

## **Neither heroes nor victims: Women migrant workers and changing family and community relations in Nepal**

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**Abstract** Circular labour migration is frequently portrayed as a gender-neutral phenomenon. Despite the growing literature on the feminization of migration (see e.g. Morokvasic 1987; Piper 2008), scholarly and policy literature is often gender-blind. In Nepal, over the last decade, the share of women migrant workers has significantly increased. The National Population Census 2011 shows that about 13 percent of absentee population is composed of women. Due to prevailing patriarchal norms and value, women labour migration is traditionally stigmatized and associated with sex work or equated to trafficking. However, with rising demands for cheap labour (particularly domestic work) in destination countries, continued inadequacy of rural employment opportunities, and changing aspirations, women are increasingly migrating independently. This paper aims at investigating the changing perceptions of women migrants, by analysing both the stigma and the mythicization that accompany their contributions, as well as how masculinities and femininities are (re)negotiated in the process. Pourakhi, an organization established by women returnees in 2003, has collected over 1700 case studies on returnee women migrant workers in Nepal. This paper delves into selected case studies (307) of women migrant workers from Nepal. In addition to this, a consultation with 14 returnee migrant women from 14 districts was held in September 2016 in Kathmandu, in order to better understand the reintegration process. Following the focus group discussion, five in-depth interviews have been conducted to further consolidate the data. Using triangulation and discourse analysis, we specifically look at the narratives emerging from the voices of women migrant workers. We analyse how they perceive the changes to their subjectivities brought in by the migratory experience, and their impact on social norms, gender stereotypes at both the family and community levels.

## 1. Introduction

Research on migration in the Global South, especially in South Asia, has focused on agrarian transition and the consequent “feminization of agriculture”. In recent decades, with rising new demands for cheap labour worldwide, along with continued inadequacy of rural employment opportunities, and increased connectivity, male outmigration has increased, bringing both positive transformation and increased autonomy and power for women (Ahmad, 2012; UN-INSTRAW 2007), as well as increased drudgery and mobility challenges for women who stayed behind and their families (Allen 2003, Shrestha and Bhandari 2007, Massey et al 2007, Bohra-Mishra and Massey 2010; Gioli et al 2014). In some cases transnational practices reproduced or even exacerbated gendered power structures, especially when control over financial remittances rested with men (Mahler and Pessar, 2001; see also Walton-Roberts, 2004, King et al 2006). Several studies have addressed the issue of feminization of agriculture in Nepal (Kaspar 2005; Thieme and Mueller-Boeker 2010; Adhikari and Hobley 2011; Maharjan et al 12) with similar mixed outcome.

Circular labour migration (especially South to North, including labour migration to countries in the Persian Gulf)<sup>1</sup> has often been portrayed as a gender-neutral phenomenon. Studies focusing on the role of migration for development and sustainable livelihoods have taken the household as unit of analysis, hence ignoring intra-household and inter-generational dynamics (Thieme 2011), which are crucial for gender analysis. Critiques to approaches such as the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) have shown how unequal gendered power relations both in the migration process, and within the conflicting networks of migrant and other non migrant people involved, have been overlooked (Arango, 2000; de Haas, 2010; Lindley, 2009). The lack of gender analysis in the transnational migration literature has also been highlighted (Pessar & Mahler 2003; Kunz, 2011), even though attention to gender dynamics in transnationalism has pointed at the complex interplay of gender, class and normative constraints in shaping women’s social personhood in a transnational field (see e.g. the case of Morocco –Italy, Salih 2001).

Scholarly research often takes for granted that migrants are ‘men’, despite the growing literature on the feminization of migration (Silvey 2006; Piper 2008; UNFPA 2009) and the long-established fact that “birds of passage” are also women (Morokvasic 1987). In Nepal, over the last decade, the share of women migrant workers has significantly increased. The National Population Census 2011 shows that about 13 percent of absentee population is composed of women, an increase by 5 percent since 2001 census (CBS 2012).

In the Persian Gulf, a majority of women migrant workers is occupied in low skilled jobs -domestic workers

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<sup>1</sup> In standard classification, migration to the Gulf is considered as a South-South type of movement. However, there would be much to discuss as to what makes the countries of the Persian Gulf, “South”. As global governance bodies are increasingly advocating for the virtues of South-South circulation, the way we classify such types of circulation has important consequences on the types of policy and the regime of protection for migrant workers.

and low-end service providers- (Rakkee and Sasikumar, 2012). The violations of human rights (and workers' rights) at place in the Gulf countries are well known and documented by many prominent human rights organizations. Many of these violations are linked to the 'kafala' (sponsorship) system, which requires workers to have a sponsor, usually the employer, who is responsible for their visa and legal status, and literally "own" the employee. This system has been heavily criticised for creating opportunities for the exploitation of workers and creating a de facto slavery market depriving migrants of the most basic rights (Shah and Fargues 2011; Pande 2013).

At the macro level (structure), global capitalism and the related fluxes of labour contributed to framing a narrative on development which focuses on the increasing remittances (especially in remittances-dependent countries like Nepal) and their outcomes. On the other hand, agency has to be considered. What kind of changes in power structures at the micro level occur in labour-sending regions?

In particular, when it comes to migrant women workers, some studies tend to argue that the migratory experience for women resulted in the transformation of gender relations. For instance, in Bangladesh, the migration of women to Malaysia led to increased economic independence, and changes in social practices (Dannecker, 2004). On the one hand, migration, particularly by women, often disrupts traditional care arrangements for children and the elderly (King and Vullnetari 2006) and creates long-term separation between spouses, parents and children (Pribilsky 2004) and is often stigmatised and considered as synonymous to trafficking and sex work.

Studies focusing on women's remittances show similar mixed outcomes. Some demonstrate that remitted money enable households to improve their livelihoods, children's education and, at times, to substitute family carers for paid carers (see Kofman and Raghuram 2011,). Recent policy literature has been promoting the idea that 'women remit more than men', that "are the more consistent remitters and send larger amounts, more regularly than men" (Rahman, 2012: 4). This idea seems to essentialise a context-specific finding, that holds true in certain case (see, e.g. Collinson et al. 2003 on South-Africa or Curran and Saguy (2001) on Thailand, or Orozco et al 2006), but in many other cases, "men remit more than women" (see e.g. Semyonov and Gorodzeisky 2005 on the Philippines). Obviously, it makes sense to collect such sex-disaggregated data, yet the analysis can't be reduced to an allegedly higher propensity of "women" to remit, which just (re)produces stereotypes on the alleged instinctive "caregiving nature" of women, where "women" are understood as a homogeneous, monolithic category. Women are also often depicted as more "altruist", sacrificing for the family rather than for their own individual interest. Without proper relational/intersectional analysis of power relations at several scales, such findings make very little sense and often reinforces gender stereotypes.

The present paper does not focus on remittances, or on the alleged propensity of women to remit, but rather focuses on the lived subjectivities of migrant women from Nepal, trying to unpack the multi-faceted experience of their journeys. Women are often depicted as "heroes of development" (e.g. for the alleged 'altruist' nature of their remitting habits") or as "victims" (fragile, vulnerable subjects with little agency), which often leads to the stigmatisation of women labour migration, and even to equating it to trafficking (see de Haas 2007a).

This paper is an attempt to move beyond the “simple heuristic dichotomisation of the interpretation of migration as a potentially liberating and transformatory experience” or as a negative one “whereby migration is yet another layer added to the multiple oppression” (King et al 2006: 420). As argued above, migration comes with both structure and agency. Rather than focusing on a (necessary) critique of labour markets and on the high human, social and financial costs of migration, this paper aims at giving voices to the subjectivities of migrant women in Nepal, as less attention has been paid to this aspect. We unpack their reasons for undertaking international migration, and their struggle for capability to secure a livelihood in the context of globalisation (see Briones 2009). Their experiences crucially reveal how the migratory experience is harnessed for (re)negotiating their role in their families and communities, and challenge the stigma and the mythicization that still accompany women’s migration.

## 2. Background and Methods

### 2.1 The context: Migration in Nepal

Nepali people have historically migrated for labour to many destinations, from the Gurkhas’s engagement in the British Army, to the persistent flows to India, facilitated by the fact that the two countries share an open border<sup>2</sup>. From the 1990s, the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia have become major destinations. This has brought a surge in the magnitude of remittances inflow that constituted about 28.8 per cent of the country’s GDP in 2014.<sup>3</sup> From 2008 to 2014 more than 2 million labour permits have been issued by the Government of Nepal (DoFE 2014).

Initially, as in most of South Asia, labour migration to the Gulf and Malaysia was heavily gendered, and almost exclusively dominated by men except for Sri Lanka (where women dominate migration). All-over South Asia the ideal of *pardah* (seclusion of women), that assign a symbolic capital of honour and respectability to the control over women’s realms of action (Siegmann and Thieme 2010), has hampered women’s mobility. Only in recent years, India and Nepal have witnessed a feminization of international migration, linked to a global demand for domestic workers reproducing the traditional gendered division of labour (Agrawal, 2006). However, as compared to other countries in the region (see table 1), in Nepal there are less restrictions, and in 2012 women accounted for 13% of the total absentee population (CBS, 2012). This figure certainly underestimate the magnitude of women migration, as it does not account for cross border migration to India, and restrictive provisions on the mobility of women migrants often increase undocumented migration.

#### Table 1: Age restriction imposed on international migration of female domestic workers

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<sup>2</sup> It has to be noted that due to the 'open border' between the two countries, migration is not documented in terms of collection information/data on the flow.

<sup>3</sup><http://data.worldbank.org/country/nepal>[Accessed: 9th December 2014].

Country	Condition
Bangladesh	Women must be at least 25 years old
India	Women must be at least 25 or have completed matriculation
Nepal	Women must be at least 18
Pakistan	Women must be at least 35
Sri Lanka	Women must be at least 21

Source: Rakkee and Sasikumar, 2012

## 2.2 Methods

Mixed methods have been employed in the study. We have coded and analysed 307 cases studies of women migrant returnees who have stayed at the shelter house run by Pourakhi<sup>4</sup> in Kathmandu for the period spanning from July 2015 to June 2016. In addition to this, a consultation with 14 returnee migrant women from 14 districts was held in September 2016 in Kathmandu, in order to better understand the reintegration process. The interaction was focused on the challenges and the opportunities of reintegration after women's migration journeys. Following the focus group discussion, five in-depth interviews have been conducted to further consolidate the data.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Women migrant workers: a socio-economic profile

Pourakhi's database for the period spanning from July 2015 to June 2016 contains the profiles and stories of 307 women from 56 districts of Nepal (out of a total of 75 districts). Most of the migrant women hailed from rural districts. There were no cases from Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur – the three districts with the highest urban population.

In what follows, we present some key trends and the key socio-economic characteristics emerging from the analysed profiles. The average age of the migrant is 35 years, however there were 4 cases of underage migration. Most of the women (68%) were married, 16% were unmarried, 10% separated or divorced, and 6% were widows.

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<sup>4</sup> Pourakhi is a non-government organization established in 2003 by returnee migrant women, whose objective is to make migration safer, organized and beneficial for women migrants and their families. Pourakhi runs a shelter in Kathmandu where women migrant can receive psychological, medical and legal counselling, as well as support on how to reintegrate in their society and communities. Pourakhi also runs a migration information booth at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu, and, over the years, has developed an extensive network including the Embassies of Nepal and Nepali associations/groups (both formal and informal) in major destination countries. These networks are another source for providing information about the shelter home in Kathmandu for women migrants returnees that need a safe place of transit in Kathmandu before going back to their homes or finding a suitable alternative. Pourakhi keeps a detailed database of the shelters, where systematic information on the different stages of the migratory process is recorded, including women's socio-economic background prior to migration, their stay in destination, and the reasons for returning.

<http://www.pourakhi.org.np/>

Another salient characteristic of the socio-economic background of migrant women is early marriage: out of the 259 married women, 56% were married underage. In Nepal, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 years, but many of the women were married when they were only 14 years. Similarly, 34% of the respondents mentioned facing violence at home (verbal, physical and sexual abuse). On average, women had 2 children, and only 6% of them were found to have no children.

The major destination countries were found to be Kuwait (42%), Saudi Arabia and U.A.E. (15%), Lebanon (7%), Oman (15%), and Malaysia and Qatar (2%). Few women migrated also to Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Cyprus, and Hong Kong. The average duration of their stay in destination countries is 25 months. About 70% were documented migrants, and the majority resorted to an agent. The top occupation (94%) was domestic work, while the rest of the migrant workers was employed in factories.

The shelters staff meticulously documented the pre-migration household socio-economic situation of the migrant workers. From the analysis of this information, six main factors can be singled out: 1. Difficult and deteriorating economic situation (e.g. due to death, illnesses, or economic losses and debts); 2. Gender-based violence at the family level, especially from the husband's family; 3. Family not supportive (husband or the family not supporting the basic needs of women/children, thus forcing them to earn their own income); 4. Underage marriage (below the legal age of 18 years); 5. Desire to provide better future for the children. About 63% of the migrant women perceived their economic situation to be poor, 27% reported hard but acceptable conditions, and only 9% said that their economic situation was fair before the migration process.

About 88% out of the total of married women mentioned their wish to provide a better future to their children as a main reason for undertaking labour migration, as they felt that with the limited opportunities back home, it would have not been possible to meet their children needs and hopes. For unmarried women, the reason for migration ranged from providing economic security to family and siblings, to aspirations of getting an opportunity to have financial independence. Interestingly, migration was also used as a means to deter early marriage. The repayment of family debts (e.g. health-related expenditures, gambling debt, investment loans) was a driver for 6% of the sample.

### 3.2 The migratory experience

A significant number of migrant women (59%) reported to have faced problems in the destination, overwhelmingly those employed as domestic workers. A common problem reported is drudgery and long working hours, including night shifts, which are particularly hard for Nepali women who are used to work from early morning and sleep early. As reported by one migrant worker "Social life in the Gulf starts at 10pm, which is already past the sleeping time back home. So adjusting to this new life is extremely difficult as, even if allowed, we could simply not sleep during the day".

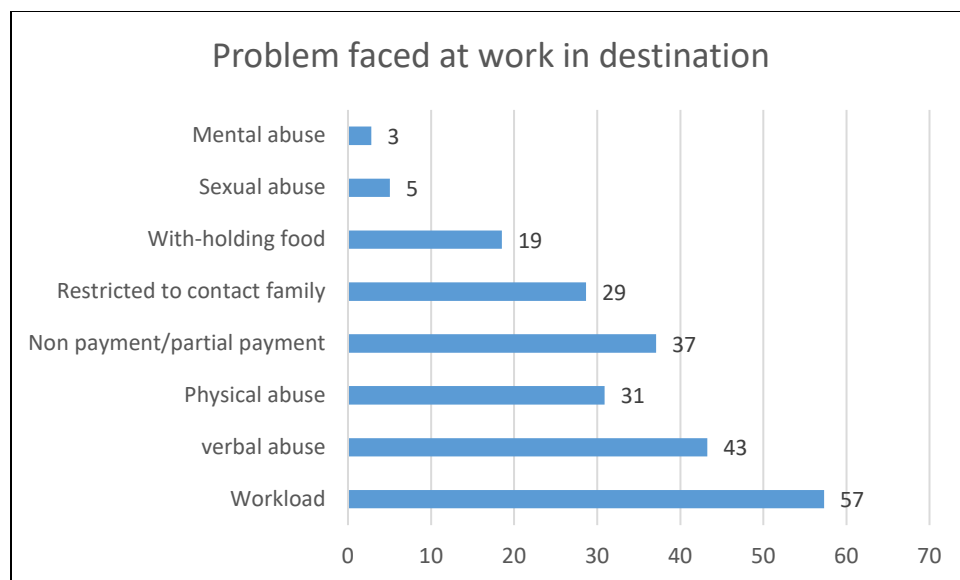


Figure 1: Major issues faced by migrant women in destination countries

Other issues are mental and sexual abuse (that might be under-reported for the fear of stigmatisation), lack of food, inability to be in contact with the family members back home, delay or interruption in the salary payment, and physical and verbal abuse (see Figure 1).

The problems faced by women migrants in factory employment are different from those of domestic workers. However, in our sample, very few women were employed in factories (only 17 migrants). Even though the sample is small, only 5 women out of 17 reported facing problems – one was not paid her salary, one was deported (due to visa expiry), two had health problems, and one mentioned workload as an issue.

Due to the length of their stay, often a strong emotional bond developed between them and their hosting family. They enjoyed the exchange of language, culture and knowledge with women and children in the family. Women has shared to be very proud of what they taught to the children of the families they worked for, and t have imported what they deemed to be “good practices” that are common in Nepal but not in the receiving countries<sup>5</sup> (such as encouraging breastfeeding, and teaching the importance of work to the children).

Women also expressed sharing language, food and culture with the family in destination.

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<sup>5</sup> As shared by a returnee: “While migrating I had to leave my two children behind under other’s care and I missed them terribly initially. But the bonding with the children under my care helped me to settle in destination. Taking care of the children was my major duty, and we had developed a strong bond. Children are generally very much pampered in the Gulf countries, particularly male children. I am very proud that I have managed to instill some discipline in the children under my care. I had taught them to respect household work and the contribution of the domestic help. Both the children under my care used to help me with work. I believe that this will help them to grow as responsible adults who respect work and workers and not look them down”

Migrant women also felt that they were somewhat acting as “goodwill ambassador” for their country. As shared in the FGD *“we are teaching Nepali language, culture, food to people who have never known about them before. Women in Gulf live a very restricted life. So for them to learn about different culture and food is an opportunity too. And we feel proud to be introducing these to them.”*

### 3.3 The return: Breaking stereotypes, conquering independence

Drawing on the results from the consultation and the in-depth case studies, we have identified some key areas where women felt that their migratory experience made a difference for them, their families and communities, and has helped them to redefine their space and roles back in Nepal.

#### Access to education

One of the primary use of the remitted money by migrant women is education. Improved education for children is a priority, but investments were made also for improving their own educational status. As puts by a migrant worker from Sarlahi District:

*I had discontinued my study mostly due to lack of interest and partly to reduce the financial burden on my parents. After marriage (mine was a love marriage) there was no way to study further and I was not very keen either. But after having 2 children and the need to feed them and school them, I suddenly realized the mistake in not pursuing my study. Without proper education, there were very little that I could do help financially in providing a good education to my children. That was the reason that I had gone for foreign employment. Upon return, I decided to continue my study. I had completed 10 years of schooling so I joined high school, which I completed successfully. I am positive that with my work experience and qualification I can get a good job and provide a good future to my children.*

This finding is in line with much of the literature on remittances and development, showing that education is one of the primary fields of investment. This has often improved education for girls, so that the impact of migration on the transformations of patriarchal power structures is often viewed as intergenerational (See e.g. King et al. 2006 for Albania; de Haas 2007b for Morocco, Thieme and Wyss 2005 for Nepal; Gioli et al 2014 for Pakistan). Interestingly, in our study, many women invested also in their own education, thus bringing a significant transformation in their present lives, and helping them to renegotiate their role at home and in society at large.

#### Freedom of mobility

The migration experience has given courage and confidence for traveling alone to many women. This is one of the benefits of migration shared and enjoyed by a majority of returnees. While before migration, even a short visit to nearby areas was challenging, due to patriarchal norms and purdah, after their journeys, their perceptions of place and scale have been profoundly changed. As Manita shared:

*“Before migration I would wait for my husband to go to nearby market. I cannot even think of travelling to Kathmandu alone from my home in Chitwan [southern District]. I just did not have the confidence to go anywhere on my own. And it never struck me as a limitation either, as that is how things were for women in my village. But after my migration experience sometimes I look at myself and cannot relate to my earlier self. I do not understand why I*



*hesitated so much in going out of the village and what I was afraid of. Now I have no problems commuting to Kathmandu or any other place on my own."*

Similarly, Tika shared her experience of increased mobility, which brought her to purchase a motorbike:

*"I have always been involved in social work, even while I was in school. I used to run adult literacy classes in my community while I was a student myself. So after returning from migration, I was thinking of ways to engage myself. Initially, I used remittance to open a small grocery shop near the village school, which made good business. But running a shop took a lot of my time. As my aspirations were always on community work, I decided to sell that shop and devote more time to social work instead. In my community, education is not a priority for girls. As I am educated and I have also worked abroad, my community really trust me and listen to my advices. The demand for my services in various community committees started to increase with time. With this increased workload, I could not manage to just walk, hence I have purchased a motorbike. I am the first and only woman to ride a motorbike here. Even in cities, you would not see women on a motorbikes, those who have a vehicle, would rather drive a scooter."*

To various degrees, depending on the local context, in South Asia the concept of *purdah* (gender segregation) is still a normative one. A 'symbolic capital' of honour (see Thieme and Siegmann 2010 on Pakistan) comes with the household ability to control women's mobility. In Nepal things are fast changing and women have always worked in agriculture, however, restrictions and stigma still persists. The migratory experience have given women enough confidence to challenge restrictions that they had internalised.

#### Decision making power

After the experience of taking (often very difficult) decisions in destination countries, with no support, without understanding the language or the legal and social context, many returnee women shared that they now feel much less threatened by their families and communities. They shared that they have learnt to use what they called "strategic thinking", i.e. influencing decisions by avoiding conflict as much as possible. A daughter-in-law has normally very little space in the household decision-making process, but with increased capacity to strategise, bargain and negotiate, many women felt that they have improved their influence in both their maternal and in-laws houses. Purna heads from the Terai region (the Gangetic plain in southern Nepal), where the role of a daughter-in-law is even more restricted as compared to the hills. She thinks that she has gained respect and a voice in the family through her migratory experience. She is now consulted by her husband, but also by her parents-in-law, as well as by other family members in any crucial household decision. Her opinions are taken into due account, and she has been playing an important role in maintaining peace in her household. As she puts it:

*"In every family there are conflicts and dissent... in my family too. But in family conflict mitigation, a woman hardly has any role, particularly a "buhari" (daughter-in-law). My migration experience has helped me gaining respect from my family elders. I have gained two things from migration: I have contributed to my family's income and learnt problem-solving. When living in a foreign you need to learn to deal with situations strategically. After living in destination for more than 4 years, it has become a reflex for me to think strategically. Upon my return, I have solved and prevented family feuds with strategic thinking. My objective is to try and understand everybody's perspective and offer solutions that are least conflicting or confrontational. My father-in-law has come to respect this, and now consults me not only on family feuds, but also on community issues. This is the biggest learning from my migration experience."*

In Nepal, violence, daughters-in-law often suffer physical and psychological abuses. Hence, the newly acquired ability of claiming a role in the household and having their voices heard means in the first place negotiating a space free from abuse and victimization. As explained above, for many women, such violence was precisely what motivated them in undertaking migration.

### Financial independence

Many women returnees have started small business activities in order to secure their economic independence. Before migration, they were dependent on their parents, brothers, husbands for even very minor purchases and decisions. Migration and remittance has helped them in breaking their subservience. As shared by a returned during the FGD:

*“We can keep talking about “mahila ko adhikar” (women’s rights) but when one has to depend on husband, father and brother for even small money to purchase a packet of salt or a bangle, there is never going to be empowerment. It is important to have financial independence, or better contribute to the family’s income, so that we can actually feel equal.”*

Some returnees have not only gained financial independence but have also challenged existing gender norms and taken up employment in male dominated sectors. A returnee from Kaski District works now as a tourist guide. She has acquired confidence in speaking and traveling during her migration experience. This has helped her to take the courage to engage in a male-dominated profession. In her words:

*“I was very keen to learn the English language. I was interested in the language while in school but never got much opportunity to learn. While I was working abroad, my family in destination country encouraged me to learn the language during my free time. My employer and their children also helped me with books, and corrected my mistakes. After returning, I was in a dilemma as to what to do. I come from a beautiful part of Nepal, well known for famous trek routes like the Annapurna Base Camp and others. Tourism was flourishing after the conflict. This is why I decided to utilize my experience and started working as a tourist guide. I had to take training and get a certificate before, but it’s a very satisfying job and it pays well. The language skills that I learnt in destination and the confidence to interact with people have helped me build my confidence.”*

### Access to land and property

In Nepal, land is customarily transmitted along patriarchal lines. Only 19.7% of women own around 5% of land throughout Nepal, and only around 11% have effective control over their property (IOM 2016)<sup>6</sup>. A returnee from Bardiya district has supported her family with remittances for years. Due to this, her father has decided that she should also inherit land, hence the family land has been equally split between her and her two brothers. She has also built her own house, where she is taking care of her old parents, which is customarily responsibility of a son. Similar stories were also shared by others migrant women, both during the FGDs and in the shelter cases. In this case, migration has helped challenging a well-entrenched system of discrimination that deprives women of strategic assets and access to resources.

### Migration as an alternative to early marriage

It is a general practice for women in Nepal to work and study in the parental home until the age of 18-19, and then get married and move out to the in-laws house, where they are expected to take care of the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/images/Demographic-infographic.jpg>

household. Girls' access to education has improved over the years, but if there are financial constraints and the girl does not prove herself in her study, little options remain but to get married and move out, as moving outside the parental house without being married comes with great stigma in Nepali society. Migration offers an alternative. The money earned abroad allows women to negotiate their future and their space in the new house after marriage. After experiencing the importance of financial independence and the emotional maturity required to have a better role in the in-laws place after marriage, women returnees feel very strongly against child marriage and shared that this is one social evil that they consistently work to redress. This strong attitude against child marriage is also a result of their own personal experience of getting married underage and unprepared. A returnee woman from Sarlahi district came to know about two marriages within her community where both bride and groom were below 16 years. She took a very non-confrontational approach to avoid this marriage. Instead of taking legal help or a strong stance against the families, she calmly explained that such marriages are illegal in Nepal, and what are the consequences of breaking the law. She convinced her own family and other relatives to not participate in such marriages, as they could all be held responsible and arrested. After hearing of the legal implications, many families decided to boycott the wedding and inform the parents of the children about the risks. She managed to postpone the weddings this way.

It is worth mentioning that in some of the stories, the practice that allows husband to take a second wife also played a role in the decision to migrate. For instance, J.G. from Rupehendi district got married only to find out that her husband was already married. As after a couple of years of marriage, he could not have children, her husband's family had decided to marry him with a second wife, based on the superstition that this will help him overcome his bad "*graha*" (phase). She hence decided to go to Bahrain and escape the situation. She worked as a cook and came back after 15 months. She currently works in the hospitality sectors and she wishes to pursue a hotel management level-2 certificate course.

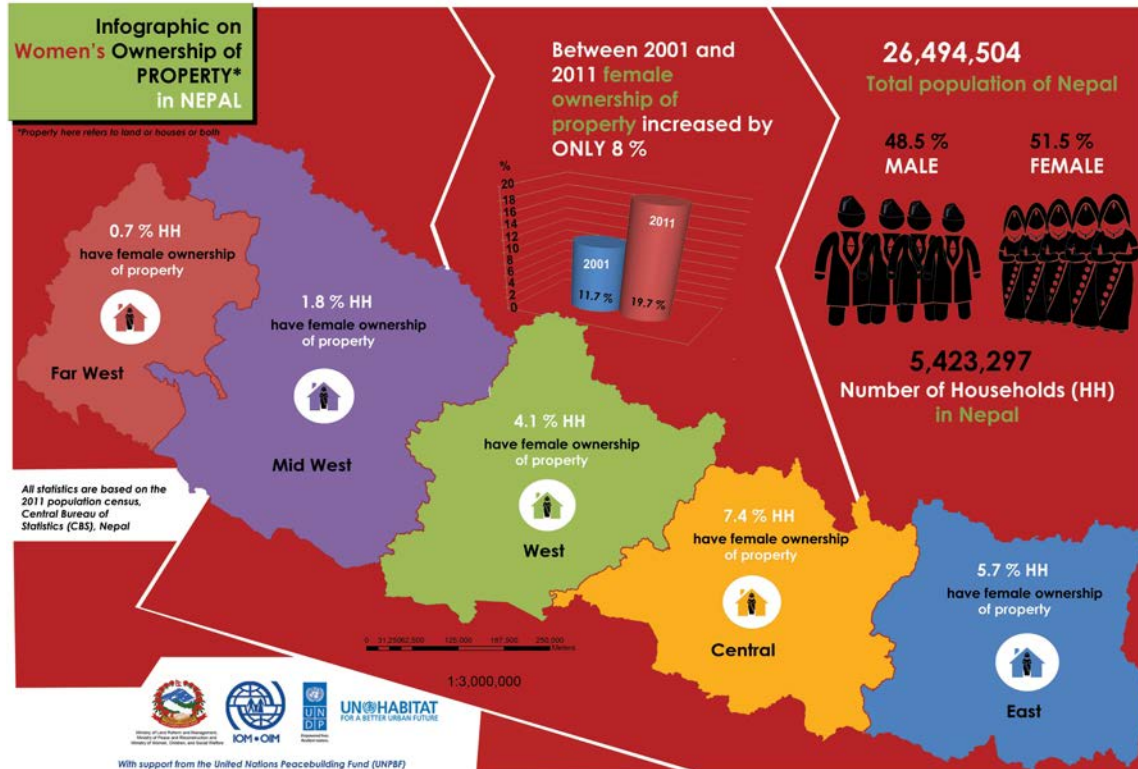


Figure 2: Women’s ownership of property in Nepal (Source: IOM 2011, <https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/images/Demographic-infographic.jpg>)

Earlier research in transnationalism has shown how, for instance, women’s migration from North-Africa to Europe has contributed to increase the age of marriage (Fargues 2006), as well as to the diffusion of different pattern of marriage. Women have used migration as a way to postpone or re-negotiate their marriages (see Salih 2001; de Haas 2007b). On the other hand, studies on male migration to conservative Gulf countries have also seen opposite outcomes (e.g. Taylor 1984 on Egypt).

Chhapaudi: Challenging the notion of impurity

Another patriarchal practice still prevalent in rural Nepal, known as ‘chhapaudi’ (“untouchable being”), prescribes girls and women to stay in isolation during their menstruation as they are considered “impure” during this period. Despite several interventions from (I)NGOs, and a formal ban in 2005<sup>7</sup>, this monthly forced exile is hard to stop. Besides its psychological consequences, such practice is even dangerous for health and hygiene, and more than once has resulted into death (Preiss 2016). The migratory experience has helped women to gain enough confidence to challenge this custom. In destination countries, women

<sup>7</sup> Although *Chhapaudi* was outlawed by Nepal’s supreme court in 2005, the practice is still widely observed, especially in the western parts of the country.

migrant workers were working normally while menstruating, and they found it perfectly possible and socially acceptable: “We do not believe in this superstition anymore” (FGD, 27/09/2016). Out of respect, back in Nepal, they still refrain from entering into temples and in the kitchen during their periods, but they no longer stay in isolation or refrain from their normal working activities. The example of migrant women might have a great impact on young girls and help stopping period shaming more than many development interventions. This is evidence of the how the social remittances<sup>8</sup> that the returnee migrants have brought with them work to transform the norms and practices.

### Fighting against stigmatization of women migration

Women returnees are also actively fighting the stigma that is still attached to women’s migration. In Nepal, women migration has long been associated with sex work and is stigmatized. The media reports of migrant women facing sexual violence in destination countries is further fuelling the equation between women migration and trafficking and prostitution, which is highly stigmatized in a patriarchal society like Nepal (Maharjan et al 2016). Male migrant workers face extreme abuses and sexual violence too in destination countries, but while their sacrifices are glorified and appreciated by both families and communities, women are constantly victimized, due to the fact that women are considered as the symbol of family honour. As shared by a woman returnee: *“I lied about my migration to my neighbours for a number of years, as migrant women were considered as spineless, easy, and I did not want to face this stigma.”* Many unmarried women still shy away from revealing their migration experience, as they are afraid of encountering problems in finding a partner. Women feel that people tend to equate migrant women with victims of sexual violence. It has to be noted, that rape in Nepal is still largely not considered as violence against women, but rather as something for which women are to be blamed. Thus, people do not want to marry a returnee who has certainly been *“Arabi le bhyayeko”* (“already used by an Arab”).

Upon return, many women returnees organized themselves in groups and try to give a more nuanced picture of their migration experience – not only one of violence and exploitation, but also a story of opportunities, emancipation and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, by leveraging their networks, they are also putting efforts in advising perspective migrants on safe migration, and in preventing trafficking and exploitation. Janaki used migration to escape domestic violence, after she got married when she was only 13 years old. With six sisters and a brother, her parents could not afford to educate her and instead married her off at the young age of 13 years. Migration gave her the opportunity to not only change her life, but also to improve the life of her sisters. She has invested some of the money earned in her own education, and she is now providing counselling on safe migration under an ILO project in her district. Similarly, Chetana from Sunsari district has leveraged her extended network to prevent trafficking of women in her community. She has mobilized media, national stakeholders including higher authorities in the police to rescue trafficked women from her village.

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<sup>8</sup> New ideas, images, beliefs and values brought by the migrants to their community (Levitt, 1998, 2001)

Finally, it has to be noted that Nepal is one among the 27 countries that currently have laws or policies prohibiting or limiting the rights of women to pass citizenship to a child or non-citizen spouse<sup>9</sup>. This law, under debate in the new Constitution of the country, has particularly dire consequences for migrant women and their children. Women who have faced sexual abuses in destination countries, often come back pregnant and they have to face further violence from their community and the state, as they are unable to give citizenship to their children. A case study illustrating the kind of violence that women migrant workers have to suffer upon their return is provided in Box 1.

### **Box 1: Mothering a stateless child: Advocating for citizenship through mothers**

Like thousands of other people, L.M. was forced to leave her family due to the armed conflict (1996-2007) when she was 13 years old. She fled from Sindhuli to Kathmandu in 2000. She never went to school. In Kathmandu, she started working in a carpet factory and, later, with some help from her family, started a small business providing processed yarn supply to carpet factories. The business lasted 11 years and successfully. However, she desired to further improve and at the age of 26 went to Lebanon with the help of her family and through a legal agent. She was expected to work in one house and earn 150 Lebanese pound per month, instead, she had to work in 4 houses for only 100 Lebanese Pound a month. She felt physically and mentally unsafe. She lived under the fear of being physically and sexually attacked. She waited for 16 months to be rescued. One day she had a fight with her master who furiously tore all her documents. She ran away from the violent master and went to a police station. She filed a case against her master. While she was at the police station she got offered a job as housemaid.

With no documents and money, she accepted. In the new house she faced sexual abuses and she gave birth to a child in CARITAS centre. After four months CARITAS and Pourakhi managed to bring her back to Nepal. But repatriating her back to her family was a difficult task, as her family did not accept her with her unwed child, which is a strong gender based taboo. She is now living in Kathmandu with her daughter working in a carpet factory. Life is a constant struggle for L.B. as even small steps as admitting her daughter to school is a challenge for her. The school admission system requires filling up forms where name of both father and mother is mandatory. Many schools refused to enroll her daughter as she had no father. L.B. refused to lie and give false information (false name or pretend that her husband is dead) to the school authorities. She is worried about the future of her daughter as getting citizenship certificate and other legal document is going to be equally challenging under the present legal structure.

L.M.'s story is shared by many other migrant women who have been victims of sexual violence in destination. During the FGD returnee women shared the predicament of such "stateless children". The bullying such children face in school and in community and the opportunities lost to these children due to lack of access to legal documents are few examples. This is one such policy which adds to the vulnerability of women in general which is expressed by a returnee women - *"My husband is a womanizer, so I had left him and started to live with my parents along with my son. In order to support myself and education of my son, I had to go for foreign employment. Though I am financial independent now, I still had to beg my husband for his support in order to get citizenship for my son. My son wants to go for foreign employment*

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/05/27-countries-limit-a-womans-ability-to-pass-citizenship-to-her-child-or-spouse/>

*too but for passport he needs his father's support. So I had to send my son to his father for this. I sometimes feel so frustrated as if the state's policy is made to harass and humiliate women"*

## **5. Conclusions**

Despite the fact that women's labour migration is on the rise, (globally, as well as in South Asia), the literature has so far paid insufficient attention to this. Most of the scholarly and policy literature has focused on the vulnerability of women's migrant workers. This is an important aspect of it, necessary for advocating for better rights and working conditions. However, the lived subjectivities of migrant women are often ignored, their aspirations and gains are overlooked. While documenting and recognising the high human cost of labour migration (both for men and women) from Nepal, this paper focused on how Nepali women have harnessed their migration experience for re(negotiating) their roles in their families and communities, and challenge the stigma that still accompany women's migration.

Women often migrate to escape a reality of violence and subjugation. Many have shared that they were facing abuses from their husbands and in-laws, and they had no voice in the decision making process. Interestingly, while the majority of the sample was made of married women migrating also for giving a better future to their children, we also captured some women who married underage. Migration helped them in escaping this reality and renegotiating their role in the family and community. Also, some women have migrated to escape early marriage.

Being exposed to a radically different environment, alone, has boosted women returnees' confidence and give them the courage to challenge patriarchal norms in their society. For instance, women have less fear in being mobile, they have undertaken jobs in male dominated sectors, and challenged patriarchal customs such as chhapaudi (women segregation during menstruation) and early marriage. As senders of remittances and having accumulated some financial resources of their own, these women are able to acquire not only self-esteem and confidence but also respect from their families as well as more autonomy in managing household resources and taking on traditionally male roles, including decision-making in the household and community.

Women undertake migration to escape a context of violence and poverty, and pay immense human costs for their decisions. However, their transnational subjectivities are also caught in a complex process of emancipation, leading them to break social norms, taboos and gender stereotypes. It is paramount to move beyond a simple heuristic dichotomisation that portrays women migrants as victims (most often), or heroes of development. This simple storylines created for policy makers create stereotypes that have very little to do with women's realities and struggles. The complex layers of emancipation and oppression need to be unveiled and investigated at several scales.





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