

MIGRATION ATLAS OF NEPAL



नेपाल विकास अनुसन्धान प्रतिष्ठान
Nepal Development Research Institute



International



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Migration Atlas of Nepal

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FOREWORD

Migration has become one of the most important features of Nepal's economy and society. For decades, Nepali people have been moving within the country and abroad in search of better opportunities. The money they send home has helped many families improve their lives and contributed significantly to the national economy. At the same time, migration has brought several challenges, including the loss of the working-age population as people leave to work in foreign economies, changes in family roles in rural areas, and an increasing dependence on remittances.

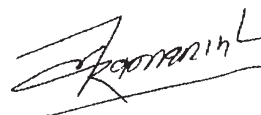
Understanding these dynamics is essential for the Governments as they plan the country's future for various tiers of governance. Sound policy is built upon reliable data and rigorous analysis, which together enhance the effectiveness of national planning and decision-making. In this regard, the *Migration Atlas of Nepal*, prepared by the Nepal Development Research Institute (NDRI) with support from AWO International, represents a timely and valuable contribution to evidence-based policymaking.

The Atlas presents a comprehensive picture of how and why people move, both within the country and abroad. It uses data from the National Statistics Office and the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security to analyse and map the scale and patterns of migration, and its

linkages with food security, livelihoods, and climate change. Such a visual overview of the evidence, also highlighting the geographical differences, helps us better understand not only the economic side of migration but also its social and environmental dimensions.

As Nepal prepares to graduate from the Least Developed Country category and aims to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the insights from this *Atlas* can help guide our policy and research priorities.

On behalf of the Policy Research Institute, I extend sincere thanks to the study team for their diligent effort in preparing this important work. I believe it will be a useful reference for government institutions, researchers and development partners working on migration and related issues.



Prof. Dr. Lekhnath Sharma

Executive Chairperson

November 7, 2025



नीति अनुसन्धान प्रतिष्ठान
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(नेपाल सरकारको विशेषज्ञ समूह)



PREFACE

Migration is one of the most defining forces shaping Nepal's social and economic landscape. It has transformed communities, strengthened household resilience and contributed significantly to national income through remittances. At the same time, it has introduced new challenges such as labour shortages, social shifts and dependence on external economies.

The *Migration Atlas of Nepal* fills an important knowledge gap by presenting a spatial and analytical overview of migration trends, drivers and impacts across the country. Drawing on diverse national datasets and presenting complex data in an accessible and visual form, the *Atlas* provides an evidence base for how migration patterns vary significantly across the country and calls for interventions to recognise this differential aspect of labour migration flows.

This publication reflects NDRI's continued commitment to generating knowledge that informs policy and practice. Prepared in collaboration with AWO International, the *Atlas* is intended as a resource for government institutions, researchers and development partners working towards effective, inclusive and sustainable migration governance in Nepal. We extend our sincere appreciation to the research team and contributors whose efforts made this publication possible.



Dr Shikha Thapa Magar
Executive Director



नेपाल विकास अनुसन्धान प्रतिष्ठान
Nepal Development Research Institute

Migration shapes nearly every aspect of life in Nepal, from livelihoods and family structures to national development priorities. For many, it represents both opportunity and necessity, linking individual aspirations with broader economic and social change. Yet migration also brings significant risks to social safety, equity and inclusion.

The *Migration Atlas of Nepal* is an important step toward understanding these complex realities. By presenting data, analysis and spatial insights, the *Atlas* provides an evidence-based foundation for strengthening migration governance and ensuring the well-being of migrants.

This publication synthesises AWO International's practical experience and research insights on migration and related social protection themes. Developed in collaboration with Nepal Development Research Institute (NDRI) and supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the *Atlas* bridges research and policy to strengthen informed decision-making.

The *Atlas* reflects AWO International's efforts to promote informed decision-making, strengthen social structures and advance rights-based, locally driven approaches to migration and development. We extend our appreciation to the dedicated research team at NDRI for their rigorous work in preparing this *Atlas*, and to all contributors who supported the process.



Surendra Gautam
Director, Country Office, Nepal



International

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This *Migration Atlas of Nepal*, the first of its kind in Nepal, documents and presents a visual and geospatial snapshot of Nepal's current migration patterns, trends and implications. At a time when youth out-migration numbers dominate Nepal's headlines, it is useful to see how exactly these numbers vary across the country and how policies can be shaped accordingly.

The *Atlas* would not have come to fruition without the chance meeting with Surendra Gautam, the Country Director of AWO International, who, acknowledging Nepal Development Research Institute's (NDRI) earlier work on two iterations of the *Food Security Atlas of Nepal*, asked me casually during a coffee catch-up whether it would be feasible to work on a similarly themed *Migration Atlas of Nepal*. With a background in GIS and mapping experience for more than three decades, this timely request and opportunity resonated with me, and soon, we at NDRI started taking this forward. Surendra Gautam has been a constant source of guidance and motivation throughout this work, together with his team, including Kushum Kishor Bhatt and Rajendra Rajbhandari.

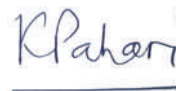
The study team would like to acknowledge the contributions from various persons in preparing this *Atlas*. Thanks to Prof. Dr. Lekhnath Sharma, the Executive Chairman of the Policy Research Institute, for his interest in this work in support of the evidence-based discourse on migration and related issues. The team is very grateful for his inspiring Foreword in the document. The study also benefited from the inputs provided by the participants of a regional workshop organised by AWO International in Kathmandu in May 2025, where the concept of the *Atlas* was first pitched to a wider audience. We are also grateful to Prof. Dr. Punya Prasad Regmi for his constructive

guidance and feedback throughout the whole process. Prashuna Tamang provided valuable research support on certain chapters.

Thank you to the participants of a stakeholder workshop among technical experts on topics related to migration organised in August 2025 for their valuable technical inputs (in no particular order: Dr. Sridhar Thapa Chhetri (from WFP Nepal); Mr. Hari Sharma Neupane (from Policy Research Institute); Mr. Saurav Koirala (from GIZ Nepal); Ms. Sangeeta Rana Thapa (Former International Professional of International Organizations); Ms. Manju Gurung (from Pourakhi Nepal); Ms. Durga Neupane (from Tribhuvan University – TU); Mr. Sagar Bahadur Basnet (from Ministry of Labour, Employment and Transport – MoLET, Bagmati Province); Mr. Dev Chandra Rai (from Safer Migration Programme – Helvetas/MoLESS); Ms. Sadhana BK (from CESLAM); and Mr. Ishwor Barshila (from Tohoku University)).

Special thanks go to NDRI's Executive Director, Dr. Shikha Thapa Magar, for her support throughout this project.

We will feel honoured if this humble step could contribute to the well-being of migrants and the creation of dignified livelihoods benefiting the Nepali society at large.



Krishna Pahari, Ph.D.

Study Coordinator

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1 INTRODUCTION

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another, driven by a range of reasons, encompassing shifts from one locality or spatial coordinate to another. Migration has been a global phenomenon for centuries as people move to different places either in search of better opportunities or to escape challenges at home. Migrants often earn more abroad than at home and contribute to their left-behind families through remittances. Migration also builds the skills of migrants, especially when moving to countries with declining populations.

In Nepal, migration in significant volume started some two centuries ago when thousands of youths were recruited into the British army, which was followed by migration of young Nepali men to India in the army and other jobs. Since the 1960s and 70s, there has been a large surge of internal migration from the hills to the fertile plains. Since the

1980s, particularly after various civil conflicts, there has been a surge of migration from rural to urban areas, including the capital and other major cities. Nepal has recently experienced a significant migration of its youth to various countries worldwide in search of work opportunities. Nepal now ranks top five globally in terms of reliance on remittances for its economy.

Nepal, striving to transition from the Least Developed Country status to a developing country, aims to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Providing adequate livelihoods for its working-age population within the country and reducing its reliance on foreign remittances for economic growth remain pressing challenges. Therefore, the Government of Nepal (GoN) should prioritise addressing these issues through well-informed policy actions.

2 OBJECTIVES

In this context, Nepal Development Research Institute (NDRI), supported by AWO International, has prepared this *Migration Atlas of Nepal*. This comprehensive overview aims to provide a detailed analysis of key migration-related topics.

The specific objectives are as follows:

- i) Analyse and present migration patterns and trends, together with associated sectors.
- ii) Gather national and subnational data on work-related migration, its relationship to livelihoods and the factors influencing migration, including both push and pull factors, as well as its impact on food security.
- iii) Prepare an atlas showing migration's geographic distribution, livelihoods, and food security, including GIS-based maps, narratives, figures and charts.

- iv) Conduct analyses on factors contributing to migration and associated vulnerabilities and provide recommendations for policies and programmes to address this important issue.

The *Atlas* focuses specifically on migration patterns linked to work and securing livelihoods for families back home. Both internal and international labour migration are covered. Migrants are classified as absentees¹ in national-level surveys such as the National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) and the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS), while individuals with labour permits are considered work migrants. In the case of India, the *Atlas* covers only those migrating for work, not for settlement or study, though robust tracking of seasonal and informal labour migration to India remains absent.

¹Individuals who are considered members of a household but are absent for more than six months, and have moved abroad for reasons like work, study or dependency

3 METHODOLOGY

The *Atlas* is designed in a way that provides broad visual insights into patterns and trends of Nepal's labour migration and associated sectors.

The following methodologies were used for this work:

1. A literature review on Nepal's migration trends and related issues provided the foundation. Existing studies cover migration flows through extensive reports and present information in tabular or graphical forms, but lack spatial and geographical representation.
2. Descriptive analyses present the scale and magnitude of migration aspects, supported by literature-based narrative analysis for a better understanding. These methods generate GIS-based spatial and geographical variations.

3. The findings from the analysis of data from different sources were triangulated to verify the findings for the convergence of evidence. This was required because there is a lack of precise and reliable data on different aspects of migration from a single source, and thus, there is a need to draw the most logical conclusions. These findings were also validated through a consultative stakeholder workshop with technical professionals engaged in various migration-centric research and policy aspects.

Data for all the maps were prepared by NDRI based on available secondary datasets provided by the National Statistics Office (NSO) and the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) under the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS).

4 LIMITATIONS

The following are the limitations of this *Atlas*:

1. While this *Atlas* presents a broad overview of Nepal's migration trends and patterns and links them across different sectors, comprehensive in-depth analyses for each topic are beyond the scope of this project. The analyses, for the most part, are limited to descriptive summaries.
2. The *Atlas* relies on data from various official government sources, so its reliability is limited by the quality of those sources. However, efforts have been made to use authentic sources and verify data through triangulation of different datasets. Source data for each map, figure and table is clearly mentioned.
3. Despite substantial migration to India, the available data on this topic is far from comprehensive, as much of it remains undocumented. Moreover, data on other migrants who travel to various countries through informal channels without proper documentation is also not adequately captured.

5 NEPAL: AN OVERVIEW

Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia that lies in the southern face of the Himalayan Mountain range with a population of 29.16 million (as of 2021). The country borders India to the south and China to the north, covering an area of 147,516 square kilometres. Physiographic regions within the country include the High Himalayas, High Mountain, Middle Mountain, Siwalik and the Terai (see Map 2). Within these regions, elevations range from 59 meters to 8,848 meters.

Since 2017, Nepal has operated under a federal system established by the 2015 Constitution, dividing governance into three tiers – the federal level, seven provincial levels and 753 local levels. The local level comprises 460 rural municipalities and 293 urban municipalities (municipalities and metropolitan cities). The previous administrative division of 77 districts remains (see Map 1 for Nepal's administrative divisions). The 753 local bodies are further subdivided into 6,743 wards.

Nepal is expected to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status to a developing country status in 2026. Nepal's economy has grown to around USD 46 billion, driven by agriculture (25.16%), industry (12.83%) and services (62.01%)². GDP per capita reached USD 1,496 in 2024, and the GDP growth rate is projected to reach 4% in 2025/26 after a steady increase from a contraction to -2.37% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Income inequality is moderate, with about 20.3% of the population living below the national poverty line of NPR 72,908 (~US\$525). The labour force totals 8.4 million, with an unemployment rate of 12.6%. Unemployment among the youth (15-24 years), at 20.82%, is rampant.

Nepal's economy and development are deeply intertwined with labour migration. Remittances make up over one-fourth of the GDP and play a significant role in reducing poverty among migrants' families.

²Data for FY 2024/25 according to the Nepal's central bank, Nepal Rastra Bank. The industry sector includes manufacturing, construction and mining; the service sector includes wholesale and retail trade, ICT, financial services and tourism.

Table 1: Key Facts

Indicator	Value	Indicator	Value
Land Area (sq km)	147,181	Total labour force (2024)	8.4 million
Population (end of 2024)	29,651,054	Labour force participation rate (15 years and above) (2024)	28.43%
Nominal GDP (current prices)	US\$45.5billion	Unemployment rate (2022-23)	12.60%
GDP per Capita (current prices)	US\$ 1,496	Youth unemployment rate (2024)	20.82%
GDP per Capita (PPP)	US\$ 5,715	Human Development Index (HDI) (2025)	0.622
Real GDP growth rate (2024/2025)	3.1%	Gender Development Index (GDI) (2023)	0.858
Gini Coefficient	0.30	Gender Inequality Index (GII) (2023)	0.487
National literacy rate	76.2%		
Population under the poverty line	20.27%		

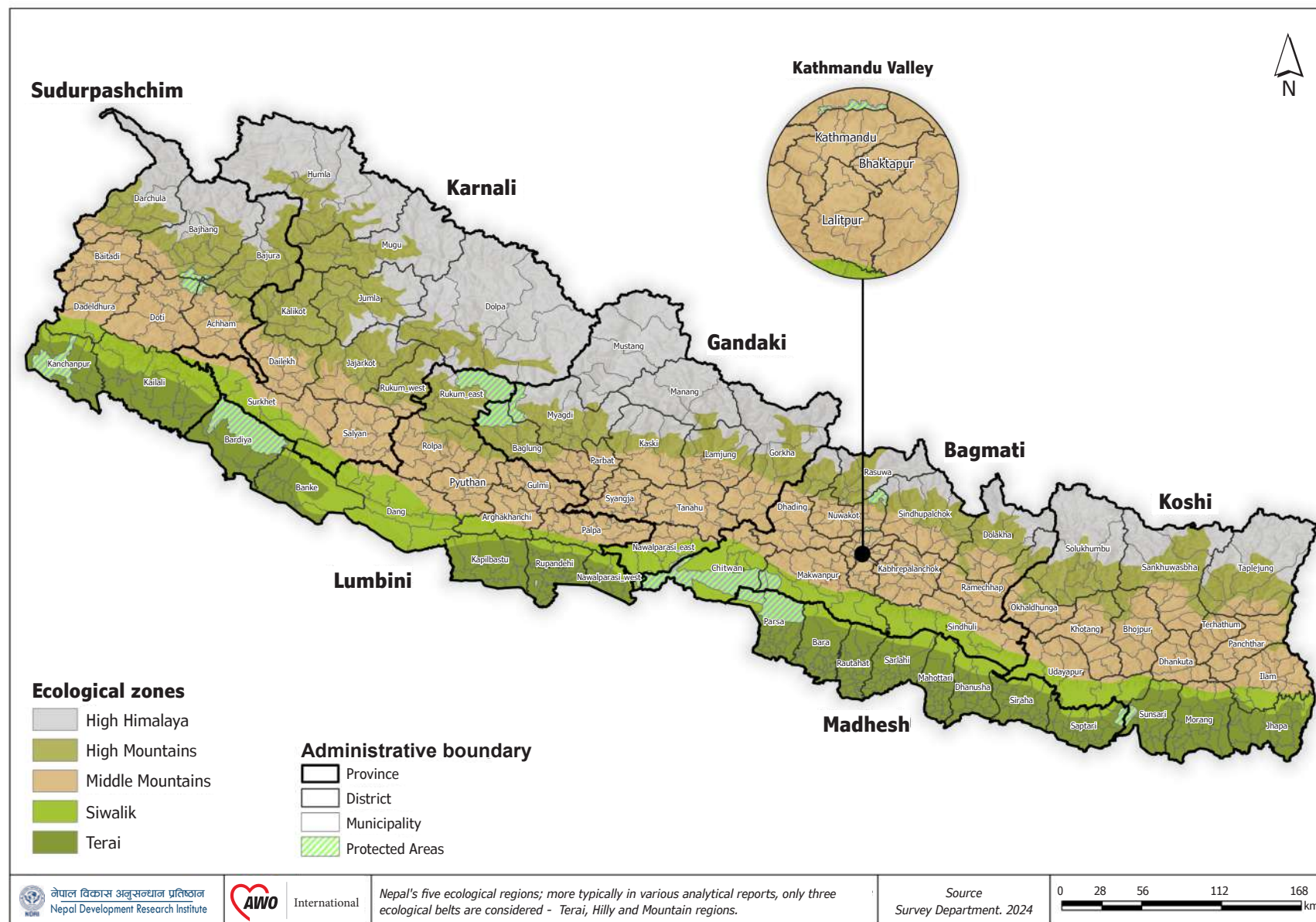
Compiled from various sources

Health, nutrition and education outcomes have improved significantly. Life expectancy at birth has reached 70 years as of 2022, and primary school enrolment rates have improved, with an overall literacy rate of 76.2%. Nepal has made significant strides in maternal and child health, with the maternal mortality ratio decreasing to 174 per 100,000 live births as of 2020, and the under-five mortality rate dropping to 27 per 1,000 live births as of 2021. Climate change poses significant risks to the economy and has resulted in substantial loss and damage.

MIGRATION ATLAS OF NEPAL



Map 2: Nepal's ecological boundaries



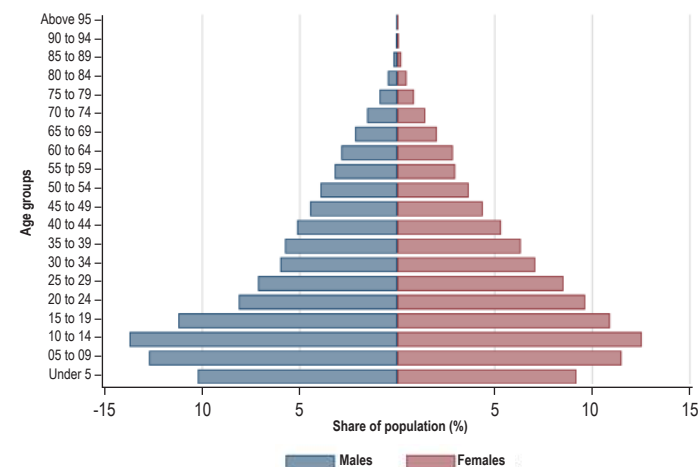
6 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The results of Nepal's 2021 NPHC show that the country is on a path of significant demographic transition. While its absolute population grew to 29.16 million, the annual population growth rate declined to 0.92% - marking the slowest rate since 1911. 142 caste and ethnic groups (125 in 2011) were recorded due to a redefinition of the 'ethnic group.' With a fertility rate of 1.9 in 2021, the population is expected to decline soon. There is also a dramatic change in the age structure of the population; the youth share (0–14 years) dropped steeply (from 34.9% in 2011 to 27.8% in 2021); the share of the working-age group (15–59 years) rose substantially to 62% (from 57% in 2011); the share of older population group increased (from 8.1% in 2011 to 10.2% in 2021). These numbers, seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, illustrate a unique demographic transition in Nepal as fewer children, a larger working-age cohort and an increasing elderly population bring challenges like old-age care, pensions and health support, as well as opportunities like a larger labour force. Nepal's demographic dividend is growing due to falling dependency ratios and a growing working-age population. To maximise its benefits, appropriate labour policies and a rewarding labour market are crucial.

Population change has also been different for different regions. The share of the population in the middle mountains dropped from about 43% in 2011 to 40.3% in 2021; that of the high mountain region decreased to 6.1% (from 6.7% in 2011), and that of Terai's share increased significantly (from 50.27% in 2011 to 53.61% in 2021). Map 3 provides an overview of the municipality-level population head count based on the latest census. Urbanisation in Nepal is growing rapidly.

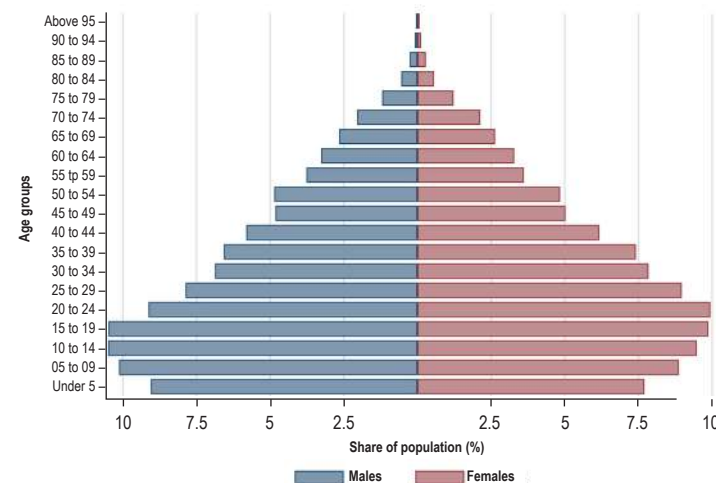
While there are definitional problems regarding what constitutes an urban space, the urban population rose from 22.3% in 2011 to 27.1% in 2021. Considering the administrative region categorised as 'urban' and 'rural', the urban population can be as high as 66.2%.

Figure 1: Population pyramid, 2011 census



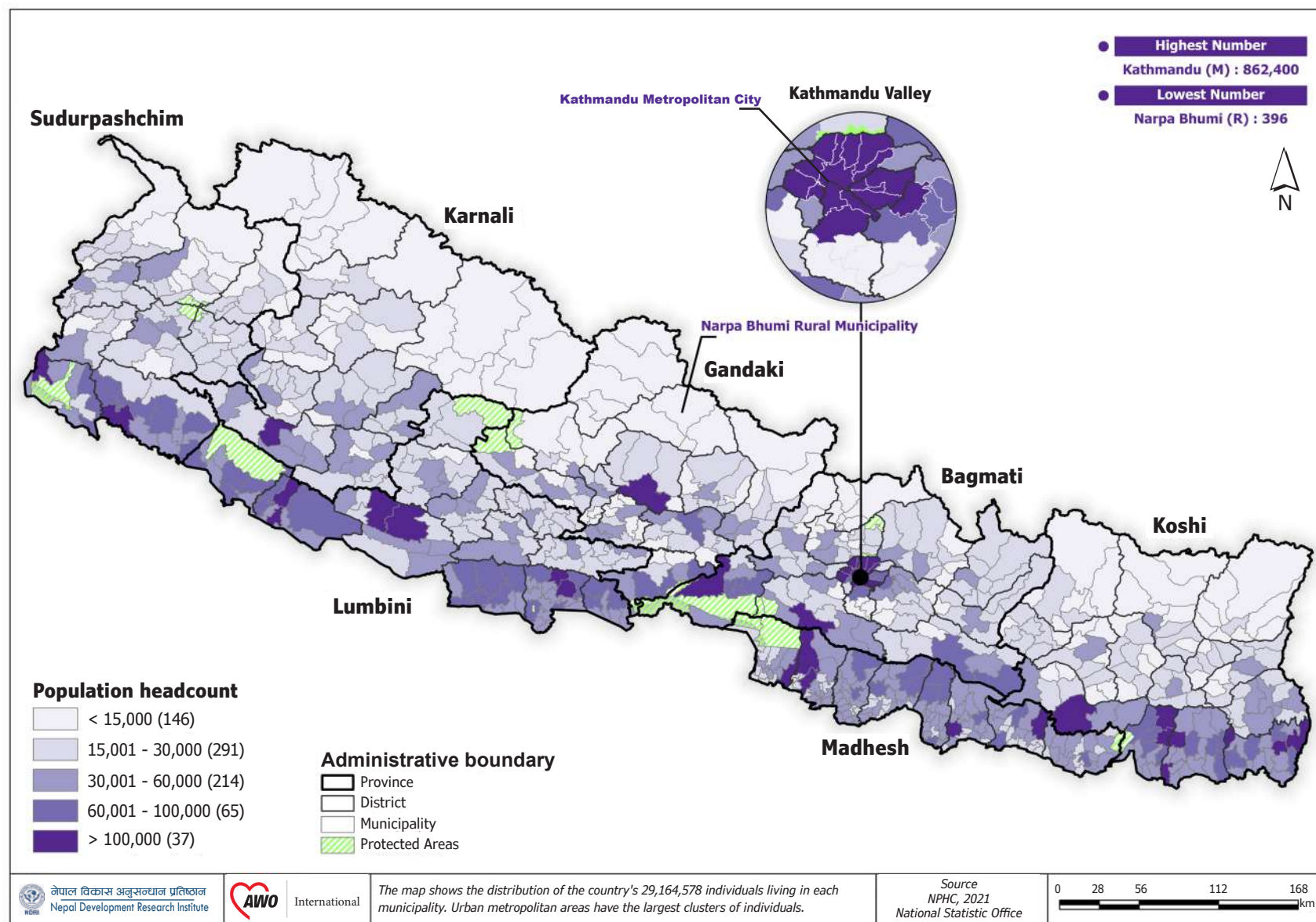
Source: NPHC, National Statistics Office, 2011

Figure 2: Population pyramid, 2021 census



Source: NPHC, National Statistics Office, 2021

Map 3: Municipality-level population head count, 2021 population census



7 MIGRATION AT A GLANCE

Nepali migration has a long history, beginning with military service in Lahore and the British Indian armies, later expanding to India for petty jobs in search of better livelihoods. The nature and magnitude of migration have changed significantly in the past few decades. Nepalis now migrate in large numbers to many countries other than India, particularly to the Gulf countries in the Middle East. Figure 3 shows the trend of migration since the 2014/15 fiscal year to countries other than India with formal approval from DoFE. In the most recent fiscal year 2024/25, 405,610 new labour permits and 280,314 renewed labour permits were issued. The large volume of re-entry labour permits suggests that returnee migrants prefer going back to alternative destinations rather than contributing to Nepal's economy. Similarly, when it comes to going abroad for education, prospective students are issued No Objection Certificates. The number has steadily gone up, reaching over 112,000 in the 2023/2024 fiscal year.

Data from the 2021 national census showed over 10 million migrant individuals, a 15% increase from 10 years ago. Map 4 shows the distribution of the absentee population across municipalities as recorded by the 2021 census. The highest proportions are concentrated around the middle mountains of Gandaki and Sudhuraschim provinces, with the least in Karnali province. Two-thirds of Nepalis now live in urban areas due to rapid urbanisation caused by internal migration for work and other purposes. As Nepal's demographic dividend expands while employment

opportunities remain limited, the DoFE has issued almost 2,500 daily labour permits. The absentee population is largely at the early stages of their working years, with most looking into securing labour permits once they received their citizenship at the age of 16 years old (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Trend in labour and education migration

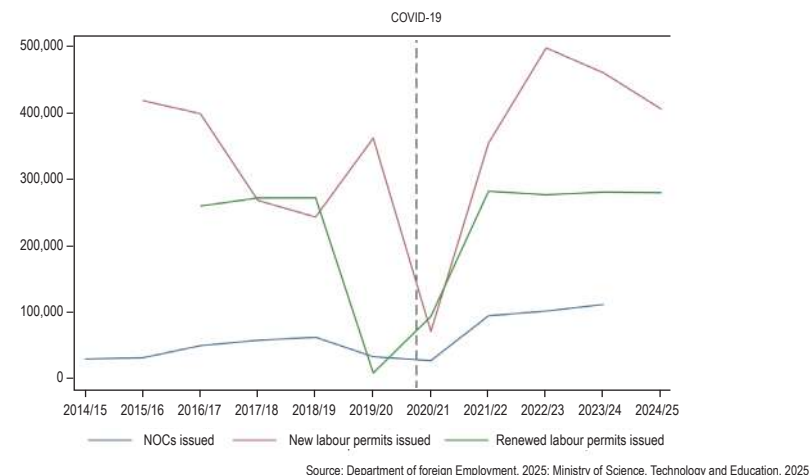
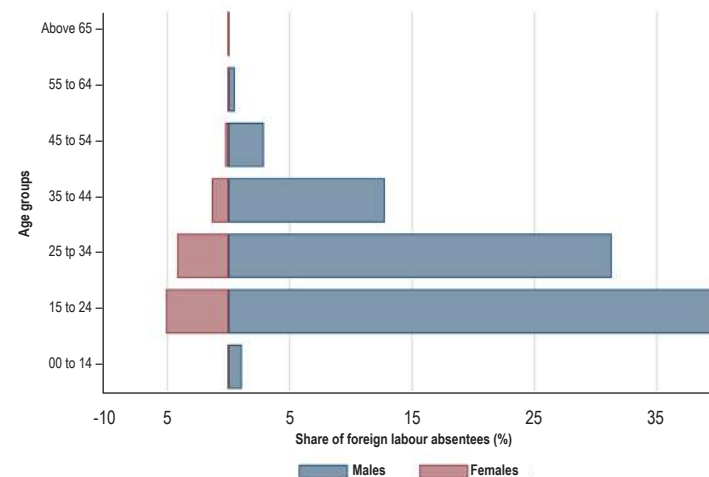
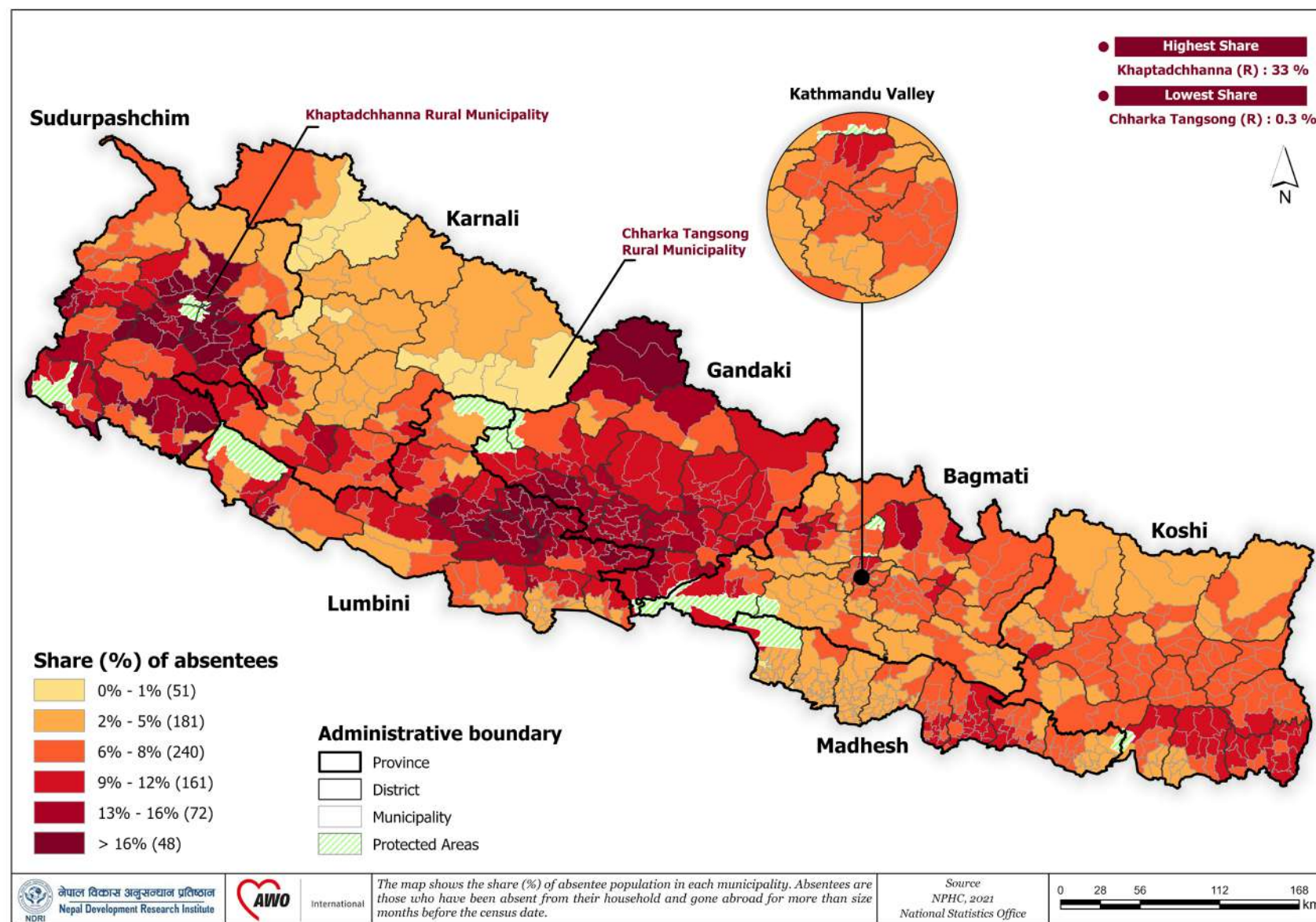


Figure 4: Population pyramid of work-related absentee population



Map 4: Proportion (%) of absentee population by Municipality-level



8 WHERE ARE THE MIGRANTS FROM?

During the 1950s–70s, the state encouraged resettlement from the Hill regions to the Terai to open land for cultivation. But later, labour migration was linked fast pace of urbanisation and the growth of the service and construction sectors. Internal migration has continued to play a role in the livelihoods of people, especially those of low socio-economic background.

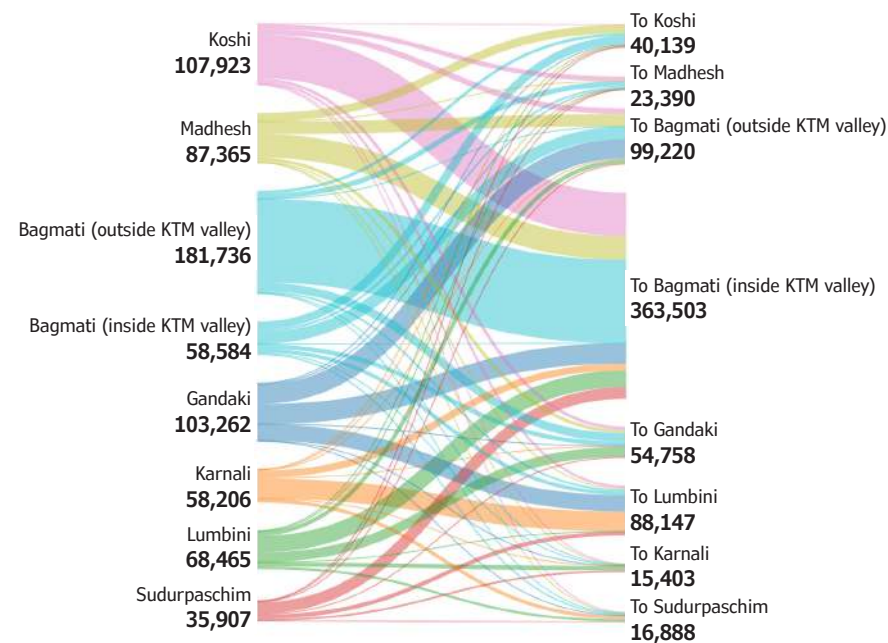
The 2021 census shows that about 2 million migrants moved between rural and urban areas – i.e., 7.1% of Nepal's native-born population, and about a quarter of all recent migrants. Nepal's urbanisation is thus fed by rural to urban as well as urban to urban migrations, and Kathmandu Valley is the magnet. Urban-urban migration also represents a significant share, driven largely by movement from smaller towns to major cities in search of better livelihood opportunities. In both rural-urban and urban-urban migration, males slightly outnumber females. Disaggregation by geographical regions suggests that the highest shares of work-related out-migrants are in the middle mountains of Koshi and Gandaki provinces (Map 5). In the Terai regions, rural-urban migration dominates, given a large concentration of employment opportunities in urban sub-metropolitan cities. Most of these internal migration flows are likely to be permanent since over 50% of them reported staying in their current areas for more than 10 years.

Internal migration for work in Nepal

Internal migration has been a main driver in the demographic transition and in changing the livelihood pattern in rural areas. Internal migrants have helped in sustaining cities and urban areas by providing services. The 2021 census measured recent internal migration using people's last prior residence. Nepal recorded 8.24 million recent internal migrants, 29.2% of the population. But not all migrants moved from their place for work. Migration for work or job was 19.2%, which means 1.6 million people moved out of their place for work.

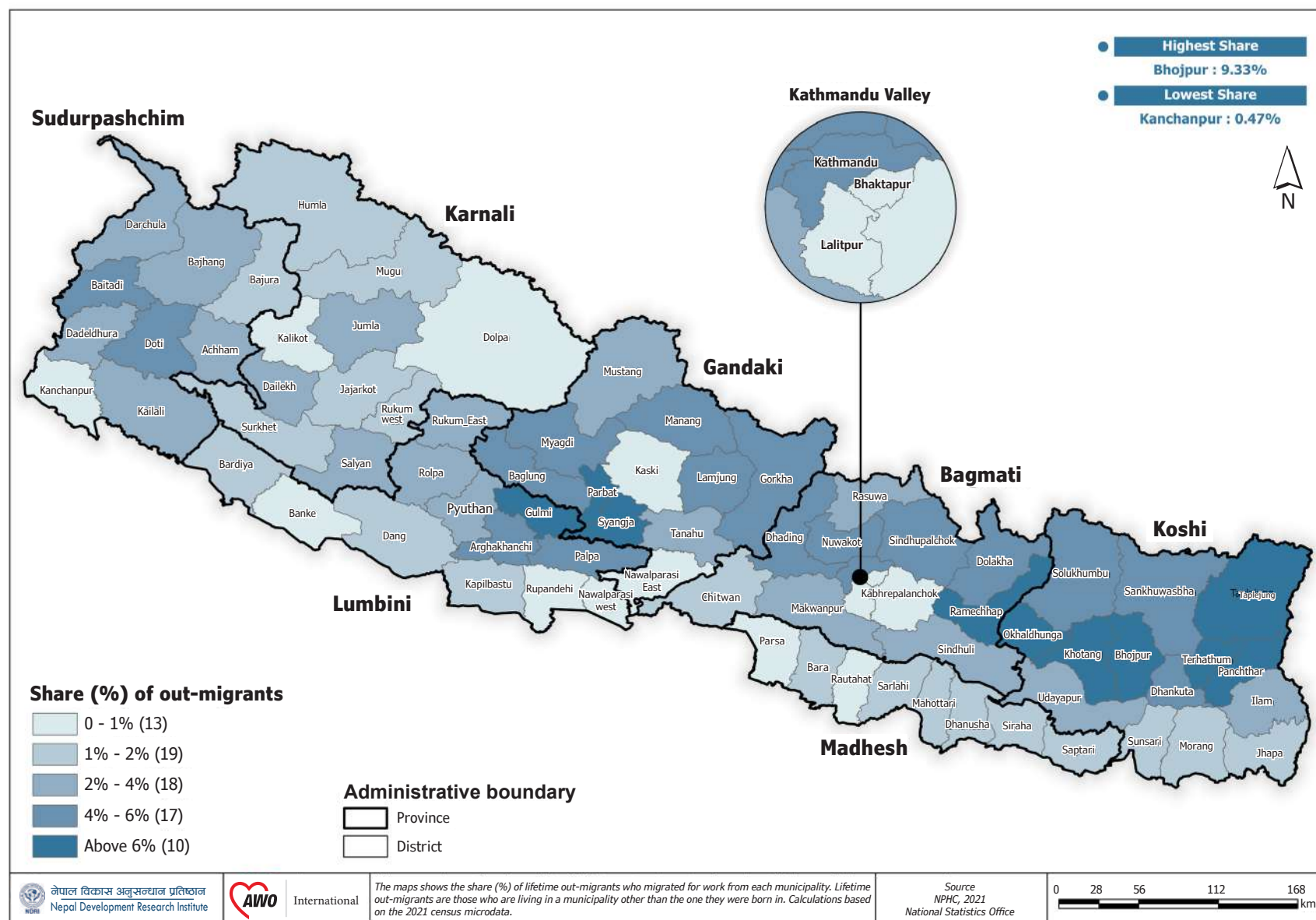
Inter-provincial movements seem very uneven (see Figure 5). Kathmandu Valley is the primary destination of choice for internal migrants. Kathmandu Valley has the highest inter-provincial inflows of all inter-provincial migration. This was

Figure 5: Origin and destination provinces of internal migrants



Source: NPHC, National Statistics Office, 2021

Map 5: District-level share (%) of lifetime work-related internal out-migrants



followed by Bagmati (outside the Kathmandu Valley) and then Lumbini. Karnali received the lowest number of inter-provincial migrants. Koshi contributes proportionately more people in these migrant flows, followed by Gandaki. Except for Kathmandu Valley and Lumbini all other provinces face a net loss. There is also a tendency to move to the nearest province or region.

Most of these internal migrants are employed in the informal sector and thus their work is casual, low-paid and outside of the regulated sectors. Proportionately more male migrants are employed in construction, transport, manufacturing, and informal services. Female migrants are often employed in domestic work, small trade, hospitality and in the garment and carpet industries.

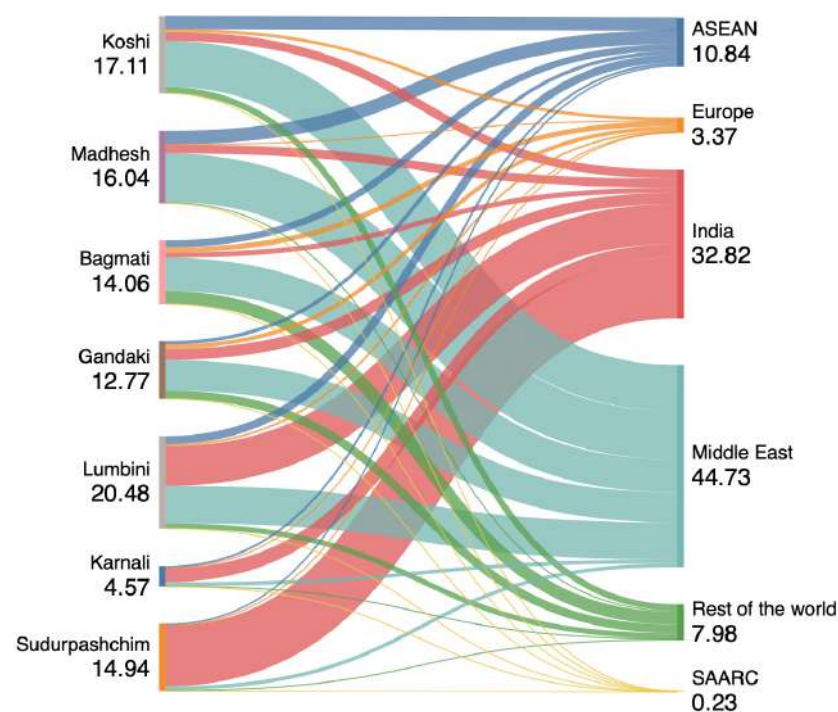
There is also seasonal migration within Nepal, which is not captured in the census reports. There is a dearth of actual data on seasonal migration, even though seasonal mobility from hills to Terai during winter and the transhumance system of seasonal movements have been in existence for a long time. Seasonal workers come from disadvantaged regions like the hills and mountains of Karnali and Sudurpachim. Seasonal migrants within Nepal also work in sectors where working conditions are poor.

A strong link persists between districts with a higher share of absentees abroad and negative decadal population change, despite the overall national slowdown in population growth (see Map 7 and Map 8). The decadal change maps reinforce the notion that people have depopulated the hills and moved to areas with better opportunities. In 2021, 33 districts recorded both negative decadal growth and more than 5% of their population living abroad. Among them, 13 districts had negative decadal growth alongside over 10% absentees in their population (mostly in the middle mountains of Koshi and Bagmati provinces). The 2021 census showed that in 31 districts, there were more absentees outside the country than within. In terms of ecological region, the Terai and the Kathmandu Valley receive more of such migrants. Hills (outside the Kathmandu Valley) have the highest negative net-flows and lost about 0.42 million people between the 2011 and 2021 censuses.

International migration for work abroad

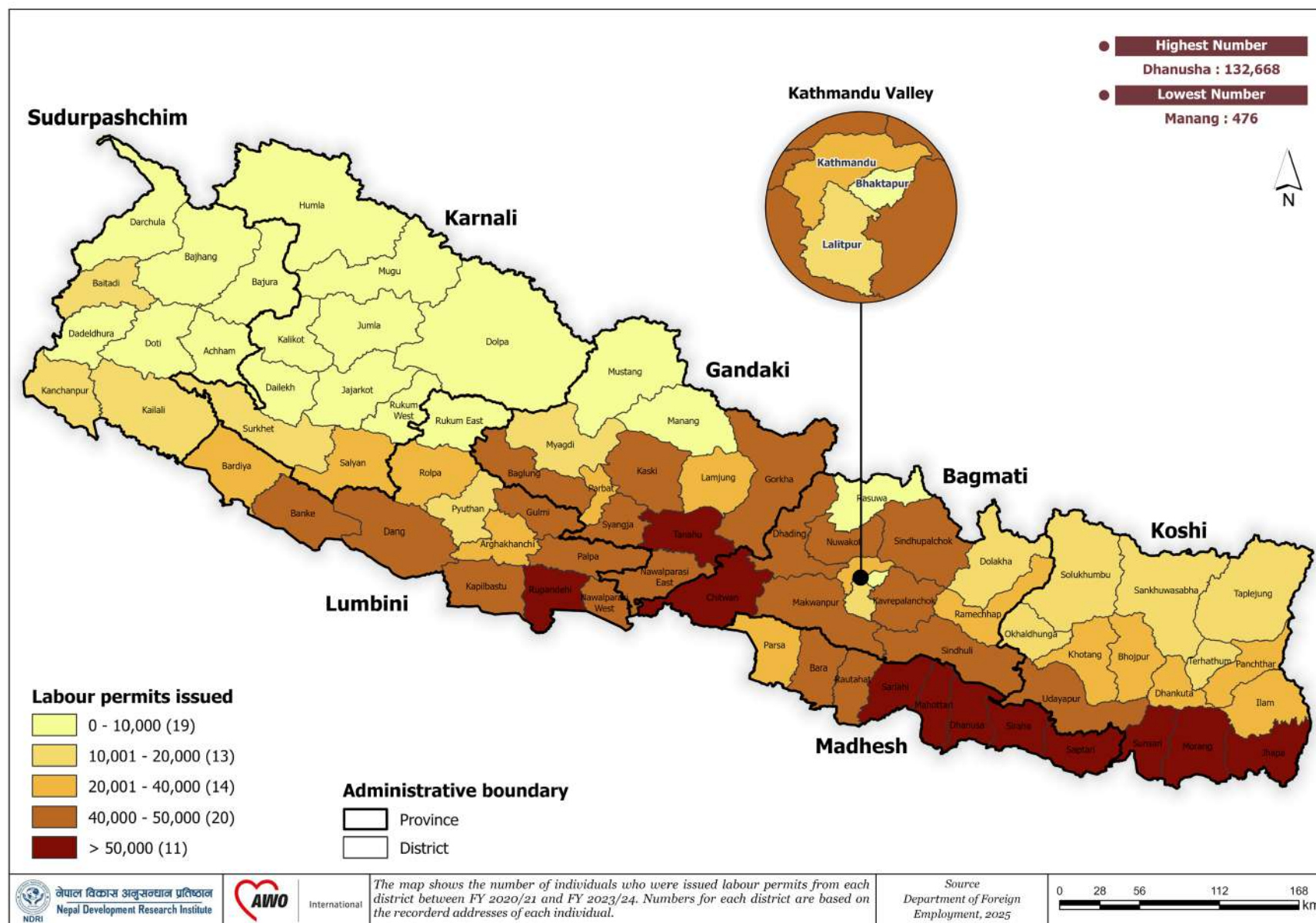
With respect to foreign migration, the Eastern Terai belt of Madhesh and Koshi provinces recorded the highest aggregate number of labour permits issued over the past four fiscal years (see Map 6). The least volume is seen in the Karnali and Sudharpaschim provinces, where the most common destination for work migration is India. The DoFE does not record information on labour flows to India owing to the porous open border. According to the 2021 census, the highest concentration of absentees is in the Middle East (44.73%), followed by India (32.82%) (see Figure 6). The largest originating province of absentees in the 2021 census was Lumbini province (20.48%).

Figure 6: Origin and destination of work-related absentees

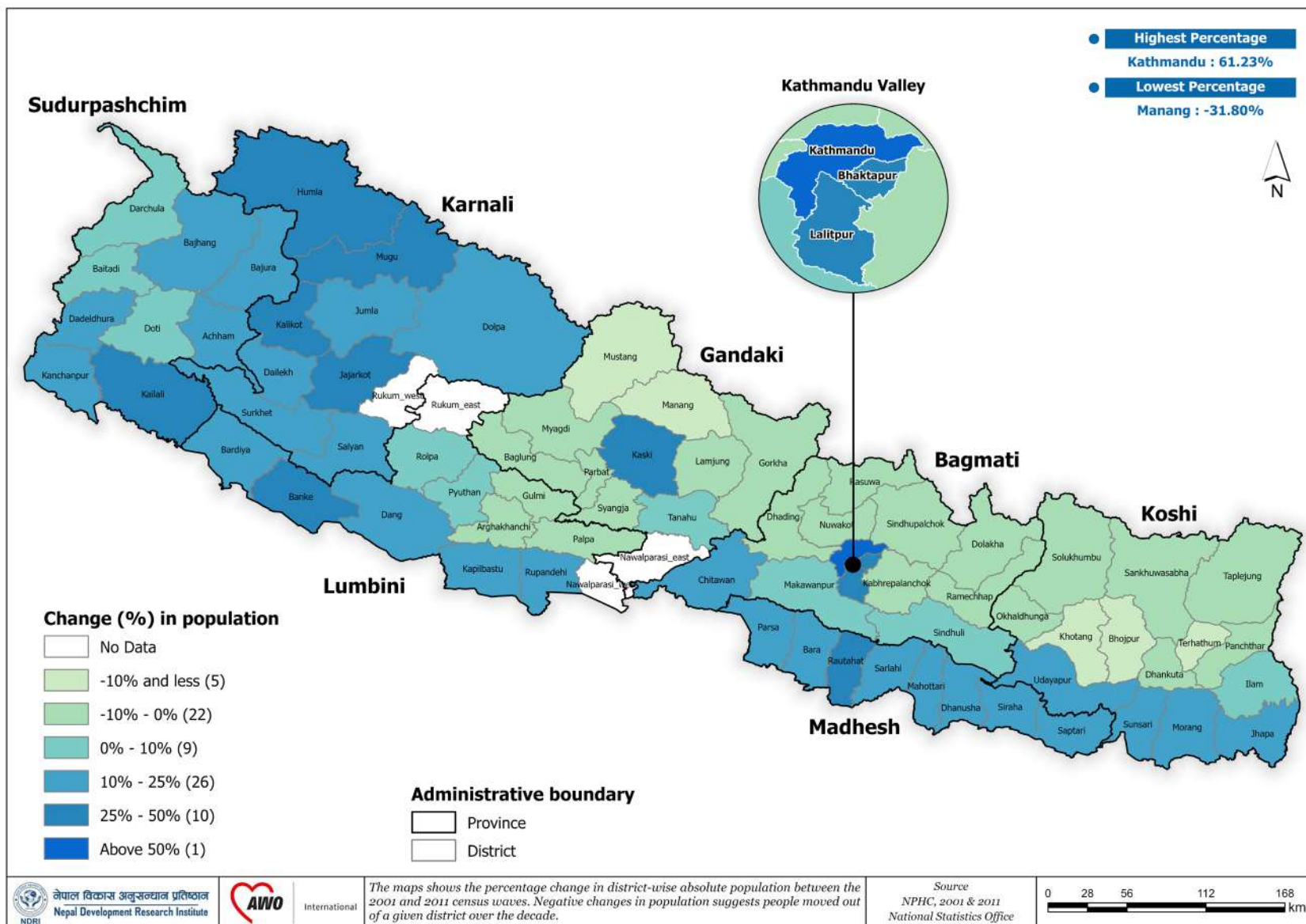


Source: NPHC, National Statistics Office 2021

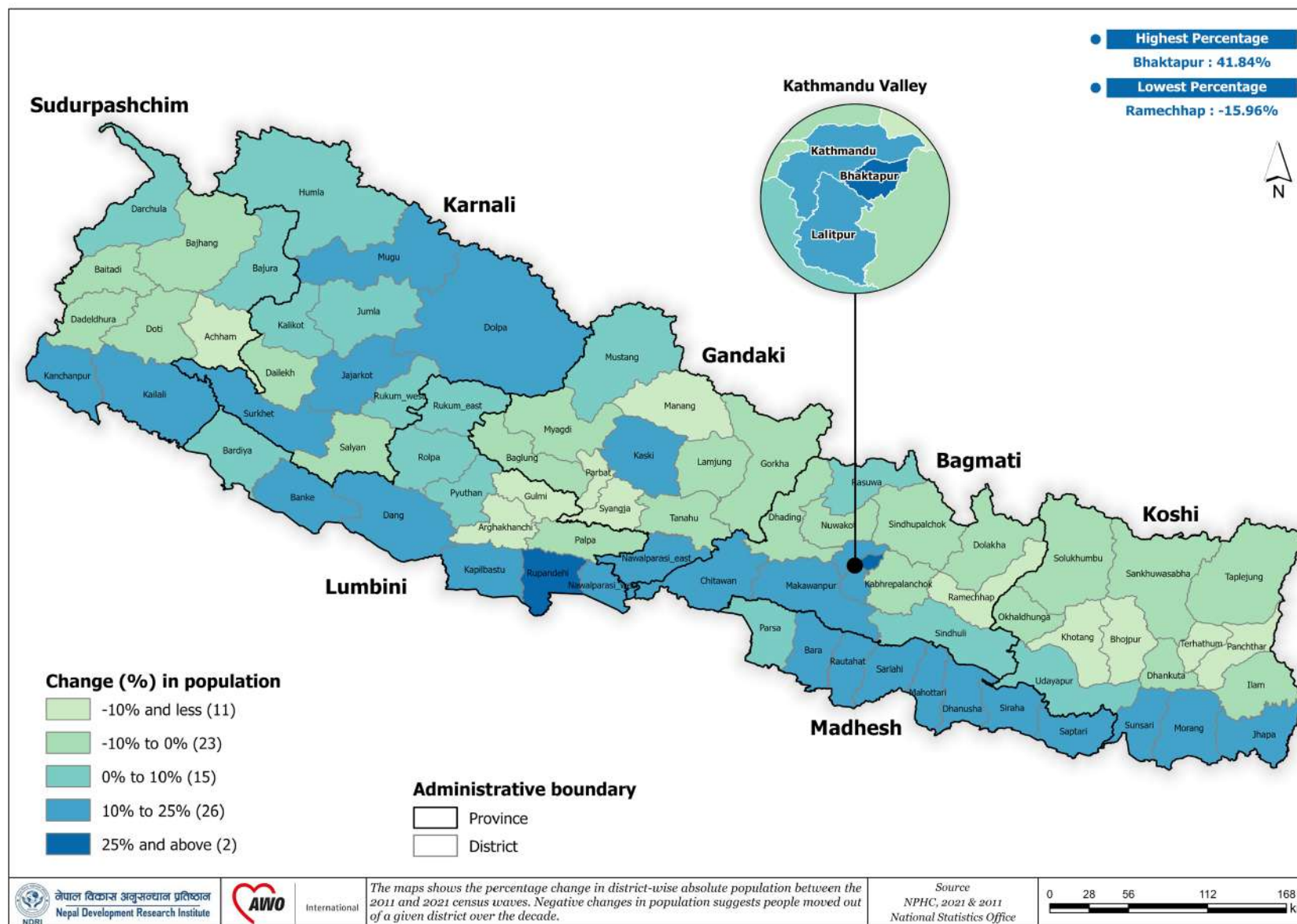
Map 6: District-level number of labour permits issued between FY 2020/21 and FY 2023/24



Map 7: Decadal change in district-level population between 2001 and 2011



Map 8: Decadal change in district-level population between 2011 and 2021



9 WHERE ARE THE MIGRANTS GOING?

In 2024, the DoFE formally issued labour permits to 148 different countries globally, excluding India. The Middle East continues to be the most popular destination among both men and women (Figure 7). The top 5 global labour migrant destinations were all in the Middle East, ten years apart between 2015 and 2024 (see Map 10 and Map 11). Within the Middle East, six countries part of the Gulf Cooperation Council – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – make up the most popular destinations. Those going to the Middle East originate largely from the Terai and Hill regions of Central and Eastern Nepal (Map 13). Among other popular migrant destinations that require government approval, Malaysia and other ASEAN countries dominate, while Europe has become a popular destination in the last few years.

The lowest number of labour approvals occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by strict movement controls and reduced demand for workers abroad. During this period, only about 167,000 Nepali youth received approvals for foreign employment. The share of Nepalis going to ASEAN countries, dominated by Malaysia, has slowly declined due to lower labour demand following a local policy change regarding the hiring of foreign workers. Migrants to ASEAN countries originate mostly from the hills of Eastern Nepal, as seen in Map 14.

Figure 7: Annual labour permits issued by region

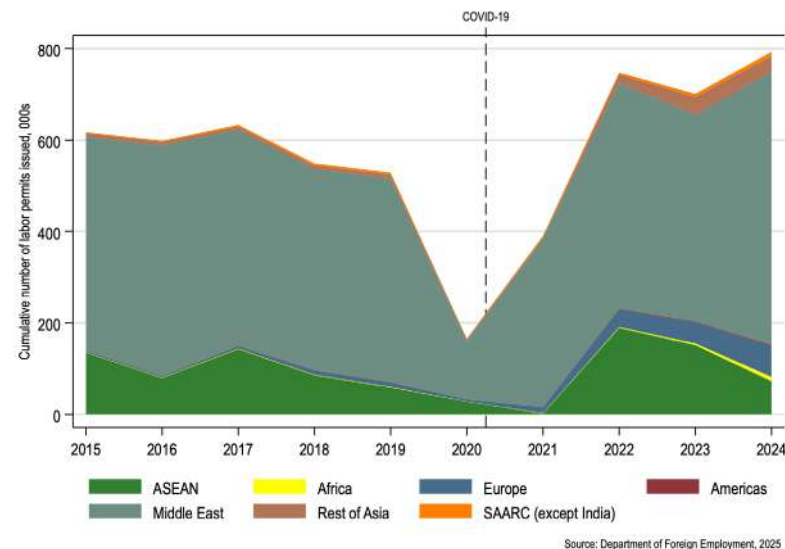


Figure 8: Annual labour permits issued by category

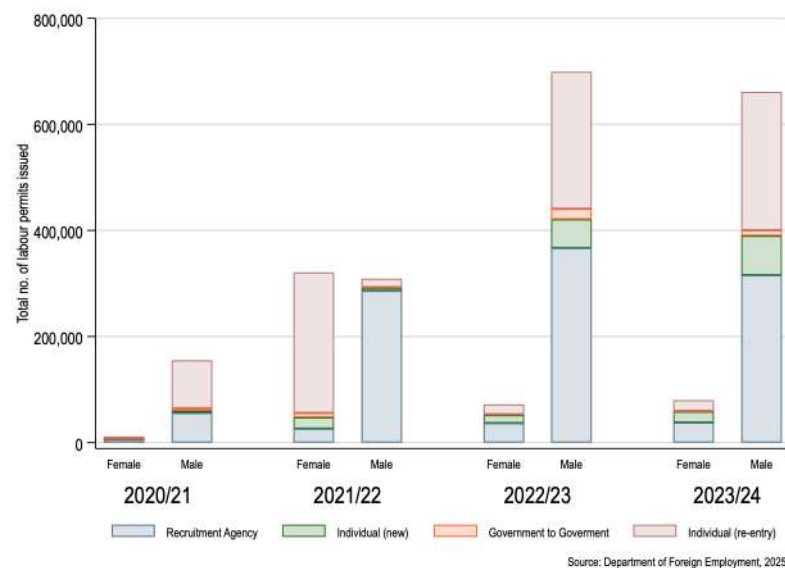
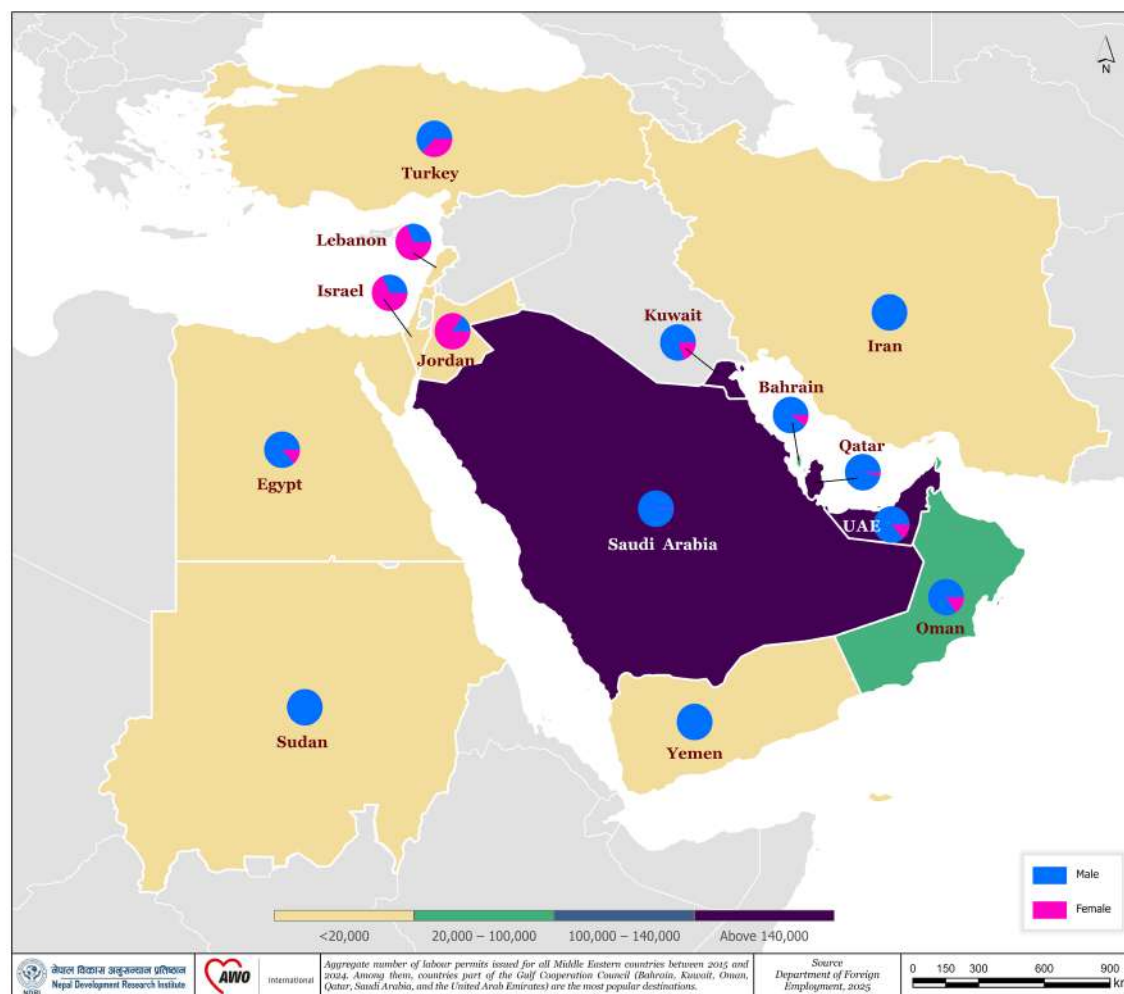


Figure 8 shows the progression in the types of labour permits issued. The Nepal government has government-to-government arrangements with Japan, Israel, and Jordan. Recruitment processes are largely guided by various private recruitment agencies, which have generated bouts of negative coverage in the national discourse on migration. Processes are regulated under the guidelines of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security (MoLESS). They are largely responsible for formalising opportunities in the Middle East. Local embassies and consulates of the GoN offer assistance and support to Nepali workers.

Gulf countries as the primary destination of choice

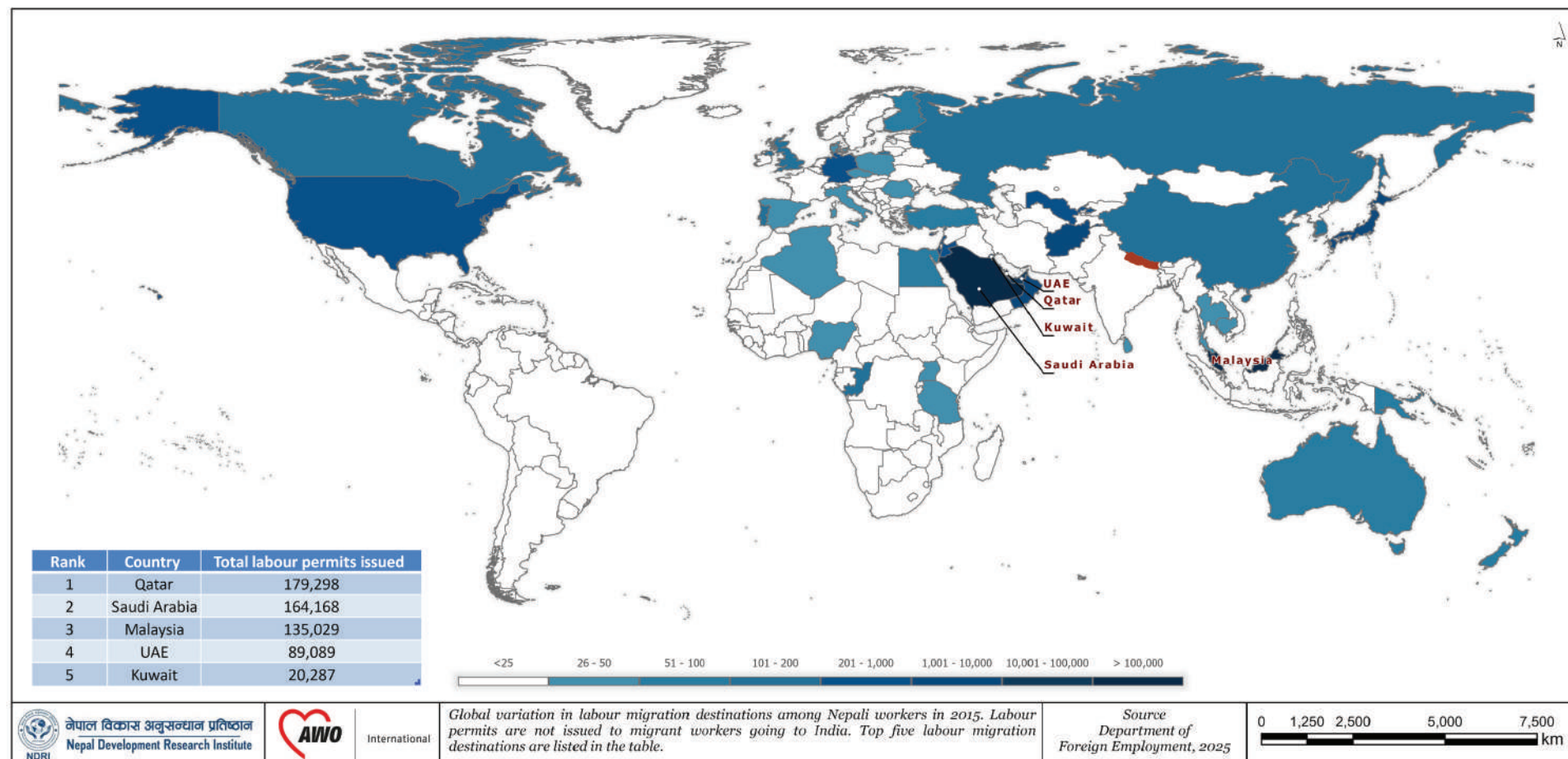
Over a third of the absentees abroad were recorded in the GCC during the 2021 census. The GCC have a predominant share of migrant population, with 88% in the UAE, 85% in Qatar and 41.6% in Saudi Arabia; the share of foreign workforce in those countries is even higher. An estimated 204,000 Nepalis went to Qatar in 2015, largely due to the construction and hospitality workforce demand surge created by the preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In 2024, the UAE and Saudi Arabia comprised the largest share. The flow to Saudi Arabia is expected to surge in the coming years, considering the country's Saudi Development Vision 2030 and preparations to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. According to the Nepal Embassy in Riyadh, more than 400,00 Nepali workers are currently engaged in various

Map 9: Labour permits issued for Middle Eastern countries (2015 -2024)

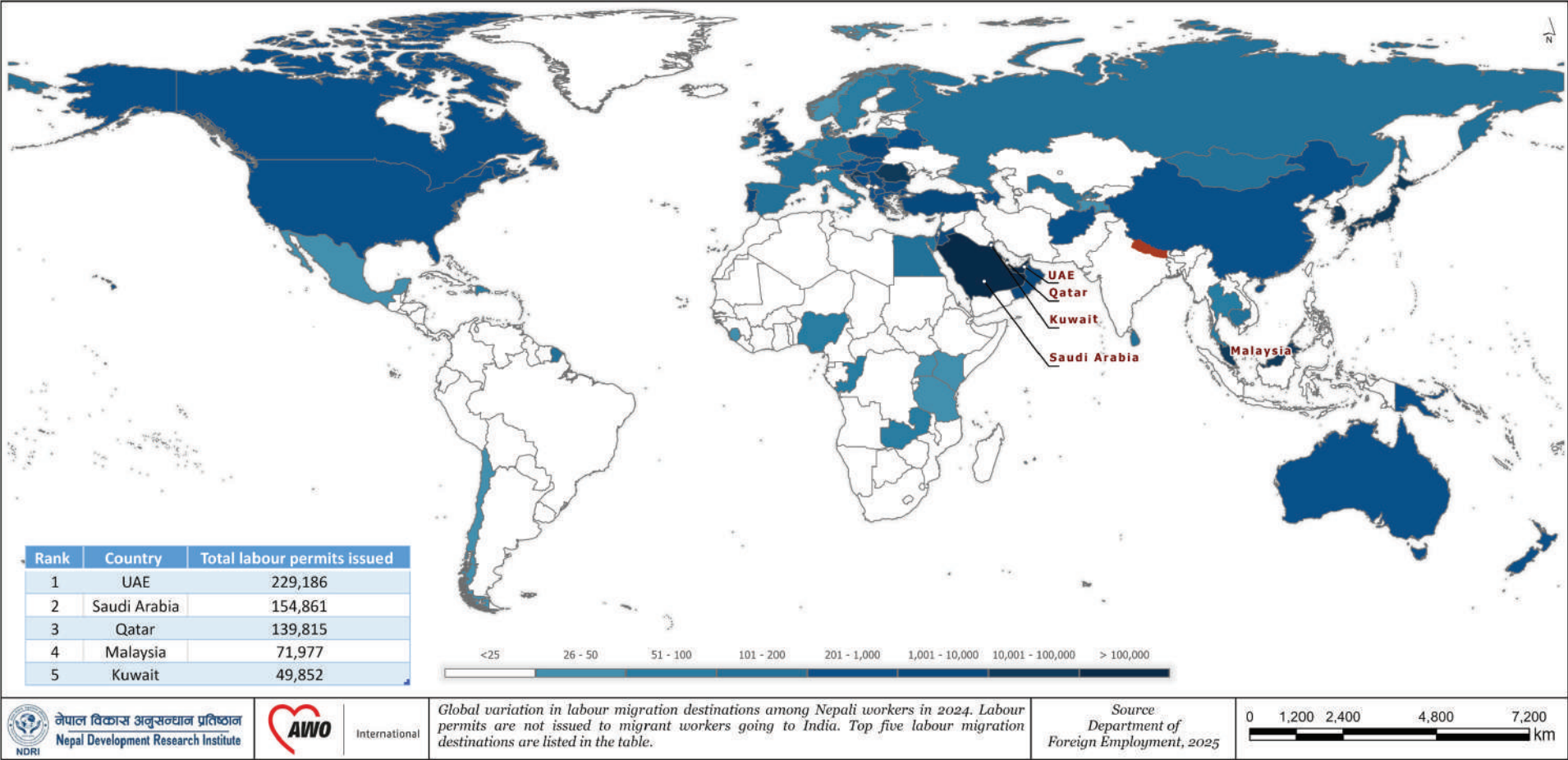


professions, with over two-thirds unskilled. Nepal labour migrants and their misfortune and human rights violations made global headlines on the eve of the World Cup, with many human rights organisations criticising the working conditions faced by the workers.

Map 10: Global labour migrant destinations in 2015



Map 11: Global labour migrant destinations in 2024



Europe as an emerging destination

More recently, Europe has emerged as a popular labour migration destination. Since 2021, there has been a more than 15-fold increase in the total number of labour permits issued to European countries. For example, in countries like Poland and Romania, Nepalis make up the largest share of the countries' foreign labour force. They are lured by the prospects of better working conditions and salaries relative to the conditions in the Middle East. The shrinking working-age population in many European countries has created growing labour demand and contributed to the phenomenon. This surge, however, comes during a time when many of the European Union countries are enforcing stricter border controls on illegal labour flow. Nepalis often start out in countries with less stringent regulations (e.g., Cyprus, Malta, Croatia; see Figure 9 and Figure 10) and take advantage of the cross-border mobility offered by the Schengen area in order to end up in more lucrative Western European countries (see Map 12). Given that care workers are part of the more in-demand workforce, the share of women migrants across the country is sizeable. Romania and Cyprus have emerged in the top 10 labour destinations for men and women, respectively (see Map 17 and Map 18).

However, going to Europe is a more expensive affair since various documentation and cross-verification processes in order to secure a labour permit are lengthy and detailed. The prestige associated with migrating to a European destination as opposed to traditional Gulf countries is much higher. A cursory correlation based on the absentees' data of the 2021 NPHC suggests that those who chose to go to Europe mostly belonged to the second-lowest wealth quintile, suggesting that the financial challenges associated with pursuing the European dream are a stumbling block. This is in comparison to migrants to the Middle East who largely belong to the poorest quintile of households.

Figure 9: Labour permits issued for Cyprus

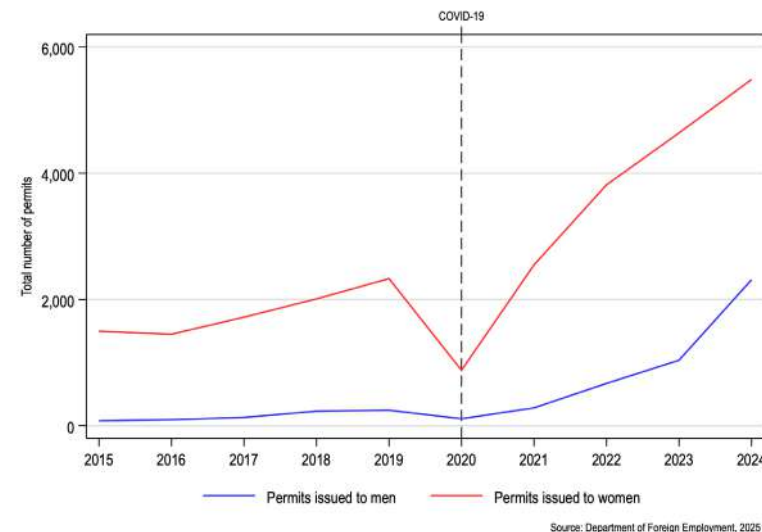
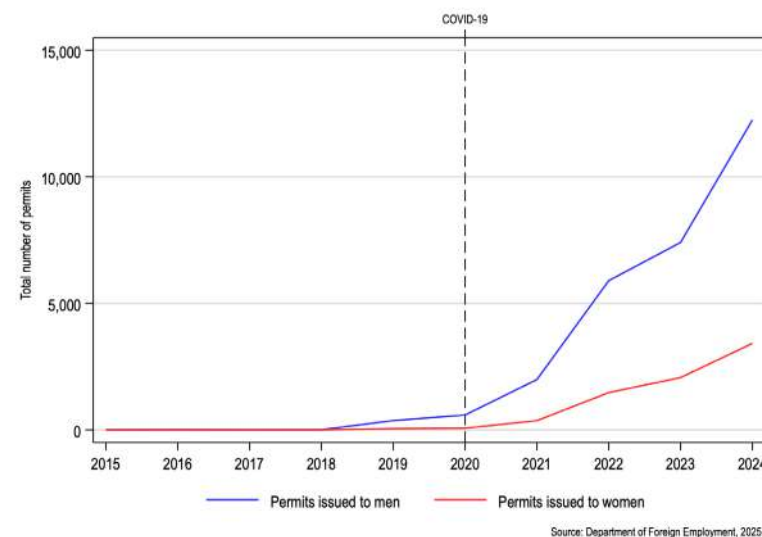
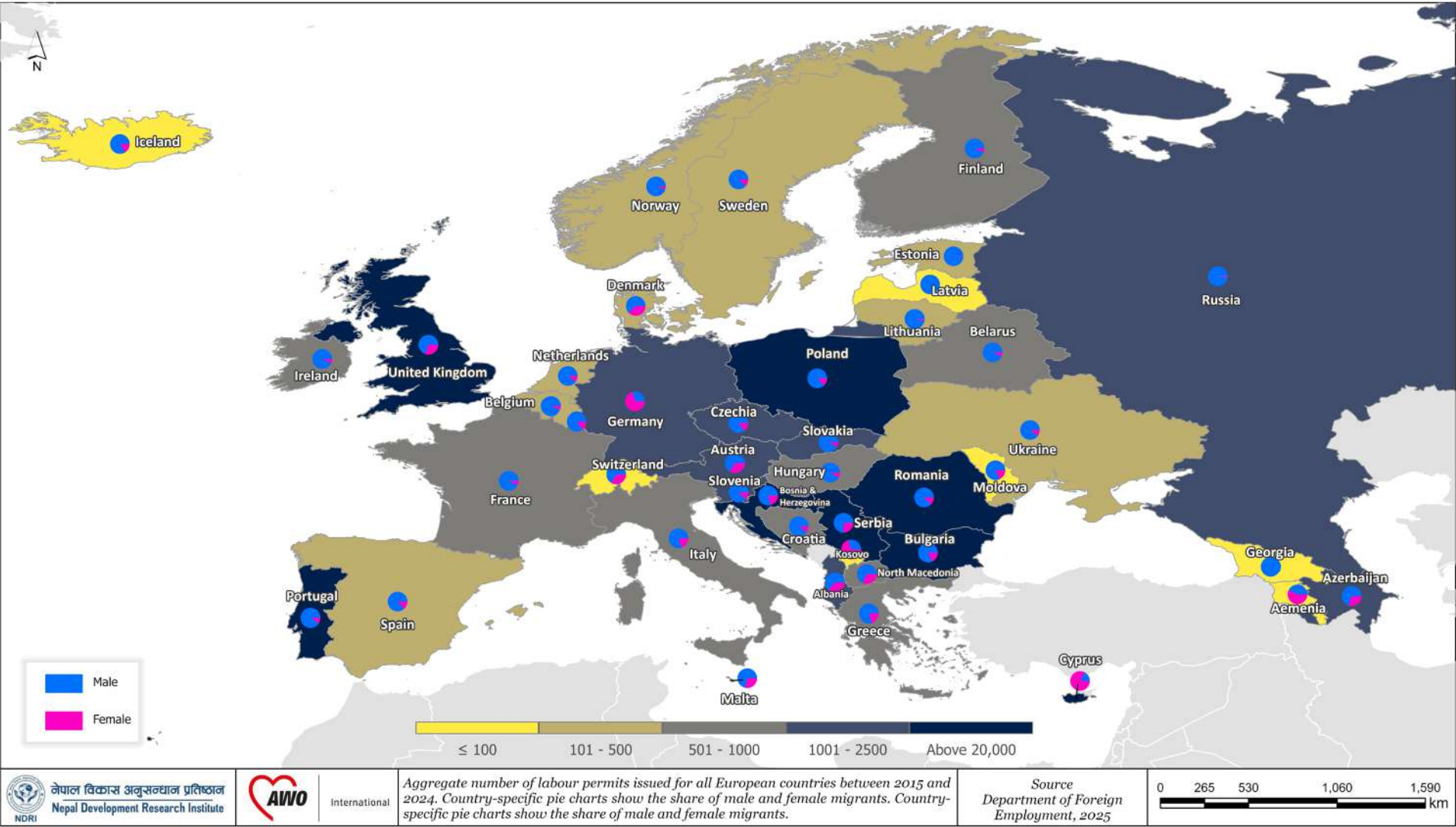


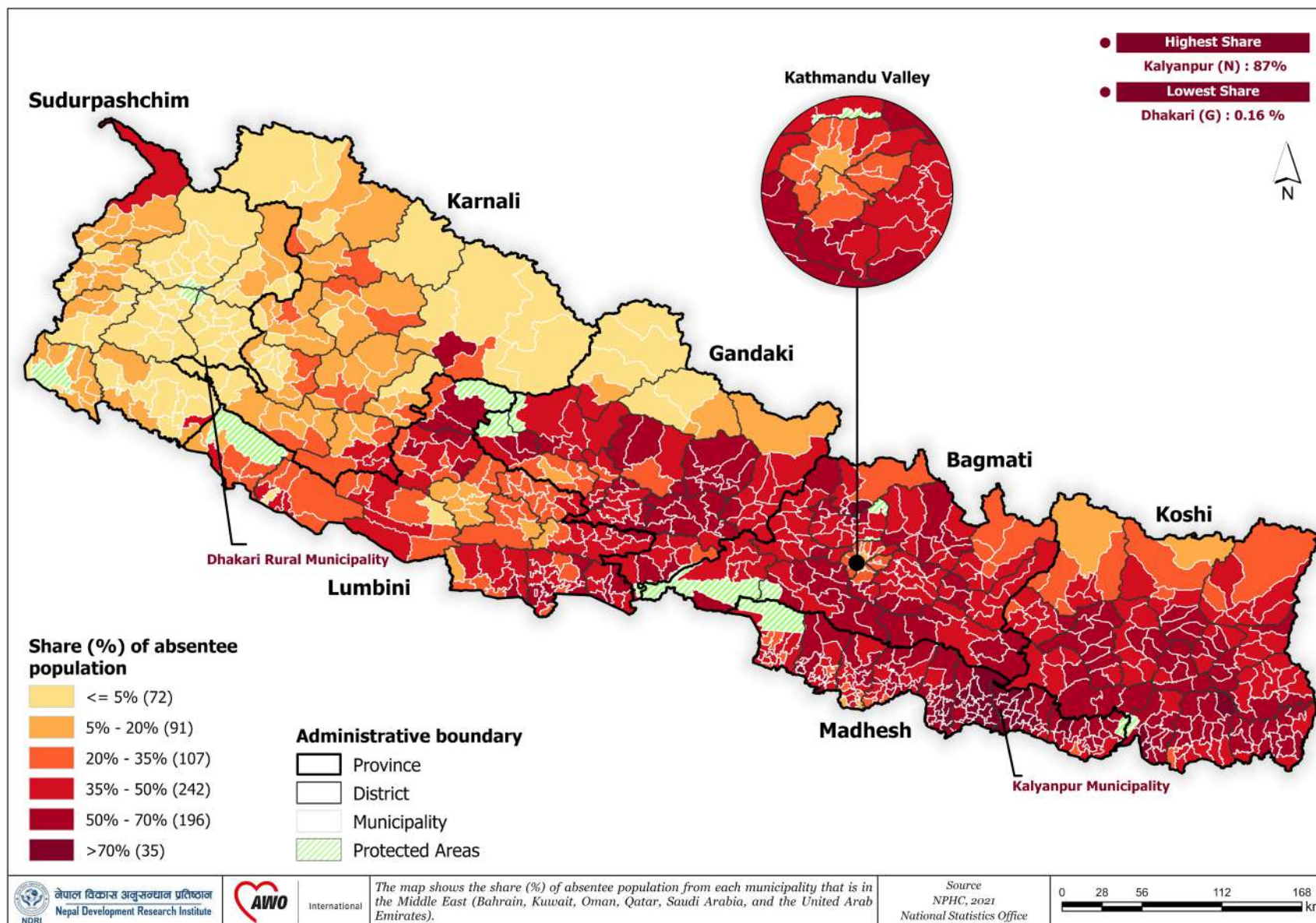
Figure 10: Labour permits issued for Croatia



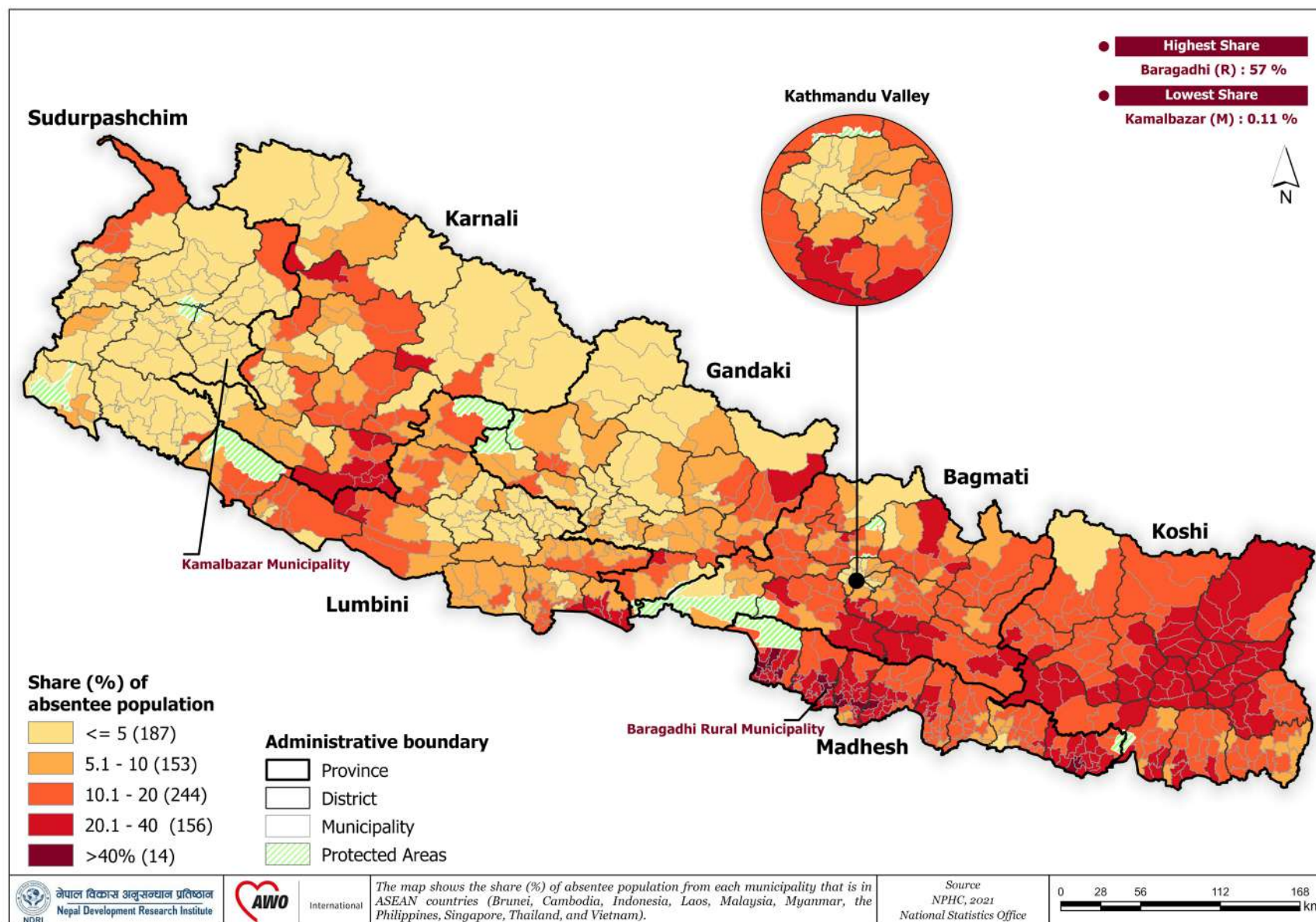
Map 12: Labour permits issued for European countries (2015 -2024)



Map 13: Share (%) of absentee population that is in the Middle East



Map 14: Share (%) of absentee population that is in ASEAN countries



Migration to India

Migration to India is a long-established practice, and most of the labour migrants end up in India. The census reveals that almost 35% of all absentees were in India. Despite the popularity and the seeming ubiquity of migration to the Middle East, India remains an obvious, and for many, the first and ‘cheapest’ destination for work. The border itself is not physically demarcated except at a limited number of official crossings and citizens of both countries are able to move freely and remain in either country to live and work without restriction. Its booming economy has brought a huge increase in construction in major cities and elsewhere, and that brings with it more jobs for labourers. The most common types of jobs include agricultural work, hospitality work, porters, security guards and factory work.



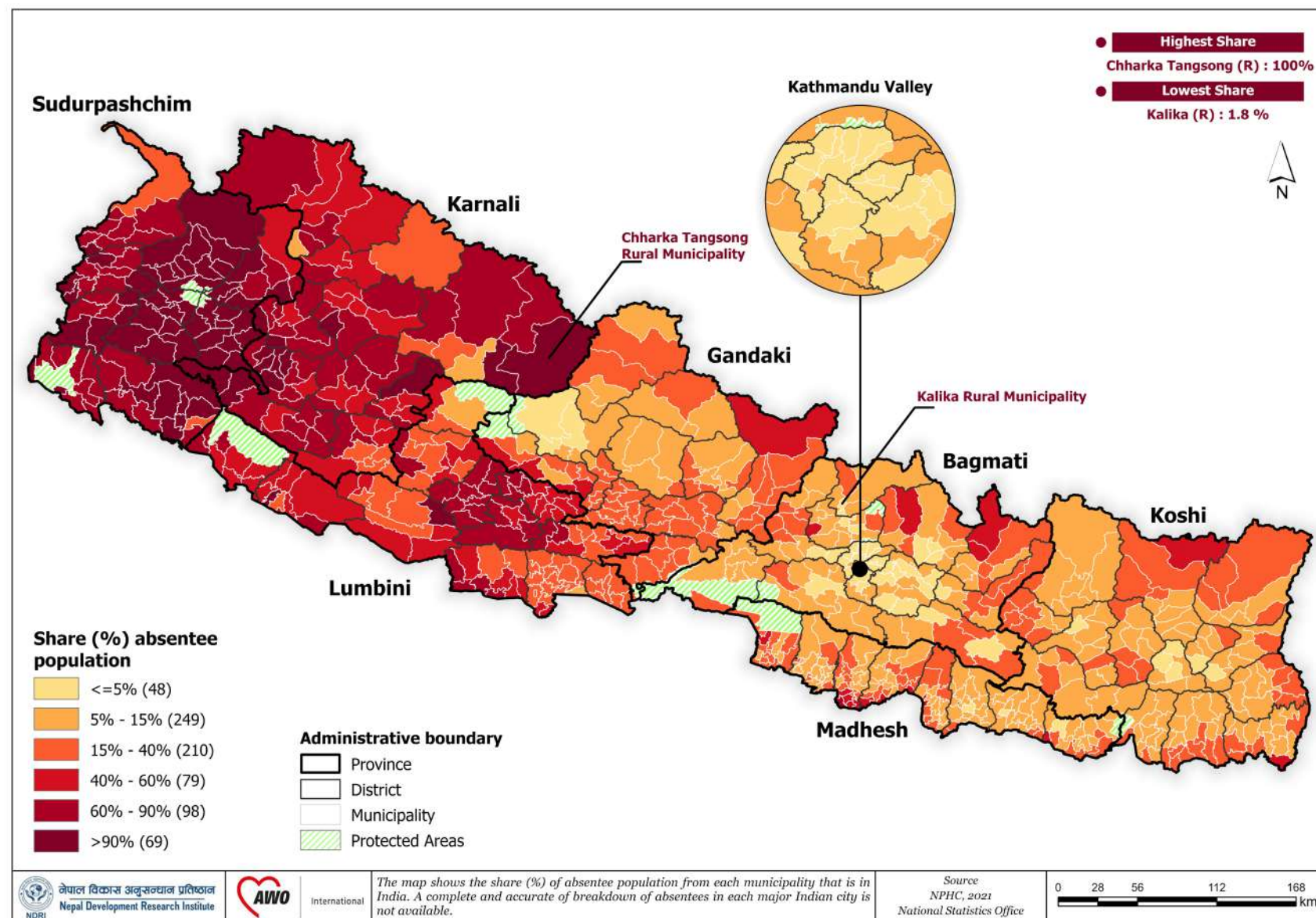
Young men lining up to migrate to India for work at the Gauriphanta border in Kailali district during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Data from the 2021 census shows that migration to India is most common in municipalities in the Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces (see Map 15). Migration to India is a common livelihood strategy for the poor, rural and food-insecure communities in these regions. Men make up 80% of migrants and migration increases during food crises. They have relatively little education, with almost a tenth illiterate. In communities with long-standing migration traditions, the main drivers are a lack of employment, insufficient food access and debt. The earnings are limited, with one study reporting that men earned between NPR 20,000 – 50,000, but this is often offset by the costly loans they take to finance their migration decisions.

Women, the elderly and children face heavier workloads, and children often miss school. Migrants’ wives face uncertainty about their husbands’ return and remittances, while the migrants face financial strain from migration costs and poor working conditions and crowded living in cities with high infectious disease rates. This contributes to serious health risks, including mental health issues and disproportionate spread of HIV and tuberculosis among seasonal labour migrants.

Migration to India is mostly seasonal. Patterns are closely linked to the agricultural cycles and festival periods. Agricultural and livestock workers are often repeat migrants. In the Terai of Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces, migration peaks during sowing (June) and post-festival months (November–December), with returns timed for harvesting (February–March and October). In the Hills and Mountains, shorter planting windows and harsher climates extend lean periods, driving migration primarily around planting and harvesting seasons and major festivals. So closely linked is migration to the cropping calendar that, as an old saying from Jumla district goes, “if a migrant doesn’t return in time for sowing, he may as well be dead.”

Map 15: Share (%) of absentee population that is in India



10 GENDER DIMENSION OF MIGRATION

Women make up almost 18% of the total share of absentees, showing that work-related out-migration remains male-dominated. 10% of total labour approvals are for women as of 2024, but their participation has been rising steadily since 2012, signalling gradual gender diversification in migration flows. Map 16 shows that women make up less than five per cent of the absentees in most of the municipalities of the Madhesh Province. Towards the western and northern mountain municipalities, the share of female absentees is much higher.

The distribution of Nepali female migrant workers shows a clear dominance of the Gulf region (over 60%), with the United Arab Emirates absorbing 34.2%, followed by Qatar (13.5%) and Kuwait (12.6%) (see Map 18). India also remains a primary destination, especially for women from Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces. Table 2 shows the top five countries where more aggregate labour permits were issued to women than men between 2015 and 2024. Special factors enable more women to go to certain countries for work. Cyprus and Jordan have a high demand for female care workers, the latter of which is helped by a special government-to-government agreement. Israel has a sizeable demand for seasonal female agricultural extension workers.

Table 2: Top five destinations where more women migrate for work

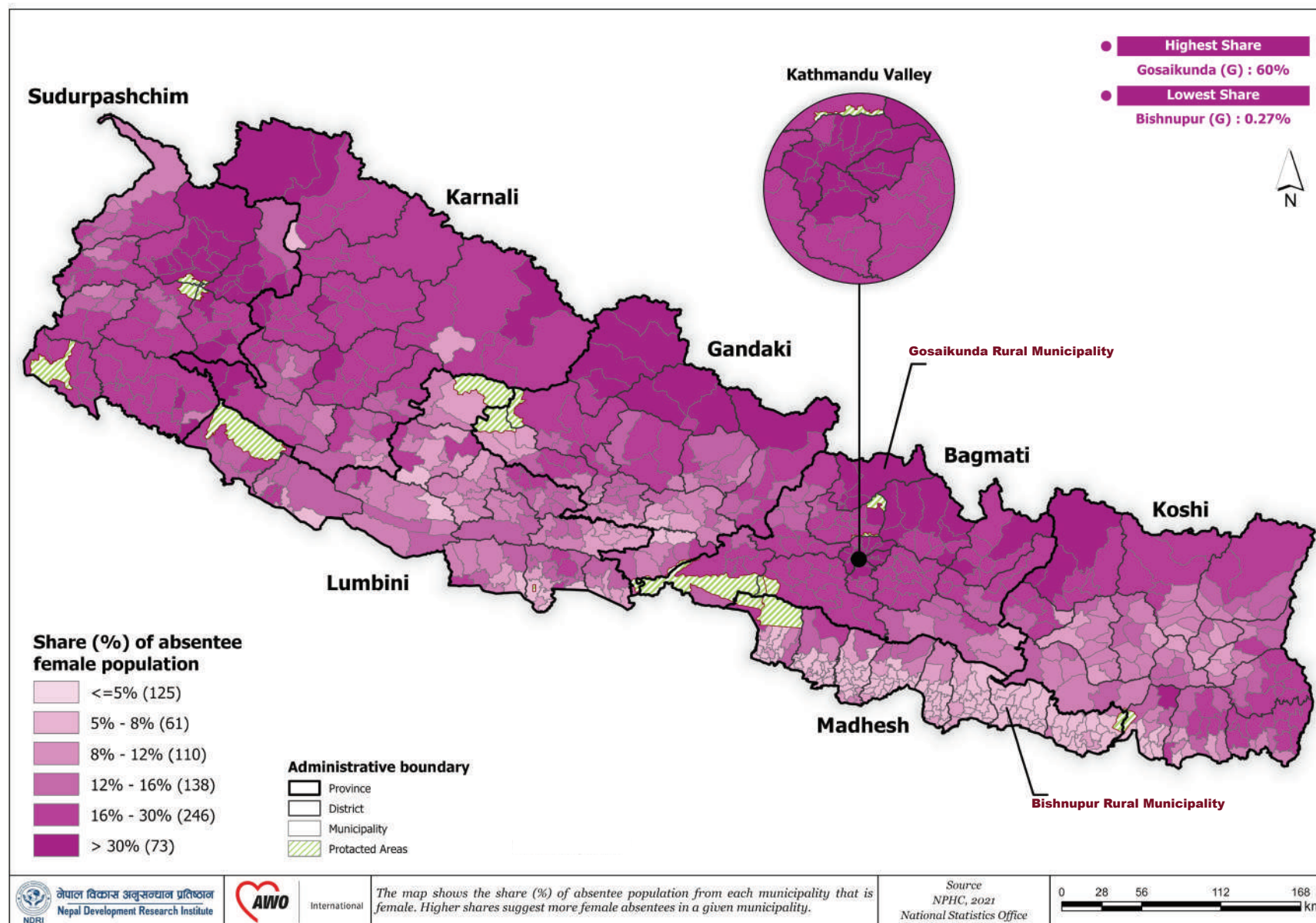
Country	Total labour permits issued	Share of female (%)	Share of male (%)
Cyprus	31,578	83.5	16.5
Jordan	17,616	84.4	15.6
Israel	7,033	68.5	31.5
Germany	1,940	70.7	29.3
Lebanon	1,910	68.6	31.4

Source: Department of Foreign Employment, 2025

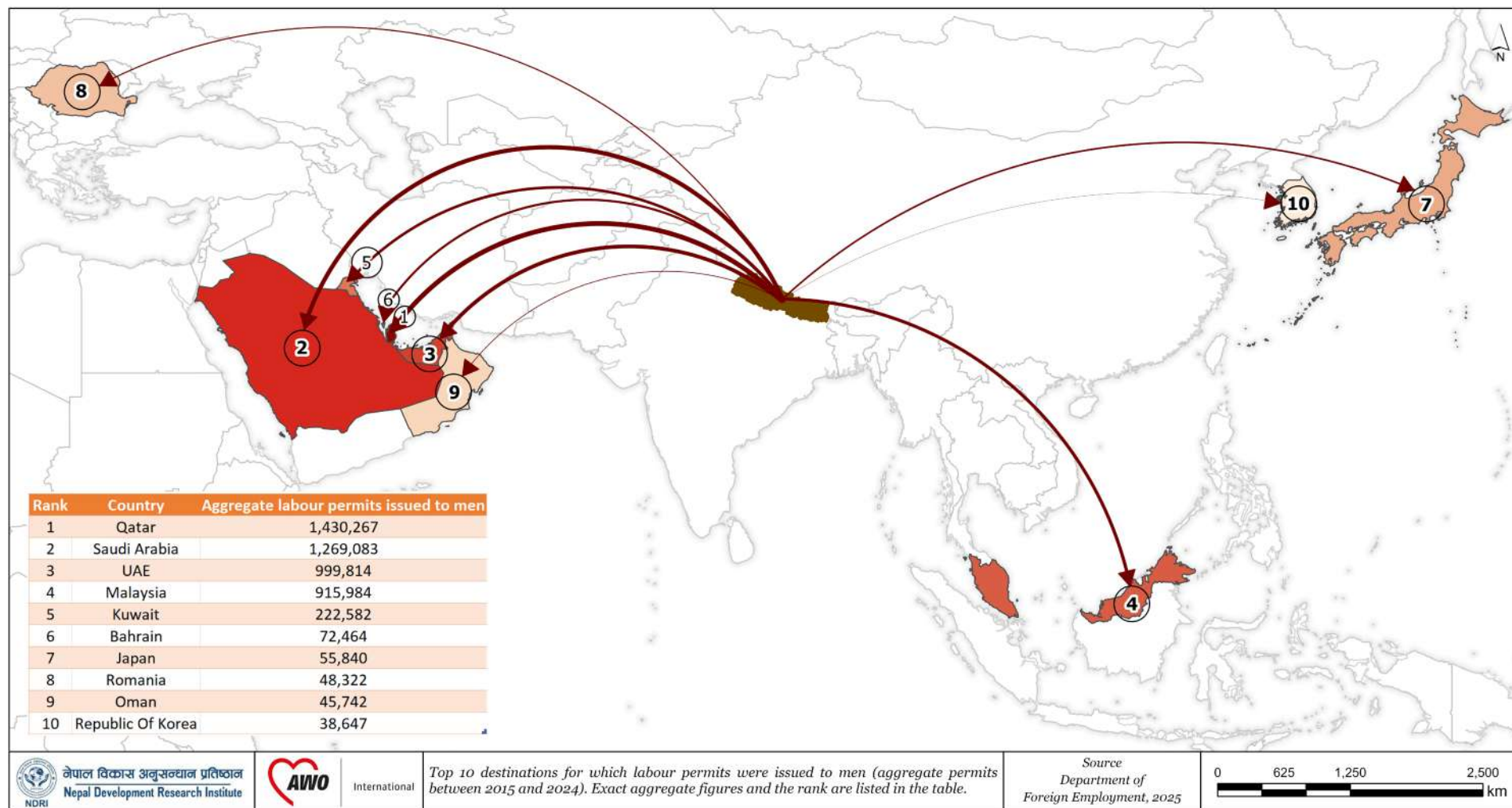
These figures, however, reflect only documented movements, while data on irregular migration, trafficked victims and the number of returnees remain largely unavailable. Despite gradual growth, women migrants continue to face significant challenges, including low wages, weak legal protection, exploitation and health risks. Moreover, government bans on female migration for domestic work in GCC countries, while intended for protection, have reduced official migration but inadvertently fuelled irregular and unsafe pathways. Many women resort to crossing the open Nepal-India border before moving onward to other destinations.

As many women are left behind while their partners are abroad, there have been noticeable shifts in the country's agricultural and credit access landscape. Large portions of agricultural land remain fallow while women are constrained in accessing credit to partake in entrepreneurial activities since they don't have male guarantors. Predominantly male labour migration from Nepal has led to a rise in female-headed households (12.4% in 1996 to 31.3% in 2016) as women take on the responsibility of managing households and agricultural work in their husbands' absence. Nearly two-thirds (64.2%) of absentee households participate primarily in agricultural activities.

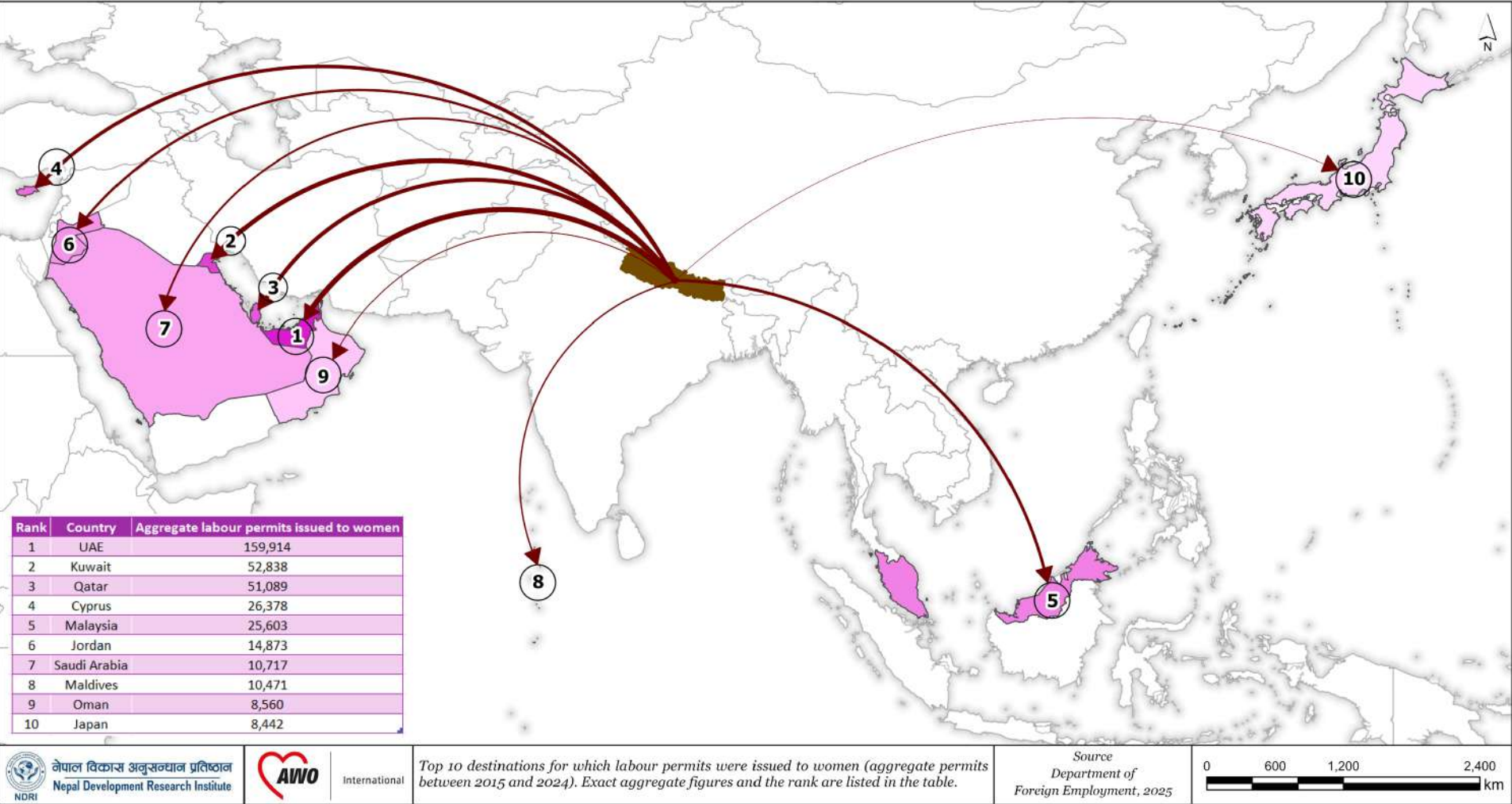
Map 16: Share (%) of the absentee population that is female



Map 17: Top 10 labour migration destinations for men (2015 – 2024)



Map 18: Top 10 labour migration destinations for women (2015 – 2024)



11 MIGRANTS' PROFILE

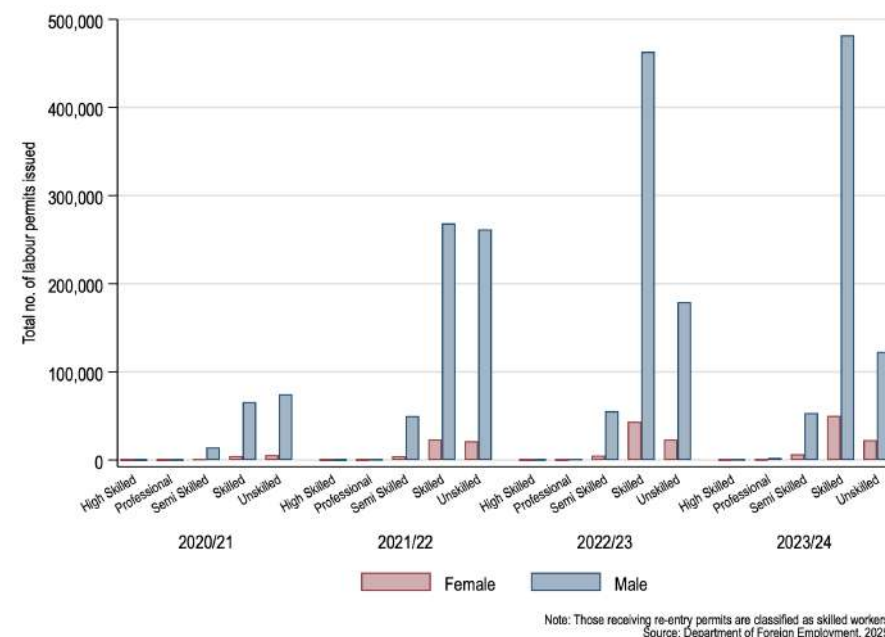
Almost 16% of all absentees who were abroad during the 2021 census were part of the poorest wealth quintile³. This pattern is most marked in municipalities of the far-western part of the country (see Map 19). This is because Karnali and Sudhuraschim are the poorest two provinces of the country, with almost all households classified into the poorest wealth quintile. These provinces, particularly in the mountain and hill districts, are characterised as having the highest levels of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition. Another cluster of the poorest absentee households is seen in the high mountain areas of Koshi province. The wealth divide between Kathmandu Valley and the rest of the country is also apparent.

Migrant diversity is also highlighted by their ethnic backgrounds. Over two-fifths of the absentees abroad belong to the well-off hill castes, suggesting that migration decisions are usually facilitated by socioeconomic backgrounds. Almost a third were Janjatis, or members of indigenous communities and ethnic groups. Just over 15% belonged to the Dalit community, who have historically faced systemic discrimination, poverty and social exclusion.

One out of every four absentees of working age (15 years and above) who are abroad reported little to no education (i.e., primary school or less). The prevalence of areas where absentees have little to no education coincides with areas with low literacy, as determined by the 2021 census (Map 20). Geographically, shares of the least educated absentees are in the middle mountains of Lumbini province

³The National Statistics Office has computed a wealth index with Census 2021 data using seventeen criteria, which include nine household assets, four services and four indicators of dwelling quality. The individuals were then categorised into five wealth quintiles based on the individual wealth index computed.

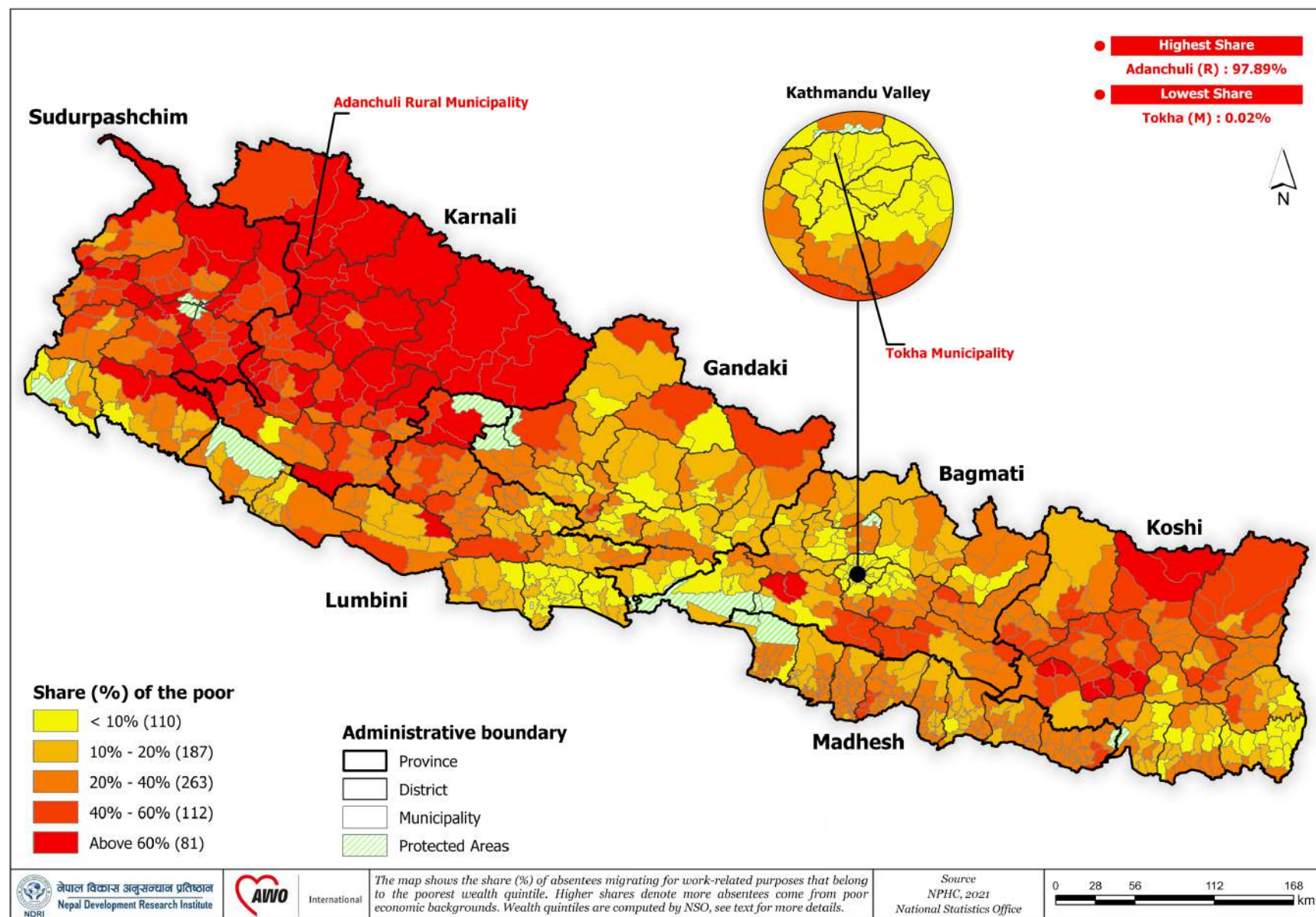
Figure 11: Reported skills of labour migrants



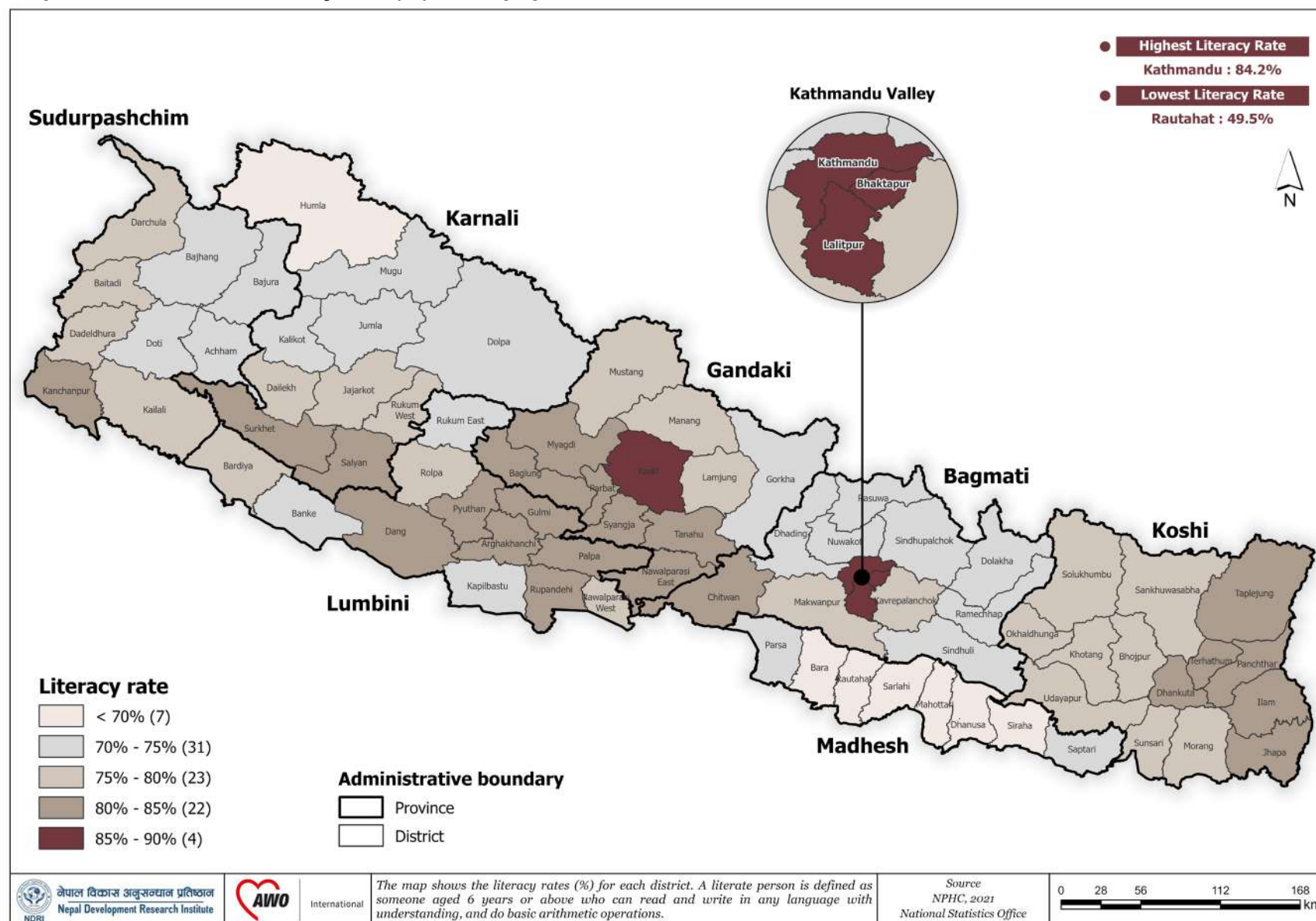
and the Terai municipalities of Madhesh province (see Map 21). Low levels of education translate to difficulties in acquiring new languages, assimilating into new cultures abroad and acquiring jobs and opportunities that are classified as non-menial. The skills classification of workers who take labour permits also shows a similarly bleak story (see Figure 11).

The number of high-skilled or professional workers continues to remain chronically low. Among them, the share of high-skilled women workers who obtain foreign labour permits is even lower. Various government communications fully accept that most Nepali migrants do not hold specific skills or higher levels of education that can help them better adapt to work conditions abroad. MoLESS categorizes return workers (those with re-entry permits) as skilled workers, recognizing their gainful work experiences during their previous stint.

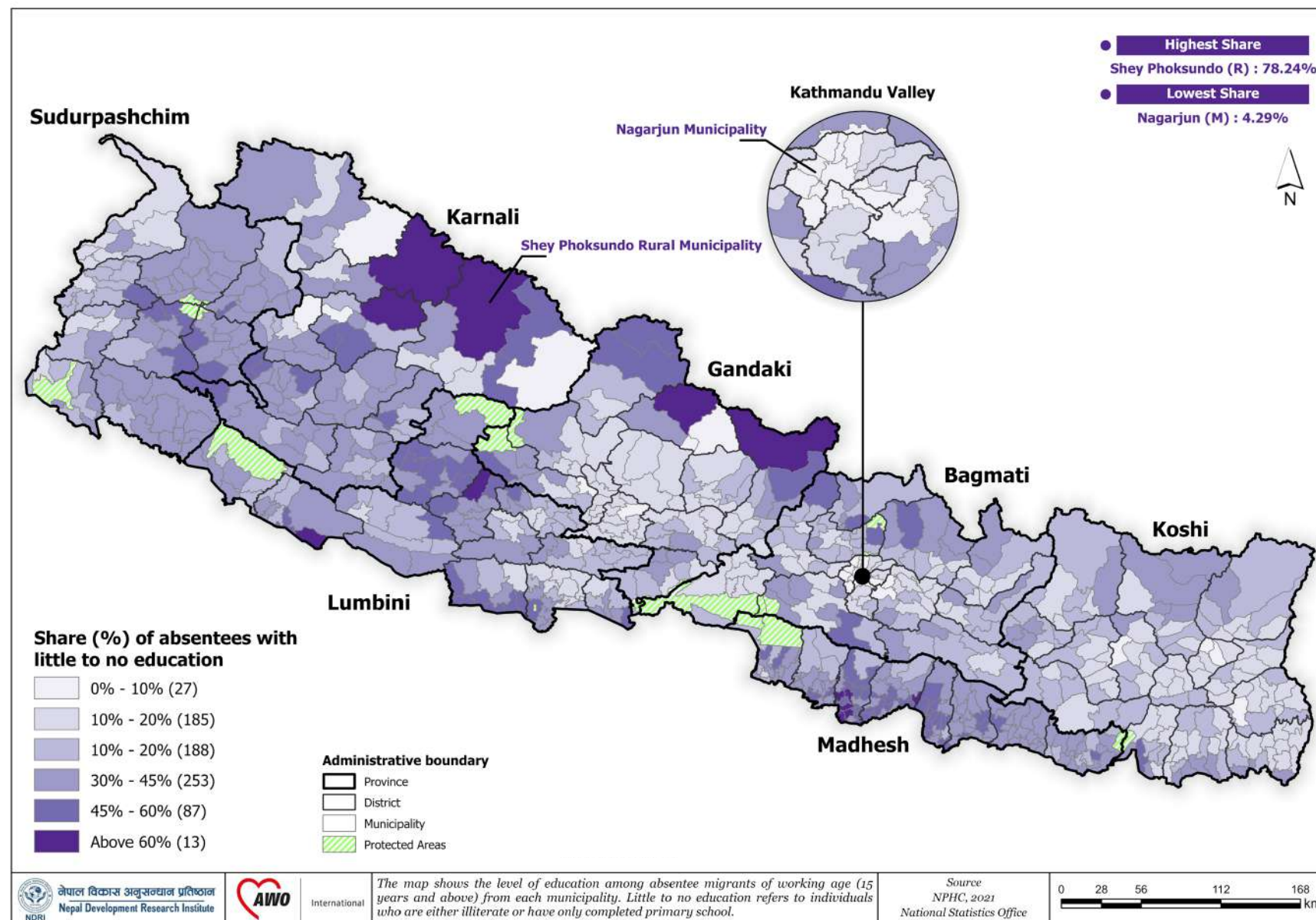
Map 19: Share (%) of labour-migrant absentees that belong to the poorest wealth quintile



Map 20: District-level literacy rate (%), 2021 population census



Map 21: Share (%) of absentees of working age (15 years and above) who reported little to no education



12 WHY DO THE MIGRANTS MIGRATE?

People migrate for various reasons. According to the push-pull theories of migration, people migrate when they are pushed out by negative circumstances in their usual area of residence and are pulled towards areas with better opportunities. Yet, migration patterns are also shaped by history, policies, the imagination of people and their social networks. For the youth nowadays, migration has also become personal, seeking to build their own identity.

11.1 Push factors

Livelihoods strategy

Lack of employment is the primary driver of migration across all wealth groups, acting as both a push and pull factor. This can be both seasonal migration and long-term or permanent migration. In many communities, migration is long established, planned and often expected of young men. Environmental shocks such as droughts, floods, landslides and soil erosion regularly damage crops, undermining food self-sufficiency. The death of a primary earner, coupled with limited and costly healthcare, can also prompt migration. The search for security and safer living conditions in the face of conflicts, as seen during the Maoist insurgency in the early 2000s, can also spark a mass exodus.

Among internal lifetime migrants, moving away from their place of birth after getting married or as part of a family relocation are the top reasons for migrating (37.4% and 20.5%, respectively). Moving in search of work and employment is the next most common reason, according to the latest census.

Table 3: Reasons for absence among internal absentees

Reason	Number of absentees	Share (%)
Work/Employment	1,330,653	15.77
Trade/Business	242,820	2.88
Study/Training	714,007	8.46
Marriage	3,156,402	37.41
Dependent	1,729,715	20.50
Natural Disaster	59,293	0.70
Agriculture	355,237	4.21
Returnee	150,906	1.79
Other	698,057	8.27
Total	8,437,090	100

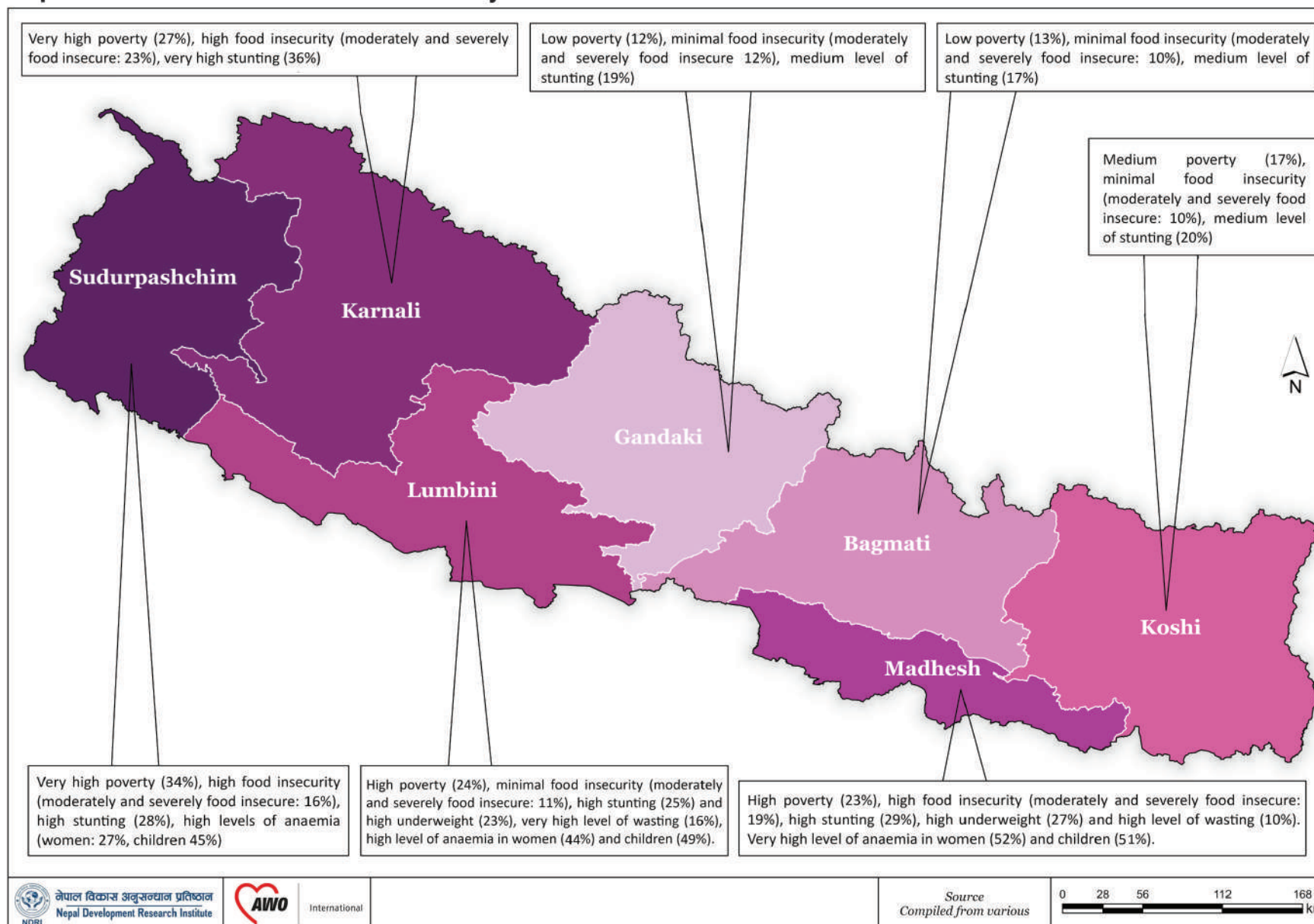
Source: NPHC, National Statistics Office 2021

Lack of employment within the country for the young people coming into the job market is a major reason for migration. About 0.7 million youths enter the job market each year. However, employment opportunities remain limited, and almost 90% of them opt to move abroad each year.

Food security

Food insecurity also motivates migration, particularly among poorer households. Studies suggest that faced with recurring food shortages, declining agricultural productivity and rising food prices, many rural households perceive migration, whether seasonal, internal or international, as a coping or adaptation strategy to maintain food and income stability. Map 22 provides an overview of the food security and nutritional status of each of the seven provinces. Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces have the highest levels of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly in the mountain and hill districts. People from here migrate primarily to India, often for petty jobs that offer very little income. Bagmati and Gandaki provinces have relatively better food security situations. A larger share of migrants from these regions migrate to more developed countries. Koshi, Madhesh

Map 22: Provincial overview of food security and nutrition status





A young herder walks his sheep through the high mountains of Kaski district.

and Lumbini provinces have moderate to high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. A high proportion of migrants from these provinces go to the Middle East and Malaysia, known for moderate to high returns. Studies that ascertain the exact improvements in household food security as a result of migration decisions are limited. As young people move out of their places of birth, labour in the area becomes scarce. This shortage has hampered both the agricultural and industrial sectors of the country. As more people move away from agricultural lands, more land remains fallow, contributing to even more instances of food insecurity. A vicious cycle ensues.

Despite poor households' desire for better livelihoods, large costs hinder migration. A probit model⁴ suggests households in the poorest wealth quintile are 3.4% less likely to migrate overall, primarily due to studying decisions. However, work migration is 5.2% more likely, indicating that overcoming financial barriers is crucial for poverty alleviation. Map 23 shows the likelihood of work migration for the poorest households at the district level. Poverty drives migration decisions most in the Terai districts of Koshi and Sudurpaschim province.

Climate-induced migration

Climate-induced disasters have become a major driver of migration worldwide. In 2023 alone, 56% of 47 million internal displacements were triggered by climate disasters such as floods, droughts and heatwaves globally. The number of disaster-induced displacements in South Asia alone nearly tripled to reach 9.2 million from 2023 to 2024. Although not all disasters are climate-induced, climate change is making weather events intense, causing people to migrate to other places for safety, security and improved livelihoods.

⁴ The probit model controlled for household characteristics, and standard errors were clustered at the municipality level.

Map 23: Likelihood that a member of the poorest household migrates for work

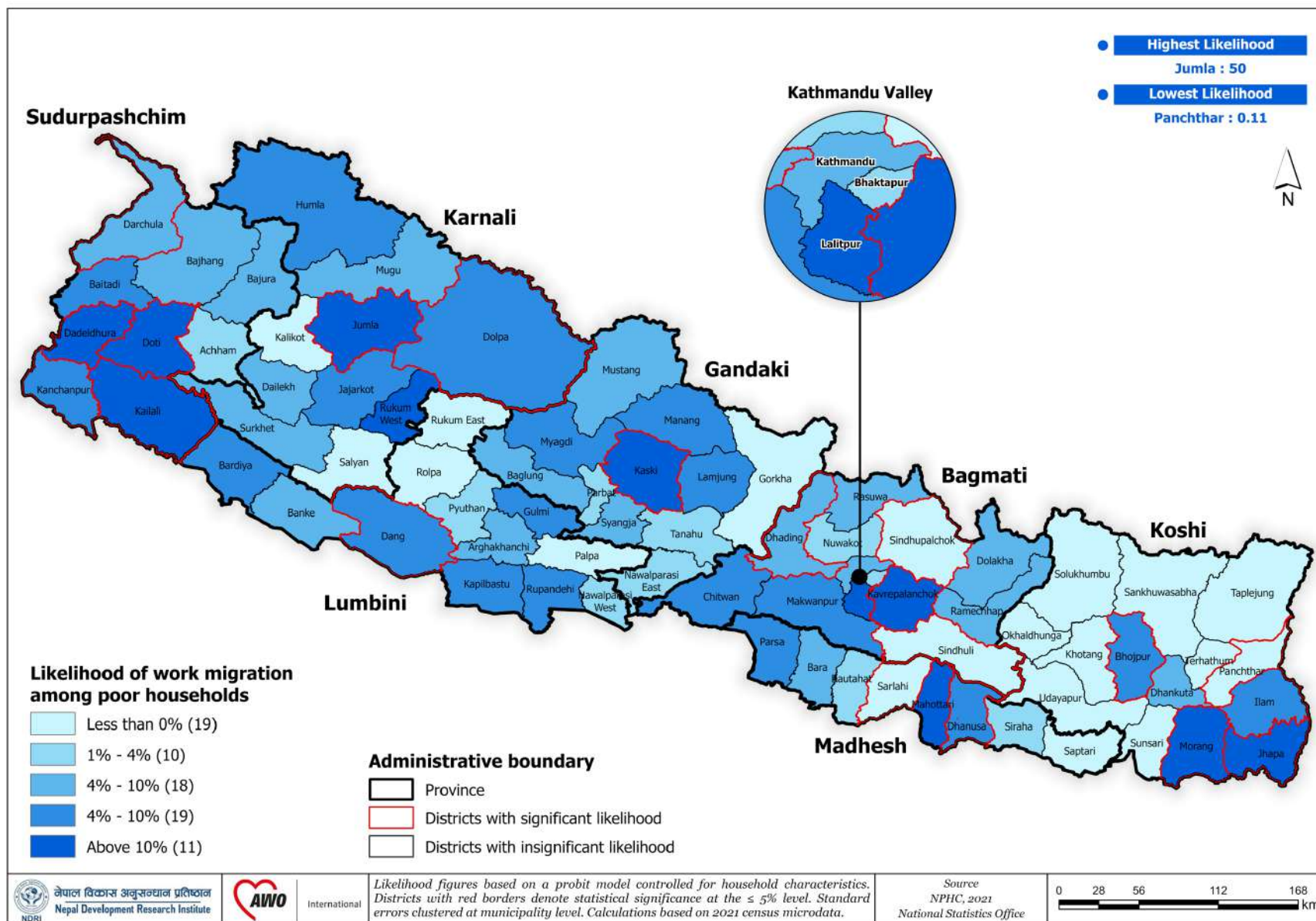
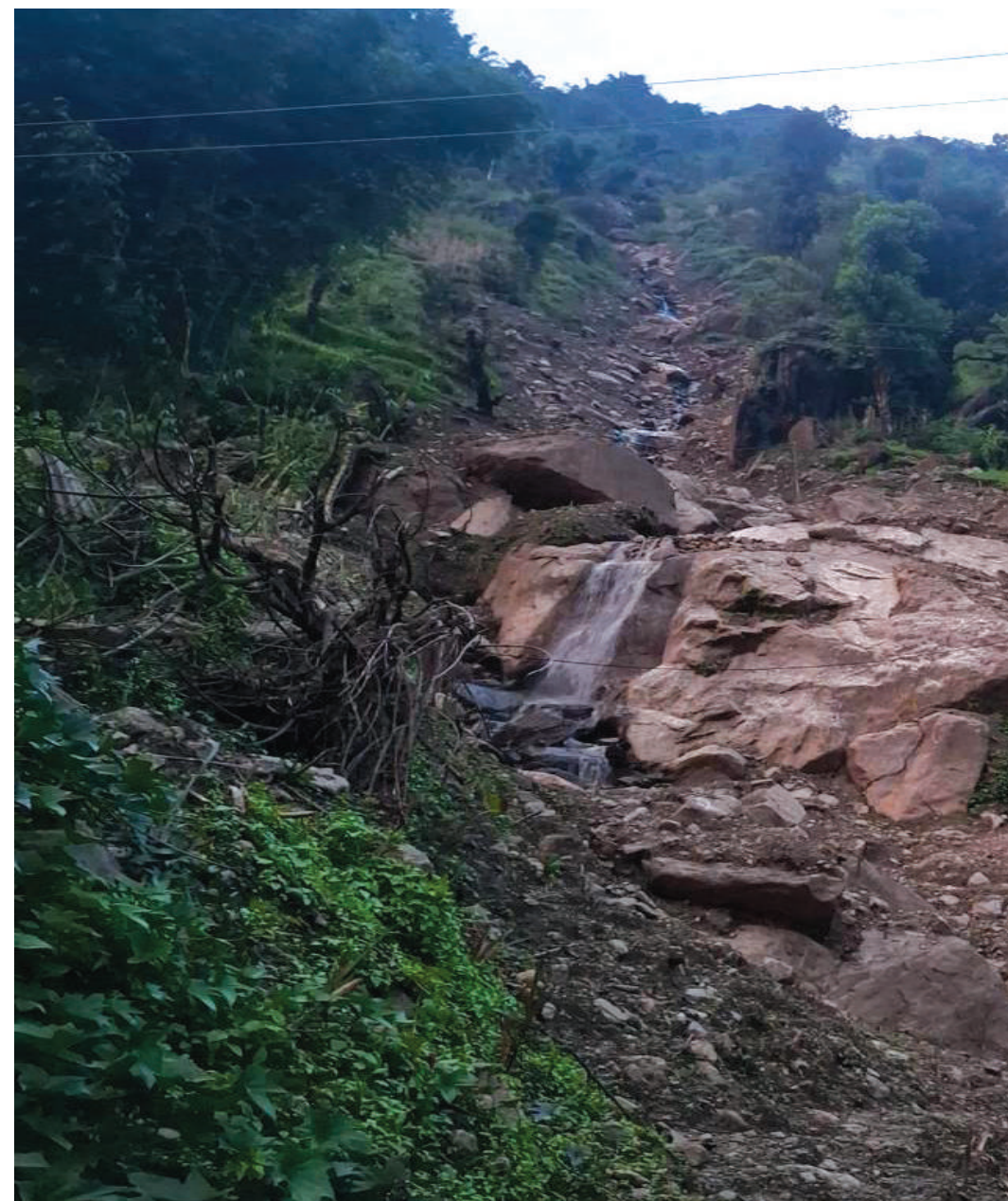


Table 4: Displacements induced by some major climate disaster events

Year	Major events	Individuals displaced
2014	Sindhupalchowk landslide	~ 40,000
2017	Terai monsoon floods (35 districts affected in the Terai belt)	~ 383,000
2019	Monsoon floods and heavy rainfall across the country	~ 121,000
2020	Recurrent monsoon floods across the country	~ 48,000
2022	Monsoon floods and landslides, with Koshi, Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces most affected	~ 89,000

Source: IDMC and ADB, 2022

Initial displacement following a disaster is often temporary, as people seek short-term shelter and employment. However, when risks persist or livelihoods are destroyed, these temporary movements frequently become permanent. In Nepal, floods and landslides are the most frequent drivers of climate-induced migration. Data from the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA) shows that middle and high mountain districts had the most frequent cases of climate disaster events (see Map 24). Between 2011 and 2024, there were over 9,000 disaster incidents. In the mid-hill regions, frequent landslides in districts like Sankhuwasabha, Sindhupalchowk, Gorkha and Kaski push households to move downhill to the Terai plains or urban centres as they view these areas as viable long-term destinations for better access to jobs, infrastructure, and services. However, in the flood-prone Terai regions bordering India, cross-border migration is also significant. Table 4 highlights some major disaster incidents over the past decade that contributed to the largest number of displaced individuals.



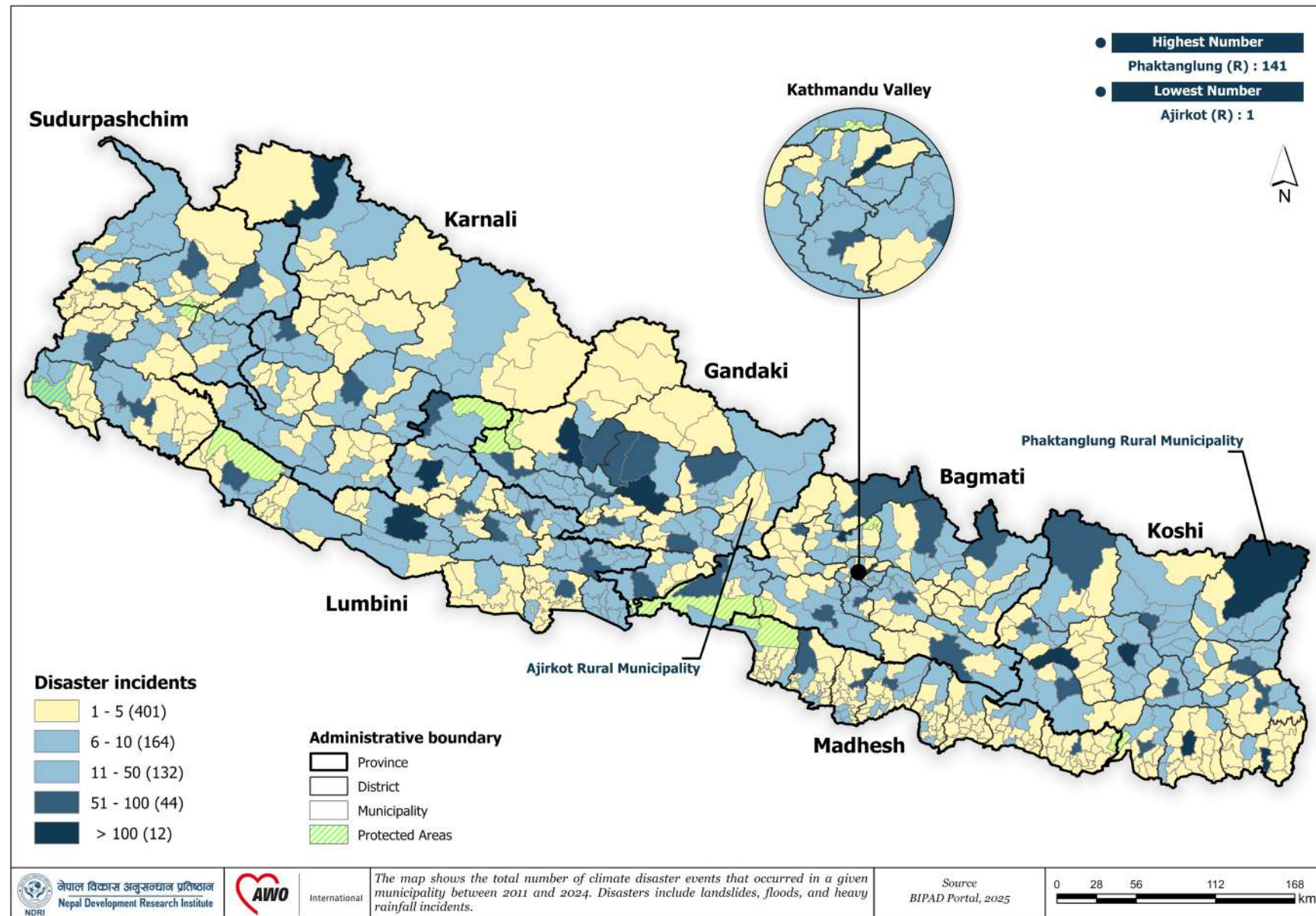


A man inspects a landslide near his home in Phungling, Taplejung district.

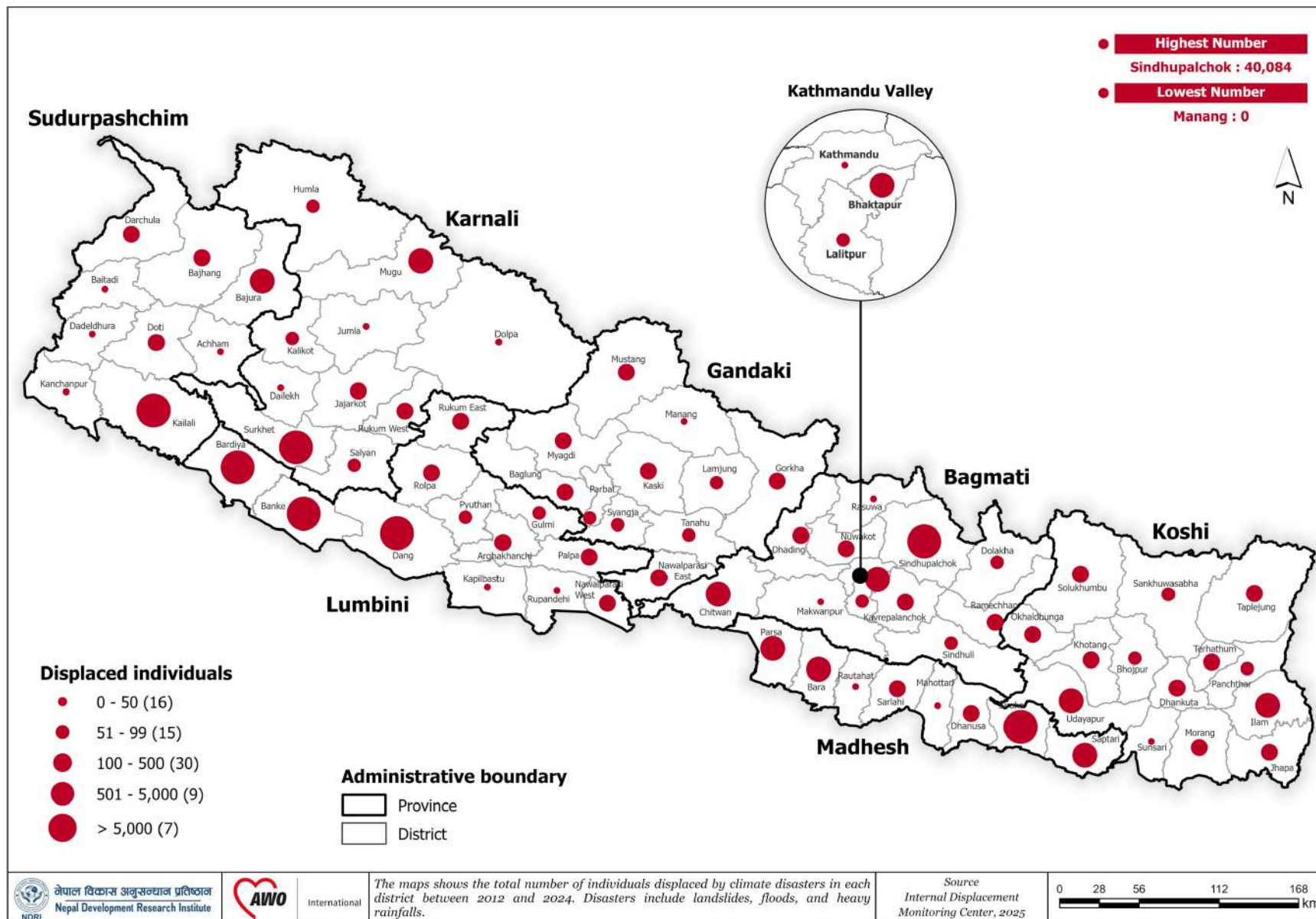
Data from IDMC shows that over 800,000 individuals were displaced by climate disasters between 2012 – 2024. Several Terai and mid-western districts experienced the highest displacement figures in recent years (e.g., Kailali (15,191), Dang (7,671), Banke (6,797), Bardiya (6,344), Siraha (5,815) and Surkhet (5,741) ranked among the top 10 districts in terms of disaster-induced displacement) (see Map 25).

Climate-induced migration in Nepal does not affect everyone equally. Their impacts are deeply gendered because women, girls and other marginalised gender groups often face unequal access to resources, decision-making and safe mobility. For example, in flood-prone districts like Siraha, repeated flooding contributes to broader patterns of male out-migration. While not all migration from such areas is directly driven by disasters, environmental stressors often act as push factors alongside economic and social motivations. One community reported that around 500 male members from 1,300 households had migrated to the Gulf countries, Malaysia, India, or nearby cities such as Kathmandu and Biratnagar for seasonal or permanent work. Moreover, women face greater barriers to migrating due to limited access to financial resources, restrictive gender norms and the burden of unpaid domestic and care work. A 2024 review by the International Organization for Migration further underscores that current migration and disaster risk reduction policies rarely address these gender-specific vulnerabilities. Without gender-responsive strategies, climate-induced migration risks reinforce existing inequalities and expose women and girls to further harm. Therefore, recognising how migration patterns, whether directly or indirectly linked to climate stressors, intersect with gender is essential for designing inclusive and effective migration planning.

Map 24: Municipality-level climate disaster hotspots between 2011 – 2024



Map 25: District-level number of individuals displaced by climate disasters between 2012 – 2024





11.2 Pull factors

Rural-urban migration in search of better opportunities

In Nepal, rural–urban migration, which accounts for 51.3% of total migration, can be partly explained through the lenses of the Harris–Todaro and Lewis dual-sector models. The Lewis model, which views development as a process of transferring surplus labour from the low-productivity traditional sector (agriculture) to the high-productivity modern sector (industry and services), helps explain the steady shift from the middle mountains and Terai rural areas, where rural–urban migration rates reach 48.6% and 55.5% respectively, toward urban hubs in Bagmati province, particularly Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur. These cities embody the “modern sector” that draws labour with perceived higher wages and income potential. The Harris–Todaro model, which emphasises that migration decisions are based on expected rather than actual wages (factoring in the probability of securing a job), accounts for why people continue moving to cities despite high unemployment or informal job

prevalence. This is captured by Map 26, which depicts a pattern of a high share of in-migrants relative to the native-born population in urban (sub)-metropolitan cities across the Terai region and within Kathmandu Valley. Additionally, urban clusters are home to better educational institutions, seen as investments that can yield higher long-term returns for younger generations. The age pattern, peaking at 20–29 years, reflects the demographic most responsive to these expected wage and education gaps. Still, high in- and out-migration in districts like Manang and Mustang shows that while urban centres pull labour, local seasonal opportunities and tourism also shape migration flows, suggesting a more nuanced reality than either model alone predicts.

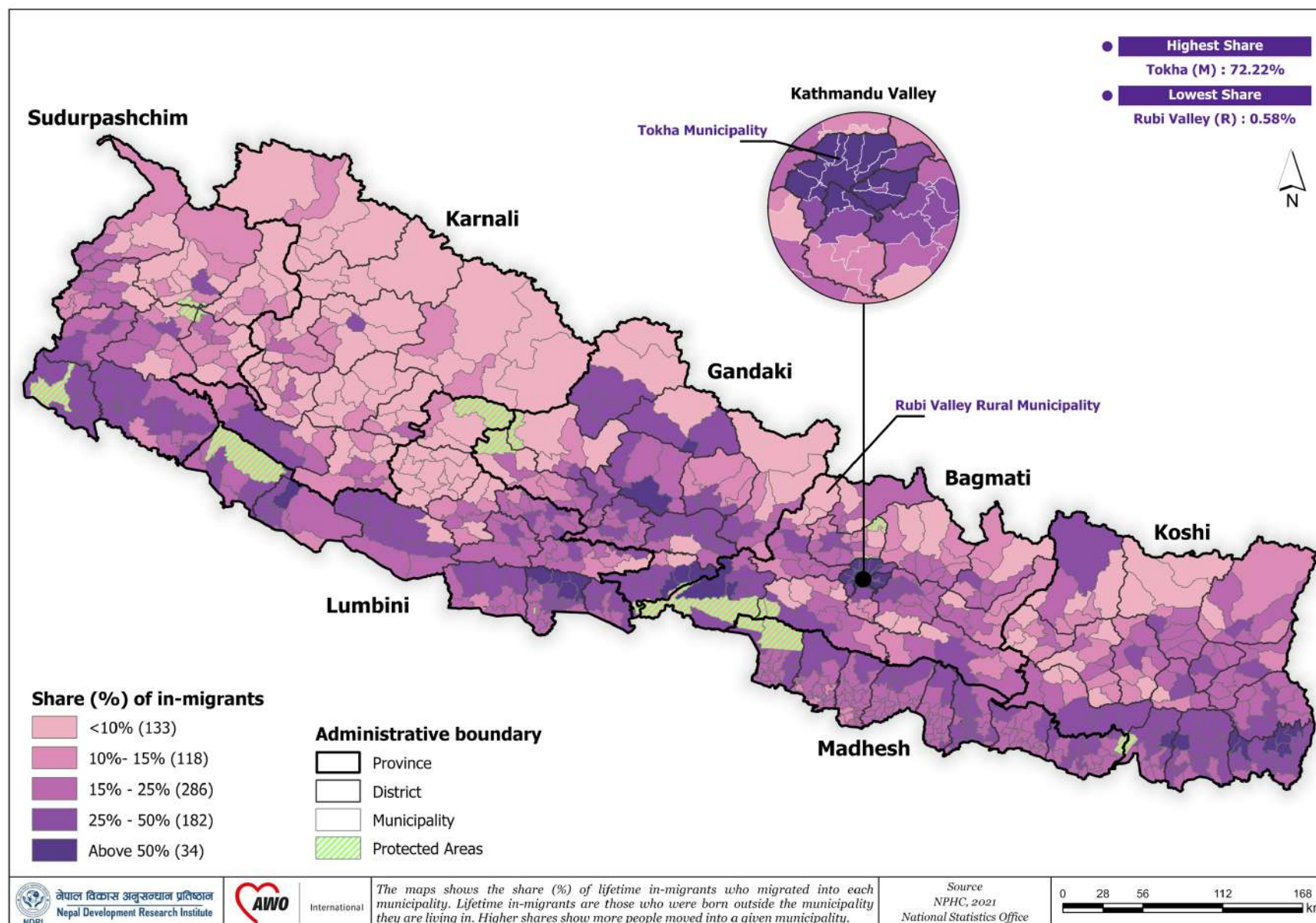
Table 5 depicts the 10 top district to district lifetime work migration corridors outside of Kathmandu Valley. Proximity seems to be a big part of movement decisions, considering that the top 5 most popular corridors are neighbouring districts.

Table 5: Top 10 district-to-district lifetime work migration corridors outside Kathmandu Valley

Rank	Source - Destination district corridor	Number of individuals
1	Palpa to Rupandehi	1,209
2	Gulmi to Rupandehi	1,207
3	Syangja to Kaski	986
4	Morang to Sunsari	962
5	Bhojpur to Sunsari	848
6	Rukum West to Kanchanpur	827
7	Doti to Kailali	798
8	Dhankuta to Sunsari	757
9	Gorkha to Chitawan	736
10	Dailekh to Surkhet	731

Source: NPHC, National Statistics Office 2021

Map 26: Municipality-level share (%) of lifetime in-migrants



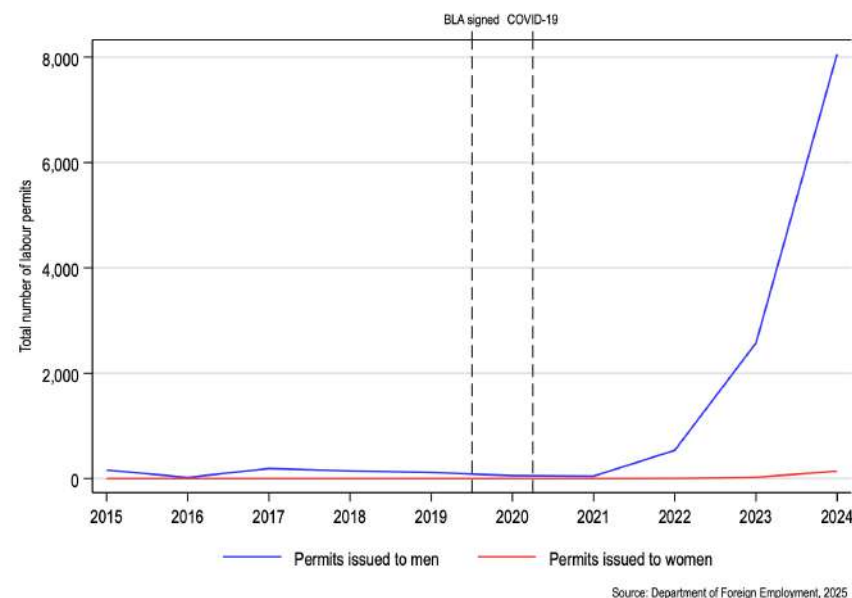
Social networks

Existing migrant networks in destination countries are another strong pull factor that lowers the costs of migration and raises expected returns. Social networks provide information about jobs, wages, housing and migration procedures, reducing search and information costs for prospective migrants and making migration more attractive and feasible, encouraging further flows from the same sending communities. Empirical evidence from Mexico suggests that each additional migrant raises the probability that others from the same origin will migrate, producing path dependence and growth of migration enclaves in specific destinations. While strong empirical evidence among Nepali migrants is lacking, data from the 2021 census suggests that migration decisions among households are tied closely to existing members abroad. Of the 45% of households with more than one absentees abroad, over three-fourths have members working in the same destination country. The same level of inference in the ward level cannot be made with the publically available census data. A study of migrants to India finds that social capital often compensates for migrants' lack of human and financial capital in securing decent returns.

Bilateral labour agreements

Bilateral labour agreements (BLAs) have emerged as a significant pull factor driving international labour migration from Nepal, particularly to destination countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council and other high-demand labour markets. Nepal has signed 12 BLAs with key destination countries – Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, Bahrain, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Israel, the United Kingdom, Romania and Germany (see Map 27). These agreements formalise recruitment processes, set minimum employment standards, and offer legal safeguards for migrant workers, thereby reducing the risks associated with migration and increasing

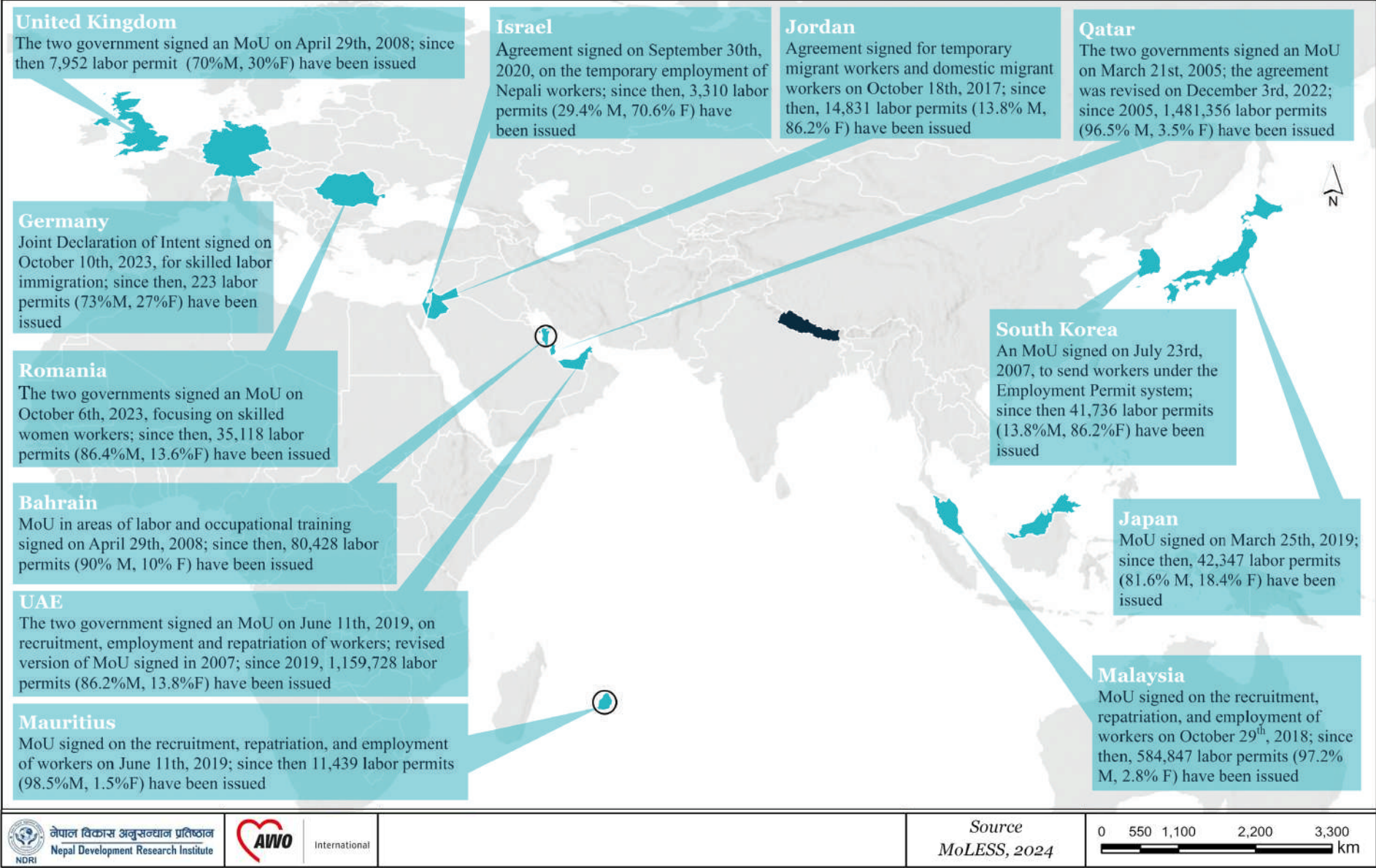
Figure 12: Labour permits issued for Mauritius



its appeal. For many Nepali workers, especially from rural areas with limited employment opportunities, the presence of a BLA signals a reliable pathway to overseas jobs, higher earnings, and long-term financial stability, further strengthening the economic pull towards migration. A 2024 World Bank report suggests that there is strong evidence that BLAs increase migration flows between any two countries by about 76% within the decade of signing, with effects lasting up to three decades.

The case of Mauritius (Figure 12) illustrates this impact. Following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on June 11, 2019, with the government of Mauritius regarding the recruitment, repatriation and employment of workers, a total of 11,439 labour permits were issued (98.5% to men and 1.5% to women), transforming Mauritius from complete obscurity to a viable migration destination in a country of just over 1.2 million people.

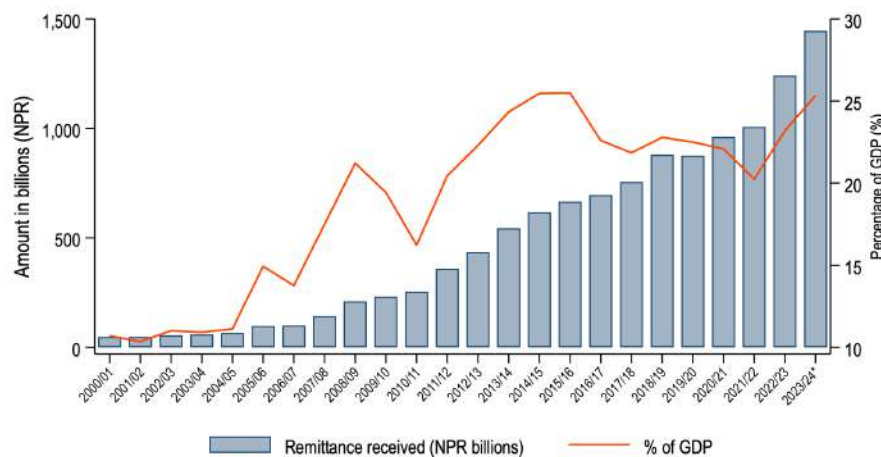
Map 27: A look at Nepal's bilateral labour agreements



13 REMITTANCE

Remittance from migrants has become a backbone of the country's economy, amounting to over 25% of the national GDP in the latest fiscal year. The annual trend in incoming remittances has dramatically increased over the years, as seen in Figure 13. The latest absolute volume of remittance was NPR 144 billion in the 2023/2024 fiscal year. These flows have played a pivotal role in uplifting the living standards and resilience of the origin communities. Various World Bank studies reveal that remittances directly contributed to poverty reduction in Nepal. Remittance is attributable to a 20% reduction in poverty between 1995 and 2004, and over 30% between 2011 and 2023. However, the current state of food security and nutrition, which is dependent on remittances from the outmigration of the working force, is not sustainable and is making the country highly vulnerable to external shocks.

Figure 13: Trend of remittance received



Note: * Projected figures
Source: Nepal Rastra Bank, 2025

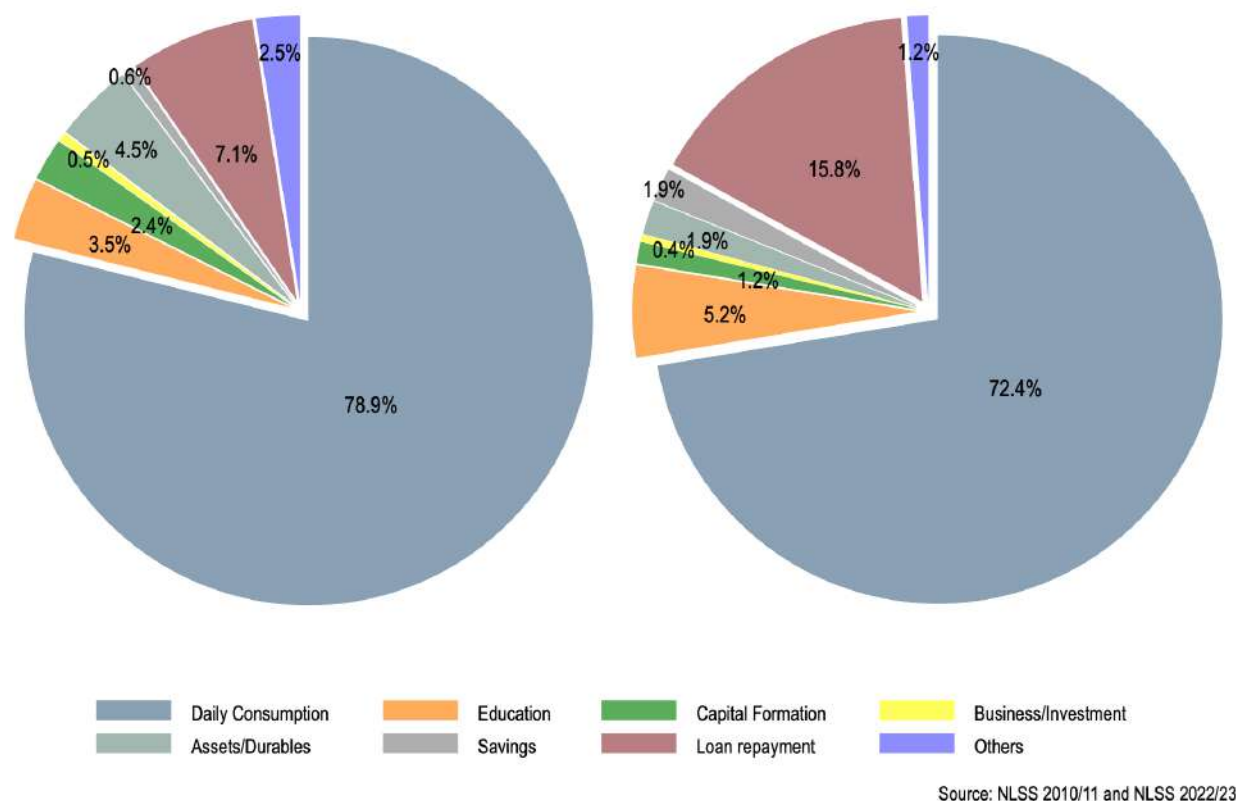
Table 6: Top 10 remittance-sending labour destinations in 2021

Country	Annual remittance (USD million)	Migrant stock	Average annual remittance per migrant (USD)
Saudi Arabia	1,692.0	5,03,404	3,361.1
Malaysia	1,684.7	5,85,864	2,875.6
India	1,583.4	7,33,734	2,158.0
Qatar	1,098.6	2,53,940	4,326.2
United States	684.2	1,76,462	3,877.2
Australia	466.6	1,31,830	3,539.2
United Kingdom	224.5	66,000	3,402.1
Korea, Rep.	136.8	40,748	3,356.0
UAE	105.8	27,886	3,794.7
Kuwait	89.2	24,607	3,624.8

Source: KNOMAD/World Bank Bilateral Remittance Matrix 2021

Exact up-to-date data on which country's migrants send how much remittance to Nepal is hard to come up. A global initiative by the World Bank collected the annual remittance flow for the year 2021 for every migration corridor globally. Migrants in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia were the largest absolute contributors to Nepal, owing to their large migrant stock. When it comes to average annual remittance per migrant, Qatar, the USA and the UAE ranked in the top three. The figures in Table 6 show that the per-person remittance contribution is significantly higher than the per capita GDP of the country, highlighting the disparities in the returns of domestic and foreign economic opportunities. It seems that the promise of higher returns outweighs the various hardships associated with working abroad in the difficult and dangerous conditions.

Figure 14: Use of remittances: 2011/12 (left) vs 2022/23 (right)



According to the past two NLSS waves, conducted over 10 years apart, most of the remittances have been used mainly for daily consumption, indicating that the improvement in food consumption is closely associated with the remittances (see Figure 14). Households' investment in the education of children and food has also improved. General savings have

also improved. Nevertheless, remittances have not been invested in creating employment and income generation within the country but rather have been used to repay personal loans associated with the costs of migrating. Remittances haven't been integrated into internal economic growth engines like agriculture and industries. Migrant workers'

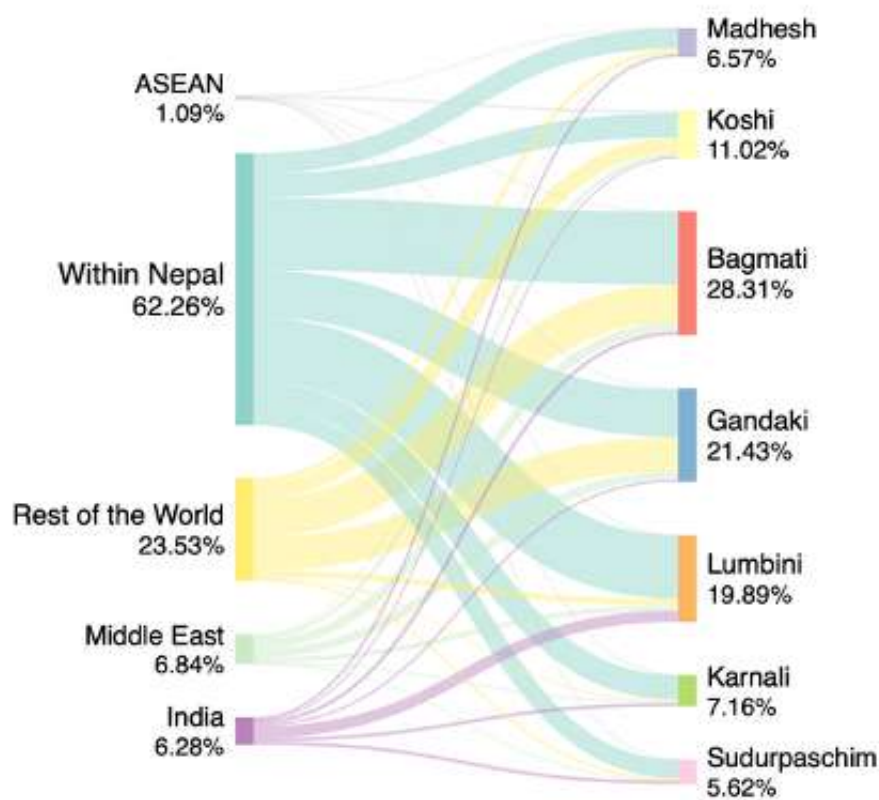
households' exposure to the globalised world and their reliance on remittances have led to an increase in their preference for foreign products and commodities. This consumerism-driven reshaping of the economy has resulted in the ballooning of imports. This present state of the economy, which is generally termed as *Dutch disease*, is not sustainable, especially when there is a decline in remittance inflow, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data from the latest NLSS shows that the largest share (63%) of remittance transfers originates from within the country. Similarly, 75% of the incoming foreign remittance is transferred through formal financial institutions, up significantly from the 19% of 10 years ago. Informal and risky channels, such as *Hundi*⁵, make up just under 2% as a means of remittance transfer. However, remittance is usually self-transferred in the case of internal migration (45%). The proliferation of operational branches of various banking and financial institutions across the country has contributed significantly to the formalisation of remittance

⁵The *hawala/hundi* system operates with a broker delivering cash money at the request of another broker servicing a client in a different country. The brokers earn by levying a transaction cost to the client

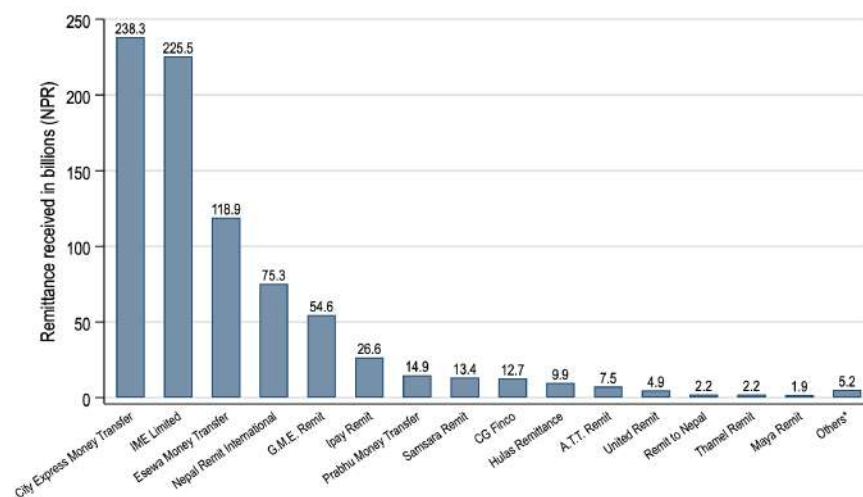
channels (see Map 28). Nonetheless, formal remittance channels are the least utilised by seasonal work migrants to India, who largely originate from Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces. The country's central bank, Nepal Rastra Bank, recognises 20 commercial banks, 17 development banks, and 24 remittance companies that are primarily responsible for facilitating remittance transfers. In the 2023/2024 fiscal year, 43.2% of the NPR144 billion remittance came in through BFIs, while 56.8% came in through remittance companies. Figure 16 charts the share of remittance each of the institutions was responsible for.

Figure 15: Share (%) of reported remittance by source and destination

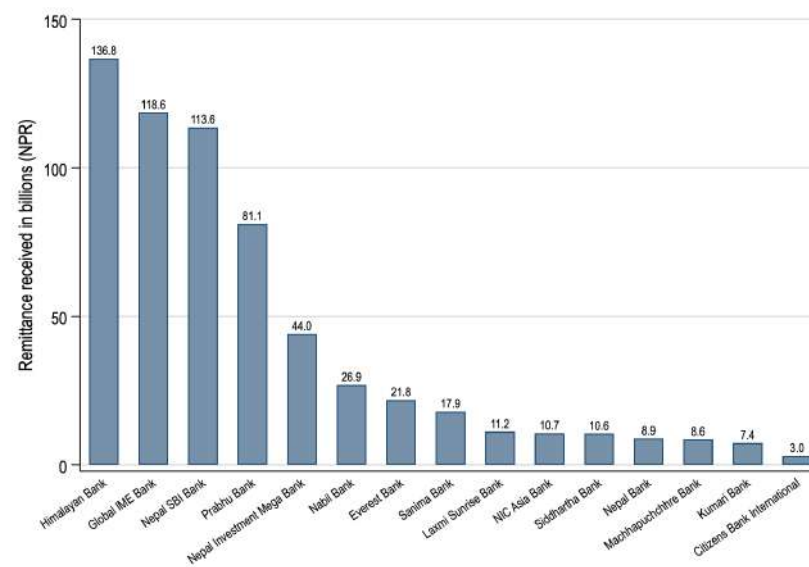


Source: NLSS, 2022/23

Figure 16: Remittance channels: Remittance companies (top panel) and BFIs (bottom panel)

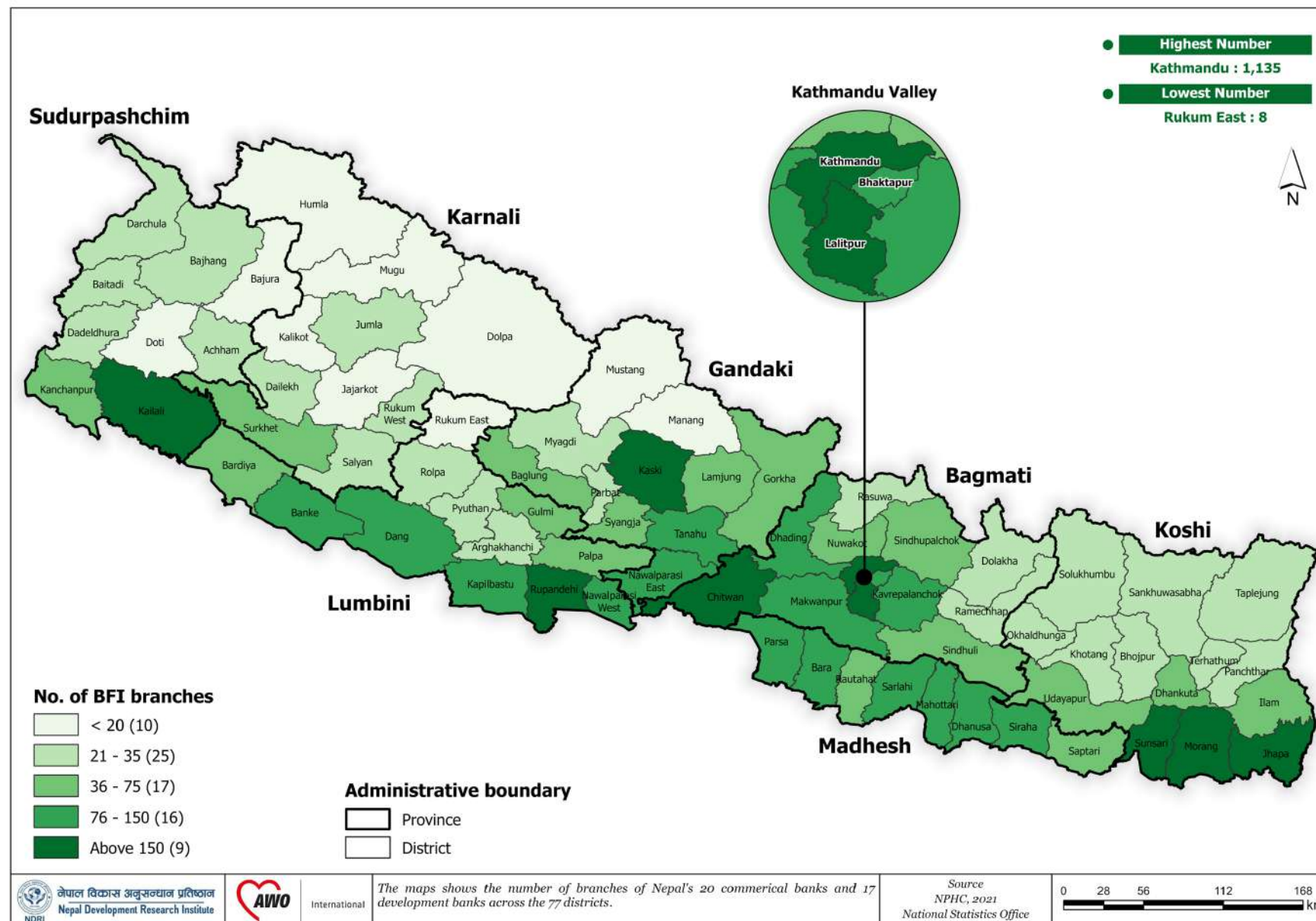


*: Includes 7 other remittance companies
Source: FOREX Department, Nepal Rastra Bank, 2025



Source: FOREX Department, Nepal Rastra Bank, 2025

Map 28: District-level coverage of operational branches of banks and financial institutions



14 CONSEQUENCES OF MIGRATION

Migration has profoundly impacted Nepal, shaping its economy, society and demographic landscape. The steady influx of remittances has played a crucial role in reducing poverty, enhancing household consumption and supporting investments in education, healthcare and housing. However, this economic reliance has also brought forth vulnerabilities. The growing dependency on external labour markets, rising costs in non-productive sectors like land and housing and a shrinking workforce for domestic agriculture and industry are among the challenges. Socially, migration has altered family dynamics. While remittances have improved opportunities, prolonged absences often leave women and children with increased responsibilities, leading to psychosocial stress. Demographically, out-migration has resulted in population decline in several rural districts, particularly in the Hills and Mountains, while accelerating urbanisation in the Terai and major cities. The absence of men in prime working and reproductive ages has further contributed to falling fertility rates and shifts in household structures. These interconnected economic, social and demographic impacts underscore both the opportunities and challenges that migration presents to Nepal's development trajectory.



Women enjoy their time in the sun in Rukum West.

Impact on food security

There are reports of significant areas of agricultural land uncultivated or abandoned, particularly in the hilly areas, either due to the lack of working people or because the households decided not to cultivate as they now have the ability to purchase food from the market with the income received from the remittances. Further to this, with the increasing forest cover, there are increasing cases of animals, particularly monkeys, causing damage to the agriculture in the hilly districts, which is also causing people to abandon farming and/or out-migrate. This is causing increased dependence on imports even for basic food needs, while the agricultural land inside the country is underutilised. This has become a challenge for the country's plans for food self-sufficiency through domestic production, which is important for a country like Nepal.

Women migrant workers and gender-based violence (GBV)

Nepali women migrant workers face gender-based violence (GBV) throughout their migration cycle, from spousal abuse before and after departure to exploitation, harassment and fraud by recruitment agencies. Factors like gender, age, caste, religion, migration status and structural inequalities heighten women's vulnerability. According to a report published by UN Women on the vulnerabilities of women migrant workers, over 30% reported spousal violence, with underprivileged groups facing even higher rates. Among returnee domestic workers, 41% reported workplace abuse, and 31% endured torture overseas. Fraud cases at Migrant Resource Centres indicate that recruitment agencies and contract substitution were the most common issues, affecting 23% of female and 36% of male migrant workers. Restrictive migration policies force women to rely on irregular channels, increasing their risk of trafficking, sexual exploitation, and forced labour. GBV is both a cause and consequence of migration, with higher risks for women from marginalised groups and those employed in unregulated domestic work.

Migrant welfare

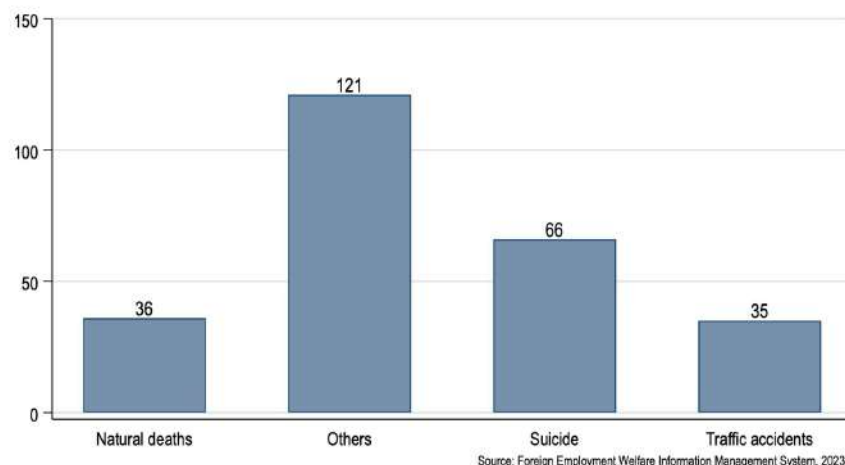
Nepali women migrant workers face significant risks to their health and safety, leading to various causes of death during their migration journey. According to the Foreign Employment Welfare Information Management System (FEWIMS), between 2008/2009 and 2021/2022, a total of 258 women died while working abroad. The leading causes



Migrants Information Centre at Mahendranagar buspark, Kanchanpur district

of death among these women are suicide, natural causes and traffic accidents, with about 26% of deaths due to suicide and approximately 14% due to natural causes or traffic accidents (see Figure 17). Many of these women experience mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety, with isolation, abuse and exploitation further

Figure 17: Deaths of women migrant workers by cause of death between 2008/09 and 2021/22



increasing the risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts. Women migrant workers in Gulf countries are particularly vulnerable to natural deaths due to harsh working and living conditions. Factors such as overwork, heat stress, inadequate rest and nutrition, mental health challenges, chronic illnesses and unsanitary or overcrowded accommodations significantly heighten their risk.

Family disruption

Migration has also caused significant family disturbances with gendered impacts. Prolonged separation often strains marital relationships, increases mistrust, and contributes to rising divorce rates, with the Foreign Employment Board (2019) reporting that nearly 11% of migrant households experienced family conflict or breakdown due to migration. Women left behind face increased responsibilities, including managing households, farming, and childcare, which can heighten stress and

vulnerability. Some may engage in extramarital relationships or elope, while others endure social stigma and community scrutiny, with women-headed households being particularly affected due to limited social support and economic dependency. Returning men also encounter challenges, including disputes over financial management or decision-making shifts that occurred during their absence, as well as difficulties adjusting to changing gender roles.



Family members see off their loved ones at Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu.

Migration provides women with greater autonomy, decision-making power and social engagement, especially when remittances enable them to assume primary farming roles and gain access to bank accounts. Despite these gains, household decision-making remains gendered, with women often limited in major financial and household choices, sometimes needing to consult husbands abroad. Children of migrant fathers experience mixed effects - while remittances can improve education, diet and health outcomes, paternal absence may lead to behavioural challenges and exposure to intimidation or neglect.

Return and reintegration of migrant returnees

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale return migration created significant reintegration challenges in Nepal, with women disproportionately affected. Various ILO and World Bank studies indicate that 82% of women returnees were unemployed compared to 55% of men, reflecting substantial gender gaps in labour market absorption. Women's overseas experience, primarily in domestic and informal sectors, are largely undervalued, forcing many into subsistence farming, unpaid household roles, or small-scale self-employment, often supported by remittances. While migration can enhance women's confidence, decision-making power and contributed to gradual shifts in gender norms, these social gains rarely translate into formal employment or sustainable livelihoods. According to the ILO and UN Women, structural discrimination, lack of credit, training, and support networks further constrain women's reintegration, underscoring the urgent need for targeted policies and reintegration infrastructure. Women migrant workers returning to Nepal face disproportionately severe social and economic reintegration challenges compared to men. A study finds that nearly 60% of female returnees remain unemployed six months after their return. Beyond economic hurdles, many women confront entrenched social stigma,

restricted mobility and inadequate family support, collectively hindering their path to independence and successful reintegration. Mental health concerns are especially acute. There is also evidence that 72.8% of returnee women migrants suffer from high levels of depression, with domestic violence and exploitative working conditions abroad cited as major contributing factors. These findings highlight the urgent need for gender-responsive reintegration policies that include psychosocial counselling, vocational training and access to financial resources, enabling women to reclaim their dignity and rebuild their lives upon returning home.



As men migrate for work, only women and children are left behind across many rural villages.

15 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The *Atlas* highlights the various facets of Nepal's migration patterns. Migration decisions and their implications are deeply interconnected with several different topics, including but not limited to food security, agricultural outcomes and land utilisation, monetary and non-monetary gains, household and family dynamics, social perceptions, conflict, gender welfare, migrant rights, health and education outcomes, skill development, climate change and disaster events and community and societal traditions. There must be effective implementation of existing policies and acts through strong inter-governmental collaboration across the three tiers of governments to achieve stronger and inclusive labour migration governance. To that end, the following considerations are imperative:

- **Different migrants, different needs:** Migrants have diverse needs, from distress migration for survival and basic well-being to income generation and human capital enhancement, requiring differentiated policy responses for both internal and international migrant flows.
- **Destination matters:** Migration destinations vary in opportunities and risks, so policies must be tailored to the specific characteristics of destination countries.
- **Invest in skills development:** Expanding access to skills training that meets domestic and international labour market demands is crucial for improving migrant outcomes and increasing remittance potential,

especially for migrants from less educated regions who often end up in low-income and high-risk jobs.

- **Acknowledge internal migration:** Recognise the role of internal migration in sustaining cities and reshaping rural livelihoods and address related food security challenges.
- **Strengthen and promote bilateral labour agreements:** Securing new bilateral labour agreements that ensure safe recruitment practices and protect the rights and welfare of migrant workers with popular destination countries is paramount. At the same time, strong labour diplomacy is needed to protect Nepali migrant workers.
- **Vulnerabilities of women migrants:** Gender-responsive policies are needed to address women's unique vulnerabilities, including GBV, domestic work risks, stigma and reintegration challenges. Non-discriminatory policies and provisions without any restrictions or preconditions for women and domestic migrant workers for destinations such as the GCC and Malaysia are also important.
- **Reintegration:** Returnees need structured support such as psychosocial counselling, vocational training, financial access and recognition of their contributions.
- **Migration data and monitoring:** A dynamic and publicly available migration data dashboard is crucial for timely policy responses

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About NDRI

Nepal Development Research Institute (NDRI) is an independent, non-profit research organisation established in 2004 to generate quality research that informs evidence-based policy and programming in Nepal. With an interdisciplinary team of nationally and internationally experienced experts, NDRI serves as a bridge between policymakers, academia, development partners and society at large. It works on four thematic areas: Livelihood and Food Security, Water and Climate, Health, Education and Environment and Economic Development, and two cross-cutting priorities of Disaster Management and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion. Over the past two decades, NDRI has evolved into one of Nepal's leading think tanks, fostering collaboration, dialogue and knowledge sharing to address the country's pressing and emerging challenges. Guided by its core values of supporting decision-making, delivering the best knowledge and promoting positive change, NDRI remains committed to advancing evidence-driven development.

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AWO International is the professional association for development cooperation and humanitarian action of the German Workers' Welfare Association (Arbeiterwohlfahrt – AWO). Established in 1998, AWO International works globally to improve the living conditions of marginalised communities through sustainable development cooperation and humanitarian action as part of its vision to strengthen local social structures and civil society. Its programmes focus on safe migration and protection, food security and livelihoods, disaster risk reduction, health and nutrition and youth empowerment, implemented in partnership with national and local organisations. Officially active in Nepal since 2009, AWO International supports safe and fair migration, strengthened livelihoods and enhanced disaster preparedness, with a strong emphasis on empowering women, protecting migrants and promoting inclusive development. Through its evidence-based and participatory approach, AWO International contributes to a more just and resilient society.



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