



# The middle space of migration: A case study on brokerage and recruitment agencies in Nepal



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## ABSTRACT

Foreign employment has become a global phenomenon. With the increasing commercialisation and formalisation of transnational labour migration, recruitment agencies and agents have gained importance. The paper aims to contribute to a more differentiated understanding of the role and the practices of the main actors in the middle space of migration, the brokers in the recruitment process for transnational migration. Based on empirical material from Nepal, it argues that the detected negative reputation of labour brokers is only partially justified. Besides common bad practices and fraud cases, recruiters perform important roles for the facilitation of transnational mobility and present the necessary infrastructure for labour migration. They connect people and places, establish networks and can play an important role in making migration safer. Brokers are important facilitators in supporting alternative income strategies and new livelihood options of people. At the same time they are entrepreneurs in a competitive and risky economic field, confronted with multifaceted constraints. As long as the gap between the dreams of potential migrants and the reality of marginality in Nepal remains wide, labour brokers might persist as important middlemen for global work. Thus, migration brokerage is likely to remain big business.

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## 1. Introduction

*"Oh, you are planning research on recruitment agencies in Nepal? Well, then you better make sure you've got bodyguards with you!"*  
[Interview, Zurich 2012]

With the increasing commercialisation and formalisation of transnational labour migration, recruitment agencies and agents have gained importance. While much has been written about migrants, their motivations and their livelihoods, less is known about the brokers that facilitate foreign employment. Brokers have been rather neglected in the migration literature so far, although, as Lindquist et al. (2012:7) write, a "focus on brokers is one productive way of opening the 'black box' of migration research". The paper aims to gain a better understanding of the role and the practices of the brokers in the recruitment process for transnational migration in Nepal. During the last decade, the number of recruitment agencies (also known as 'manpower agencies' or 'recruitment companies') and agents (also termed 'head-hunters') has considerably increased (NIDS, 2003; Thieme, 2006; NAFEA,

2014). Our empirical data reveals that these migration entrepreneurs share a narrative about negative reputation, political instability and legal uncertainty. They also suffer from growing competition and internal conflicts (interviews, 2013). The government authorities interfere with changing regulations and bureaucratic processes in the migration trajectories (Agunias, 2013; Thieme et al., 2014; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2014:19ff). We assume that the increasing formalisation of the migration procedure reinforces the importance of brokers as providers of services and infrastructures that facilitate transnational mobility.

From several perspectives, we explain why brokers are needed in transnational migration and how recruitment agencies work and perform in the social fields in which they assume their brokerage function. We want to grasp the complexity of the business as well as the proximity of constraints and opportunities. We show which framing strategies brokers, confronted with an ambivalent reputation, deploy. Furthermore, we demonstrate how the brokers navigate through the complicated administrative processes and how the government shapes their room of manoeuvre. Our overarching goal is to contribute to a more differentiated understanding of the "middle space of migration" (Lindquist et al., 2012:11) and to overcome prevailing stereotypes of brokerage. In doing this, we were inspired by the following conceptual thoughts.

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## 2. Conceptual and methodological approach

In the context of migration research, a stream of literature has focused on the “migration industry”, the big business around migration (Nyberg Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013; Spaan and Hillmann, 2013). The term “migration industry” grasps the emerging opportunities “that capitalize on migrants’ desire to move, or [...] the struggle governments face to manage migratory flows” (Nyberg Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013:2). Hernández-León (2008:154) defines migration industry as “the ensemble of entrepreneurs, businesses, and services which, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, facilitate and sustain international migration”.

To unravel the role and functioning of recruiters in Nepal, we introduce the brokerage concept. This concept has become particularly influential in recent years in studies on development where an emphasis is placed on so-called ‘development brokers’ (e.g. Long, 1992; Neubert, 1996; Bierschenk et al., 2002; Mosse and Lewis, 2006). Bierschenk et al. (2002:2) assume that functions and activities of brokerage occur in all societies and in various aspects of social life. This stream of literature aligns brokers with organisational competence and entrepreneurial spirit. Their position requires them to juggle strategic contacts and to sell their services on all sides. Brokers act as middlemen<sup>1</sup> between socially and spatially unconnected social fields. They are capable of translating, redefining and fundamentally changing what they transport (Hiteva and Maltby, 2014:120). Brokers are gatekeepers guarding entrance and communication in two or more directions of a social interface, where actors with different forms of knowledge and interests encounter (Long, 2001:243).

In the context of migration, Lindquist et al. (2012:8) introduce the term ‘broker’ “to denote a party who mediates between other parties, in this case the migrant and the employer or client.” The authors emphasise the widely varying role and function of brokers, which must be considered in relation to location, time and power.<sup>2</sup> While some brokers work alone, others are engaged in complicated networks; some are professional brokers, others are dilettantes (Lindquist et al., 2012:8). In order to capture brokerage and its broader context, Lindquist et al. (2012:9) introduced the term “migration infrastructure” that comprises “the institutions, networks and people that move migrants from one point to another”.

Which specific activities do the recruitments agencies in Nepal perform that constitute them as brokers? Recruitment agencies position themselves between potential employees and employers and demonstrate the advantage of cooperation despite different interests and goals (Nay and Smith, 2002). Recruitment agencies are gatekeepers as they select the employees and employers. But at the same time they have to compete on the national and international labour market with other recruitment agencies, and on national level with agents. They have the necessary knowledge, infrastructure and networks to facilitate the mobility of the potential employees, which is restricted by various rules and regulations and implementation practices of the Government of Nepal and the destination countries. Brokers have means to translate verbatim (between different languages), but also the ability to ‘translate’ in a wider sense. This ability is of particular importance as the poten-

tial migrants are distant from the employers and in many cases lack knowledge about bureaucratic procedures. For example, recruitment brokers have the opportunity to interpret the condition of work, the agreements, the rules and regulations to maximise their own and the migrant’s benefits. They are in a position to align their work to the different contexts. For example, in Nepal they emphasise frequently the social and economic importance of their work, and vis-à-vis employers they underline their capacity to recruit cheap and good workers (cp. chapter 6.2 and 8). It is thus important to recognise that these processes of translation are not neutral. Moreover, they tend to shape interactions between actors, re-interpret regulations, as well as social and economic processes (Marvin and Medd, 2004; Guy et al., 2011).

It is important to analyse the social situations and contexts within which actors can assume brokerage functions in order to understand the role of the broker and the work of brokerage. We thus consider the social fields within which the functions of brokerage are needed, by referring to Bourdieu’s theory of practice. For Bourdieu, a social field is a social structure of power relations (not necessarily bound to a locality), with its own institutions, specialised agents, and hierarchy of positions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:16). By considering the social fields of brokerage, we can understand how brokers are endowed with, and struggle for, different types of capital – resources that are more or less valuable in a specific social field – and how they use these capitals to “frame”<sup>3</sup> their practices. Furthermore, we highlight the important component of space and multi-locality, as well as the space-bridging function of brokerage (cp. Herzig and Thieme, 2007; Bruslé and Varrel, 2012).

The analysis is based on more than 60 qualitative interviews and additional informal discussions with representatives of recruitment agencies (directors, employees, branch managers, secretaries), agents and representatives of the Agents Association, potential and returning labour migrants, government officials, NGOs, and media representatives. Most interviews were held in Kathmandu and in the Eastern Terai (Sunsari and Sarlahi District). Additional data stem from Far Western Terai (Kailali District), from the Mid-Western and central hills (Surkhet, Dailekh and Sindhupalchowk District). In addition to the interviews, observation of migration and recruitment practices in private agencies (e.g. during training and in waiting halls), state departments (such as the Department of Foreign Employment) and public or semi-public spaces (such as airports, planes, buses and markets) provided important information. Additional material stems from analysis of laws and government documents, records and websites of recruitment agencies, as well as articles from Nepalese and international newspapers. Several days of investigative research in Qatar provided additional insights, based on informal discussions with Nepalese migrant workers and observations at construction sites. This brief investigation in the major destination country contrasted the expectations and discourses from Nepal by engaging more closely with the actual challenges of migrant workers. The main fieldwork took place between August and October 2013, and in February and May 2014. In addition, both authors had the possibility to supplement the research with previous or later assessed primary data and observations in different districts of Nepal.

## 3. Recruitment brokers in Nepal

Past and on-going research, as well as the political discourse in Nepal, indicates the central importance of international labour

<sup>1</sup> As most recruitment agents are in fact men, we think the term ‘middlemen’ is appropriate in this case and commonly used in discourses (interviews, Nepal, 2013). The term, ‘intermediaries’, in contrast, is less widespread in the Nepalese case. In the literature, no common conceptual understanding exists (see e.g. Marvin and Medd, 2004; Moss et al., 2009; Guy et al., 2011). Therefore, we have decided to use the term middlemen.

<sup>2</sup> Empirical examples of the wide range of brokerage are provided in the special issue of *Pacific Affairs* (85, 2012) and the edited volume about the migration industry and the commercialisation of international migration (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Sørensen, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Framing refers to the use of language and ideas to interpret and influence the understandings of others regarding an issue or event (Benford, 2010).

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