

**Original Research Article**

# Sexual Harassment Among Nepali Non-Migrating Female Partners of International Labor Migrant Men

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## Abstract

International migration shows an increasing trend around the world. The majority of labor migrants, particularly low/semi-skilled migrants from low- and middle-income countries, immigrate to destination countries leaving their family members behind, leading to an increasing number of transnational families. While non-migrating spouses often receive financial support in the form of remittances, their husbands' migration also creates numerous social and personal problems. This general qualitative study aimed to explore non-migrating spouses' experience of sexual harassment/abuse and its impact on their mental health. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data. Participants reported experiencing harassment by men they knew, including their teachers and colleagues, who knew their husbands were abroad. None of the women reported taking any action against the perpetrators. Policy level changes to spread awareness on sexual harassment, encouraging victims to report such acts, and establishing and implementing appropriate laws are essential to mitigate this serious problem.

**Keywords:** Abuse, Asia, harassment, migrant wives, mitigation, Nepal

## Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon with 272 million international migrants in 2019; more than half are migrant workers and most are from low-and middle-income countries (LMICs) (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2020). With over half of the households having a current or returnee migrant, migration is common in Nepal (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2018) and it is increasing trend (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2020). Labor migrants from Nepal are predominantly men (GoN, 2020; Sharma et al., 2014) with most migrating to work in India, Malaysia, and the six countries of Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) (GoN, 2020). Due to lack of money (Telve, 2019), stringent migration laws in host countries (Acedera & Yeoh, 2020) and the need to leave someone in charge of assets at home (Lu, 2012), most labor migrants from LMICs, emigrate to destination countries alone. Leaving spouses/family behind, which has resulted in an increasing number of transnational families

globally (Démurger, 2015; Lu, 2012) and in Nepal (Lokshin & Glinskaya, 2009). There is growing literature on the sexual harassment of female migrants, for example in China (Zong et al., 2017), but left-behind family members of labor migrants (Acedera & Yeoh, 2020; Shattuck et al., 2019), non-migrating spouses remain relatively understudied (Archambault, 2020; Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2020) particularly in Nepal (Maharjan et al., 2012).

Prolonged absence of their migrant partner affects spouses in several ways. While left-behind men with migrant wives as breadwinners of the family are also affected (Acedera & Yeoh, 2019; Elizabeth et al., 2020; Hoang & Yeoh, 2011) in patriarchal settings, left-behind women are more affected since women generally have a lower status than men and they are considered to be dependent on men (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2020). While non-migrating women receive financial support in the form of remittances, their husbands' absence often creates both social and personal problems (Kunwar, 2015). The societal perception is that women in the absence of their partners are vulnerable to sexual violence/abuse/harassment (Krug et al., 2002).

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies sexual violence as a serious problem with short- and long-term consequences on women's physical, mental, and sexual and reproductive health (WHO, 2021). The WHO defines sexual violence as: "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (Krug et al., 2002).

Studies have looked at sexual harassment experienced by female migrant workers in the carpet industry in Kathmandu Valley (Puri & Cleland, 2007), or internal migrants in China (Hu et al., 2022). Other studies reported that many women experienced sexual abuse/harassment in the absence of their migrating husbands (Ahmed, 2020; Kamal, 2019). This study aimed to explore the experiences of non-migrating female spouses of Nepali international migrant workers on sexual harassment/abuse and its impact on their mental health.

### **Methods and Materials**

This study employed a general qualitative approach using in-depth interviews. Women were recruited using snowball sampling (Green & Thorogood, 2018). The initial participant, whose husband was working abroad, was chosen for an interview. She then introduced additional participants, and subsequent selections were made based on the subsequent participants. Owing to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, 14 in-depth interviews (Van Teijlingen & Forrest, 2004) were conducted online with wives of international migrants residing within the Kathmandu Valley via Facebook messenger and Viber by a female interviewer. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, participants were informed about the study objectives, confidentiality and anonymity, and voluntary participation and verbal consent was taken from all prior to the interview. Interviews were conducted in Nepali language. Since data were collected virtually, participants requested not to be recorded. Therefore, the first author, who conducted all the interviews, took notes and after each interview checked these with the participants. All interviews were then transcribed and translated into English language for analysis. After translation, the first author manually coded the transcripts using thematic analysis (Green & Thorogood, 2018). Participants' verbatim quotes formed a major part of the

findings. The names of participants have been changed to maintain anonymity. Ethical approval was sought from the Nepal Health Research Council (Ref: 163/2019) and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

## Results

### Participants' Characteristics

Most women (86%) were identifying themselves as Hindus. With 64% having higher secondary education or above, most participants were better educated than the average women in Nepal. Most were engaged in some form of employment, such as government or private-sector jobs (57%) or business (14%), while 21% identified themselves as housewives. Two-thirds of participants (36%) were under 30 years old, 43% were between 30-40 years old and 21% were over 40 years old (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Participants' Individual Characteristics*

	Frequency	Percentage
Caste		
Brahmin/Chhetri	9	64.3
Janajati	4	28.6
Dalit	1	7.1
Religion		
Hinduism	12	85.7
Other	2	14.3
Education		
Primary or below	1	7.1
Secondary (Grades 6-10)	4	28.6
High School or above	9	64.3
Occupation		
Housewife	3	21.4
Business	2	14.3
Paid employment	8	57.1
Student	1	7.1
Age (in completed years)		
Under 30	5	35.7
30-40	6	42.9
Above 40	3	21.4
Migrant destination		
GCC countries	8	57.1
South-east Asia	2	14.3
Other (Japan, Korea)	4	28.6
Family type		
Nuclear	6	42.9
Joint	8	57.1
Living arrangement		
Rented accommodation	9	64.3
Own home	5	35.7

### *Participants' Circumstantial Characteristics*

Most (57%) reported their husbands were working in GCC (Gulf Corporation Council) countries and participants were living in joint family and 57% resided in joint families. Most lived in rented accommodations (Annex 1). Most participants living in joint families shared that the relationship with their in-laws was unpleasant which caused them stress, for example:

My relatives told negative things about my character to my mother-in-law. Things like I am very beautiful, and I might have extramarital affairs with my colleagues and asked her to take care of me. After that my mother-in-law started to doubt my character and threatened and scolded me. My job is to collect money from the market so sometimes I am late to come home... [Pooja (pseudo name), 27 years]

Another woman explained why she had to stop living with her husband's family:

I lost my baby girl three days after birth. After that, my father-in-law and mother-in-law started to behave very badly with me. They used to put cold water and excess salt in my dal (lentil soup). They started to scold me and tortured me so much... I used to get to college in tears... They took my husband's income; we always provided them money... It's been a few months I started living separately, otherwise I would have died. [Radha, 44 years]

Thus, many migrant wives lived in challenging circumstances in their husbands' absence. Participants elaborated that their husbands had to work abroad because they were unable to get good jobs in Nepal. However, participants reported that their husbands loved them, send them remittances and communicated with them regularly. Owing to increased mobile ownership and the Internet availability in Nepal, women communicated with their husbands regularly using Viber and Messenger and phone calls.

### **Experiences of Harassment**

Most of the participants reported experiencing some form of harassment at some point in their lives, five had experienced sexual harassment by men who knew their husbands were abroad. They reported that physical harassment in the form of touching/pinching; verbal abuse wherein the perpetrator used vulgar words and repeated propositions for dating. Participants shared that as women they faced similar but less severe forms of harassment commonly in their lives. Two participants were sexually harassed by their teachers.

...while writing my master's thesis, I was sexually harassed by a teacher... He was the head of that department and he asked me to date him and have sexual relations with him. He told me to visit him at a hotel in Nagarkot where he would check my thesis. Before this, he used to touch my body parts as if unknowingly and he told me that if I needed anything, he would fulfill my demands. I used to ignore all this... then he created problems in my thesis correction and viva process and stopped everything (stopped the natural progression of thesis correction and finalization). After some time, his head of department post was terminated, only then I could submit my thesis for correction and viva... through the new head of department. [(Bindu, 27 years)]

Another woman reported similar abuse from her academic tutor:

Touching/pinching, using vulgar words... these are very common in my life which I have been facing in the streets and public buses. But I had such bitter experience of sexual harassment from my teacher, I cannot forget. I was a science student. I passed my master's degree with a first division. However, I was sexually harassed severely and abused by my thesis guide (supervisor). He asked me to date him and meet him in different locations and used to touch my private parts. Because of his behavior, I felt scared, and depressed as well. I had decided to give up my master's degree. But, due to my sister's encouragement, I could continue my study. I changed my thesis guide and finally I completed my thesis. [(Sushila, 27 years)]

Two women reported being harassed by work colleagues. Nepal's workplace follows a strict hierarchical structure wherein women facing harassment may find it difficult to challenge their seniors, for example:

In our organization, there is a hard and strong chain of command and generally, people with a lower profile cannot oppose their seniors. In this case, most harassment cases might be overlooked or kept secret. In real working life, I have also faced some bitter experiences of sexual harassment in my career from our seniors and male friends like touching, body brushing, use of vulgar words, sexual messages via social media, and propositions for dating also. Some lady friends have shared to me their bitter experiences about sexual harassment from seniors like the request for sexual relations too. [(Suman, 28 years)]

One participant, 34-year-old Sita (pseudo name), was sexually harassed by her brother-in-law:

My husband has been in Dubai for the past 10 years... My sister-in-law and brother-in-law also live with us. I feel unsafe from my brother-in-law... I am experiencing domestic violence from my mother-in-law and sister-in-law, and sexual harassment like verbal harassment... and touching and brushing body parts (from brother-in-law)...

The provided text highlights the disturbing reality faced by women living alone while their husbands work abroad. These women encounter various forms of sexual harassment from multiple sources, such as their teachers, office colleagues, and even their own family members.

Many migrant wives, particularly the ones who experienced harassment, shared two main reasons why they thought migrant wives faced harassment. First, men's mindset that migrant wives in the absence of their husbands are easy targets as they are alone and may need sexual partners. Second, the patriarchal societal norms where victim-blaming and shaming women as being immoral instead of accusing men who make the advances.

It is very common in our life, people (men) think that married women need sexual pleasure, therefore, wives of migrant men who are alone in Nepal might need a sexual partner. With such a wrong ideology, men are motivated to sexually harass wives of migrant men. Such sexual harassment might be less severe type (touching, teasing) to extremely severe type (force dating and abuse)... because of my beauty, I have faced different types of sexual harassment like propositions for dating and sexual relationship too. Once my senior in the office proposed me to marry him. [(Pooja, 27 years)]

Many participants mentioned that weak laws on sexual harassment and poor implementation of existing laws, as offenders do not get punished, encourage perpetrators of harassment, and discourage victims to speak up. Thus, our participants who had experienced harassment, did/could not report what was happening to them, despite being relatively empowered in terms of education and employment.

### **Impact of Harassment**

Participants reported facing several negative effects due to sexual harassment including irritation, fear, frustration, humiliation, and depression. They reported that in addition to their mental health, their academic/professional life was also affected as they could not perform their jobs well.

I felt mental and professional stress due to sexual harassment. I was afraid, stressed, and depressed while my thesis supervisor was torturing and harassing me sexually. I was not able to complete my thesis. At that point, I was thinking of leaving my studies due to the mental pressure.... At that time, I was very stressed, depressed, and humiliated, because of my thesis guide... [Bindu, 27 years]

It also negatively affected how they saw their employing organization:

Yes, I feel humiliated, tortured, flustered, due to the sexual harassment at work from friends and seniors. Simple types of sexually harassing behaviors are common and we also take it lightly but some cases of sexual harassment are hard to forget and makes us nervous always (for fear it will happen again). It makes me lose respect for my organization and causes mental stress. [Suman, 28 years]

Depending on available support network and life circumstances, sexual harassment may add to already complicated life for some migrant wives. Such was the case for 31-year-old Dhanmati:

After the death of my husband, people falsely blamed me for it. Family members as well as the society, and colleagues tried to harass me sexually... that made me depressed and scared... I thought of committing suicide, but at the same time, I thought about my child and my responsibilities toward him... to protect me from such a bad environment, I took support from a kind male friend (her current boyfriend). Now he is helping me to solve my problem as a good friend and I am feeling quite safe now. [Dhanmati, 31 years]

Even in such challenging circumstances, Dhanmati was still justifying entering another relationship. This reflects the strict moral values that women are subjected to in patriarchal societies:

My family members and my late husband used to blame me as characterless woman, I ignored it because I was not like what they thought of me. After my husband, I have to depend on some other person for my safety and needs. He is just a good friend. But in society sometimes I tell other people that he is my husband to protect me from other sexually deprived persons (sexual predators). (Dhanmati, 31 years)

Therefore, the issue of sexual harassment has led to challenging circumstances for the wives of immigrant male spouses, prompting them to employ various strategies and approaches to shield themselves from such negative behaviors.

### **Suggestions to Mitigate Sexual Harassment**

When asked what could be done to prevent such incidents, most migrant wives' suggestions were these. First, that the society should take responsibility and create a safe space for migrant women in the absence of their husbands. Instead of blaming and shaming migrant wives for being harassed, and subjecting those to doubts of immoral behaviors and affairs, a culture of respect should be developed. Second, the government and judiciary should formulate and implement strong laws against sexual harassment. Also, the judiciary should ensure the legal procedures are victim-friendly. Finally, awareness should be created regarding sexual harassment prevention and reporting to create a safe environment for women in society.

### **Discussion**

In this study, we explored the experiences of sexual harassment of non-migrating wives of international labor migrants from Nepal and participants were found suffered from several types of harassment such as touching/pinching, verbal abuse and repeated requests for dating.

Sexual harassment is particularly common in patriarchal societies (Berman et al., 2000; Foulis & McCabe, 1997). Participants also noted that they were vulnerable to sexual abuse/harassment from men because of the patriarchal society in Nepal which places women in a subordinate position. Less severe forms of sexual harassment such as name-calling, wolf-whistling, and other forms of public sexual harassment are extremely common in Nepal (Kunwar et al., 2014). All five women suffered from sexual/abuse harassment at the hands of people they knew and who knew their husbands were away. Some studies also found migrant wives being sexually harassed by people they knew and who knew their husbands were away including male relatives and friends of their husbands (Ahmed, 2020; Kamal, 2019). Thus, we argue that the societal, particularly the perpetrators', mindset is such that non-migrating wives can be harassed as her husband is not there to protect her, and also because she may be willing to engage in an affair. Sexual harassment in academic institutions (Dunne et al., 2004; United Nations Children Fund[UNICEF], 2016) and workplaces (Kunwar et al., 2014) is common in Nepal and that in many cases perpetrators are people the women know (Puri & Cleland, 2007; Thapalia et al., 2020).

Although most of our participants were highly educated and employed, they did not mention reporting or taking an active approach to dealing with harassment. They reported being very disturbed by it, so much so that their studies/work was suffering. This is consistent with existing literature where women tend not to report sexual violence (Krug et al., 2002; Puri et al., 2011) to authorities because they feel ashamed and afraid of being blamed or mistreated (Krug et al., 2002). Many participants mentioned that their in-laws, neighbors, and people in their community generally doubted their loyalty towards their husbands and in some cases even accused them of infidelity. Similar to our finding, a qualitative study among migrant wives in rural Bangladesh (Kamal, 2020) found that some participants experienced sexual harassment from the men in the family or community, but did not report or take any action for fear that if



they revealed being harassed, the society would blame them for not being 'respectable' (Kamal, 2020).

Participants reported facing several negative effects due to sexual harassment including irritation, fear, frustration, humiliation, shame, and depression. They reported that in addition to their mental health, their academic/professional life was also affected as they could not perform their jobs well. According to McLaughlin et al. (2017), women suffering from sexual harassment are more likely to quit jobs leading to financial stress. Already, these women were vulnerable as they were struggling with finances, missing their husbands, and adjusting with their husbands' family and life without the intimacy and support of their husbands. The additional stress of being sexually harassed further complicated their personal and even academic/professional lives. Further, except for a few women who sought help from their close family members/friends, women were unable to seek help. Berman et al. (2000) observed that girls and women who experienced sexual harassment reported feeling afraid, intimidated, belittled and a decreased sense of confidence.

With no studies to date focusing on sexual abuse/harassment experiences of non-migrating wives, our study fills an important gap in literature. It highlights the urgency to focus on the protection and the needs of the non-migrating wives. However, our study's qualitative nature is a potential weakness, because we only interviewed women residing in the Kathmandu Valley who were recruiting using snowball sampling, hence the generalizability of our findings is very low. We suggest further qualitative exploratory work on non-migrating wives in different parts of Nepal including in rural/urban and mountain/hill/terai (plain) areas. We also recommend quantitative surveys to produce more generalizable findings.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study show that sexual abuse/harassment is common among the non-migrating wives and that the perpetrators are usually men they know and men who know their husbands are away. None of the women experiencing harassment reported/took any action against the perpetrator due to fear of self-blaming and hopeless to get justice in society. Patriarchal social norms where family and community view non-migrating wives dubiously and question their loyalty to their husbands, and who perceive women as weak in the absence of their husbands encourage perpetrators to commit such acts and discourage victims to report such acts. Our recommendations include that we need to develop a culture of respect. Secondly, the government should initiate support groups for migrant wives locally where they can discuss their problems and support each other. Thirdly, the government should encourage women suffering from harassment to report the act(s) and the judiciary should formulate and implement strong laws against sexual harassment. Again, the judiciary should ensure the legal procedures are victim-friendly. Fourthly, psychosocial counselling should be made available at the local level wherein women seeking help could go. Finally, awareness should be created in the society regarding sexual harassment prevention and reporting to create a safe environment for women in the society.

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### Role of Authors

PS and EvT: Designed the study. KG: Conducted, collected, and analyzed the data. KG: Wrote the first draft. KG and SM: Wrote the second draft with advice from PS, EvT and RCS. All authors reviewed the manuscript and provided critical feedback and suggestions.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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