

Gender and Migration Gendered Dynamics of Male Labour Migration: Assessing Impacts on Women's Empowerment in the Nepalese Context

Mahima Singh

Department of Sociology, Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus, TU, Kathmandu, Nepal

Email: singhmahima2054@gmail.com

Abstract

This article offers a brief summary of the changes in the lives of Nepalese women due to the increasing trend of men migrating abroad for work in Nepal. Primarily centred on the economic benefits derived from remittances, shifts in intra-household power dynamics, and an exploration of women's roles as household leaders, financial managers, and single parents, the article sheds light on their experiences in a society historically limiting their freedom. However, it tends to overlook changes in intra-household power dynamics and the impact of the predominantly male nature of Nepalese migration on women's lives. The analysis draws insights from secondary data and literature reviews. The study's outcomes may contribute to a gendered understanding of migration consequences, empowering women with awareness to navigate challenges arising from men's migration. A review of various literary works suggests that male migration both supports and hinders women's empowerment. While women gain opportunities such as decision-making, mobility, and assuming household leadership, they also bear the burden of traditionally male responsibilities, with left-behind women living with in-laws experiencing limited freedom compared to those without such constraints.

Keywords: Empowerment, Foreign Labour, Gender Equality, Migration, Remittance

Background

With the widespread increase in the migration of workers across regions and continents, there is a rising emphasis on the economic and social welfare of migrants, their families, and their home communities. Presently, out of the approximately 232 million international migrants globally, around 150 million are labour migrants (ILO, 2015). These migrants play a substantial role in the progress of their home countries and families through the transmission of remittances. Foreign labour migration is frequently perceived as a positive force, particularly for workers from developing nations grappling with challenges like poverty, unemployment, inequality, and conflict.

In 2022, as per the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the total global remittance flow was USD 782 billion, an increase of 32% from 2015 (IMF, 2023). Of this amount, an estimated USD 627 billion was directed to developing countries. This accounts for 80% of total global remittances, exceeding the Official Development Aid (ODA) of USD 163 billion and representing over

half of the Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) of USD 830 billion received by developing countries in 2022 (World Bank, 2023). Consequently, labour migration has emerged as a crucial component of developing economies, offering key insights into the dynamics of globalisation and development in the contemporary era.

Nepal's economy has become heavily reliant on migration, with a substantial portion of its population engaged in foreign employment has left an indelible mark on the country's economic landscape, with remittances from overseas workers playing a crucial role in sustaining many households. The World Bank estimates that one in every eleven Nepalese adults is currently employed abroad, and more than half of the country's households rely on these remittances for their livelihood (World Bank, 2023). Nepal's high reliance on labour migration underscores the need to strengthen its domestic economy and create employment opportunities within the country.

A growing number of Nepalese workers are increasingly seeking opportunities in foreign labour markets to sustain their livelihoods. According to the World Bank, the latest available data on remittance inflows to Nepal shows that Nepalis working abroad sent home USD 9.29 billion in 2022. This represents an increase of 13.37% from the previous year when remittances totalled USD 8.19 billion. Remittances have been a lifeline for many Nepali families, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are a major source of income for many households and contribute significantly to the country's economy (World Bank, 2023).

The rise in worker migration has led to a consistent growth in remittance inflow into the country. In 2022, remittance accounted for approximately 28.02% of Nepal's GDP (World Bank, 2023). This means that nearly one-third of the country's economy is dependent on money sent home by Nepalis working abroad. The proportion of Nepal's GDP that is remittance has been increasing steadily over the past decade. Remittances stand as the most substantial source of foreign funds for the country, surpassing the combined inflows of Official Development Aid (ODA) at USD 1.42 Billion and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) at USD 250 million in 2023, with total remittances received reaching USD 9.29 Billion (World Bank, 2023).

Gender and Migration

Gender plays a pivotal role in shaping migration trends, with foreign migrants exhibiting a relatively balanced distribution between sexes—approximately 56 percent being men (ILO, 2015). However, labour migration from Nepal reveals a significant gender disparity, with almost 90 percent of the country's labour migrants being men (Rajkarnikar, 2020). As indicated by data from the country profile of Nepal by the Organization for Migration (IOM)¹, nearly 92 percent of labour migrants are men. Among these men, about 59.1 percent fall within the 15 to 29 age group, and an additional 31.9 percent are between 30 to 44 years old (ILO, 2022).

The limited participation of women in foreign employment is shaped by the patriarchal structure of Nepalese society, where men are traditionally seen as the primary earners. Men migrate to support their families, while women are restricted to caregiving and domestic roles (Kasper, 2005). Women in Nepal face mobility constraints in public spaces and have limited access to education and employment

opportunities (Morgan & Niraula, 1996), which impedes their migration prospects. Furthermore, societal views often label migrating women as morally questionable, bringing dishonour to their families, which further deters families from allowing women to seek employment abroad (Danneekar, 2005).

The impact of remittance inflow affects both micro and macro-economic levels within a country. At the household level, remittances directly boost income, alleviate budget constraints, and improve living standards through increased consumption. In Nepal, a 2021 study by Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) found that 78.9% of remittances are used for consumption, with only a small portion invested in productive activities. Specifically, 78.9% is spent on daily consumption, 7.1% on loan repayment, 4.5% on household property, 3.5% on education, and just 2.4% on capital formation (NRB, 2021). Beyond economic effects, men's migration influences the non-economic aspects of daily life and socio-cultural dynamics in the country of origin, affecting household structures, gender compositions, and social norms within the community.

Socio-cultural Setting

When men undertake work-related migration, the economic and socio-cultural dynamics experienced by their families left behind change. In social strata with less restrictive gender norms, women may take on some of the economic and social responsibilities traditionally borne by men. Additionally, they might experience increased freedom and gain greater access to and control over household possessions during the absence of their male counterparts (Palmer, 1985; Acosta, 2006).

In societies with stricter gender norms, the absence of husbands often leads to increased social scrutiny of women's activities. Migrant wives may encounter suspicion and face a greater risk of sexual abuse, which may prompt them to limit their public presence to maintain their reputation as devoted wives (Menjivar & Agadjanian, 2007; Debnath & Selim, 2009; McEvoy, Petrzalka, Radel, & B., 2012). In such situations, taking on roles that involve public engagement or entering male-dominated spaces can heighten anxiety for women.

Division of Labour and Patriarchy

Men's migration also leads to structural changes within the family, altering the distribution of tasks and authority structures among those remaining. In smaller households, women frequently take on the role of de facto heads, managing comprehensive home and child responsibilities while also handling new financial duties. Although these changes may increase women's independence and negotiating power within the household, they can also introduce stress as women navigate the challenges of being both single parents and migrant wives in a patriarchal society (Brown, 1983; de Haas & Van Rooij, 2010).

Women living in extended families could find themselves residing under the watchful eye of their in-laws or other elderly family members. In these situations, the husbands' relocation may result in the spouse losing a supporter and having less negotiating power because women frequently rely on their husbands to negotiate their roles in the family and express their thoughts. (Kasper, 2005; Desai &

Banerji, 2008). In other cases, women's relationships with their in-laws might not change while their husbands are away, or they might even get better. (Louhichi, 1997).

Research Problem

The empowerment of women is a significant concern in the developing world and is increasingly recognized as a crucial indicator of societal development. The (World Bank, 2002) has emphasized that women's empowerment should be a central component of all social development programs.

Male migration induces alterations in the structure of family life, impacting women's social and economic standing, often to their disadvantage. Women must adapt their lifestyles and assume greater responsibilities due to the migration of male family members, such as husbands. During the absence of husbands, wives may take on various roles, including agricultural work, childcare, household chores, and even assuming the position of household heads, affecting the lives of women left behind both socially and economically.

While the migration of men might be expected to grant women increased authority and decision-making power, there is a dichotomy in views. Some believe that male migration should lead to an enhancement of women's decision-making powers, while others argue that such migration does not necessarily alter women's decision-making dynamics. This study aims to establish a connection between women's empowerment and men's migration, specifically examining whether women experience any changes in their lifestyle due to their husband's migration.

The research focuses on two key questions:

- Do women's decision-making processes change due to their husband's migration?
- What changes do women experience while their husbands are engaged in labour migration, particularly in terms of mobility and social participation?

Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To investigate whether women, whose husbands are engaged in labour migration, undergo any changes in their decision-making process.
- To analyze the alterations in the lifestyle of women, with a specific focus on mobility and social engagement, during their husbands' participation in labour migration.

Methods

The analysis in this study relies on exploratory methods, utilizing secondary sources that include various documents, books, and journals. The qualitative nature of this study emphasizes a nuanced understanding of the subject matter through in-depth examination and interpretation of information gathered from these sources.

Conceptual Framework

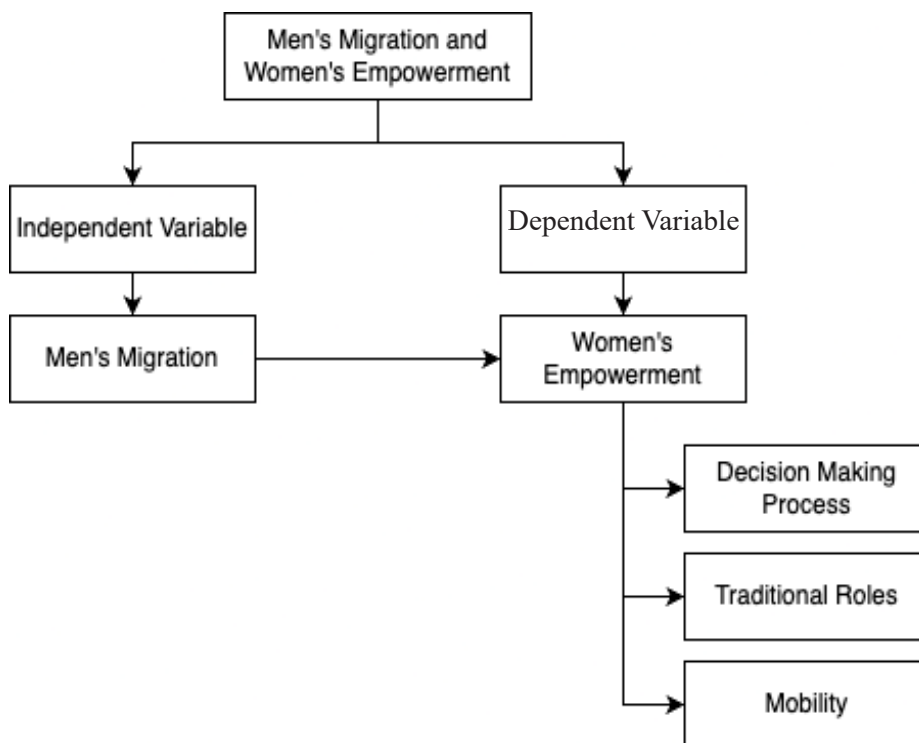


Figure 1: Relationship between men's migration and women's empowerment and its components

Discussions

Men's migration often leads to a transformation in the traditional roles of women at home. The increased workload and dependence on remittances reshape expectations regarding autonomy and decision-making power. The impact of male migration is felt profoundly as women, children, and the elderly left at home face significant changes in their daily lives. Married women, in particular, bear the brunt of their male partners' migration, taking on the entire responsibility for the household and children (Gartaula, Visser and Neihof, 2010). Research indicates both positive and negative impacts of men's migration on their wives who remain at home.

When husbands migrate, women are compelled to assume economic and social responsibilities typically fulfilled by men. On the positive side, women often experience increased freedom and greater control over household chores. Studies suggest that men's migration creates a labour supply shortage, leading to a rise in women's participation in market labour, contributing to their financial upliftment and reducing dependence on men (Massey, 2008).

Rajkarnikar's (2017) study of 9,598 married women in rural Nepal indicates that men's migration leads to an increase in women's unpaid work responsibilities and reduces their capacity to participate in

market labour. Women residing with their in-laws may experience diminished decision-making power and heightened restrictions on their mobility in public spaces. Remittances sent by migrant husbands, however, enable women to improve their standard of living, investing in education, healthcare, and other facilities for themselves and their children.

Research consistently highlights the disparity between women living with and without in-laws. Those living with in-laws often experience limited improvement, as decisions are made for them (Karki, 1998). In contrast, women living without in-laws and assuming the role of household heads tend to have more autonomy in decision-making and mobility.

In Nepal, the central finding is that although women may gain opportunities for increased freedom and expanded abilities during men's absence, these opportunities are limited by factors such as their position within the household, educational and employment background, caste and class affiliations, and gendered social norms (Rajkarnikar, 2017).

Impact on Women's Work

Examinations of changes in women's work responsibilities in Nepal reveal notable patterns. Women in households with migrant members often take on greater domestic and subsistence farming duties, while their involvement in wage employment or self-employment in non-agricultural sectors is relatively lower compared to women in households without migrants. The migration of men led to an increase in women's workloads both at home and on the farm. This rise in domestic responsibilities, coupled with the economic relief provided by remittances, often reduces their inclination or capacity to engage in market work (Khatrri, 2017). As a result, migrant wives are more prone to become financially reliant on their husbands.

Even while migrant wives carry out important social and economic tasks connected to household upkeep, their capacity to support their families financially decreases when their husbands are away. This reinforces their subordinate position within the household, highlighting the complex interplay between migration, gender roles, and economic dynamics in these contexts (Palmer, 1985; Acosta, 2006).

Impact on Women's Decision-Making

In Nepal, a woman's position within the household is crucial in determining her role in key decision-making processes. Women in single households, especially those who take on the role of household head due to men's migration, often see an increase in their decision-making authority. Conversely, women living under the authority of other household members in extended households frequently experience either no change or a reduction in their involvement in decision-making (Louhichi, 1997). According to Kasper (2005) and Desai and Banerji (2008), if a woman's husband previously supported her participation in household decisions, his migration may lead to a loss of her bargaining power and influence. Thus, the dynamics of decision-making are closely linked to the specific household structure and its internal relationships.

Impact on Women's Social Participation

The research in Nepal highlights that women's participation in the social realm during their husbands' absence is closely tied to their roles within the family. Women who step into the position of household heads when their husbands are away often enjoy increased physical mobility. On the other hand, women in extended families may face greater restrictions on their social activities (Brown, 1983). Generally, migrant wives endure intensified social scrutiny and vulnerabilities, which curtail their involvement in social spheres. Nevertheless, for women who become household heads, there is a need to navigate public spaces to sustain their livelihoods (Menjivar & Agadjanian, 2007). The interaction of household dynamics, gender roles, and societal expectations significantly influences women's social participation during their husbands' migration.

Conclusion

The overall effect of men's migration on women's empowerment in Nepal is multifaceted and depends on both the individual traits of women and the socio-economic context in which they live. Generally, women who step into the role of household heads due to men's migration tend to have increased decision-making authority and greater involvement in social activities. However, they also contend with a heavier domestic workload and face challenges related to defying social norms to achieve greater mobility. It is evident that women's empowerment is greatly affected by their living situation, with those not residing with in-laws often demonstrating higher levels of empowerment compared to those who do.

Power imbalances within households, influenced by factors such as age, sex, education, and employment status of women, alongside gendered social norms, significantly shape women's experiences during men's migration. While some women may gain negotiating power and better access to resources, others might face increased stress from added responsibilities and limitations on their physical mobility. This highlights the importance of considering regional cultural norms and socio-economic conditions when examining the varied impacts of migration on women's empowerment. A nuanced understanding of these factors is crucial for creating effective strategies to tackle the diverse challenges encountered by women in the context of male migration.

References

- Acosta, P. (2006). Labour supply, school attendance, and remittances from abroad: Evidence from El Salvador. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, 3903.
- Brown, B. (1983). The impact of male labour migration on women in Botswana. *African Affairs*, 82(327), 367-388.
- Dannecker, P. (2005). Transnational migration and the transformation of gender relations: The case of Bangladeshi labour migrants. *Current Sociology*, 53(4), 655-674.
- De Haas, H., & Van Rooij, A. (2010). Migration as emancipation? The impact of internal and international migration on the position of women left behind in rural Morocco. *Oxford Development Studies*, 38(1), 43-62.

- Debnath, P., & Selim, N. (2009). Gender roles and support networks of spouses of Bangladeshi male labor migrants: A study of Sylhet division, Bangladesh. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(5), 1-18.
- Desai, S., & Banerji, M. (2008). Negotiated identities: Male migration and left-behind wives in India. *Journal of Population Research*, 25(3), 337-355.
- Gartaula, H., Niehof, A., & Visser, L. (2010). Feminization of agriculture as an effect of male out-migration: Unexpected outcomes from Jhapa district, eastern Nepal. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences: Annual Review*, 5(2), 565-578.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). Nepal labour migration profile 2022.
- International Monetary Fund (IMF). (2023, April). Remittances: Bridging borders. Retrieved from <https://www.imf.org/external/np/sta/bop/remitt.htm>:<https://www.imf.org/external/np/sta/bop/remitt.htm>
- Kasper, H. (2005). I am the household head now! Gender aspects of out-migration for labour in Nepal. *International Migration and Development*, 1(1), 47-58.
- Karki, B. K. (1998). Male out-migration from rural areas: Effects on women and children, a case study of Chadikalika VDC, Syangja, M.A thesis, TU Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Khatri, S. (2019). Impact on women due to male migration: A sociological study of Kalinchowk rural municipality, Dolakha district. Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Louhichi, K. (1997). Gender and the process of international migration: The case of Tunisia. *International Journal of Population Studies*, 3(1), 105-128.
- McEvoy, J., Petrzalka, P., Radel, C., & B., S. (2012). Gendered mobility and morality in a South Eastern Mexican community: Impacts of male labour migration on women left behind. *Mobilities*, 7(3), 369-388.
- Menjivar, C., & Agadjanian, V. (2007). Men's migration and women's lives: Views from rural Guatemala. *Social Science Quarterly*, 88(5), 1243-1262.
- Morgan, S. P., & Niraula, B. B. (1996). Marriage formation, post-marital contact with natal kin and autonomy of women: Evidence from two Nepal settings. *Population Studies*, 50(1), 35-50.
- Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB). (2021). Remittance flows to Nepal: An analysis. Retrieved from <https://www.nrb.org.np/er-article/remittance-inflows-to-nepal-economic-impact-and-policy/>: <https://www.nrb.org.np/er-article/remittance-inflows-to-nepal-economic-impact-and-policy/>
- Palmer, I. (1985). The impact of male out-migration on women in farming. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 13(1), 98-127.
- Rajkarnikar, P. J. (2020, December 21). Men's Migration and Women's Lives: Evidence from Nepal | Economics in Context Initiative. Boston University. Retrieved November 24, 2023, from <https://www.bu.edu/eci/2020/12/21/mens-migration-and-womens-lives-evidence-from-nepal/>
- World Bank. (2023). Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) - Nepal. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT>
- World Bank. (2023). ODA, FDI, Remittances. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/>: <https://data.worldbank.org/>