

**Migration and Emotional Distress Among Left-Behind Wives in Rural Nepal**

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**Abstract**

Male labor migration from rural Nepal has become a defining socio-economic phenomenon that simultaneously promotes household prosperity and disrupts family structures. While remittances enhance financial security, the emotional cost borne by wives left behind remains profound yet under-researched. This study investigates the psychosocial and emotional distress experienced by left-behind wives in rural Nepal, exploring the interplay between patriarchal norms, socio-cultural pressures, economic dependencies, and limited access to mental health support. Drawing on a synthesis of recent empirical and theoretical studies from 2010–2025, the research reveals that prolonged spousal separation contributes to chronic loneliness, anxiety, and depression among women, exacerbated by increased domestic burdens and societal stigma. Consistent remittance flow and frequent communication with migrant husbands serve as partial buffers, though they rarely mitigate the deeper emotional void or social isolation. The review identifies remittance reliability, communication frequency, and community support as key mediators of psychosocial well-being. Findings further highlight that while migration-induced role shifts can increase women’s autonomy in financial and household decision-making, they also intensify workloads and emotional exhaustion. The study concludes that sustainable interventions must integrate mental health services with gender-sensitive development and empowerment initiatives. Policies focusing solely on economic remittances fail to address the complex emotional dimensions of migration. A holistic, multi-sectoral approach—combining psychosocial counseling, community awareness, and digital connectivity—can enhance resilience and ensure the well-being of left-behind wives, thereby promoting both family and national development.

**Keywords:** labor migration, emotional distress, left-behind wives, rural Nepal, psychosocial well-being, remittances, gender roles

**Introduction**

Labor migration is one of the most transformative socio-economic processes shaping contemporary Nepal. Since the 1990s, the country has witnessed a dramatic outflow of working-age men seeking employment in Gulf countries, Malaysia, India, and other destinations. According to the Department of Foreign Employment (2025), more than

44,000 Nepalis leave for foreign jobs each month, the majority from rural districts. This large-scale migration contributes to nearly one-fourth of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product, making remittances a crucial lifeline for many households (Chaudhary, 2025; World Bank, 2018). For rural families, migration often represents hope-an avenue for escaping poverty, financing children's education, and improving living conditions. Yet, behind the apparent economic success lies a silent psychosocial crisis affecting those left behind-particularly wives.

In rural Nepal, where patriarchy and gendered division of labor dominate, the migration of husbands reconfigures family dynamics and women's everyday lives. The absence of men compels wives to shoulder the dual burden of managing domestic work and emotional responsibilities while upholding the family's social reputation. While remittances provide financial security, they cannot replace emotional companionship, marital intimacy, or shared parental duties. The resulting emotional distress-manifested through loneliness, anxiety, depression, and fatigue-has become a pervasive yet invisible phenomenon.

### **Contextual Background**

Nepal's rural society is marked by rigid gender norms. Women are often confined to caregiving and domestic tasks, while men are perceived as primary breadwinners. Migration, therefore, introduces a paradox: it empowers women economically but reinforces patriarchal expectations socially. Left-behind wives find themselves navigating contradictory roles-expected to be both autonomous and obedient, strong yet submissive, independent yet constantly supervised by in-laws or community members (Thieme & Müller-Böker, 2019; Bhattarai et al., 2024).

The emotional cost of these conflicting expectations is amplified by structural neglect of mental health in rural areas. The Ministry of Health (Nepal) reports that fewer than 20% of rural health posts provide any form of psychosocial counseling. Cultural stigma surrounding mental illness, coupled with limited awareness, prevents many women from seeking help (Chhetri et al., 2019). Consequently, left-behind wives often internalize their distress, normalizing suffering as a form of sacrifice and endurance.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

From a theoretical standpoint, the issue of emotional distress among left-behind wives can be examined through stress-coping theory and gender role theory. The former explains how prolonged separation and caregiving responsibilities act as chronic stressors that demand adaptive responses. When coping resources-social support, communication, and mental health services-are scarce, emotional exhaustion intensifies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Gender role theory further clarifies how patriarchal expectations dictate women's behaviors, restrict emotional expression, and stigmatize vulnerability (Connell, 2009). In

this intersection of structural constraints and emotional demands, women's psychosocial well-being is continuously tested.

### **Knowledge Gap**

While the economic and demographic dimensions of migration have been widely studied, its emotional and psychological dimensions remain understudied. Research in Nepal has focused on remittances, empowerment, or labor policy but seldom addresses the lived emotional experiences of wives who sustain families in the absence of their partners. Empirical studies suggest that left-behind wives exhibit higher rates of depression and psychosomatic symptoms compared to women in non-migrant households (Aryal, 2020; Ghimire et al., 2019). Yet, the variations in emotional distress-by caste, class, region, and communication frequency-are rarely examined comprehensively.

Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for academic reasons but also for policy formulation. Sustainable migration governance must integrate psychosocial welfare into labor policies to prevent social fragmentation and intergenerational trauma.

### **Problem Statement**

The rapid pace of male labor migration has created a new social class of "left-behind wives" in rural Nepal. These women experience economic dependency, emotional loneliness, and social isolation, compounded by weak mental health services. Although remittances alleviate material hardship, they do not offset the psychosocial cost of prolonged spousal separation. The absence of institutional support, coupled with cultural silence around emotional suffering, renders these women particularly vulnerable. Addressing their experiences is vital for promoting gender equity and sustaining family welfare in migration-dependent communities.

### **Objectives of the Study**

To ensure focus and analytical clarity, this study pursues two core objectives:

1. To examine the socio-cultural, economic, and psychological factors contributing to emotional distress among left-behind wives in rural Nepal.
2. To propose evidence-based interventions and policy directions that enhance psychosocial well-being and resilience among these women.

## **Literature Review**

### **Global and South Asian Context**

Across the Global South, international labor migration has emerged as both a survival strategy and a development mechanism. In South Asia, millions of families rely on remittances sent by male migrants, particularly in Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. However, studies from these countries reveal that while migration improves economic

conditions, it disrupts family structures and induces emotional suffering for those left behind (Siriwardana et al., as cited in Aryal, 2020).

Sri Lankan studies show that wives of migrant men often experience “emotional widowhood,” characterized by anxiety, sleep disorders, and reduced self-esteem. Similarly, Bangladeshi women report social isolation and an erosion of marital intimacy due to extended absences. These regional parallels situate Nepal’s experience within a broader pattern of migration-induced emotional distress, shaped by patriarchal traditions and weak welfare systems.

### **Historical Overview of Migration in Nepal**

Migration has been embedded in Nepal’s socio-economic fabric for over a century. Historically, Nepali men migrated to India and Bhutan for military and labor work. The post-1990 liberalization and Gulf labor demand transformed migration into a mass livelihood strategy (Kandel & Massey, 2002). By 2025, over three million Nepalis are estimated to be working abroad (Department of Foreign Employment, 2025). The majority are men from rural and economically marginalized households. Consequently, a significant portion of the rural female population lives as de facto heads of households.

The economic benefits of migration are undeniable-improved housing, education, and healthcare access (Khadka & Thapa, 2023). Yet, these gains mask the emotional deficit within households, where women bear the invisible cost of maintaining family stability under separation.

### **Emotional Distress and Mental Health Burden**

Emotional distress among left-behind wives manifests as depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic disorders (Pandey et al., 2021). Aryal (2020) found that psychological distress among these women was significantly associated with longer migration duration, irregular remittance flow, and poor communication. Another study by Manandhar et al. (2023) reported that over 40% of women in migrant households experienced moderate to severe emotional strain.

In many rural areas, women internalize distress as part of their social duty. Mental health discussions remain taboo; expressing sadness or seeking therapy is often equated with weakness. Chhetri et al. (2019) observed that women prefer confiding in peers or religious leaders rather than seeking clinical help. This stigmatization of emotional vulnerability perpetuates untreated psychological suffering.

### **The Gendered Paradox of Empowerment**

Migration simultaneously empowers and disempowers women. As husbands leave, wives assume new responsibilities: managing finances, supervising farms, and making child-rearing decisions. Some gain confidence and community recognition (Ghimire et al., 2019; Bhattarai et al., 2024). Yet, empowerment is often constrained by social expectations and family control. Women's autonomy tends to expand economically but shrink socially, as in-laws and communities impose stricter behavioral codes to "protect family honor."

This duality-freedom and restriction-creates cognitive dissonance. As Thieme and Müller-Böker (2019) argue, Nepali women's empowerment during male absence often lacks legitimacy. They act as "temporary guardians" rather than full household heads, which fosters role confusion and emotional exhaustion.

### **Social Isolation and Community Stigma**

Social isolation is one of the most consistent predictors of emotional distress. Left-behind wives, especially young ones, face moral surveillance. Rumors about infidelity or disloyalty circulate easily in tight-knit rural settings, compelling women to restrict mobility and social engagement (Paudel & Marahatta, 2019). Over time, such isolation breeds depression and erodes self-esteem.

Joint families may provide support but can also be sources of tension. In-laws often monitor women's actions, limiting decision-making power and autonomy (Gartaula et al., 2012). Conversely, nuclear families grant more freedom but less emotional support, leaving women vulnerable to loneliness. The family structure, therefore, mediates the impact of migration on emotional well-being.

### **Economic Dimensions of Emotional Health**

Remittances are central to both empowerment and emotional distress. Regular remittance flow alleviates anxiety related to survival and enhances security (Khadka & Thapa, 2023). However, irregular or insufficient remittances heighten stress, as women must manage debts, food shortages, and social pressure simultaneously (Lama & Gurung, 2023). Economic dependency without agency-where women handle money but lack control over decisions-produces "empowered helplessness."

Moreover, the economic valuation of women's labor remains unacknowledged. Despite managing farms and households, their contributions are perceived as "extensions" of men's economic success, not independent achievements. This undervaluation further undermines self-worth and emotional stability.

### **Communication and Technological Mediation**

Technological advancements, particularly mobile phones and social media, have transformed spousal relationships across distance. Frequent communication reduces uncertainty, strengthens emotional bonds, and fosters psychological resilience (Kumar & Shrestha, 2023; Aryal, 2020). Conversely, communication breakdowns—due to poor networks, restrictive employer policies, or long work hours abroad—intensify emotional pain.

Interestingly, technology also introduces new anxieties: women may experience mistrust or jealousy due to online interactions or rumors of infidelity. Thus, while communication mitigates loneliness, it may also generate psychological complexity in transnational marriages.

### **Coping Strategies and Resilience**

Despite adversity, left-behind wives develop diverse coping mechanisms. Many engage in religious rituals, women's savings groups, or community cooperatives to find solidarity (Bhandari, 2023). Others seek strength in motherhood, channeling emotions into caregiving. Resilience is sustained through faith, kinship, and collective identity.

Yet, coping mechanisms remain informal and fragile. Institutional mental health interventions are scarce. Khanal et al. (2024) advocate for integrating psychosocial care into rural health systems through community health volunteers. Such culturally tailored interventions show promise in improving emotional resilience.

### **Policy and Research Gaps**

Nepal's migration policies prioritize economic indicators remittance flow, labor safety, and recruitment regulation—while ignoring family welfare. Sapkota and Koirala (2024) argue that migration governance lacks a gender and psychosocial lens. Government and NGOs seldom address emotional health within migration programs.

Academically, the literature still lacks longitudinal and comparative studies. Most data are cross-sectional, preventing causal understanding of emotional trajectories over time. Similarly, intergenerational impacts how mothers' distress affects children's well-being remain understudied (Pant et al., 2025).

### **Synthesis**

In summary, emotional distress among left-behind wives arises from a triad of vulnerabilities economic dependence, social isolation, and psychological neglect. Migration reshapes gender roles but does not dismantle patriarchy. Empowerment and suffering coexist. The reviewed literature suggests that communication frequency,

remittance regularity, and social support serve as the strongest buffers. Yet, without structural interventions addressing stigma and mental health access, women's distress persists as a silent crisis in rural Nepal.

### **Model, Data and Methodology**

#### **Conceptual Model**

The study is guided by an integrative conceptual framework combining stress-coping theory, gender role theory, and the social-ecological model of mental health. This multi-level model situates emotional distress among left-behind wives within interconnected domains individual, relational, community, and structural.

At the individual level, emotional distress results from the prolonged absence of the spouse, increased workload, loneliness, and worry about the husband's safety abroad. Personal coping resources education, self-efficacy, and resilience mediate this distress.

At the relational level, communication quality, frequency of remittance transfers, and marital trust shape women's sense of emotional stability. Strong, regular communication acts as a protective factor, whereas irregular contact or conflict amplifies anxiety and depression (Aryal, 2020; Kumar & Shrestha, 2023).

At the community level, gender norms, social stigma, and the availability of informal support networks (such as women's groups, religious circles, and kinship ties) influence psychosocial outcomes. Rural Nepali women often depend heavily on these networks to navigate emotional hardship (Bhandari, 2023).

At the structural level, the presence or absence of mental health services, state policies, and economic opportunities determines whether women's emotional distress becomes chronic or manageable. In Nepal's context, limited psychosocial infrastructure and patriarchal governance perpetuate emotional vulnerability.

Hence, the model assumes that emotional distress is multidimensional, shaped by the interplay of migration dynamics, social context, and personal resilience. It recognizes that while migration can lead to economic empowerment, it simultaneously exposes women to psychosocial risks embedded in gendered cultural systems.

#### **Research Design**

This research adopts a systematic qualitative meta-synthesis approach. The goal is to integrate findings from diverse empirical studies conducted in Nepal between 2010 and 2025, offering a comprehensive understanding of emotional distress among left-behind wives.

Data were drawn from both primary research articles (quantitative surveys, ethnographies, mixed-methods studies) and secondary materials (government reports, NGO assessments, and dissertations). This combination allowed triangulation of evidence across methodological traditions.

The study employed interpretive synthesis techniques (Noblit & Hare, 1988), in which findings are conceptually reinterpreted rather than merely summarized. Thematic clustering was used to identify recurring patterns of emotional distress, coping mechanisms, and socio-cultural determinants.

### **Data Sources and Selection Criteria**

Data were collected from reputable academic databases including PubMed Central, Google Scholar, NepJOL, and Scopus. Search keywords included: “*labor migration Nepal*,” “*left-behind wives*,” “*emotional distress*,” “*mental health*,” “*remittances*,” and “*rural psychosocial well-being*.”

Inclusion criteria:

1. Studies published between 2010 and 2025 focusing on the Nepali context.
2. Research involving female spouses of international migrants.
3. Studies with explicit discussion of emotional, psychological, or social outcomes.
4. Availability of full-text in English or Nepali.

Exclusion criteria:

- Research centered solely on male migrants or economic impacts without gendered or psychosocial analysis.
- Studies lacking empirical evidence (e.g., policy briefs without data).

After rigorous screening, 52 studies met the inclusion criteria, covering more than 30 districts across Nepal, with heavy representation from Terai and Hill regions such as Kapilbastu, Nawalparasi, Sarlahi, and Dhading.

### **Analytical Framework**

Data analysis followed a three-stage thematic synthesis process:

1. Coding and Theme Identification: Each study was examined for recurring concepts emotional distress indicators (depression, anxiety, loneliness), mediating factors (remittance flow, communication, social support), and contextual modifiers (caste, education, family type).

2. Cross-Comparative Analysis: Themes were compared across geographic and methodological variations to discern consistent and divergent findings.
3. Theoretical Integration: Insights were interpreted through gender role and stress-coping frameworks to reveal underlying mechanisms.

The resulting framework classified emotional distress into three typologies:

- Acute distress: short-term anxiety linked to separation shock;
- Chronic distress: long-term depression or psychosomatic symptoms;
- Contextual distress: stress arising from social judgment, gender expectations, and economic strain.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Although qualitative synthesis does not involve statistical validation, the study ensured reliability through triangulation and critical appraisal of data quality. Each source was evaluated for methodological rigor, sample representativeness, and ethical transparency. Contradictory findings were retained to illustrate heterogeneity, not discarded.

Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring all referenced data came from publicly available, ethically approved studies. The synthesis aimed to amplify participants' lived experiences without distortion or cultural bias.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Emotional Distress Patterns**

The synthesis confirms that emotional distress is widespread among left-behind wives in rural Nepal. Symptoms commonly include persistent sadness, fatigue, insomnia, appetite loss, and somatic complaints. Studies by Pandey et al. (2021) and Manandhar et al. (2023) found that 35-45% of left-behind wives reported moderate to severe psychological distress, particularly during the initial years of separation.

Women describe emotional distress as "*man dukheko*" (a heavy heart), reflecting a culturally embedded expression of sadness rather than clinical depression. Such local idioms of distress highlight the need for culturally sensitive mental health assessment tools (Chhetri et al., 2019). The emotional burden intensifies when communication is infrequent or remittances are delayed.

### **Gender Roles, Workload, and Identity Shifts**

Migration forces a renegotiation of gender roles. Wives assume managerial control over farms, finances, and children, effectively becoming "shadow heads" of households. However, their authority often lacks legitimacy. Decisions are expected to align with

distant husbands or in-laws, creating a paradox of *responsibility without recognition* (Bhattarai et al., 2024).

The expansion of women's roles can be both empowering and exhausting. Many women gain confidence managing money or attending community meetings, but their physical and mental load multiplies. Long workdays, combined with community scrutiny, generate chronic fatigue and anxiety (Ghimire et al., 2019).

This paradox illustrates the “double-edged empowerment” of migration where women's autonomy is both expanded and constrained within patriarchal limits (Thieme & Müller-Böker, 2019).

### **Economic Dimensions and Financial Dependency**

Economically, remittances bring visible improvements better housing, food security, and educational opportunities for children (Khadka & Thapa, 2023). However, irregular remittance flows create instability. When remittances are delayed, wives experience anxiety and social humiliation, especially when borrowing becomes necessary.

Lama and Gurung (2023) observed that women managing finances often remain dependent on male relatives for validation. This dependency undermines self-worth, perpetuating the emotional cost of economic reliance. Therefore, economic upliftment without financial autonomy does not guarantee emotional well-being.

### **Social Stigma and Isolation**

Social stigma remains a profound contributor to psychological suffering. In many communities, a woman without her husband's physical presence faces moral suspicion. She is expected to uphold strict modesty and avoid public interaction to protect “family honor” (Paudel & Marahatta, 2019).

Such isolation restricts participation in community life, creating loneliness and alienation. Ethnographic studies (Gartaula et al., 2012) show that gossip and social policing reinforce patriarchal control even from afar. Consequently, many women self-isolate, avoiding festivals or gatherings leading to further emotional withdrawal.

### **Communication as Emotional Lifeline**

Frequent communication between spouses mitigates loneliness and maintains emotional connection. Aryal (2020) found that daily or weekly contact significantly reduced psychological distress scores, whereas sporadic communication correlated with higher anxiety. Modern technology mobile phones, video calls, and social media offers a crucial bridge for maintaining intimacy.

However, digital communication can also introduce new anxieties, such as fear of infidelity or misunderstandings over text. Furthermore, economic and infrastructural constraints limit access to reliable communication in many rural areas, sustaining emotional gaps.

### **Coping Mechanisms and Resilience**

Left-behind wives employ a spectrum of coping strategies. Common mechanisms include participation in savings cooperatives, community health groups, and religious rituals (Bhandari, 2023). Religious faith provides emotional refuge prayer, fasting, or attending temples offers symbolic control over uncertainty.

Psychosocial resilience often emerges from collective solidarity. For instance, women's groups in Kapilbastu and Sarlahi have created informal support circles for sharing experiences. Such collective spaces transform personal pain into social strength. Yet, professional mental health services remain scarce, limiting deeper recovery (Gautam & Adhikari, 2023).

### **Children's Well-Being and Intergenerational Impact**

The emotional distress of wives reverberates across generations. Studies by Pant et al. (2025) reveal that children of migrant fathers often display behavioral issues, emotional insecurity, and academic underperformance. Mothers, burdened with dual roles, struggle to provide adequate emotional support. Thus, migration-induced stress becomes a family-wide phenomenon, not confined to individual wives.

### **Policy Gaps and Structural Constraints**

Despite the pervasive nature of emotional distress, migration policies in Nepal remain economically biased. The state prioritizes remittance management and overseas labor safety while neglecting the psychosocial welfare of migrant families (Sapkota & Koirala, 2024).

The absence of gender-sensitive mental health programs in rural areas exacerbates distress. Government and NGOs need to coordinate on community-based psychosocial models that integrate counseling into primary healthcare (Khanal et al., 2024). Without structural reform, emotional suffering will persist as an invisible cost of labor migration.

### **Comparative Insights**

Comparative data from Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh highlight similar patterns economic gains coupled with emotional deficits. However, Nepal's rural isolation, caste hierarchies, and limited female mobility make its context uniquely vulnerable (Rai, 2022).

Nepal can learn from Sri Lanka's model of family reintegration programs, which combine remittance management training with counseling for left-behind families.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

#### **Summary of Findings**

This study underscores that male labor migration is a double-edged process economically beneficial yet emotionally taxing. Left-behind wives endure profound loneliness, anxiety, and identity crises. Despite increased household responsibilities and partial empowerment, their psychosocial well-being remains fragile.

Communication and remittance regularity emerge as critical protective factors, while patriarchal control, social stigma, and inadequate mental health infrastructure exacerbate vulnerability. Migration's emotional toll extends beyond individual suffering, influencing children's behavior and community cohesion.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

The findings reaffirm stress-coping theory, revealing that prolonged spousal separation functions as a chronic stressor that demands adaptive mechanisms. However, these mechanisms are constrained by gendered cultural expectations, supporting gender role theory's assertion that patriarchal norms shape emotional expression and coping capacity. Furthermore, the social-ecological lens reveals that emotional distress is systemic not just psychological arising from interactions among individuals, families, communities, and institutions. This multi-level understanding calls for integrated interventions rather than isolated mental health solutions.

#### **Policy Implications**

To address the psychosocial consequences of male labor migration, a holistic, gender-sensitive policy framework is essential. The following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Integration of Mental Health into Rural Health Systems:**

Expand community-based mental health programs using local health volunteers trained in psychosocial counseling.

2. **Digital and Communication Support for Migrant Families:**

Subsidize mobile and internet access for low-income migrant households to maintain consistent spousal communication.

3. **Economic Empowerment with Autonomy:**

Introduce remittance literacy and financial independence programs enabling women to manage resources without patriarchal gatekeeping.

4. **Community Awareness and Stigma Reduction:**

Conduct campaigns promoting mental health literacy and challenging gendered stigma around emotional vulnerability.

5. Inter-Ministerial Coordination:

Link the Ministry of Labor, Health, and Women's Affairs to design joint interventions supporting migrant families holistically.

### **Future Research Directions**

Future studies should adopt longitudinal and participatory approaches to trace how emotional distress evolves across migration cycles. Mixed-method research integrating psychological screening with ethnographic narratives can capture both prevalence and lived experience. Comparative regional studies would further clarify how Nepal's cultural structures mediate psychosocial outcomes.

### **Final Reflection**

Migration in Nepal is not merely an economic transaction it is a social and emotional journey that redefines gender, identity, and belonging. Recognizing and addressing the emotional distress of left-behind wives is both a moral and developmental imperative. Empowering these women psychologically is crucial for sustaining the social fabric of migration-dependent communities. A future where remittances coexist with resilience, and economic mobility aligns with emotional stability, is essential for Nepal's inclusive progress.

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