise migrations has been conducted in such manner. We have demonstrated that this approach identifies in a systematic manner links between migrants' changing motivations and their resources on the one hand, and coercive and enabling structures on the other. Our findings also show that most of the Nepalese high-skilled migrants aspired to migrate to the Global North but did not have enough of the required economic resources, working experience, or education to migrate directly from their home country to the desired top-tier countries. They gave up waiting for years in Nepal for such a thing to happen, instead taking a detour to the GCC. However, for them, the countries in the region function primarily as a gateway where they sojourned, reducing the mismatch between their abilities and aspirations for further migrations to the Global North.

We have also found that alterations between temporary residence in the GCC and temporary returns in Nepal are an inherent part of stepwise migrations. The temporary residence in the GCC may be associated with the lack of opportunities and resources required to move to the Global North, while temporary returns to the home country are part of their transnational living and preparations for further migrations. The experiences of these people resonate indirectly with the above-mentioned notion of low-skilled 'middle category of migrant' or 'middling migrant', who were far from being infinitely resourced.<sup>29</sup> However, in contrast to the low-skilled Nepalese migrants in the region, who usually did not have the resources to migrate to the top-tier countries, they were able to enhance their migration abilities and use the Gulf as a gateway to the Global North.<sup>30</sup>

We have argued that the costs of migration and rejection of visa applications by the USA and other developed countries are some of the main reasons for highly skilled Nepalese to move to the GCC, while temporary returns to Nepal are linked to emotional needs and family visits, but also to practical tasks such as visa and marriage arrangements conducted before the next stage of their stepwise migrations. In other words, returns to Nepal were an intermediary stage in those multiple migrations, driven by push factors in Nepal and the GCC and aspirations to resettle permanently in desired top-tier countries.

Finally, it was indicated that the stepwise migrations of Nepalese migrants differ regarding the resources, motivations and strategies used to reach top-tier countries. However, they had to overcome similar obstacles while climbing up in the hierarchies of affordable and desirable reception countries. We also concur that high-skilled Nepalese stepwise migrations are not driven solely by economic aspirations. Instead, different, changing and complex aspirations motivate various migratory steps. Their initial migrations to the GCC are driven by economic costs and gains embedded in enabling and constraining migration policies; they are also influenced by their educational and professional aspirations and the affordability of the potential destinations. Likewise, their migration out of the GCC to the Global North is not necessarily prompted by migrants' aspirations towards higher wages, but rather, it is triggered by their hope to achieve stability and permanent residence for themselves and their families, sometimes even to the detriment of the socioeconomic position achieved in the GCC.

## Notes

1. The Gulf cooperation council countries (GCC) are Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain.
2. This is one recent exception from this prevailing trend, exemplified by studies such as that of Limbu on ongoing mobility of Nepalese migrants in Qatar (2022).
3. For example, the webpage of the Nepalese Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility provides very useful information on migrations from Nepal. However, this source also focuses primarily on migrations of lower skilled migrants to the GCC, See [www.ceslam.org](http://www.ceslam.org).
4. For more, see also [www.ceslam.org](http://www.ceslam.org)
5. Indeed, wage differentials seem to be one of the most important explanatory factors that affect labour migrations in the region (Malla and Rosenbaum 2017; Ekanayake and Amirthalingam 2021).
6. The figures presented in this section do not distinguish skilled from unskilled migrants. UN's Population Division only provides data on total migrant stock provided. However, we believe that our outline of the general trends would suffice as the main ambition with the figures is to contextualise Nepalese imaginaries of different country tiers and general hierarchies of places among Nepalese migrants.
7. The figures in this section are based on estimates from the reputable sources such as the World Bank and UN's Population Division and the International Organization for Migration, which are combined with estimates reported by Nepalese missions abroad. It should be noted that there are variations in numbers of migrants, wages and costs of migrations in different data sources. They are only estimates and should be used with caution.
8. The figure is the authors' compilation. GDP shows World Bank's data from 2019 on GDP per capita (PPP based), which is GDP converted to US dollars using purchasing power parity rates and divided by the total population. The numbers of Nepalese immigrants in India are based on UN estimates from 2019. The numbers of Nepalese migrants in other countries are based on UN's population data and the numbers reported by Nepalese missions abroad. See IOM (2019, 39); see also <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrantstock> and <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.
9. The figure is the authors' compilation. The costs of migration and earnings are estimates in US dollars, as reported by Nepalese missions abroad. Source: IOM (2019).
10. The figure is the author's compilation based on IOM and UN's population data. See IOM (2019) and <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>.
11. The number of Nepalese in the USA has increased since 2010. For more, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/asian-americans-nepalese-in-the-u-s>
12. Most interviews were conducted electronically via internet using Skype, WhatsApp and other digital platforms. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted in Nepalese by four Nepalese research assistants.

13. Nepal imposes strong restrictions on the migration of female migrants to the GCC. Therefore, there are very few female labour migrants in the GCC.
14. Their perspectives are not presented explicitly in this article, but they were extremely helpful as we analysed the stories of the Nepalese skilled migrants.
15. Mohan worked for almost four years in Kuwait before he decided to migrate further to Canada. He returned first back to Nepal to get his paperwork in place, and then, he applied for a permanent residency for Canada via the high-skilled worker programme, where he resettled permanently.
16. At the time of the interview, Bishal was 34 years old and lived in the Netherlands.
17. As later indicated in the study, only one of our informants, Sumita, had to combine borrowed money with savings from the Gulf in order to migrate further to the Global North.
18. At the time of the interview, Suresh was 52 years old and lived in the USA.
19. Suresh repeatedly tried to migrate to the USA via the Diversity visa programme. He was eventually awarded the Diversity visa and migrated to the USA.
20. It is relevant to note here that in Saudi Arabia, as in other countries in the region, it is almost impossible to obtain permanent residence or citizenship. The Kafala system – a sponsorship-based migration regime in the region – stipulates that all labour migrants are temporary residents (Kamrava and Babar 2012; Valenta and Jakobsen 2016). Several researchers point out that the intermediate countries in the trajectories of stepwise migration are usually those that are relatively easy to enter but where it is very difficult to resettle permanently (Paul 2011; Carlos 2013).
21. For an overview see Montagna, della Puppa, and Kofman (2021).
22. Onward migration in Europe was propelled and enabled by other factors, such as economic insecurity, employment opportunities, social networks, and the European passport which resembles findings from other studies on onward migrations in Europe (Montagna, della Puppa, and Kofman 2021; Mapril 2021)
23. Similar motivations are indicated in other studies, also among other Asian migrants in the region (see Carlos 2013; Ekanayake and Amirthalingam 2021; Limbu 2022).
24. The Canadian point system for skilled migrants ranks applicants primarily according to their age, education, language proficiency, work experience and adaptability. The highest-ranking applicants may apply for a residence permit. For more, see <https://www.visaexperts.com/canada-immigration/canada-points-system.aspx#>
25. Australia is one of the largest destinations for international students, and it has become the most popular destination for Nepalese international students. Nepalese international students and their dependents are allowed to work in the country. They also have various pathways to permanent settlement in the country for certain categories of students, which adds to the popularity of Australia as a destination country for Nepalese.
26. For example, a husband gains a temporary residence in the top-tier receiving country as an international student, and his wife would be the family dependent. Although both could take postgraduate studies, instead, the family dependent focused entirely on paid work, while the student combined part-time work and studies. When the husband's student visa eventually expires, the wife takes over and acquires an international student status, while the husband becomes the family dependent, if he has not managed to advance to other statuses.
27. Similar strategies are identified in Agn's study on Nepalese international students in Australia (Ang 2022).
28. The role of Nepalese female international students in the migration process is pertinent to explore further for several other reasons; *inter alia*, it seems that their position as primary visa holder also has an impact on shifting gender roles and expectations in Nepalese families (Ghimire 2020; Ghimire and Barry 2020).
29. Wee and Yeoh (2021, 107)
30. For more on migration abilities of low-skilled migrants in the region.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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