

# Migration, Social Structure and Economic Interdependence in Nepal: A Sociological Input-Output Analysis

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## Abstract

*This article examines the interrelationships among migration, social structure, and economic interdependence in Nepal through a sociological input–output analytical framework. Migration has become a central livelihood strategy for a large segment of the Nepalese population, profoundly shaping household economies, community relations, and national development patterns. Drawing exclusively on secondary sources—including census data, academic literature, policy reports, and publications by international organizations—the study analyzes how labor out-migration and remittance inflows operate as key structural inputs that generate multiple social and economic outputs across different levels of society. The findings reveal that migration is deeply embedded within Nepal’s hierarchical social structure and is strongly mediated by caste, class, gender, and regional inequalities. While remittances have contributed to poverty reduction, improved household welfare, and short-term economic stability, their social and economic impacts are uneven and often contradictory. Migration has altered gender roles, household authority, and community institutions, yet it frequently reproduces existing forms of social stratification and creates new hierarchies based on migration success. At the macro level, remittance-led growth has strengthened consumption and service-sector expansion but has also generated structural dependency on external labor markets and constrained domestic productive transformation. By applying a sociological input–output perspective, the article moves beyond fragmented economic or social explanations and highlights the systemic and relational nature of migration in Nepal. The study contributes to migration and development scholarship by demonstrating how migration simultaneously functions as a mechanism of social stability and a constraint on long-term structural change. It concludes by emphasizing the need for integrated and equity-oriented policy interventions to ensure that migration contributes to inclusive and sustainable development in Nepal.*

## Keywords:

Migration; social structure; remittances; economic interdependence; Nepal

## Introduction

Migration has long been a defining feature of Nepal’s social and economic landscape, shaping household strategies, community relations, and national development

trajectories. “Many counted as “employed” are engaged in unstable or unpaid work, and access to education or health services is often limited by quality and cost barriers, especially for the poorest”, (Gautam, 2025, p. 119). From seasonal and circular labor migration within the country to large-scale international migration to the Gulf states, Malaysia, and beyond, population mobility has become deeply embedded in Nepal’s social structure. “During the last two centuries, human mobility within Asia and across the world witnessed an unprecedented surge, which is much higher than at any other time in human history”, (Seethi, 2022, p. 25). Migration is no longer a peripheral livelihood option but a central mechanism through which families manage risk, access resources, and negotiate social status. In this context, migration cannot be understood merely as the movement of labor; it represents a complex social process that simultaneously restructures class relations, gender roles, kinship networks, and regional inequalities. This research article situates migration within a broader sociological framework, emphasizing its reciprocal relationship with social structure and economic interdependence in Nepal.

Nepal’s social structure—historically shaped by caste hierarchy, ethnic stratification, regional disparities, and uneven state development—both conditions and is transformed by migration. “Historically, Nepal is a multi-ethnic nation with diverse languages, religions and cultural traditions”, (Dahal, 2003, p. 111). Access to migration opportunities is not socially neutral; it is mediated by caste, class, education, gender, and social networks. Upper-caste and urban populations often access higher-skilled or better-paid migration channels, while marginalized groups are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage, high-risk labor markets. At the same time, remittance flows have altered traditional hierarchies by enabling new forms of social mobility, consumption patterns, and political participation. These dynamics raise critical sociological questions about whether migration reproduces existing inequalities or creates new pathways for social transformation. Understanding this dialectical relationship requires an analytical approach that goes beyond descriptive accounts of migration trends. “South Asia is also home to several world-renowned large-scale initiatives that have promoted the productivity of the working poor in several sectors”, (Doane, 2008, p. 28).

Economically, migration has generated a high degree of interdependence between households, regions, and sectors of the national economy. “Foreign workers contribute remittances - transfer of funds by workers (remitters) living and working in developed countries, typically to their families in their home countries”, (Dhungel, 2014, p. 168). Remittances constitute a significant share of Nepal’s gross domestic product and play a crucial role in sustaining rural livelihoods, financing education and health, and stabilizing household consumption. However, this remittance-led economy has also produced structural dependencies, including labor shortages in agriculture, feminization of rural economies, and vulnerability to external shocks in global labor markets. The inflow of remittance income stimulates demand for goods and services, influencing local markets, urban expansion, and patterns of investment, while simultaneously reducing incentives for domestic productive transformation. These contradictory outcomes necessitate a systematic examination of how migration-generated economic flows circulate within Nepal’s social system.

To address this complexity, this study adopts a sociological input–output analytical perspective, integrating economic flow analysis with social structural variables. Traditionally used in economics to map sectoral interdependencies, input–output analysis is reconceptualized here as a sociological tool to examine how migration-related inputs (labor outflows, remittances, skills, and social capital) generate multiple social and economic outputs across households, communities, and institutions. “This theory understands the state as an open system, which continuously interacts with the environment and produces outputs by receiving various inputs”, (Magar, 2025, p. 39). This approach allows for a relational understanding of migration, highlighting feedback loops between migration, social stratification, and economic reproduction. By linking macro-level economic interdependence with meso- and micro-level social processes, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of migration as a system embedded within Nepal’s broader social formation.

This article, therefore, aims to contribute to sociological debates on migration and development by offering an integrated framework that connects mobility, social structure, and economic interdependence in Nepal. Rather than treating migration as an isolated variable or purely economic phenomenon, the study conceptualizes it as a structural force that reshapes social relations and redistributes economic risks and opportunities. In doing so, it responds to the growing need for interdisciplinary and theoretically grounded analyses of migration in South Asia. By applying a sociological input–output lens, the article seeks to generate insights that are relevant not only for academic scholarship but also for policy debates on sustainable development, social equity, and labor governance in Nepal.

## **Research Methods**

This study employs a qualitative and analytical research design based exclusively on secondary sources to examine the interconnections among migration, social structure, and economic interdependence in Nepal. Data are drawn from a wide range of published and publicly accessible materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, edited volumes, government reports, census data, policy documents, and publications by international organizations such as the International Labor Organization, World Bank, and International Organization for Migration. These sources provide longitudinal and cross-sectional insights into migration patterns, remittance flows, labor markets, and social stratification in Nepal. The selection of secondary materials is guided by their academic credibility, relevance to sociological theories of migration and development, and their empirical focus on Nepal or comparable South Asian contexts.

Analytically, the study adopts a sociological input–output framework to synthesize and interpret secondary data. Rather than conducting statistical input–output modeling, the framework is used conceptually to trace the flows of migration-related inputs—such as labor out-migration, remittances, skills transfer, and social capital—and their social and economic outputs across households, communities, and national structures. Thematic analysis is applied to identify recurring patterns related to caste, class, gender, and regional inequalities, as well as forms of economic dependency and inter-sectoral linkages. By triangulating findings across multiple secondary sources, the study ensures analytical rigor and minimizes source-specific bias. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive

and theoretically informed understanding of migration as a structural process embedded within Nepal's social and economic system.

## **Literature Review**

The study of migration in Nepal has generated a rich and multidisciplinary body of literature spanning sociology, economics, anthropology, and development studies, reflecting the complexity and centrality of mobility in the country's social formation. Existing scholarship examines migration not only as a response to economic scarcity but also as a socially embedded process shaped by historical inequalities, institutional arrangements, and global labor regimes. Researchers have explored how migration interacts with caste, class, gender, and regional structures, while others have focused on remittances as a critical driver of household welfare and national economic stability. However, much of this literature remains analytically fragmented, often isolating economic outcomes from their social foundations or treating social change without systematically accounting for economic interdependence. This literature review synthesizes key scholarly debates on migration, social structure, and remittance-led development in Nepal, while identifying the need for an integrative sociological framework capable of capturing the reciprocal and systemic relationships among these dimensions.

## **Migration as a Structural Feature of Nepalese Society**

Scholarly literature consistently identifies migration as a long-standing and structural feature of Nepalese society rather than a recent or temporary phenomenon. Early sociological and anthropological studies highlight how ecological constraints, limited agrarian productivity, and historical patterns of state neglect encouraged seasonal and permanent migration even before the liberalization era. "Labor migration has been a feature of Nepalese livelihood strategies for at least 200 years; the first large scale migration being that of men from the hills to join Gurkha regiments", (Gill, 2003, p. 1). Contemporary research situates migration within broader processes of globalization and labor market restructuring, emphasizing Nepal's incorporation into transnational labor regimes. Scholars argue that migration has become normalized as a household survival strategy, deeply embedded in social expectations and life-course planning. This body of literature establishes migration as a socially produced and socially consequential process that must be analyzed within Nepal's specific historical and structural context.

## **Social Structure, Inequality and Access to Migration**

A substantial body of literature examines how Nepal's hierarchical social structure shapes differential access to migration opportunities. Studies grounded in caste, class, ethnicity, and gender analysis demonstrate that migration pathways are unevenly distributed, reflecting pre-existing social inequalities. Upper-caste and better-educated individuals are more likely to access skilled or semi-skilled migration, while Dalits, Janajatis, and the rural poor are often confined to low-wage, high-risk labor markets. "This trend has not only created social inequality but also undermined democratic values and political stability. The working class continues to suffer from problems such as minimum wages, precarious employment, and lack of social security", (Magar, 2025, p. 53). Feminist scholarship further reveals how gender norms restrict women's mobility while

simultaneously increasing their unpaid care burdens in migrant-sending households. This literature underscores that migration does not occur in a social vacuum; rather, it is mediated by power relations that both constrain and enable mobility.

### **Remittances and Household-Level, Socio-economic Transformation**

Extensive research focuses on the role of remittances in transforming household economies and social relations in Nepal. Empirical studies document the positive impacts of remittances on poverty reduction, food security, education, and access to healthcare. At the same time, sociological analyses caution against overly optimistic interpretations, noting that remittance benefits are uneven and often reinforce consumption-oriented livelihoods rather than productive investment. “The Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) defines remittances as payments made to a household in cash or in kind during the preceding 12-month period (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2023)”, (Acharya, 2025, p. 10). Scholars highlight how remittances reshape household power dynamics, sometimes empowering women through financial responsibility while also increasing their workload and emotional labor. This literature positions remittances as a critical input in Nepal’s socio-economic system, producing complex and often contradictory social outcomes.

### **Migration, Community Change, and Social Capital**

“Migration and its social and economic antecedents have long been the subject of scientific thinking”, (László Lőrincz, 2022, p. 1119). Beyond households, migration has been shown to significantly alter community structures and forms of social capital. Village-level studies indicate that large-scale out-migration leads to demographic imbalances, labor shortages in agriculture, and the reconfiguration of local institutions. While remittance inflows may finance community infrastructure, festivals, and social organizations, prolonged absence of working-age men can weaken collective action and traditional governance mechanisms. Some scholars argue that migration produces new transnational forms of social capital, linking local communities to global networks, while others emphasize the erosion of everyday social solidarity. This literature highlights migration’s dual capacity to both strengthen and fragment community life. “Dependency and interdependency as such are not a threat to human endeavor, they are the necessary pre-conditions, but the structures and processes that establish networks of order and solidarity need to be negotiated rather than imposed” (Lorenz, 2005, p. 100).

### **Economic Interdependence and Remittance-Led Development**

A growing strand of literature analyzes Nepal’s economy through the lens of remittance dependence and inter-sectoral linkages. “Focusing on these strategic sectors would enable Nepal to optimize its limited resources—including skilled human capital and financial investments—to drive economic growth and reduce its reliance on imports”, (Bhusal, 2025, p. 21). Macroeconomic studies demonstrate that remittances constitute a substantial share of national income and play a stabilizing role in balance-of-payments management. However, critical political economy perspectives warn that this dependence creates structural vulnerabilities, including reduced domestic labor supply, declining agricultural productivity, and exposure to external economic shocks. Scholars argue that remittance-driven consumption fuels service-sector growth and urban expansion while

failing to generate sustainable industrial development. This literature frames migration as a key driver of economic interdependence between Nepal and global labor markets, with profound structural implications.

### **Theoretical Approaches to Migration and Social Change**

The literature on migration in Nepal draws on diverse theoretical traditions, including neoclassical economics, new economics of labor migration, structuralist, and transnational perspectives. While economic models emphasize wage differentials and household risk diversification, sociological theories focus on social networks, institutional constraints, and power relations. “Migrating groups seldom move into unknown territory, choosing instead regions that have either been scouted or with which they have had previous contacts”, (Clark, 1995, p. 272). More recent studies adopt a transnational and systems-based approach, viewing migration as a circular and relational process that links origin and destination societies. However, critics note that many studies remain theoretically fragmented, often privileging either economic or social explanations. This gap points to the need for integrative frameworks capable of capturing migration’s multi-dimensional effects.

### **Toward a Sociological Input–Output Perspective**

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, limited attention has been paid to analytically mapping the reciprocal flows between migration, social structure, and economic outcomes. “A society may change over time, but functionalists believe that it will return to a stable state” (Berger, 2001, p. 10). Most studies examine isolated dimensions—such as remittances, gender, or poverty—without systematically tracing how migration-generated inputs circulate across social and economic domains. Emerging interdisciplinary work suggests that adapting input–output thinking to sociological analysis can illuminate these interdependencies and feedback loops. By conceptualizing migration as a system of inputs and outputs embedded in social relations, this approach offers a promising way to bridge micro-level social processes and macro-level economic structures. The present study builds on this emerging gap, positioning itself within and extending the existing literature on migration and social transformation in Nepal.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents and critically discusses the key findings derived from secondary data on migration, social structure, and economic interdependence in Nepal, using a sociological input–output analytical lens. Rather than treating migration outcomes in isolation, the discussion situates empirical patterns within broader social relations, institutional arrangements, and economic flows that shape Nepal’s development trajectory. The results demonstrate that migration operates as a systemic process, generating interconnected social and economic effects across household, community, and national levels. By examining these multi-layered interactions, the section highlights how migration simultaneously functions as a mechanism of livelihood security, social restructuring, and structural dependency, thereby revealing its dual role in both stabilizing and constraining Nepal’s social and economic transformation.

## **Migration Patterns and the Restructuring of Nepal's Social System**

The analysis of secondary data reveals that migration in Nepal has evolved from a coping mechanism into a structurally embedded social institution. Migration is no longer confined to economically distressed households; rather, it has become a normalized expectation across social classes and regions. “It includes different backgrounds such as high skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled migrants” (Tharu, 2023, p. 13). Census reports, labor surveys, and migration studies consistently indicate that foreign labor migration—particularly to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Malaysia, and India—has become the dominant livelihood strategy for a significant proportion of working-age Nepalese men and an increasing number of women. This widespread participation demonstrates that migration is not a marginal phenomenon but a central organizing force within Nepal's social system.

From a sociological perspective, migration has restructured traditional social roles and institutions. The prolonged absence of working-age males has transformed household composition, authority patterns, and gendered divisions of labor. Women increasingly assume responsibilities as household managers, agricultural decision-makers, and primary caregivers, thereby altering patriarchal norms at the micro level. However, the literature also suggests that this transformation is uneven and context-dependent; while some women experience enhanced autonomy, others face intensified workloads without corresponding decision-making power. Thus, migration simultaneously disrupts and reproduces traditional social hierarchies.

At the community level, migration has contributed to demographic imbalances, particularly in rural hill and mountain regions. Declining youth populations and aging communities have weakened local labor systems and social institutions such as traditional cooperative labor practices. “International migration is not a new experience for the Hill and Mountain people but mass-level international labor migration in recent decades has drastically changed the socio-economic and demographic characteristics” (Chidhi, 2004, p. 61). Yet, these disruptions are accompanied by the emergence of transnational social networks, where migrant associations and remittance-funded community projects replace older forms of collective action. This dual outcome highlights migration's contradictory role as both a destabilizing and adaptive force within Nepal's social structure.

## **Social Stratification, Inequality, and Differential Migration Outcomes**

The findings indicate that migration outcomes in Nepal are deeply stratified along lines of caste, class, ethnicity, gender, and region. Access to migration opportunities is not uniform; rather, it reflects pre-existing social inequalities. Upper-caste and relatively affluent households tend to access better-paid and lower-risk migration destinations through education, social networks, and financial capital. In contrast, Dalits, Janajatis, and economically marginalized groups are disproportionately represented in low-skilled, hazardous, and insecure labor markets abroad.

This stratification produces unequal social returns from migration. While some households experience upward mobility through remittance accumulation, others remain trapped in cycles of debt due to high recruitment costs, wage exploitation, and employment instability. Sociological studies emphasize that migration often reproduces class

differentiation within migrant-sending communities, creating new hierarchies based on migration success. Households with sustained remittance inflows gain symbolic and material power, influencing local politics, marriage markets, and consumption norms.

Gender further mediates migration outcomes. Although female migration has increased, women migrants often face restrictive policies, occupational segregation, and heightened vulnerability. At the same time, women left behind experience ambivalent empowerment—greater responsibility without structural recognition. These findings challenge modernization assumptions that migration automatically leads to social equality, instead demonstrating that migration interacts with social structure in ways that frequently reinforce inequality.

**Table 1**

*Social Stratification, and Migration Outcomes in Nepal*

<b>Social category</b>	<b>Access to migration</b>	<b>Type of employment</b>	<b>Social outcome</b>
Upper caste/urban class	High	Skilled/semi-skilled	Upward mobility
Middle rural households	Moderate	Semi-skilled	Economic stability
Dalits and the marginalized groups	Low	Low-skilled and risky	Persistent vulnerability
Women migrants	Restricted	Care/domestic work	Ambivalent empowerment

*Note:* Author’s development.

**Remittances and Household-Level Economic Transformation**

The analysis of remittance literature demonstrates that remittances constitute a critical economic input into Nepal’s household economy. Secondary data consistently show that remittance income contributes significantly to poverty reduction, improved nutrition, educational attainment, and access to healthcare. Households receiving remittances are better positioned to withstand economic shocks, indicating that migration functions as a risk diversification strategy within the new economics of labor migration framework.

However, sociological interpretations complicate this positive narrative. The majority of remittance income is allocated toward daily consumption, housing construction, loan repayment, and social ceremonies rather than productive investment. This consumption-oriented use reflects both structural constraints and cultural priorities, limiting the transformative potential of remittances. As a result, while household welfare improves, long-term economic sustainability remains uncertain.

Remittances also reshape intra-household power relations. Control over remittance income often determines decision-making authority, altering traditional gender and generational hierarchies. Yet, these changes are not uniform; patriarchal norms frequently reassert control over financial resources despite women’s increased labor contribution. Thus, remittances act as both an economic stabilizer and a site of social negotiation.

## Migration, Community Change, and the Transformation of Social Capital

At the meso level, migration has significantly altered community structures and forms of social capital. Traditional agrarian communities that once relied on reciprocal labor exchange and collective institutions have increasingly shifted toward monetized and individualized systems. Labor shortages have reduced agricultural productivity, leading to land abandonment in many rural areas. These changes have weakened traditional bonds of solidarity and community participation.

Conversely, migration has facilitated the emergence of transnational social capital. Migrant networks provide information, financial assistance, and emotional support, linking local communities to global labor markets. Remittance-funded infrastructure projects—such as schools, roads, and temples—have replaced state-led development in many areas. While these initiatives strengthen local infrastructure, they often lack inclusivity and long-term sustainability.

The findings suggest that migration transforms social capital rather than eroding it entirely. Bonding social capital declines, while bridging and transnational capital expands. This reconfiguration reflects broader processes of social change under globalization and neoliberal development.

## Economic Interdependence and Remittance-Led National Economy

At the macro level, Nepal's economy exhibits a high degree of dependency on migration-generated income. Remittances constitute a substantial share of national GDP and play a stabilizing role in foreign exchange reserves and household consumption. Input–output analysis of secondary economic data indicates that remittance inflows stimulate demand across sectors such as construction, retail, education, and health services.

However, this remittance-led growth model has structural limitations. The outflow of labor reduces domestic productive capacity, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing. The economy becomes externally dependent on global labor demand, exposing Nepal to geopolitical and economic shocks. Moreover, remittance-driven consumption inflates land and housing prices, exacerbating urban inequality.

From a sociological input–output perspective, migration functions as an external input sustaining internal economic circulation without generating endogenous productive transformation. This dependency underscores the paradox of migration-led development: short-term stability coexists with long-term vulnerability.

**Table 2**

*Migration Inputs, and Socio-Economic Outputs*

<b>Migration input</b>	<b>Immediate output</b>	<b>Long-term structural effect</b>
Labor out-migration	Remittance inflow	Labor scarcity
Remittances	Consumption growth	Economic dependency
Skills exposure	Limited skill transfer	Weak individual growth
Social networks	Migration continuity	Structural reliance

*Note:* Author's development.

## Feedback Loops Between Migration and Social Structure

The results highlight strong feedback mechanisms linking migration, social structure, and economic interdependence. Migration alters social relations, which in turn shape future migration decisions. Successful migrant households invest in further migration, reinforcing migration as a dominant livelihood strategy. Communities with established migration networks exhibit higher migration rates, illustrating cumulative causation.

These feedback loops contribute to the institutionalization of migration within Nepal’s social system. Migration becomes self-perpetuating, reducing incentives for domestic employment creation and policy reform. Social prestige associated with migration further entrenches this cycle, particularly among youth. This dynamic reinforces dependency while limiting alternative development pathways.

## Integrating Sociological Input–Output Analysis

Applying a sociological input–output framework allows for a holistic understanding of migration as a systemic process. Migration-related inputs generate multiple social and economic outputs that circulate across levels of society. Unlike conventional economic models, this approach captures power relations, inequality, and social reproduction.

**Table 3**

*Sociological Input-Output Matrix of Migration in Nepal*

Level	Inputs	Outputs
Household	Labor migration	Income security, role shifts
Community	Remittances	Infrastructure social change
National	Labor export	GDP stability, dependency
Social structure	Inequality	Stratified outcomes

Note: Author’s development.

## Discussion: Migration as Stability and Constraint

The findings suggest that migration in Nepal functions simultaneously as a mechanism of social stability and a constraint on structural transformation. While it mitigates poverty and sustains livelihoods, it also entrenches inequality and dependency. Migration compensates for state failure in employment creation but does not resolve underlying structural weaknesses.

This duality challenges simplistic development narratives and underscores the need for sociologically informed policy interventions. Without addressing social stratification, labor governance, and productive investment, migration will continue to reproduce Nepal’s dependent development trajectory.

## Implications for Sociological Theory and Policy

The study contributes to sociological debates by demonstrating the utility of input–output thinking beyond economics. Migration emerges as a relational system linking global labor markets with local social structures. Policy implications include the need for inclusive migration governance, productive use of remittances, and social protection for migrant households. In sum, the results and discussion reveal that migration in Nepal is not merely an economic phenomenon but a deeply social and structural process. Its impacts are uneven,

contradictory, and systemically embedded, requiring integrated sociological analysis to fully understand its consequences.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that migration in Nepal is not merely a response to economic hardship but a deeply embedded structural process that reshapes social relations and sustains economic interdependence at multiple levels. Through a sociological input–output analysis of secondary sources, the research shows how labor out-migration and remittance inflows function as critical inputs that generate wide-ranging social and economic outputs across households, communities, and the national economy. While migration has contributed to poverty reduction, household security, and short-term economic stability, its benefits are unevenly distributed and strongly mediated by caste, class, gender, and regional inequalities. As a result, migration both challenges and reproduces existing social hierarchies, transforming social roles and expectations without fundamentally dismantling structural inequities.

At the same time, the findings highlight the paradoxical nature of Nepal’s migration-led development pathway. Remittance dependence has compensated for limited domestic employment and state capacity, but it has also entrenched structural dependency on external labor markets and constrained long-term productive transformation. The institutionalization of migration through social norms, networks, and economic feedback loops risks reinforcing a cycle in which mobility substitutes for sustainable development. This study therefore, underscores the need for sociologically informed policy approaches that address social stratification, strengthen labor governance, and channel migration-related resources toward inclusive and productive sectors. By integrating social structure with economic interdependence, the article contributes to a more holistic understanding of migration in Nepal and provides a conceptual foundation for future research and policy debates on equitable and sustainable development.

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