Shramik Sanjal

Statement on theWorld Mental Health Day

10 October

The Origin of World Mental Health Day

10th October marks World Mental Health Day, a global initiative that raises awareness of mental health issues and mobilizes efforts to support mental well-being. The World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH) established the day in 1992, and the World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognizes it.1 In 2022, the WHO launched its *World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All*, which emphasized that mental health is a fundamental human right, heavily determined by socio-economic structures and working environments.[2] Furthermore, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) formally recognize this within Target 3.4, committing the international community to "promote mental health and well-being" by 2030.[3]

The Invisible Toll of Migration

The mental health and well-being of migrant workers are substantially affected by social isolation, separation from family and community, and the challenges of adapting to unfamiliar social and cultural environments. Geographic distance from home, limited opportunities for social interaction, and increasing social and financial expectations from families and communities contribute to loneliness, stress, anxiety, and emotional distress. Digital technologies may intensify these pressures by reinforcing feelings of isolation or generating expectations for migrants working abroad. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies family separation, social isolation, discrimination, and inadequate living and working conditions as key factors influencing the mental health of migrants[4].

Exploitative employment practices, unsafe working conditions, wage discrimination, job insecurity, and limited access to health and social protection services frequently exacerbate these challenges. In addition to workplace-related issues, migrant workers may experience severe shocks resulting from natural disasters, armed conflict, pandemics, and other emergencies. These crises can lead to job loss, income insecurity, bereavement, family separation, and the destruction of homes and livelihood opportunities. For individuals already living in precarious circumstances, such experiences can intensify psychological distress and diminish their capacity to cope with adversity. The cumulative effects of exploitation, uncertainty, and repeated exposure to crises further undermine mental health, dignity, and overall well-being. Consequently, protecting migrant workers requires not only the assurance of physical safety and employment rights but also the provision of decent working and living conditions, access to affordable and culturally appropriate mental health services, robust social support networks, and effective safeguards against exploitation and discrimination.

For Shramik Sanjal, World Mental Health Day is a critical labour rights issue. We issue this

statement against a silent epidemic that probably every Nepali migrant worker faces while on the migration journey. The psychological trauma inflicted by exploitation, isolation, and debt is often witnessed in the GCC corridor and Malaysia.

While the physical hazards of labour migration, such as heat stress and workplace accidents, are increasingly documented, the psychological cost remains invisible. For millions of Nepali workers, migration is not just an economic transition; it is a test against a governance architecture designed to restrict their autonomy and commodify their labour.

The Architecture of Anxiety

Mental health struggles among migrant workers are not isolated personal failures; they are predictable, psychological phenomenon, specifically in exploitative working environments in GCC countries and Malaysia. The International agencies assert that the migration process itself, combined with poor working conditions and lack of legal protection in destination countries, creates severe psychosocial vulnerabilities.[5]

For Nepali workers, this vulnerability manifests in three distinct layers:

1. **Recruitment Debt and Coercion:** The psychological burden begins before departure. Coerced into paying exorbitant, illegal recruitment fees to sub-agents, workers enter destination countries under immense stress. The constant fear of defaulting on predatory loans while facing arbitrary wage theft abroad creates a relentless state of anxiety and depression.[6] Shramik Sanjal's inclination to advocate for ethical recruitment stems from these situations.
2. **The Kafala System and Isolation:** The structural immobility enforced by the *Kafala* (sponsorship) system strips workers of their agency in the GCC countries. The inability to change jobs, resign, or return home without employer permission enables profound feelings of entrapment. For domestic workers, isolation within private households intensifies vulnerability to gender-based violence and abuse, leading to severe trauma and, tragically, a rising incidence of suicides.[7]
3. **The Trauma of the "Left Behind":** The emotional toll of prolonged separation from families, missing children's milestones, and the inability to grieve the loss of loved ones from afar cannot be quantified by remittance data. When the state treats workers merely as economic units, it ignores the human cost of this managed absence.

The Failure of Social Protection

Despite these psychological pressures, accessing mental healthcare remains a luxury that low-income migrant workers cannot access. Destination countries rarely include comprehensive psychiatric or counseling services in mandatory health insurance packages. Furthermore, language barriers, the fear of being labeled "unfit for work," and the criminalization of "absconding" force workers into the shadows, preventing them from seeking help.[8]

Even after returning to Nepal, reintegration programs frequently focus solely on economic enterprise, neglecting the urgent psychosocial support returnees need to process years of trauma, or the counseling required for families receiving the repatriated bodies of their loved ones.

Our Call to Action

Shramik Sanjal believes that there is no "safe migration" if a worker returns home psychologically broken. We demand a shift from treating workers as disposable economic assets to recognizing their holistic humanity.

We call upon:

- **Destination Countries:** To mandate the inclusion of mental health services and culturally sensitive counseling within employer-provided health insurance, and to end the criminalization of fleeing abusive employers.
- **The Government of Nepal:** To institutionalize free, accessible, and trauma-informed psychosocial counseling for all returnee migrants and their families through local Skills, Employment and Entrepreneurship Centres; and to enforce zero-cost recruitment to eradicate the debt-induced anxiety that plagues aspiring and current migrant workers.
- **Civil Society and Employers:** To dismantle the stigma surrounding mental health in the labour sector and to build safe, accessible grievance mechanisms that are in reach of the migrant workers.

"Shramik Sanjal stands in solidarity with every worker silently battling anxiety far from home. It is time for our policies to heal the invisible wounds of migration."

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