

**Pandemic (Im)mobility:
COVID-19 and Migrant Communities
in the Global South**

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic migrant communities have become immobile—stuck in the destination countries, or unable to continue their journeys in transit or in origin countries. This project brings together a collection of essays that seek to spell out how migrant communities in the Global South, namely in Mexico, Nepal, Qatar and Zimbabwe, have been affected by, and reacted to the pandemic. Inspired by a mobility justice approach, we speak to the (changing) power relations inherent to mobility, as well as the intersectional nature of migration with inequalities mapped along a global geography of race and class, amongst others. We do this by acknowledging that long before COVID-19, migration and mobility were intrinsically embedded into a hierarchical globalized regime of asymmetric power, that largely determines who can move and under what conditions. The essays aim to not only re-centre the Global South, but also to view these cases as relational to each other and to the state of global affairs.

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Life before the COVID-19 pandemic seems increasingly like a distant memory. The pandemic has gripped the world and has affected the way we live and work in many ways. More than anything it has affected our mobility, since in the words of an epidemiologist “it is not the virus that moves, but people” (Heller 2021). When lockdown measures were first applied across the world, the relationship between mobility and privilege paradoxically shifted. The ability to be immobile suddenly became a reflection of privilege. While higher income individuals could afford to stay home and enjoy private infrastructure, many lower income workers had to continue working in the same pre-pandemic conditions or worse. Still, when international travel came to a halt after the virus first hit Europe in March 2020, some observers hoped that the enforced immobility for privileged Westernized travellers, who had never had to experience something like this, might bring a renewed call for mobility justice, i.e. the removal of barriers to free movement *for all* (Adamson and Fröhlich 2020). Thus, questions regarding how and in what ways we move have become even more prominent.

A year since the pandemic halted most international travel, a plethora of policy papers, articles and webinars has addressed what the pandemic (may) mean in particular for refugees and other migrants. Overall, the news is not good: safety nets for international students have diminished (Firang 2020); migrant workers are working in dangerous conditions in healthcare and agricultural sectors (Boatcă 2020). Many others have lost their jobs, at worst being abandoned on the streets like many Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon, for example (Azhari 2020; see also Lumayag, Rosario and Sutton 2020). Vital remittances have for the most part fallen all over the world (Mughogho 2020). Social distancing and access to water is a distant dream for the 1% of the world’s population who are currently displaced, living in places such as Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh, Kara Tepe in Greece, Kakuma in Kenya or Matamoros in Mexico (Collard 2020). Governments from South Africa to Malaysia have used the virus as an excuse to strengthen pre-existing harsh measures against those seeking refuge, including through severe border policies and pushback (Zanker and Moyo 2020; Reidy 2020). Migrant communities have become immobile – stuck in destination countries with expired permits or in origin countries unable to move under ongoing restrictions. Refugees and asylum seekers have seen entry into places of refuge shut off: in April 2020, asylum applications in the European Union

dropped by 87% compared to pre-COVID levels, and there have been increasing human rights violations at many borders (Meer et al. 2021).

In this collection of essays, we seek to spell out how migrant communities¹ in the Global South, namely in Mexico, Nepal, Qatar and Zimbabwe, have been affected by and have reacted to the pandemic. We do this by acknowledging that long before COVID-19, migration and mobility were intrinsically embedded within a hierarchical globalised regime of asymmetric power that largely determines who can move and under what conditions (see Kotef 2015). This inequality is mapped along a global geography of race and class in defining access to mobility (Heller 2021). The pandemic has proven to only reinforce pre-existing inequalities. A recent study shows that migrants have a two-to-three-times higher risk of getting COVID-19 (OECD 2020). In June 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres released a policy brief where he noted the coronavirus pandemic's "disproportionate impact" on asylum seekers and migrants, but remarked that it also presented the international community with an opportunity to "reimagine human mobility for the benefit of all" (United Nations 2020). What would such re-imagined mobility look like?

We are inspired by the ideas of mobility justice as a normative ideal for a future re-imagination, and for the time being as a starting point to document how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected migrant communities in and from Mexico, Nepal, Qatar and Zimbabwe. Mobility justice, as spelled out by Mimi Sheller, makes a case for the politics and power relations of mobility and immobility as connected, relational and "never free but [...] in various ways channelled, tracked, controlled, governed under surveillance and unequal – striated by gender, race, ethnicity, class, case, colour, nationality, age, sexuality, disability" (Sheller 2018, 10). For us this speaks to the power relations inherent in mobility, as well as the intersectional nature of migration, with unequal systems not unusual for migrants from the Global South,

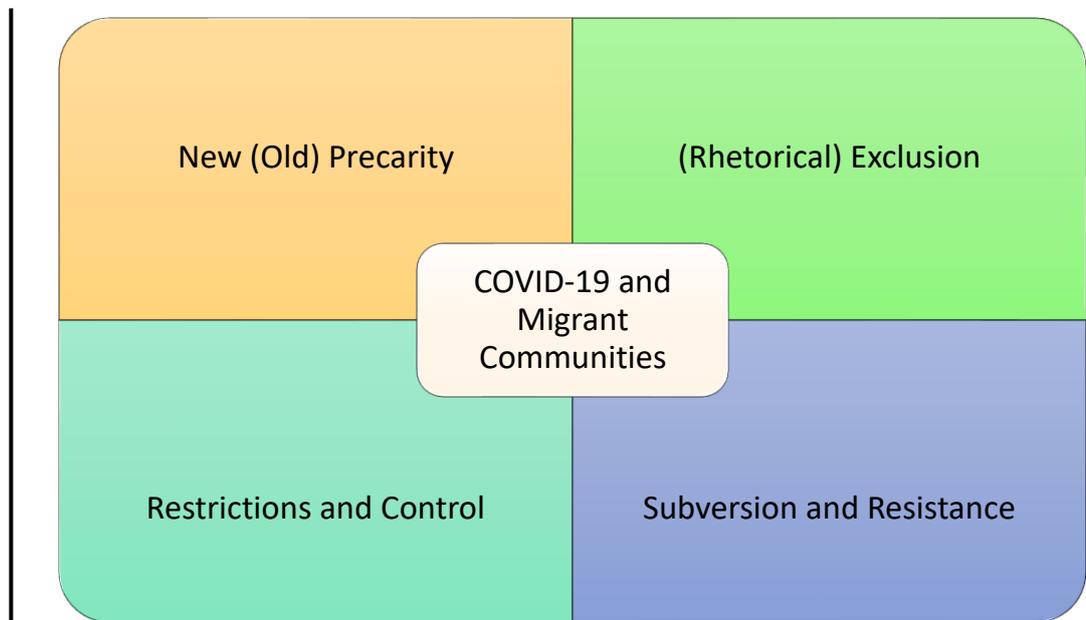
¹ We use the term migrant communities to include persons on the move, otherwise described as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, as well as their families. We argue firstly, that migrants are never acting as individuals but always act in larger social networks and that their decisions, repercussions and responses to new environments are always, at least in part, collective. Secondly, we propose that a strict differentiation between migrants and refugees is not always possible and often reiterates a particular political position of governing regimes (as does their conflation; see Mourad and Norman 2019).

further exacerbated by gender, class and race (see also Isaac and Elrick 2021; Heller 2021). Thus, we want to put the stories of “oppressed” and “disenfranchised” front and centre (Sheller 2018), showing how during the pandemic their mobility and rights have been further restricted, what consequences this has and how migrant communities have reacted.

Noting this and in discussions with our co-researchers (see below), we show four concepts that help us to understand migrant (im)mobility during the pandemic – see Figure 1.

Figure 1.

How COVID-19 has affected and been dealt with by migrant communities.



Firstly, we examine the effect on livelihoods due to pandemic-related restrictions on mobility, which we term new (old) precarity. Second, we turn to how the pandemic has been used as an opportunity for exclusion often through discursive othering, whereby migrant communities have been excluded from pandemic responses in different ways. Thirdly, we look at how governments have turned to restrictions and control (and sometimes, protection) that affect migrant communities from a meso level. In order to consider how migrant communities deal with this, from a micro level, we look at the experiences of migrant communities in the face of the pandemic, including how they have subverted and resisted acts of control.

Before we turn to explaining these four avenues in more details, we would like to reflect a little bit on the conception behind this essay series.

And the Global South?

In a recent piece from Ndlovu-Gatsheni, he notes the importance of considering the geopolitics of knowledge. Africa in particular, he argues, but also the Global South more generally, has the most experience of dealing with epidemics and pandemics (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). Yet this knowledge is overlooked and ignored, though many countries in the Global North are doing particularly badly in their pandemic responses. In fact, as Rutazibwa noted at the beginning of the first wave that hit Europe, “the Corona pandemic blows the lid off the idea of Western superiority” (Rutazibwa 2020). If we want to take this critique and its call to reorder knowledge production seriously, and we do, who are we – based in our Global North institution – to write and reflect on these issues?

We have been lucky enough to find four esteemed collaborators – Zahra Babar, Anita Ghimire, Luisa Gabriela Morales Vega and Joyce Takaindisa – who were willing to provide us with their time and thoughts on how migrants from/in Qatar, Nepal, Mexico, and Zimbabwe have been affected by and have dealt with the pandemic.² We hope this will allow us to bring the Global South to the forefront in authorship and knowledge. By working trans-regionally across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, West Asia and Latin America we seek to add new insights and nuance to the global answer-searching process currently underway in response to the still ongoing pandemic. The idea is not just to re-centre the South – though this has also been missing in most global reporting – but to see the essays from Mexico, Nepal, Qatar and Zimbabwe as *relational* to each other *and* to the state of global affairs (see also Mbembe 2016).

This introductory essay will introduce the analytical framework and reflect on some of the findings from the four case studies. Some of the authors in the essays to follow

² This project received funding from the Ministry for Science, Research and the Arts of Baden-Württemberg.

draw on the framework directly, others much more indirectly. Some have used new original empirical data, others have based their reflections on secondary readings, building on their extensive research experience on migration studies, which all four of them have. We have left this as open as possible, and the four essays can and should be read together.

I. NEW (OLD) PRECARITY

The pandemic and the response to it have led to a global economic recession and have undoubtedly affected the livelihoods of many, including migrant communities. Often discussed as a “second pandemic” or “shadow pandemic” (Githathu 2020), the consequences of abrupt unemployment and reduced wages, amongst other issues, are central to showing how migrants have been affected by the pandemic.³

Migrant communities have long been recognised as being in particularly precarious situations. Given the global inequalities in mobility, as mentioned above, it is notably migrants in and from the Global South that have been pushed into deeper precarity. Precarity as a term allows the micro situation of migrants and their communities to be connected to the broader infrastructures in which they are historically and geographically embedded (Paret and Gleeson 2016). The case of Zimbabwe, as illustrated by Joyce Takaindisa in this collection, reveals this particularly well: decades of economic downturn (and regular bouts of political repression) have led to a massive exodus of labourers seeking to secure their basic livelihoods abroad. Similarly, in Nepal, Anita Ghimire notes that remittances make up the main source of income for more than 55% of households. This makes migration an essential livelihood strategy in both cases, but precarity does not end there. Irregularised and undermined, many migrants once in their destination countries are vulnerable to state violence, deportation, insecure employment, exploitative work conditions and discrimination – not to mention the exclusion from public services (Paret and

³ Others have termed COVID-19 and its consequences as a “polypandemic” that also includes the “pandemics of poverty and hunger, of nationalism and authoritarianism” (Eisentraut et al. 2020).

Gleeson 2016; see also Takaindisa 2021). In some cases, as in Mexico, migrants are vulnerable to extreme violence and even death at the hands of criminal networks (Morales Vega 2021).

The pandemic has exposed an already precarious migrant community to new levels of inequality and precarity, with the most vulnerable communities bearing the fallout from the health crisis in the starkest manner (see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). The precarity due to the pandemic has multiple dimensions, including higher health risks as well as decreased livelihoods. Studies on precarious work have long established that market-driven globalisation treats workers like commodities rather than as humans meriting and needing social protection (Paret and Gleeson 2016); the treatment of many migrant workers – now often called “essential workers” – testifies to this. This not only applies to their working conditions but also to the conditions in which many of them are forced to live. This includes the insufficient sanitary conditions in immigration stations in Mexico, as Morales Vega points out in her essay and in overcrowded migrant housing in Singapore – often with 20 workers sleeping in one room – where there was a secondary outbreak of the pandemic. At its height, 88% of the cases in Singapore were in migrant worker housing, which had been excluded from the initial government response to the pandemic (Hennebry and KC 2020). Zahra Babar picks this up in her essay when she speaks of the conditions of migrant workers in Gulf countries that led to outbreaks in their community. Though most Gulf governments, she explains, introduced targeted measures for migrant communities – including mass testing and increased sanitation measures in their living facilities – this resulted in even greater restrictions on their mobility (Babar 2021).

The combination of pandemic measures, such as quarantine and social distancing, with pre-existing precarity can be summarised in the concept of “everyday bordering” as argued by Meer et al. (2021). Practices such as “coerced immobility, enforced impoverishment, precarious and unsafe accommodation” amount to everyday bordering which can, in the pandemic, increase the risk of infection as well as secondary risk in terms of everyday survival (Meer et al. 2021, 872).

Indeed, lockdown restrictions meant that many of the migrants lost weeks and months of salaries, and many more lost their jobs and contracts altogether, leading to “financial anxiety” (Babar 2021: 9). This brought some migrant communities in Botswana “to the brink of starvation” (Takaindisa 2021: 4) and in Mexico, an additional 4% of the population was pushed below the extreme poverty line (Morales Vega 2021). This has severely affected the livelihoods of many migrants and their wider communities. Especially in countries and regions where many rely on informal labour or “a political economy of everyday life”, lockdown measures have wide-reaching consequences (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020, 380). Anita Ghimire shows how some temporarily returned Nepalese migrants were told by their employers abroad not to return at all. In the case of Zimbabwe, Joyce Takaindisa highlights how border closures and restrictions meant that many could not (theoretically) return to their paid work in neighbouring countries. These contributions highlight the fact that precarity occurs not only in ongoing migrant work as in the Gulf countries, but also affects returned and aspiring migrants. This is not even to mention the migrants – including refugees – who are currently on the move or stuck trying to seek refuge or work, like in Mexico.

Precarity is nothing new in any sense, but the intersectional vulnerabilities of these migrant communities have to be highlighted in order to start making sense of the changing trajectory COVID-19 has imposed on the globe. Morales Vega concludes with a point about the vaccination rollout in Mexico, adding a key question to the discussion: when will the many migrants in the country, as elsewhere – many irregularised – receive a vaccine?

II. (RHETORICAL) EXCLUSION

When we start discussing vaccines as well as access to healthcare more broadly, we quickly touch upon the question of who can gain access to such public goods and who cannot. From a public health perspective, the response is clear. No one is safe until everyone is safe. Portugal guaranteed the right to access healthcare and benefits to all people living in the country, regardless of their paperwork. Other countries such as Jordan and Rwanda have included refugees in their earliest vaccination schemes. Most, however, have taken different routes. The pandemic has led to a renewed wave

of pandemic nationalism, with many countries abandoning regional and multinational commitments and turning to insular protective rhetoric and practices (Woods et al. 2020). The construction of belonging is intricately linked to mobility rights. Sheller argues that “uneven mobilities are fundamental to political identities and the making of differential political subjects” (Sheller 2020, 14). In other words, regimes of free movement are only possible by shutting out and excluding others, built on constructed notions of security (see also Kotef 2015; Mountz et al. 2013). Babar notes in her contribution that “... the migrant himself/herself is a deviation from the preferred human category of ‘citizen’ or ‘national’. The migrant has unknowable loyalties, and the reasons for his/her mobility are tied to some defects in either circumstance, geography or capacity” (p. 2). This has led to both actual as well as rhetorical exclusionary practices at the expense of migrant communities.

In very real terms, migrant communities have been designated as security threats. For example, Mexico had to receive asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors during the pandemic, when the United States declared them a threat to national security (Zard and San Lau 2020). Across the Gulf, the presence of such a large number of migrant workers – who substantially contribute to the wealth of the region – is often framed as a threat to the social and cultural fabric of the region, Babar notes in her contribution. She also reiterates the intersectional nature of such exclusions, with the highly-skilled, presumably “Western” ex-pats decidedly exempt from being framed as a threat. Though there was no documentation of xenophobic attacks during the early months of the pandemic in the Gulf, the migrant population received additional scrutiny.

In many cases, the constructed threat of migrant communities became a health threat. A recent study from the IOM notes that there is a vicious circle of precarisation and xenophobia, whereby government exclusion of migration communities reinforces the idea that migrant workers pose *a risk*, rather than being *at risk* (Hennebry and KC 2020, emphasis in original; see also Meer et al. 2021; Heller 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). The same report notes that over 60% of migrant workers are affected by racism and xenophobia. Mobilising what is effectively medicalised racism against refugee and migrant communities – tied to language of “swarms” as well as “disease” – is not new but has only become more potent during the pandemic, and such

narratives frequently pose such communities as a threat to the existence of the nation-state itself (Meer et al. 2021).

Discursive or rhetorical othering and exclusion, often repeated in the media, thus build on already pre-existing conditions. It is important to note that this has resulted in violence against migrant communities at the very time, as Heller notes, that these communities were suddenly elevated as “essential” workers (Heller 2021; see also Isaac and Elrick 2021). The scapegoating and othering of migrant communities is not new, but the public health crisis has deepened this – even as governments, especially in the Global South, face extreme economic downturns, with many not in a position to provide widespread social protection. In Botswana, undocumented migrants were initially excluded from parcels reserved for citizens only (see Takaindisa (2021); for similar initial limitations in South Africa see Moyo and Zanker 2020). Such exclusionary rhetoric (and action) has come not only from governments and the media but has been picked up in wider societal discussions. In particular, Takaindisa highlights discussions in social media that further these divisions in Southern Africa, under the hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst, which she describes as akin to a “virtual war”. She notes that “this particular hashtag has invoked hate speech,[and] cemented xenophobic attitudes towards Zimbabwean migrants” (p. 8).

The collection of essays from such different contexts bring new dimensions come to light. Thus, Anita Ghimire describes how the families who do not emigrate, or do not have a migrant worker family member, are excluded from many social and economic benefits. She argues that “migration has also helped families to build economic, cultural and social capital and thus move upward in local social circles” (p. 12). How and if the pandemic – with the resultant increased competition for access to jobs – will further entrench such social exclusion will have to be further researched.

III. RESTRICTIONS AND CONTROL

This part of the framework considers the restrictions and acts of control against the mobility of migrants during the pandemic. While such measures were common during the pre-COVID-19 era, they have been intensified and newer ones introduced during the pandemic. There is no guarantee that these steps will be removed in the

post-pandemic era and it is likely that they will be integrated into the current security architecture – thereby resulting in even tighter borders against migrants. This section also looks how sometimes acts of health care provision are really used to control certain communities. Under public health pretexts, Mexican authorities have practically barred migrant individuals from access to asylum and protection (Zard and San Lau 2020). This situation is observable on at least two interrelated levels: border upgrade and extension, and militarisation and securitisation of migration management.

In several cases, it has become apparent that different states have seized the pandemic as an opportunity for upgrading border control management (Igoye 2020). More powerful states exercise their ability to influence migration movements on the territories of less powerful states (FitzGerald 2020). In the case of Mexico, control has been intensified not only on its northern and southern borders, but also throughout its territory, as Morales Vega describes in this collection of essays. The United States’ outsourcing of its borders and its migration management to Mexico is nothing new and, in fact, is among the most notorious examples of externalisation. This US policy shapes every aspect of its relations with Mexico, including for example, the removal of special trade tariffs on Mexican products in exchange for “reduc[ing] the number of migrants” by Mexico (p. 8). In March 2020, the Trump Administration introduced several measures that halted immigration to the USA and stopped asylum processes, under the pretext of combating COVID-19. These measures, listed under Title 42 of the United States Code, included immediate deportation of asylum seekers (to Mexico) (Blue et al. 2021). This situation increased the vulnerability of those migrants to the virus, especially as they were likely to be “disproportionately affected by COVID-19” (Bojorquez et al. 2021, 2).

Mexico, in turn, has been trying to leverage its southern neighbouring countries, such as Guatemala, to control migration – consequently adding another layer of buffering between migrants and their ultimate destination, as Morales Vega notes. It is remarkable here that these acts of expanding the border regimes and control came not as a result of unilateral state action, but rather as a coordinated inter-state collaboration. Under the pretext of the lack of sanitary conditions, pushed by the

United States, at least three states – Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala – came together in an attempt to dismantle some migrant caravans.

In South Africa, the authorities have deliberately merged attempts to curb the outbreak of COVID-19 with efforts to stop migrants from entering the national territory. The pandemic has clearly been used by the South African government as yet another occasion for upgrading its physical borders with Zimbabwe as Takaindisa notes. Officials there justified the erection of a new border fence as an act to stop “undocumented or infected persons” (p. 5).

While the practice of upgrading and extending borders has been achieved significantly through the extensive deployment of military and security forces, these forces have also been instrumentalised for further acts of control and restriction. During the pandemic, military personnel have been appointed as heads of civil and bureaucratic institutions responsible for migration management in Mexico, as Morales Vega describes. In South Africa, the authorities have even established a new state entity, the Border Management Authority that has delegated even more power to security forces, as Takaindisa notes. Though the new Authority has long been in the making, the timing during the pandemic and increasing border restrictions no doubt holds significance. In Qatar, Babar describes how the state increased its power in a rather uneven way as specific state structures, namely security and police forces, were “activated” in response to the health “crisis” (p. 10).

Zahra Babar’s elaboration of how COVID-19 has been the “crisis” that enabled increased, albeit asymmetrical, state power has clear echoes in other countries, indicating that this trend has not been restricted to only one country (Qatar), but evidently is occurring in different places around the world.

IV. ACTS OF RESISTANCE

The fortified borders around nation states throughout the world, the huge budgets spent on military and security apparatuses and on the latest surveillance technologies, and the spread of xenophobic politics are realities that may initially seem difficult to reconcile with ideas of resistance or subversion. But asymmetries do not mean that

no forms of agency are possible. Indeed, the seemingly impregnable structures make any attempt to stand up to or get around these restrictions a very remarkable act that merit further discussion. The “highly collectivized” migration movements all over the world (Hess 2017, 88), as in the case of migrant caravans through Central America, which Morales Vega discusses, or the continuous attempts to cross the Mediterranean “despite the EU’s exclusionary policies points” (Heller 2021, 5), are clear examples that migrants do not simply and passively comply with rules and structures of restriction imposed by powerful states. Regardless of how successful these and similar examples may be, their frequency and continuity, vis-à-vis much more powerful entities, qualify them as acts of resistance and confirm their agential quality. For Hagar Kotef, there is resistance to the power set by liberal regimes of mobility, though the practices “from below” of what people “do” with movement (Kotef 2015, 127).

By the same logic, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a golden opportunity that was seized by states to upgrade and expand their control capabilities, has not stopped some migrants from acting and deciding. Despite the loss of income and the lack of decent housing conditions during the lockdowns, many migrants from Asian countries in Qatar decided to stay there and not return to their home countries, as Babar describes. Similarly, Takaindisa notes how some undocumented migrants from Zimbabwe in South Africa decided to stay and adopt the language and appearance of the locals despite the increased chances of being detected and deported during lockdown controls. Yet exercising agency does not always mean the act of staying put, in the case of undocumented migrants from Zimbabwe in South Africa. While the South African authorities have further increased the physical borders with Zimbabwe and sealed them off, many migrants, in response, have turned to local smugglers, also known as *gumaguma*, to pass through the border. In her essay, Joyce Takaindisa vividly shows the irony of how increased border restrictions have led to increased border crossings.

Moreover, the more restriction procedures there are, the more acts against them are internalised by migrant communities. Migrants develop different strategies to deal with or even overcome borders (e.g. Bærenholdt 2013; Kotef 2015; Paret and Gleeson 2016). In addition to using smuggling and other informal ways to cross

borders, collective actions have been effective in protecting migrants and their journeys. In Central America, the very technique of forming caravans helped migrants to be united and visibly powerful enough to deter any potential restrictive and/or violent acts against them by organised crime or by the states themselves (see also Chavez 2019). Similarly, internalised techniques of coping and resistance have been applicable on the judiciary level, as in the case of access to clean water for “the Migrant’s House” in Mexico described by Morales Vega (2021: 13). When the available number of labour visas for Nepalis was drastically reduced, many aspiring migrants travelled and entered the country of destination on visit visas, remaining undocumented after their visas expired, as Ghimire describes in her essay.

All these examples are clear evidence that no matter the extent to which bordering structures are upgraded, mobility is restricted or health “crises” are instrumentalised, migrants will, in the absence of dignified, safe and sufficient routes, develop different strategies to help them circumvent border controls and remain mobile.

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