



Empowerment or Added Burden? A Narrative Analysis of Left-Behind Wives in Male Migrant Households in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal

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Abstract

Male migration has become an articulating socioeconomic trend in Nepal, reshaping household power dynamics and prompting shifts in women's roles and responsibilities. This research explores how left-behind wives understand and experience their own empowerment and how they cope with or negotiate the disparity between their perception and the reality of empowerment. A narrative research design is applied, and a total of thirteen left-behind women were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The selected participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview questions. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed. It is found that all participants take on increased responsibilities after their husbands' migration abroad, and experience varying degrees of perceived empowerment. Factors that influence empowerment include family support, personal education, skills, and community networks. While some participants report increased decision-making authority and confidence, others have experienced symbolic empowerment that is limited by patriarchal culture, indicating an added burden rather than actual empowerment. Strategies for coping included emotional regulation, open communication, incremental economic efforts, and subtle subversion of dominant norms and values within their cultural boundaries. These findings indicate that empowerment occurs at multiple levels, depending on context, family structure, and social factors.

Keywords: double burden, gender household dynamics, left-behind wives, male out-migration, women's empowerment

Introduction

Migration is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place, either across a border or within a State (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Historically, human migration has been motivated by a broad range of factors; nonetheless, the aspiration for better economic conditions and life opportunities has consistently been identified as the foremost driving factor (Karki, 2020; Seddon et al., 2002). According to government reports, millions of Nepalese men work abroad, and their remittances play a critical role in reducing poverty and sustaining the household economy (Government of Nepal, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2020).

When married male members migrate abroad for employment, women are compelled to assume expanded roles and responsibilities across both the domestic and social spheres, resulting in shifts in household power dynamics (Lokshin & Glinskaya, 2009). This demonstrates that migration is a deeply gendered process that restructures power relationships within the household and shifts women's roles and authority, which may be a substantive or merely superficial empowerment (Mahler & Pessar, 2003).

Empowerment is the process of taking ownership of one's life and having the capacity to make informed choices (Rappaport, 1981). Several studies have shown that male migration has increased women's

participation in the workforce; however, its impacts vary notably across households and social groups. For instance, Desai (2018) found that male migration in Nepali households leads to increased empowerment of women left behind, particularly through greater autonomy in household decision-making and mobility. Ullah (2017), in his study, also found positive empowerment among left-behind women. According to him, in the absence of husbands due to migration, the left-behind women enjoyed freedom to make decisions, mobility, and participation in political activities, and that freedom has empowered them. In a similar vein, Iqbal et al. (2014) found that migration has a profound positive effect on the families left behind, suggesting that migration plays an important role in women's development and in decision-making autonomy. West et al. (2024) also found that women with international migrant spouses have significant improvements in economic empowerment, mobility, and decision-making relative to women with co-resident spouses. Fakir & Abedin (2021) also write that male out-migration from rural areas may leave women left behind with the opportunity to assume roles and responsibilities previously handled by their husbands. This shift in household power dynamics enables such women to become more empowered.

In contrast, Koirala (2023) highlights both advantages and disadvantages among left-behind women. As an advantage, they are experiencing greater decision-making authority, physical mobility, and involvement in socio-political spheres than their peers whose husbands remain at home. However, they also have to experience increased unpaid workloads and suffer more emotional strain and mental stress. In the same vein, Singh (2018) also writes that male out-migration gave decision-making power to their left-behind women, but at the same time, these women lacked financial autonomy and were unable to make decisions on important matters. Rajkarnikar (2020) also writes that, due to men's foreign labor migration, women's decision-making roles have become smaller and less strategic. But strategic decisions, especially those related to children's well-being and allocation of financial resources, are mostly made by men. Although left-behind women have gained some decision-making power over health, they have also equally faced reduced mobility, such as less freedom to visit their family or relatives (Sapkota & Wie, 2024).

Several studies have found that women who live in multigenerational families with their in-laws experience reductions in empowerment. For instance, Doss et al. (2022) found that daughters-in-law in joint households are more likely to be disempowered when their husbands are away because of migration. Kaur (2018) writes that although women's autonomy in financial and social decisions has increased, the extended family structures and traditional expectations often impose a ceiling on such autonomy. Lenz et al. (2007) also highlight that while women may appear to gain freedoms and empowerment in certain areas, these gains are often constrained by traditional gender and social norms. While different studies have researched the variations of empowerment among left-behind women, research on how such women negotiate, resist, or manage the gap between the perceived and actual empowerment, how they take such new roles and autonomy, remains lacking.

Methodological Orientation

This study incorporated a narrative research design. The narrative design outlines how married women integrate their personal and social identities, resistances, and adaptations into coherent, consistent storylines through the socio-cultural and familial dimensions of male migration. For the study, *Chabahal* Ward-7 is selected because it is urban and has

a blend of traditional and modern socio-economic activities. *Chabahal* itself has a considerably large population and succinctly reflects the changing patterns of recent migration. The main reason for selecting this study area is the availability of a multitude of family structures, including nuclear and joint families, thereby enabling an analysis that helps researchers understand how different family types affect married women's empowerment in households left behind by their husbands.

The study aimed to understand what life was like for participants whose husbands had gone abroad for work. In total, 13 left-behind participants were interviewed. At first, Padma is identified through purposive sampling as she fits the set of criteria, via the researcher's established professional networks. After that, a snowball sampling method was used for the remaining 12 participants, in which each enrolled participant was asked to refer eligible individuals in their social and professional networks who also met the study's inclusion criteria. This chain-referral process continued until no new thematic information arose from the data. The participant's consent was obtained before the interview. The interviews were conducted from December 8, 2025, to April 29, 2026. After each interview session, data were transcribed, translated, and imported into NVivo-10 software for coding and theme selection. To protect participants' identities, a pseudonym is used in place of participants' real names.

Findings and Analysis

The findings are analyzed in the following thematic areas.

Between Adaptation and Emotional Loss after Husband's Migration

A husband's migration reshapes a married woman's daily life and emotional well-being, and compels her to redefine her sense of empowerment. When women themselves recounted how their lives had changed after their husbands' migration, they gave varying answers. Padma, a 43-year-old, married for 18 years, living in a nuclear family with two kids, has completed her plus two (Grades 11-12) education, and around three months ago, her husband went to Malaysia for overseas migration. According to her,

Before his migration abroad, I used to do simple household chores and jobs... but now I have to do all the work, from managing the relationship in the community to ensuring there are no problems with electricity and water, to making time for my kids. This is a bit difficult and overwhelming to do all alone.

Her narrative recounts her transition from primarily domestic work to managing the entire household alone, including community relations and childcare. This transition reflects both an increase in workload and emotional strain due to the absence of spousal support. Similarly, Sabitri, a 28-year-old, is a university graduate. She is now living with her in-laws, but she doesn't have any kids, and her husband has been living abroad for three years. Her perspective is similar yet distinct. According to her, "I have learned to become more independent through this, but doing stuff such as going grocery shopping, etc., has been a bit hectic and difficult". This shows her mixed feelings: she is independent, but day-to-day activities, such as grocery shopping and other responsibilities, are draining her energy. This leads her to believe that she does not have true independence but is instead wrestling with circumstances and/or necessity.

Surakshya, a 32-year-old mother of two children, lived with her parents-in-law for six years while her husband was in Japan for the same period. She graduated from the University and handed household chores since her marriage. She shared, "Earlier, it was really difficult to live without my husband, but now it is habitual. Most of the time, I remain busy preparing necessary things for my children and in-laws". Although she sounds low due to her husband's absence, she is keeping herself busy with her two children's responsibilities, which could be her best adaptation to the current situation. Sima, a 25-year-old newly married woman, has a similar story, but she aspires to travel along with her husband. She shared, "I also wanted to go with him, but for years I had to stay and look after my in-laws... Nowadays I am learning to make coffee and other fast food, which might be helpful abroad". Although Sima is living with her in-laws, she is trying to normalize the situation by learning skills to apply and receive benefits in the future.

Another participant, Meena, a 38-year-old married woman, has a nuclear family. She completed her School Leaving Certificate (SLC) and started a part-time job selling food on the street. Her husband left for Qatar three years ago, and she relies on the money earned by her husband and through her part-time job. She said,

I used to do only a few household chores before he went abroad, but now I have to do more, such as doing normal household chores, helping my daughters with their studies, paying the electricity and water bills, and fixing small things in the house. Because of all this work, I feel really tired.

Meena's long narrative illustrates the fatigue that comes with the challenges of single motherhood. This narrative represents a sudden shift from wife to mother, and a complete shift in being the sole domestic worker. Her story also demonstrates that after her husband's labor migration abroad, her workload has increased dramatically beyond expectations, leading to physical and emotional exhaustion. In the absence of joint/ extended family members to support, her additional responsibilities and roles are draining her energy.

Kabita is a 33-year-old married woman, holding a Master's degree from a family of a higher socio-economic background. She married eight years ago, has a six-year-old son, and lives with her in-laws. It has been three years since her husband migrated abroad. She, however, has pointed out a stronger emphasis on emotional loss rather than operational adaptation. She said, "I feel my life is lacking some emotional support. I feel less safe and overwhelmed by the multiple responsibilities, although we do sometimes get together with my in-laws and schedule video calls with my husband together as a family". The absence of a husband has created an emotional and psychological barrier for Kabita. Due to her spouse's absence, she is unable to cope with the demands of daily life and feels overwhelmed by the multitude of responsibilities she must juggle. Although she is coping with this situation by talking over video calls with her husband and in-laws, this does not offer her the same level of emotional support from her husband.

Nirmala, an original inhabitant of Sindhupalchok, migrated to Chabahil Ward-7 nearly four years ago after her marriage. She lives in this area with her three-year-old daughter, and her husband has been working in Abu Dhabi for two years. According to her, "It is very difficult for us as he is not around. We miss him especially when the family is difficult. We talk a lot through Viber, but his physical absence is most hurtful". This shows her pain of separation from her husband. During this difficult time, her situation may have worsened further due to her husband's absence. In the same line, Nirmala's neighbor Bina, who is

originally from Kavre, lives with her in-laws after her husband went to Malaysia for labor migration. She runs a tailor shop. According to Bina, "It has already been five years, and as a wife, I feel very tense and nervous when he is not here. I wish he could come home as early as possible. We can make good out of any situation if we are together". This shows that Bina is emotionally frightened and seeking her spouse at home, which could be due to various factors, such as her new family, new home, and the absence of a caring person.

Rekha is a 31-year-old married woman, living with her parents-in-law and her widowed sister-in-law. She holds a bachelor's degree and used to be a school teacher until her husband moved to South Korea for work a year ago. They have a four-year-old son. She continues to work as a teacher. According to her,

I thought that even with him gone, it would be okay with my family. It has been some time since they helped me to cook. But I am lonely, which I didn't think I would be. I have to be tough and alert at school and obedient and good at home, which gets me exhausted.

Rekha's story is different from that of Kabita and Sabitri. Despite having external support from her joint family and professional support from her workplace, she narrates about a concealed emotional fatigue. While Kabita outwardly mentions feeling stressed, Rekha conceals the emotional burden of her roles, harboring a hidden strain. Her narrative demonstrates that the joint family and workplaces, though supportive, may not protect left-behind wives from the emotional consequences of their husbands' absence.

But Sushma, a 54-year-old married woman whose husband has been abroad for 25 years, now has a slightly different story from others. She has three kids, and she has a low level of education, but she works as a staff member at a law firm. In contrast to other participants, she finds no difference even after her husband has migrated abroad. According to her, "It hasn't changed much. I started working after he went abroad, so it was a bit overwhelming to handle everything in the beginning, but now, I am managing it quite well". Sushma's continuous involvement in a job demonstrates that she is a responsible mother, and, in fact, her involvement in the job has served as a coping mechanism.

45-year-old Sabita is a married woman with low educational qualifications. She lives in a nuclear family with her three children (the eldest one is working). Her husband has been living abroad (Saudi Arabia) for 14 years. She has a vegetable shop beside her home. According to her, "It's been 14 years. In the beginning it was hard, but later I learnt to do things on my own. I now have my stall, I do the housework and manage the money". Sabita has also gained a sense of competence and independence from her experiences of living alone. The time her husband has been away has enabled her to develop her competence and become accustomed to her new life.

Overall, these narratives reveal that emotional loss and practical adaptation are experienced side by side by left-behind women following male migration. In the meantime, Hochschild (1983) concept of emotional labor can be linked here to understand women's invisible and uncompensated effort to maintain the family.

Dilemma on Expanded Roles and Empowerments

Husband migration, especially abroad labor migration, has increased household labor (doubled roles and responsibilities such as household chores, financial management, child rearing, and their engagement in

society) among left-behind women. Padma expressed that her roles and work burden have become entangled in her life. She explained,

...I make sure all the groceries are there, dealing with and serving the guests and relatives, maintaining a good relationship within the community, looking after my kids, and making sure that they get the necessities, also making sure all the household problems like lights, water pipe bursts, and electrical problems are fixed in time... although my roles and responsibilities have doubled, and I don't feel much difference when my husband was here. But yes, now I have to make all the decisions, and when they don't go well, I feel guilty. Importantly, my family trusts me and allows me to make decisions.

This shows that Padma's roles have expanded from traditional roles to include social and technical responsibilities. Her engagement in household and social activities demonstrates her empowerment, but she believes such empowerment stems from family support and trust. It means that with emotional understanding among family members, a woman in the family will be able to participate more meaningfully in the decision-making process. Although she didn't claim anything to that effect, her statement indicates that her husband's migration has added a burden on her. This illustrates that her evolution from shared to unilateral decision-making has been a greater burden rather than a source of empowerment.

Meena also shared her new roles encompassing all aspects of family life. According to her,

I get up at 5 o'clock and prepare lunch for my daughters. I also do all the household chores and grocery shopping. Usually, I sleep at nine or ten in the evening. I don't have anyone to share my feelings with. When my daughters have difficulties at school, I try my best to resolve them. Sometimes I think I am not doing well because of fatigue... I make small decisions, such as things I buy for my daughters' education and household expenses. But again, for the important life decisions, I still call my husband, though he is far away.

Meena's story demonstrates how much responsibility is crammed into her life, leaving her little time for rest, recuperation, or self-initiative. It means that migration does not affect only women's labor, time, and bodies but also their motherhood. Meena's engaging roles suggest that she is empowered; however, her empowerment lies primarily in daily household decision-making, whereas on important issues, she relies on her husband.

On the other hand, Sabitri's experience offers a contrasting picture, as she experienced fewer domestic burdens due to support from her mother-in-law. According to her,

My main role and responsibilities in the household are to help with daily chores such as cooking and washing, and to help my mother-in-law with household tasks. I don't do too many chores, as I am a working woman and mainly focus on helping my mother-in-law... It is self-confident to handle my life responsibly, manage life and work, take care of family members, and participate in family decisions. It is also having the freedom to work, express opinions, and grow as a person without pressure or judgment.

This shows that her expanding household roles are dependent on the support provided by her family. For Sabitri, empowerment is less about

the quantity of tasks and more about mental and relational intensity. This emphasizes that empowerment comes from receiving emotional and relational support from family members, and she believes such empowerment is possible only if they trust and support her. Reflecting on how this has played out since her husband's migration, Sabitri states feeling empowered even in his absence, mainly because of her education, her ability to earn and work independently, and her supportive family environment.

Similarly, Dristi, a 29-year-old university graduate, lives with her in-laws. Her husband has been in Dubai for two and a half years. She said, "My in-laws support and allow me to make decisions at home. My decisions and opinions are considered important during family gatherings. However, there are some bigger decisions where I prefer to consult my in-laws or wait for my husband's input". This demonstrates that her empowerment lies in a collective, negotiated process. Her independence is balanced with relational harmony, suggesting that empowerment can exist as a shared, rather than purely individual experience.

But for some participants, balancing work, finances, and childcare is part of expanded roles. According to Sushma, "...the financial part is shared between him and me. All the immediate ones, such as electricity bills and groceries, are on me. I also look after my kids, work, do household chores, and engage in community stuff". These expanded roles show her understanding and experiences of empowerment. She links empowerment with decision-making authority and recognition in the household and community, saying, "I think empowerment means to have the power to make decisions and have an influence over others. It means being heard and to feel important". This shows that her greater importance is on symbolic recognition rather than responsibility alone.

For Nirmala as well, a strong alignment between perceived empowerment and actual autonomy is empowerment. She said, "I feel the sense of empowerment is actually very much aligned to the actual autonomy I have in my house. I have the decision-making power, and I feel important and empowered in my household". Her narration suggests a continuation of empowerment predating her husband's migration, supporting the notion that power and authority prior to migration significantly shape one's experiences afterward. Moreover, as she lives alone with her daughter, she makes all immediate family decisions, which is why she feels more empowered.

Sabita's increased workload is unique in that it has been sustained and has developed over the past 14 years. She explains,

I have had back pain for two years. The doctor said that it is due to long hours of standing. It is due to my double role, both at the stall and then household chores. My eldest son helps me, but he has his studies. So, even though it is difficult, I usually do it myself.

This illustrates how the sole responsibility of managing a household gradually takes a toll on one's body over time. Her physical pain is a direct consequence of unshared housework, and income-generating work exemplifies the physical manifestation of her burden. Her unwillingness to ask her eldest son for help also speaks to how left-behind wives tend to take on more work out of concern for their children, but in doing so, add to their own burden.

Sima takes empowerment as the most realistic and beneficial. According to her, "I have been learning different skills at the moment. I can earn independently after these training sessions, so I think upgrading yourself is empowerment. Regarding the double role at office and home,

this is not worrying for me". Her understanding of empowerment is refreshingly practical and self-referential. It is grounded in her learning rather than on concepts. She is not worrying much about the double roles at the office and home, which could be a factor of her young age.

Ankita is a 35-year-old married woman living in a joint family with her in-laws. She has a high school education and has been married for 12 years. She has two children, and her husband migrated abroad three years ago. She describes her expanded roles as very overwhelming. According to her, "I handle all daily chores like cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and also manage kids' schooling, pay bills from remittances that her husband sends her, deal with in-laws' needs, and also do small tailoring work from home for extra money". This illustrates how a husband's migration intensifies women's labor across multiple domains beyond household chores, highlighting the deeply unequal distribution of labor that left-behind wives face. Within this context of heavy responsibility, Ankita understands empowerment as a combination of decision-making power and psychological safety. She said, "Deciding for myself, handling money, kids, and speaking up in women's groups without shame is empowerment. For me, it's not just power, but also a safe feeling to express in different situations".

In the same vein, Surakshya said, "I am living with my in-laws, so all household chores are shared. For me, household decision-making is the key indicator of empowerment. As I value my family, it doesn't matter who holds this decision-making power in my family". This suggests that not all left-behind women long to empower themselves. The value of family matters so much to such a person that it brings all family members together for mutual growth and survival. As her children are still young, her priority might not be to sharpen her skills but to raise them and fulfill daughter-in-laws' responsibilities.

However, for Kabita, empowerment is the functional freedom and one's own ability. She elaborates,

I feel empowered when I am able to work independently and function well in society... Well, I play most of the roles in the family. I work part-time, online from home, for like three days a week. On other days, I'm free and spend most of my time on household activities. My husband sends me his income, which is enough to cover my household expenses and my son's school fees. My part-time earnings are used for groceries and personal spending.

For Kabita, being empowered means having the power to perform any task with internal confidence. Despite this internal confidence, Kabita explicitly identifies a gap between her perceived empowerment and her actual autonomy in practice. Nonetheless, she feels empowered by her educational background and technical skills.

Nonetheless, Rekha speaks of a widening scope of responsibilities that spans her work and home life. She explains,

It is easier when you have family around, people say. But the thing is, I teach from eight AM to three PM, and then I come home and do the household chores. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law do help with the cooking, but the cleaning, the kids' homework, the school fees and the teachers' meetings, all this I have to do because I am the mother. Also, my sister-in-law is a widow, and I don't want to trouble her. So I take on more than my share in silence.

Her story illustrates how a joint family helps in sharing household chores, but certain tasks must be done without sharing. This statement

also debunks the myth that living in joint families protects the left-behind wives. Although her mother-in-law and sister-in-law help with food preparation, all other childcare, financial, and school-related work remains solely her responsibility. Rekha's empowerment is interestingly characterized by a conflict between her work and her domestic role. Her schooling and employment provide her with a sense of external empowerment and acceptance, but within her joint family, this does not translate into decision-making at home.

In Bina's view, empowerment is the ability to stand on one's own feet. She adds, "I feel empowered as I run a tailor shop with my hardship. But I do not feel empowered at home because my parents-in-law decide everything". She is newly married, young, and independently earning despite being a left-behind wife. Her statement demonstrates her understanding of empowerment, grounded in economic independence rather than mere conceptual understanding.

These narratives show that men's migration changes gender roles by moving women into positions where they are responsible for decision-making, labor distribution, and emotional caregiving. Among the participants, they are playing double gender roles, ranging from the traditional sphere to independent earning and major household decisions. Husband's migration has provided opportunities for left-behind wives. In some cases, women's feelings of empowerment remain at the same level or even increase, as seen with Sabitri and Sushma, whereas in other cases, women become aware of a discrepancy between their internal confidence and their real decision-making authority, as experienced by Padma and Kabita. This illustrates that empowerment is a complicated process, influenced not only by a woman's individual ability to empower herself but also by family dynamics and societal expectations. Most importantly, despite opportunities, most of them felt an unequal and excessive burden from their double roles.

The above narratives demonstrate that role expansion is not only empowerment. According to Molyneux (1985), with migration, women take an interest in various sectors such as finance, leading the family, and independent earning. Although left-behind women work more, they have little to no legal power, which Bourdieu (1990) identified as the doxa of gender, in which they accept the situation without questioning it. Hence, empowerment is not only the product of migration but also the byproduct of structural conditions such as their economic participation, family recognition, and their education.

Household Constraints and Coping Strategies of Left-Behind Wives

When questioned about restrictions they had encountered on significant issues, the majority of the participants pointed to minor yet important boundaries in their lives. These limitations were mostly related to large-scale decision-making, legal and financial concerns, and broader social conventions, which means that although the concept of empowerment affords a certain level of autonomy, it remains negotiated and conditioned by relations with the family and society. As the accounts below demonstrate, the course of action that women resorted to was directly influenced by the type of constraint that they faced, which is why the two aspects of the same experience, limitation and response, could not be separated. Although some participants reported similar experiences of constraint, others encountered markedly different types of limitation. Among the participants, Sabitri attributes her weaknesses to major long-term decisions. She said;

I experience limitations mainly in major or long-term decisions, such as financial investments or future planning.

These situations are where I need to consult my in-laws or wait for my husband's opinion. At times, social expectations and traditional norms also influence what is considered appropriate for me to do or decide. While I am trusted with daily responsibilities, these factors can limit complete independence in certain areas.

Sabitri's description shows a distinct difference: although she has daily operational duties, when making major decisions, she shares power with her family due to social hierarchies, family norms, and cultural norms. When negotiating these limitations, Sabitri focuses more on communication and gradual assertion rather than resistance. She shared:

To manage situations with limitations, I focus on open communication and mutual respect. I discuss my views calmly with my in-laws and explain my reasons rather than resisting directly. I also try to balance my responsibilities with my personal goals, demonstrating that I am capable and responsible. In situations shaped by social norms, I choose to adapt where necessary while gradually asserting my independence without disrupting family harmony.

The negotiated way that Sabitri balances compliance with incremental autonomy exemplifies that empowerment is exercised through the relational boundaries set by others rather than through open rebellion. Since her restrictions lie in family relations and cultural norms, her reaction takes the same shape: silent, slow, and directed towards harmony rather than conflict.

Rekha's limits are most evident within the hierarchy of her joint household, where she occupies the position of the youngest daughter-in-law and cannot exercise as much power as she would like, even in matters concerning her own son. She recalled an example: "I wanted to change my son's school, it was not good. But my mother-in-law said I needed to talk to my husband first. By that time, I had to wait for three weeks, and the admission was closed". This shows how even well-informed, education-supported decisions by left-behind wives can be structurally deferred by family hierarchies that ultimately vest final authority in the absent husband or elderly family members. Her limitation is not one of outright prohibition but of procedural deferral and reference that effectively amounts to the same thing. Her approach to managing these constraints is one of subtle reframing and timing. She explains that, "I have learned to think that timing is more important than the context of what I say". Her approach to coping by putting consultation in the place of assertion is a form of performance as she is not simply presenting herself as diplomatic but is strategically presenting her own agency in a way that is acceptable to her hierarchical family and community. While this performative approach to asserting autonomy is successful, it represents a kind of "hidden work" as she must constantly attend to the limits and norms of her autonomy.

Sushma separately mentioned that there are limitations in the domestic and broader institutional settings. As she gives an example of a recent encounter she faced, "Despite being empowered in my household, when I tried to make citizenship for my kids, they asked about my husband, and that made me feel less important. Banking and financial-related work also asks for husbands." This statement demonstrates how she is viewed as a secondary citizen outside her home, especially in government institutions. In terms of coping reaction, she claims, "I don't really use any actions to resist such situations. It has been a long time since my husband has been working abroad, so it is a habit for me to accept it", reflecting her normalizing process in such a situation.

The story of Ankita brings forward a more individualistic and interpersonal form of restriction that arose from her mobility and social life. She added, "My in-laws tend to lecture me when I attend community meetings without permission". This shows how her in-laws were strict, and she had to adhere to the rules set by her in-laws, demonstrating patriarchal authority controlling the behavior and movement of women. This redistribution of control is what makes Ankita's situation constraining. In response, Ankita explains that she is a self-earner (a tailor), indicating that she can take care of herself and contribute equally to the family. This strategy serves as a form of silent resistance and a means of legitimizing her position within a patriarchal familial structure.

The family situation portrayed by Kabita is fairly more liberal. Kabita states that "I do not feel controlled in most aspects since I am aware of my rights and my family members do not coerce me into something that I am not interested in. However, I have experienced limitations in major financial decisions". Her statement shows that, although she is free in most of her decisions, limitations on major financial decisions indicate her conditional autonomy. On the other hand, Nirmala has no such special constraints as she said, "...there are no such constraints in my family besides a few household chores and my daughter's responsibility but I do not think this is a constraint because I do not need to skip this as there is nothing to do besides these two things at the moment". This shows that Nirmala remains quite free beyond her household chores and daughter-rearing responsibilities, and she is unwilling to adopt a coping strategy to overcome these constraints. Surakshya also admits that, "...my responsibility is to look after my family members while my husband is working abroad, and this provides me immense joy. In the beginning, there was some hesitancy living with in-laws, but as time passed by, everything was good." showcasing no such constraints at home. In the same vein, Dristi also reported that she does not have such limitations. She explained, "Since my in-laws are very supportive, I do not have such limitations at home. I am taken care of by my in-laws, maybe because my husband has been living apart for two and a half years". This situation has given Dristi a sense of openness and security at home, which has led her to make almost every decision at home, empowering her.

In contrast to external limitations raised by the other participants, Padma has a more self-centered experience of limitation. Her limitation is experienced through the burden of all household responsibilities. Padma explains her coping mechanism as a form of emotional control and rational decision-making. She states, "When I feel overwhelmed by my responsibilities and feel constrained, I try to remain calm and think for a while." For Padma, external pressure is not the most urgent limitation; rather, overwhelming responsibilities at home constrain her. In order to overcome such constraints, Padma's strategy to remain calm and review her situation is different from that of other participants. Likewise, Meena's constraint is not a family power dynamic but rather having no one to share her troubles with. She said, "If there is a problem at home, I can't deal with it easily. I speak to my husband, but because of the time difference, he can't help me. So, I have to make a decision". Meena's restriction is one of relational lack rather than direct prevention, leaving her to bear the full weight of individual decision-making and responsibility without support.

Sabita's constraint is her in-laws and three children. She said, "I am pinned down because of household chores, responsibility to look after my three children, and in-laws who need care and support. Because of this, I am not able to spend time for myself". Her statement clearly shows how women, after being mothers, are suppressed by multiple responsibilities.

On top of that, when her husband is not near, the simple work becomes a huge burden. As such, a left-behind wife like Sabita may not have a proper way to vent out their frustration. In a question about how she manages such constraints, she said, “I get very busy preparing for my children and looking after my parents-in-law, so I haven’t thought about it. But yes, continuous work at home could be a strategy that I have unknowingly applied”.

Combined, these separately obtained testimonies reveal that, as much as there is empowerment amongst left-behind wives, it does not always imply absolute autonomy. Women are still faced by boundaries that are dictated by patriarchal cultures, familial structures, legal and financial structures, and ingrained social expectations that hinder their lives, showing that even without the physical presence of husbands, other kinds of power within institutions, in-laws, and cultural expectations still dictate the lives of women. Simultaneously, the techniques these women use, including open communication, incremental assertion, economic demonstration of ability, emotional self-control, and silent accommodation, indicate that left-behind wives are not passive victims of constraint but are negotiators of the room they have.

Discussion

As this research demonstrates, the restructuring of male labor migration produces empowering and constraining, productive and burdensome, visible yet unrecognized by institutions, effects on the domestic and social landscape of left-behind wives. Most importantly, not all participants are empowered in the same way, regardless of their structural similarity (all are married, live in urban areas, and take care of their homes when their husbands are absent). This divergence is the central analytical finding of the study, which demands explanation beyond the simple observation that migration increases women’s responsibilities alone.

The participants reported a substantial increase in their household work following their husbands’ migration. In line with the works of Rajkarnikar (2020) and Lenz et al. (2007), this study also found that male migration leads to women being more involved in day-to-day household decision-making, yet often leaves them without strategic authority in urban settings. Although the left-behind wife has a degree of autonomy in her decision-making, it does not necessarily denote an increase in genuine decision-making authority in the family. A moderating effect of the previous socioeconomic status is an important finding. Sushma, who had a work history before her husband migrated, was relatively less affected in her day-to-day functioning. This suggests that pre-migration economic participation functions as a buffering mechanism, equipping her with the practical competencies, financial confidence, and social networks that ease the transition to de facto household headship. This result aligns with Fakir & Abedin (2021) finding that interventions in male-migrant households can result in women’s asset ownership. However, asset ownership alone does not guarantee an increase in decision-making power. In Sushma’s case, prior economic participation appears to have secured both material and procedural gains, suggesting that the relationship between migration and empowerment is also conditioned by women’s pre-existing socioeconomic position.

The gap between internal confidence and externally exercised autonomy was also evident as another analytically significant pattern. Kabita is formally educated and believes in her capabilities, but her decision-making power is constrained by her in-laws’ expectations and family structures. This disjuncture between felt empowerment and structurally permitted autonomy resonates with the finding of

Koirala (2023) that left-behind wives experience greater perceived decision-making authority and mobility but simultaneously bear increased unpaid labor burdens and emotional strain. It also correlates with the distinction between structural and psychological empowerment, as defined by empowerment theory, which requires institutional acknowledgment, access to resources, and the ability to make legitimate decisions (Haddad & Toney-Butler, 2023).

The present findings support the moderating role of household composition highlighted by Doss et al. (2022), Sapkota & Wie (2024), and West et al. (2024). Ankita, who lives in a joint family with strict in-laws, was explicitly and multi-dimensionally limited in her mobility, economic activities, social involvement, and cultural decisions. In contrast, other participants, such as Padma and Sushma, living in nuclear families, have greater freedom in financial decision-making despite other constraints, indicating that family structure does not uniformly determine the empowerment of left-behind women. Here, the dissimilar experiences of empowerment discussed by the thirteen participants are an amalgamation of their education, status within the family structure, interaction with in-laws, previous involvement in income-generating activities, and cultural practices. So it would be immature to claim the husband’s migration abroad as a sole factor.

The findings of this study are analytically significant because they show that the same structural condition, i.e., a husband’s absence, can be experienced simultaneously as liberating and burdensome. The data also shows that urban location does not dissolve caste hierarchies, in-law authority, or institutional male bias; rather, it may simply shift their expression from physical restriction to procedural deferral and bureaucratic exclusion. Furthermore, the implications of these findings are twofold. For research, this study highlights the methodological value of narrative inquiry in migration studies and calls for attention to the intersectionality of caste, class, and educational background in shaping empowerment trajectories over time and across different migratory contexts within Nepal. For policy, the findings suggest that remittance-focused migration governance is insufficient. Programs must accompany economic support with initiatives that directly address patriarchal structures: legal literacy campaigns that enable women to navigate bureaucratic systems in the absence of their husbands, community-based peer support networks, and skills development programs that build practical competencies.

Conclusion

This study highlights how male labor migration produces a structurally uneven redistribution of domestic responsibility among left-behind wives in Nepal. Women in joint family settings faced clear and multidimensional constraints on their decision-making authority. Importantly, decision-making authority was found to be curtailed by family expectations and institutional constraints. This finding further reveals that urban settings do not neutralize patriarchal constraints on left-behind wives.

Further, pre-migration economic participation served as a key buffering mechanism. Women who were employed before their husbands’ migration possessed greater practical competencies and stronger social networks, enabling them to manage de facto household headship more effectively. Most significantly, this study found that the type of constraint a woman faces directly shapes the coping strategy she adopts. In sum, these findings reframe empowerment not as a fixed outcome of migration, but as a negotiated process shaped by the structural

conditions women inhabit before, during, and after their husbands' departure.

Declarations

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Ethical approval and consent to participate

Due ethical procedures applicable to the social science research were adopted.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Data are available on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Use of AI

AI was not used for the preparation and writing of this manuscript. We confirm that this paper's content was entirely human-generated.

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