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Female Labor Migration: Gender Prospective

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Abstract

This paper is based on level, trends and pattern of female labor migration in Nepal. The changes in the lives of Nepalese women due to the increasing trend foreign labor migration of men. The changes in intra-household power relations and the transformations in women's lives, due to the male-dominated nature of Nepalese migration, are largely neglected. The aim of this paper to find the level and trend of female labour migration in Nepal and also examine women's experiences, as they assume the role of household heads, financial managers and single parents, in a society that has historically suppressed their freedom. The analysis is based on secondary data source. Women who take on the role of household head are more likely to gain decision-making power and experience an increase in social participation, while those left under the supervision of other members (usually their in-laws) may suffer from reduced decision-making ability and increased restrictions on their mobility in public spaces. These consequences are highly sensitive to the regional socio-cultural norms as well as women's caste, class, and individual characteristics. The consequences of female migration increasing trend day by day and their experience provides the valuable information for the developing policy of migration as well as traditional gender inequality and providing women with the resources to manage with the challenges faced during men's migration.

Keywords: Labour, migration, remittance, gender, & policy.

Introduction

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another. Migration can be within a country or between countries. Migration is happens in three types permanent, temporary and seasonal. Migration happens for a range of reasons. These can be economic, social, political or environmental. Migration drives by the pull and push factor. It impacts on both the places (origin and destination) where migrants settle and impacts can be both positive and negative (Mishra, 2021). Some people decide to migrate, e.g. someone who moves to another country to improve their career opportunities. Some people are forced to migrate,

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e.g. someone who moves due to famine or war. It is ongoing process of human being. These studies tend to glorify the role of financial remittances and the increased autonomy and power for women who – in the absence of men – have become the de facto head of the household. Other studies focus on the increased drudgery and mobility challenges for women who stayed behind and their families. Several studies have addressed the issue of feminization of agriculture in Nepal, with similar mixed outcomes. Increased well-being and assets gained through financial remittances are often accompanied by transnational practices that tend to reproduce or even exacerbate gendered power structures, especially when control over financial remittances rests with men.

From time immemorial Nepali households have had at least one member away from home for work or education, depicting a pattern of migration in the country. The number of out-migrants as per the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE, 2020) in Nepal was only 3,605 in 1993/94, which has now increased to over five million as of 2019/20 published in the Nepal Migration Report 2020 by the Ministry of Labour Employment and Social Security (MoLESS). However, labor migration in Nepal has mostly remained a male phenomenon as the female migrant workers accounted for a little more than 5 percent in the last decade. Given such a situation, it is imperative to delve into the trends of female labor migration in Nepal, its reasons and patterns over these years.

Women's migration to foreign countries for work and their contribution of remittances to the families back home have gender implications. On the one hand, migration for work provides women with the opportunity to contribute to the family income; hence, they are conferred with the traditionally male role of family breadwinner. Studies in different parts of the world have shown that remittances and females as the family breadwinners are especially important in female-headed households (SAARC, 2006). On the other hand, it is felt that female migrants have specific issues and problems related to their migration, both in the country of origin and in the country of employment, which urgently need to be addressed: "The specific aspects of women's migration are not dealt with separately, but are treated in the general context, which detracts from the implementation of political, legislative and regulatory measures aimed specifically at guaranteeing the empowerment of migrant women." (Hon. Ndioro Ndiaye, Minister and Deputy Director-General, International Organization for Migration (IOM) in his keynote speech at the International Women Leaders' Conference on Migration and Gender Issues Within the Millennium Development Goals, Heifa, Israel, 25-28 September 2005).

The process of globalization combined with the changing structure of the economy and society have created new opportunities for women workers (SAARC, 2006). The

feminization of poverty in Nepal, and the process of globalization and the changing structure of the global economy have a push and pull effect on Nepalese women migrant workers. On the one hand, the shift from heavy manufacturing to information and other service-related industries has created a very different labour market, one in which women workers are in much demand. Women from both developed and developing countries are increasingly employed in the market/productive sphere (Adhikari et al., 2006). On the other hand, for many women in developed and petro-rich countries, the opportunity cost in spending time on labour-intensive household work is very high in terms of leisure and outside work. For them, hiring domestic help is also a matter of prestige (D’Cunha, 2005).

When women shift their time to the public sphere or to outside work, some kind of substitution for their activities in the private sphere or the household, especially related to the reproductive role, has to occur. This introduces very interesting female labour dynamics globally. Women’s economic activities in the household or the reproductive sphere are centered on care services, and hence are termed as the “care economy”. These services cannot be delivered even by the highest level of mechanization. These services are still based on human-labour, and they require patience, perseverance and dexterity of work performance; this is something that only women are capable of performing due to their “coercive” traditional gender roles (Bhadra, 2006). In the current global labour market, the household-level care activities of women in the industrialized, newly industrializing and the petro-rich Gulf countries are substituted by women from developing countries, especially Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka (D’Cunha, 2005). In recent years, Nepalese women have also been in high demand in this “care economy”, especially in private homes. One recent study found that the vast majority (66%) of migrant women workers were engaged in domestic work as “care givers” (Adhikari et al, 2006).

Although there have been rigorous studies related to migration processes and their effects on the economy, comparatively less consideration has been given to female migrants in Nepal. Nevertheless, the migration of Nepali women is an old narrative and one of the leading factors for this is thought to be feminization of poverty. To put it more simply, feminization of poverty was identified as a major factor contributing to Nepali women seeking foreign employment in some studies carried out by the Asia- Pacific Research and Training on Trade (ARTNet). As per the study, women’s domestic care services are in abundant supply and require minimum economic investment, pushing them to migrate as a hedge against poverty. To validate this statement, the International Labour Migration Report states that an estimated 67 million domestic workers worldwide exist where 80 percent are women and girls who perform such work either paid or unpaid. Currently, globalization has also made this an easy choice for such women.

Besides, such a tendency in female migration is particularly common in underdeveloped and developing countries where women migrate to support the care economy of the developed countries. This is because it is believed that women from developing countries have the familiarity with domestic care skills due to their gender roles. Moreover, globally, it is also conceptualized that care services are products that can be bought and sold in the market. Given this, most underdeveloped and developing countries, including Nepal, have seen an increase in feminization of labor migration.

Furthermore, most literature in the case of Nepal opine that female migrant move majorly because of the lack of economic prospects and poor living conditions. Male members of Nepali families are typically provided with formal education and skills training. After marriage, either the male members or older women of the family make decisions about purchases, daily expenses, and buying or selling assets, limiting newly-wed females' authority. As a result, women are obliged to juggle domestic tasks with other responsibilities like farming. There are also additional push factors for women to seek employment abroad, such as marital issues, gender discrimination, improving children's future, and servicing debts at home. This implies that the decision to migrate among most female migrants is influenced by household economic concerns.

Moreover, female migrants with a higher level of mobility prior to migration, such as work of membership in community groups, are more confident in migrating overseas for career opportunities. Women can also escape repressive societal traditions and stigmas by migrating, and this is mostly for divorced, widowed or separated women.

In addition, the National Living Standard Survey 2010/11 conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistic (CBS) presents findings on the absentee female population. Under this, in terms of proportion, more women than men traveled to pursue education. However, the relocation for females is bound by difficulties starting from their homes/families, their country, to the country of transit, and the country of employment. Nevertheless, all of these factors encourage women to migrate abroad.

Objectives

- To find out the situation of foreign labour migration.
- To examine the female labour migration with gender prospective.

Methods

This article prepared by the secondary sources through the Department of Foreign Employment report, International Labour Organization report, the International Organization

for Migration, and other published papers. The Asia Foundation. The author used same data sources in the previous reports, which were mainly the Department of Foreign Employment, the Foreign Employment Promotion Board. The trends in foreign employment are presented for past eight years, 2009/10-2018/19. Although Nepal labour migration report 2020 and preliminary report of 2021, this report reiterates those trends along with updated data from the past fiscal year to create a single comprehensive report for readers' easy reference.

Results and Discussion

The pattern for female migrant workers differs slightly and exhibits a greater variety than for male migrants. Owing to the open border that Nepal shares with India and its close socio-cultural ties, India has been the most preferred labor destination for Nepalese. Historically, female migration from Nepal was linked to cross-border marriages in India, resettlement of entire families in Northeast India, Burma, and Bhutan, or being lured/trafficked into working as sex workers. While such a pattern of migration to India is still common and mostly undocumented, many women also started migrating independently for employment in foreign destinations.

In 1980s, Nepali women began to travel to Southeast and East Asia. After the People's movement of 1990 in Nepal, female migration as international laborers, primarily domestic workers and caregivers, picked up. By the 1990s, their migration was concentrated in the domestic and service sectors in Hong Kong and Japan. In the 2000s, countries in the Arab States began attracting more Nepali female migrants to work as domestic and service workers. By 2007, an estimated 80 of Nepali women working in the Arab States were undertaking domestic work within private households, such as cleaning, cooking, or caring for children or elderly family members. Other Nepali women migrants worked in hotels, restaurants, catering, manufacturing, medical services and beauty parlors both within Asia and abroad.

In more recent times, UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Cyprus are the top five countries where 77 percent of total female migrants of Nepal go for employment. Moreover, over 50 percent of Nepali female migrants hail from districts of Provinces 1 and 3 such as Jhapa, Sindhupalchok, Makwanpur, Morang, Kathmandu, Kavrepalanchok, Ilam, Nuwakot, Sunsari, and Chitwan. This data is consistent in 2017/18 and 2018/19 as per the latest report.

As per the preliminary report of the 2021 census, 2.1 million Nepalese population are abroad. While the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) has so far approved 110 countries as labor migration destinations for Nepalese, it is estimated that Nepalese work

in as many as 172 countries. Nevertheless, Nepal's foreign employment is concentrated in only a handful of countries: India, Qatar, Malaysia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Driven by the oil boom in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, countries and shortages of labor in South East and East Asian countries like Malaysia, South Korea and Japan, migration of Nepali workers shot up in the past two decades. Looking at the trend of labor permit issuance by the DoFE, Nepal had been experiencing a steady rise in outbound migration since the 2000s. The number of labor permits issued peaked at 2013/14, reaching a high of 519,638, before continuously falling in the following years. Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions imposed on the movement of people, only 72,081 labor permits were issued in 2020/21 (Department of Foreign Employment, 2020).

One of the main reasons for the decrease in issuance of labor permits after 2013/14 was the "Free Visa Free Ticket" policy introduced in June 2015, which made the employer in the destination countries liable to pay all the recruitment expenses, airfares, visa fees and medical examination fees of migrant workers. This policy especially hit the migration to Malaysia the hardest, as Malaysian employers were un-willing to bear the expenses of Nepali workers. The steep fall in labor demand from Malaysia resulted in a surge in Nepalese labor supply in the GCC countries, which decreased the bargaining power of Nepali workers going to these countries. Similarly, the limitations time and again on female going abroad as domestic help heavily affected the mobility of women migrant various countries. Moreover, the existing Foreign Employment Act and Regulations has not successes to integrate the current developments in foreign employment.

The Government has instituted a "free visa free ticket" scheme whereby employers are to bear the visa and air travel expenses for workers going for employment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Malaysia. Its intent is to ease the financial burden of migrants and to make migration for employment more readily accessible to aspiring labor migrants. The worker would only pay for medical tests, orientation training and a service fee to the recruitment agency. However, the 56th Annual Report of the Auditor General has raised concerns that the scheme's implementation and monitoring has not been successful and that migrant workers are still paying significant amounts to recruiting agencies. In August 2017, public interest litigation was brought in the Supreme Court of Nepal demanding effective implementation of the scheme. In January 2019 the Court issued a directive to the government to take measures to be able to effectively implement the scheme. To date however, the scheme is still not being effectively implemented. Over the nine fiscal years from 2008/2009 to 2016/2017, Nepali labour migrants obtained permits to work

in 153 different countries. The total number of labour permits issued every fiscal year from 2008/2009 to 2018/2019.

Table 1: Total number of labour work permits since 2008-2019

Years	No. of labour work permits
2008/09	221427
2009/10	294094
2010/11	354716
2011/12	384665
2012/13	450889
2013/14	519638
2014/15	403693
2015/16	499102
2016/17	383493
2017/18	354082
2018/19	236211

Source: DoFE, 2020.

The DoFE data show that a total of 236,211 labour permits were issued in the FY 2018/2019, with overwhelming majority of them (91.3%) being issued to males and the remaining (8.7%) to females. Table 8 shows the number of permits issued during this period by country and the sex of the migrant worker. Data confirm that Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Malaysia are the popular destinations for Nepali migrant workers, though the order may be different over the period of time. As shown in Table 5.3, nearly one-third (31.8%) of all permits are issued to labour migrants going to Qatar, followed by the United Arab Emirates (26.6%), Saudi Arabia (19.6%), Kuwait (6.8%) and Malaysia (4.2%). Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are the most popular destinations in 2019, together comprising 58 per cent of the total number of permits issued.

Table 2: Labour permits issued by place of destination and sex, 2018/2019

Place of destination	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Qatar	71,322	30.2	3,702	1.6	75,024	31.76
United Arab Emirates	55,444	23.5	7,332	3.1	62,776	26.58
Saudi Arabia	44,493	18.8	1,587	0.7	46,080	19.51
Kuwait	14,417	6.1	1,578	0.7	15,995	6.77
Malaysia	9,828	4.2	171	0.1	9,999	4.23
Bahrain	4,198	1.8	435	0.2	4,633	1.96
Oman	2,401	1.0	321	0.1	2,722	1.15
Japan	870	0.4	89	0.0	959	0.41
Maldives	1,484	0.6	490	0.2	1,974	0.84
Cyprus	194	0.1	1,536	0.7	1,730	0.73
Afghanistan	1,824	0.8	6	0.0	1,830	0.77
Malta	1,060	0.4	657	0.3	1,717	0.73
Jordan	85	0.0	1,373	0.6	1,458	0.62
Turkey	1,143	0.5	438	0.2	1,581	0.67
Romania	1,084	0.5	94	0.0	1,178	0.50
Poland	981	0.4	127	0.1	1,108	0.47
Seychelles	330	0.1	35	0.0	365	0.15
Israel	14	0.0	44	0.0	58	0.02
Brunei Darussalam	139	0.1	4	0.0	143	0.06
China	371	0.2	77	0.0	448	0.19
Macao SAR, China	699	0.3	40	0.0	739	0.31
Portugal	453	0.2	8	0.0	461	0.20
Czechia	359	0.2	41	0.0	400	0.17
United States of America	262	0.1	69	0.0	331	0.14
New Zealand	175	0.1	76	0.0	251	0.11
Russian Federation	160	0.1	1	0.0	161	0.07
Sri Lanka	207	0.1	25	0.0	232	0.10

Singapore	196	0.1	10	0.0	206	0.09
Republic of Korea	83	0.0	1	0.0	84	0.04
Australia	94	0.0	11	0.0	105	0.04
Canada	82	0.0	18	0.0	100	0.04
Other	1,181	0.5	182	0.1	1,363	0.58
Total	21,5633	91.3	20,578	8.7	236.211	100.00

Source: DoFE, 2019

Nepal, like a few countries in Asia, has invoked various bans on women from migrating for employment. In 1999, for instance, the Foreign Employment Promotion Board banned the issuing of a labour permit to any woman younger than 30 years who wanted to go to an Arab State as a domestic worker. The ban was lifted in 2010 after protective mechanisms were introduced for outgoing workers, but then was reinstated in 2012 to prevent any woman younger than 30 from travelling to the Middle East for domestic work. Even though the intent is to protect women from many risks, including long working hours, sexual violence, physical abuse and economic exploitation, the policy is heavily criticized, particularly for not being effective – young women continue to migrate for domestic work to Middle East countries, but now do so through irregular channels, without any form of protection that the formal system can offer. Recognizing this, the government is currently reviewing the impact of the ban on female migration and considering alternative means to protect women during employment.

Female migration was undocumented and illegal till 2007 in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other neighboring countries. As per the DoFE, more than 176,000 women have received labor permits since 2008 to go to labor destinations such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Cyprus, and Jordan. Contrastingly, another report by the DoFE stated that only 21,412 Nepali women were legally working overseas as of 2014/15.

The number of labor permits received by female migrants surged by 106 percent between 2010/11 and 2014/15 in comparison to an increase of only 39 percent of male migrants. The share of female migrants stood at around 8.5 percent in 2018/19 as per the Nepal Labour Migration Report, 2020.

Table 3: Trend in obtaining labor approvals (Disaggregated by gender in terms)

Years	Male	Female
2008/9	211371	8594
2009/10	284038	10056
2010/11	344300	10416
2011/12	361707	22958
2012/13	423122	27767
2013/14	490517	29121
2014/15	477690	21412
2015/16	385226	18467
2016/17	362766	20105
2017/18	331679	22419
2018/19	215630	20578

Source: National Migration Report, 2020, DoFE, 2020, Ministry of Labour Employment and Social Security, 2020

Labor migration has been an integral part of the livelihood of Nepal is since the sixth century, when artisans and traders from the Kathmandu valley used to travel to Tibet and India for work. Even today, foreign employment provides a huge volume of Nepali youths with employment opportunities, which has aided in the reduction of poverty. As per the NLSS- 2011, 56 percent of Nepali households have at least one member of their family working and living abroad. The remittances sent by these members have helped improve the standard of living of Nepali households. In 2020, the remittances sent by migrant workers amounted to 23.5 percent of the Nepal's GDP. Therefore, international labor migration plays a huge role in keeping Nepal's economy afloat.

Table 4: Total approved numbers of list skill wise migrants from 2020 to 2021

SN	Skill Type	Men	Women	Total
1	High Skilled	55	6	61
2	Professional	226	20	246
3	Semi-Skilled	14427	1156	15583
4	Skilled	65869	4557	70426
5	Unskilled	74665	5717	80382
	Total	155242	11456	166698

Source: Nepal Labour Migration Preliminary Report, 2021

During the period of one year, total 61 high skilled Nepalese manpower got approval to go labour migration where are 55 male and 6 female, 246 professional manpower where 226 male and 20 female got approval, 15583 number of semi-skilled manpower where 14427 are male and 1156 are female got approval to go labour migration. Similarly, 70426 total number of skilled manpower where are 65869 male and 4557 female who got approval, 80382 number of unskilled manpower where 74665 male and 5717 female who got approval to go to foreign labour migration during the one year period.

During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown enforced in March 2020, the Government of Nepal completely suspended the issuance of labor permits until July 2020. This brought recruitment of migrant workers to a complete halt. Despite an increase in demand for labor from countries like Malaysia, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Romania, Jordan and Hong Kong, workers could not be deployed due to the suspension of labor permit issuance and grounding of international flights. Nevertheless, as COVID-19 restrictions were loosened and international flights resumed, labor migration got back to pre-COVID-19 levels. While the outflow of workers from Nepal had been slowly dwindling post the 2013/14 peak, the demand for migrant workers in major destinations like the GCC countries, Malaysia, Japan and South Korea is not likely to go down in the near future. The economic outlook of these countries looks positive as their post COVID-19 recovery plans to increase the economic activities seems promising along with plans for development.

The lack of adequate policies to facilitate migrant workers, the existing bureaucratic bottlenecks and political deadlocks within Nepal remains a challenge. Nepal should also work on expediting Government-to-Government (G2G) labor agreements with new destination countries in order to ensure fair treatment of migrant workers along with adequate remuneration and benefits. Nepal currently only has labor agreements under the G2G model with Israel and South Korea. The Nepalese government should focus on making sure that migrant workers receive the required skills and knowledge before going for foreign employment, to ensure higher paying jobs that match the skills.

Conclusion

Nepal has a long history of emigration and it is in increasing trends. Now, however, migration to Gulf States and Malaysia has increased greatly, the participation of women in this emigration for work in foreign countries has been increasing too. The foreign labor migration has developed in such a way, which has shifted the agricultural based economy towards remittance based economy in Nepal. As with the migration rate, the volume of remittances and their contribution to household economy has increased significantly in

recent times. The share in Nepal's GDP stands as the third largest in the world. While on one hand, the country on the supply. The policy of foreign labour migration is fully implemented. The management of labour migration should be decentralized and thus accessible where migrants originate rather than solely functioning in Kathmandu, to motivate Nepali workers abroad to use the formal remittance channel to capture a larger volume of remittances while ensuring security and reliability of their money transfers. With development finance comprising official development assistance, foreign direct investment, debt and remittances, which make the largest contribution, remittances should be central to the development. The financial, human and social capital accumulated by migrant workers abroad are interlinked their accumulated wealth has real potential to substantially impact the economic and social development of Nepal. Women could gain from increased access to economic and social resources and higher bargaining power. The absence of men could expose women to new vulnerabilities due to the existing gender inequalities and add tensions through increased responsibilities. Given the mixed consequences of men's migration, it is not clear whether men's absence has empowering effects women. The specific aspects of women's empowerment and discussed the factors influencing each of these aspects as well as the conditions and policies under which women may be able to maximize the gains from migration and minimize the associated costs.

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