e-ISSN 2990-7721 Available online at https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/jomra

Economic and Social Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Women in Chautara-5, Sindhupalchowk

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Abstract: This study explores the economic and social reintegration challenges faced by returnee migrant women (RMW) in Chautara-5, Sindhupalchowk, Nepal. Employing a qualitative approach, the research examines the socio-cultural and economic barriers these women encounter upon returning from foreign employment. Findings reveal that RMW struggles with limited livelihood opportunities, social stigma, and inadequate government support. Despite their contributions to household economies through remittances, many return to financial instability due to a lack of sustainable income sources. The study emphasises the importance of gender-sensitive policies, skill-based training, and community awareness programs to facilitate a smoother reintegration process. Recommendations include enhancing local employment opportunities, improving access to information, and addressing systemic gender inequalities.

Keywords: *Returnee migrant women, Economic reintegration, Social reintegration, Labour migration, Nepal, Gender inequality*

Conflicts of interest: None
Supporting agencies: None

Received 24.5.2025 Revised 3.7.2025 Accepted 18.7.2025

Cite This Article: Rai, M. (2025). Economic and Social Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Women in Chautara-5, Sindhupalchowk. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research Advancements*, 3(1), 29-34.

1. Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon driven by individuals seeking improved economic opportunities, social mobility, and escape from adverse living conditions. While traditionally associated with male mobility, recent decades have witnessed a significant rise in the participation of women in labour migration. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), labour migration entails the movement of persons from one state to another, or within their country, primarily for employment (IOM, 2022). Globally, the migration of women is increasing; the United Nations estimated that out of 281 million international migrants in 2020, approximately 135 million were women, an increase from 130 million in the previous year (World Migration Report, 2022).

In Nepal, the history of labour migration dates back to the early 19th century, with the signing of the Sugauli Treaty, which permitted the recruitment of Nepali men into the British army as Gurkhas. However, the migration of Nepali women for foreign employment is a relatively recent trend, gaining momentum particularly after the democratic restoration in the 1990s (Adhikari et al., n.d.). This political shift opened the space for civil society mobilisation, women's empowerment programs, and increased gender awareness, encouraging women to step into the public sphere. Yet, poverty, gender inequality, domestic violence, and limited local employment opportunities have remained the main push factors driving women to seek foreign employment (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012).

Despite the economic benefits that migrant women bring through remittances, they often face multifaceted challenges before, during, and after migration. Upon return, these women, especially from marginalised communities, frequently experience difficulties reintegrating into their local social and economic environments. Several factors, including community stigma, cultural norms, limited livelihood opportunities, and inadequate institutional support, influence reintegration. Studies reveal that returnee women migrant workers (RMWs) are susceptible to psychological distress and marginalisation due to widespread societal prejudices and inadequate state mechanisms (Kharel, n.d.; Bhadra, n.d.).

Chautara-5 serves as a critical case study for examining the reintegration challenges faced by RMWs. It is characterised by high rates of female labour migration, particularly among Indigenous Tamang and Newar communities. The region reflects intersecting vulnerabilities: limited economic opportunities, entrenched patriarchal norms, and weak policy implementation. Many women from Chautara-5 migrate to Gulf countries and Malaysia for domestic work, only to face persistent unemployment, social stigma, and inadequate institutional support upon their return (Shrestha et al., 2025). This localised context shows the urgent need for gender-sensitive reintegration strategies focused on rural, indigenous communities, where migration remains cyclical and reintegration programs often fail to address structural barriers. The area is predominantly inhabited by Indigenous communities such as the Tamang and Newar, where patriarchal norms, illiteracy, and socio-economic vulnerability often intersect to shape the migration and reintegration experience. Although the Nepal Labour Migration Report (2020) shows a modest increase in formal female migration approvals, the data fail to capture the large number of undocumented female migrants, particularly to India and Gulf countries.

The present study examines the lived experiences of returnee migrant women in Chautara-5, focusing on the economic and socio-cultural challenges they encounter during reintegration. While several policies, such as the Foreign Employment Act (2007) and the National Human Rights Action Plan (2004), as well as international frameworks like CEDAW, aim to protect women migrant workers, the ground-level implementation remains limited (Government of Nepal, 2007; United Nations, 1979). Moreover, programs such as the Reintegration Programme 2079 have been reported as inadequately disseminated and underutilised, further exacerbating the socio-economic precarity of returnees.

By centring on the experiences of Indigenous returnee women in a specific geographic and socio-cultural context, this study aims to contribute to the discourse on gendered migration and reintegration in Nepal. It highlights the urgent need for context-sensitive, inclusive, and gender-responsive reintegration policies that bridge the gap between formal support structures and the lived needs of returnee women migrants.

2. Materials and methods

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research design to examine the economic and social reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women (RMWs) in Chautara-5, Sindhupalchowk. The qualitative approach was chosen to explore the lived realities, perceptions, and challenges of women who had returned from foreign employment. Chautara-5, located in the Sindhupalchowk District of Bagmati Province, was selected as the study area due to its high rate of female labour migration, particularly among Indigenous communities such as the Tamang and Newar. The selection of this location was also influenced by its socio-cultural complexity and the prevalence of reintegration issues among women returnees.

The study population comprised women who had returned from working abroad, primarily from Gulf countries and Malaysia. Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, a total of twelve returnee migrant women were selected for in-depth interviews. These participants were identified through local networks, NGOs, and personal referrals, ensuring that the sample represented a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds. In addition to the interviews, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each involving six to seven women, to gather collective insights on reintegration experiences. Furthermore, three key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out with a ward chairperson, a deputy mayor, and a counsellor from the SaMi Project to gain institutional perspectives on migration and reintegration support. Two case studies were also developed to highlight specific individual stories that illustrated extreme or notable reintegration challenges.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and case narratives. Interviews were conducted in Nepali, recorded with participants' consent, and later translated into English for analysis. Focus groups were facilitated with the assistance of a trained research assistant, while case studies were compiled based on detailed personal accounts. Secondary data were gathered from various sources, including academic literature, government policy documents, and reports from international and local organisations working on migration and gender issues.

The collected data were thematically analysed. Transcripts were reviewed and categorised according to recurring themes such as decision-making processes, sources of livelihood, economic reintegration, social stigma, and access to reintegration programs. Quantitative data related to demographic variables, such as age, caste, religion, and income, were tabulated to provide a contextual background for the qualitative findings.

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the study. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting interviews or recordings. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all personal identifiers were removed from the final data. The purpose and voluntary nature of the study were clearly communicated, and respondents were given the option to withdraw at any point. All data were used solely for academic purposes and handled with strict adherence to ethical research practices.

While this study offers in-depth qualitative insights, the small sample size and reliance on snowball sampling may introduce selection bias, which could limit the generalizability of the findings (Parker et al., 2019). These constraints show the need for caution in extrapolating results to broader returnee migrant populations, suggesting avenues for future research with larger, randomised samples.

3. Results

Temporary Gains and Persistent Vulnerability

For many RMWs, foreign employment served as a short-term solution to pressing household needs. The majority of women reported using their earnings primarily for family-related expenditures, such as children's education, home construction, or paying off existing debts. A few had invested in purchasing small plots of land or livestock. However, these gains were largely unsustainable, as most of the capital was either consumed or lost due to poor financial planning, lack of financial literacy, or emergencies.

Upon returning, many women faced a socio-economic environment that had not changed substantially since their departure. The same structural issues, limited job opportunities, lack of industry, and weak infrastructure remained unresolved. As a result, the majority found themselves unable to translate their migration experience into long-term economic mobility.

Livelihood Strategies after Return

Agriculture emerged as the dominant livelihood strategy, with 83.3% of the respondents engaged in subsistence farming. For these women, farming served not only as a means of food security but also as a fallback occupation when other sources of income were unavailable. However, the agricultural work was predominantly rain-fed, seasonal, and marked by low productivity. With limited access to irrigation, quality seeds, or farming equipment, the output remained insufficient to meet household needs or generate surplus for the market.

Wage labour was the second most common form of employment, reported by 66.6% of participants. This included daily-wage construction work, carrying loads, and seasonal harvesting on other people's land. While it offered immediate cash flow, wage labour was physically demanding and inconsistent. Most women were paid less than their male counterparts and had to work under precarious conditions.

Some RMWs also relied on goat rearing, tailoring, or weaving as additional or alternative sources of income. These activities were often introduced through NGO- or government-led skill development training programs. However, the income from these ventures was meagre. For instance, tailoring or weaving failed to flourish into viable enterprises due to limited local demand and lack of access to external markets. As one participant shared during a focus group discussion:

"What do we do even if we get help or training from the local government? Whatever training they give us is not so beneficial because we don't have the market to sell our product."

In some cases, women turned to traditional practices, such as brewing local alcohol, a skill deeply rooted in the Indigenous cultures of the Tamang and Newar. Although profitable in the short term, this work was stigmatised and subjected to occasional legal scrutiny, making it an unreliable and socially controversial source of income.

Barriers to Accessing Economic Support Programs

Despite the existence of reintegration programs such as the Reintegration Programme 2079 and various national initiatives promoting concessional loans, business grants, or vocational training, most participants reported a complete lack of awareness or access. This lack of engagement stemmed from several intersecting barriers.

Firstly, illiteracy and lack of information were common among RMWs, particularly those from marginalised communities. Many women had minimal or no schooling and were unable to navigate bureaucratic processes independently. Secondly, social exclusion and gender discrimination limit their participation in local governance. RMWs often lacked confidence or a social support network that could help them approach municipal offices or apply for services.

Additionally, institutional disconnects further exacerbated the issue. While some local government representatives acknowledged that budgets were allocated for women's economic empowerment under broader welfare programs, they admitted that no targeted tracking or tailored support mechanisms were in place for returnee migrant women. The lack of a dedicated unit or focal person for migration issues resulted in a situation where women "fell through the cracks," despite being recognised as a vulnerable demographic.

Frustration and the Desire to Re-Migrate

The cumulative effect of limited opportunities, lack of institutional engagement, and economic hardship led many women to express a strong desire to migrate again. Only two out of twelve women interviewed stated they had no intention of remigrating. The rest either actively sought agents for foreign employment or remained open to possibility. The primary motivator was economic: the hope of earning and saving more in a short time abroad than what local jobs could offer over the years.

This sentiment reflects a structural failure in reintegration, where foreign employment remains more appealing than domestic livelihood options. It also underscores the cyclical nature of migration, sustained not just by aspiration but by desperation. This pattern, if unaddressed, risks perpetuating the vulnerabilities of women migrant workers, including potential exploitation, trafficking, or re-entry into undocumented labour markets.

Perceptions of Self and Skills

Another critical aspect of reintegration was women's perception of their self-worth and economic capability. Many respondents felt they had returned with valuable experiences and strong work ethics, but this potential remained unrecognised and underutilised at the local level. Some women expressed interest in entrepreneurship or cooperative farming but lacked the startup capital, business knowledge, or community support to initiate these ventures.

Moreover, the mismatch between the skills gained abroad (mostly domestic work or caregiving) and local economic opportunities further limited reintegration prospects. These skills were not considered formal or marketable within the local context, and there was no system for recognising or certifying them post-return. As a result, women were left with rich experiential knowledge but few platforms to convert it into economic resilience.

Structural Invisibility of Returnee Women

A recurring theme was the structural invisibility of RMWs in local planning and policy implementation. While labour migration was widely recognised at the national level, returnee women, especially those not officially documented, remained excluded from municipal records, development plans, and budget allocations. This invisibility perpetuated a cycle of neglect and contributed to their economic marginalisation.

Some women suggested that collective action, such as forming RMW groups or cooperatives, could improve their visibility and bargaining power. However, organising such efforts required external facilitation, training, and sustained mentoring, which were largely absent in the studied community.

Social Reintegration and Cultural Challenges

Social reintegration emerged as one of the most critical challenges faced by RMWs. Many women encountered judgmental attitudes, verbal abuse, and character-assassinating rumours from neighbours and even family members. Stereotypes portraying migrant women as morally questionable due to their exposure to foreign environments fostered widespread mistrust. Some respondents were accused of extramarital affairs or immoral behaviour by neighbours or in-laws, leading to domestic tensions. One participant noted: "My husband sometimes doubts my character because of what neighbours say. It becomes unbearable to tolerate these allegations"

These attitudes were especially pronounced in conservative or patriarchal households. Although a majority stated they experienced no serious issues within their immediate families, several admitted to facing stigma and suspicion. In one documented case, a woman described how relentless gossip and mental abuse from her neighbours and relatives triggered depression, insomnia, and suicidal thoughts. She confessed, "Their frequent verbal abuse mentally impacted me. I couldn't sleep at night and even had suicidal thoughts"

Interestingly, respondents from predominantly Indigenous communities, particularly the Tamang and Newar, often internalised the stereotype of being "innocent" and "less educated," which contributed to a sense of vulnerability and diminished self-worth. This self-perception reinforced their marginalisation, as many remained unaware of their rights or the services available to them.

Despite these challenges, a few women reported supportive family environments and community solidarity among fellow returnees, which mitigated the negative impacts of societal stigma. Some NGOs like Shakti Samuha were acknowledged for their awareness programs targeting trafficked or vulnerable women, although such initiatives were described as rare and sporadic.

4. Discussion

RMWs from Chautara-5 experienced temporary financial improvements through foreign employment, but long-term economic reintegration proved unsustainable. Most used their earnings for short-term investments such as land or education, yet few established stable income-generating activities. The majority relied on subsistence farming (83.3%) and seasonal wage labour (66.6%), both of which offered limited financial security. These outcomes reflect Bhadra's (2007) observation that women often return to economic hardship due to the lack of market-linked skills and reintegration support.

Despite the presence of government programs such as skill training and concessional loans, most participants were either unaware of or unable to access them due to illiteracy, exclusion, or inadequate outreach. One woman noted, "Whatever training they give us is not so beneficial because we don't have the market to sell our product," echoing Kharel (2016), who emphasised the gap between training initiatives and market realities. Local officials also acknowledged the lack of targeted support for RMWs. Consequently, many women considered re-migrating, supporting Thimothy and Sasikumar's (2012) view that migration remains cyclical due to poor local economic prospects and gender barriers.

Social reintegration was equally challenging. Many RMWs faced stigma, verbal abuse, and suspicion regarding their morality. "My husband sometimes doubts my character because of what neighbours say," one participant revealed. Such experiences align with Tamang (2011) and Bhadra (2007), who noted that patriarchal societies often shame migrant women for breaking gender norms. Psychological distress, including depression and suicidal thoughts, was also reported, supporting Kharel's (2016) findings on mental health risks linked to social exclusion.

Respondents from Indigenous groups, particularly Tamang and Newar, often internalised social inferiority, describing themselves as "innocent" or "less educated," which limited their confidence in seeking support, consistent with Bhadra's (2007) observations on self-stigmatisation. While policies such as the Foreign Employment Act (2007) and CEDAW aim to protect migrant women, their local implementation remains weak, hindered by poor coordination and a lack of gender-sensitive programming.

This study confirms prior research (Kharel, 2016) that reintegration is a complex, multi-dimensional process shaped by cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. Without addressing the root causes of migration—such as poverty, violence, and limited opportunity—reintegration risks remaining superficial, as noted by Thimothy and Sasikumar (2012).

The findings of this study resonate strongly with feminist political economy perspectives, which critique how global labour systems exploit women's reproductive and care labour while offering minimal pathways for economic empowerment upon return (Mills, 2003). In Chautara-5, the predominance of informal livelihoods (such as subsistence farming, wage labour) post-return underscores how patriarchal-capitalist structures confine women to precarious work, perpetuating what Elias (2010) calls "gendered circuits of disadvantage".

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) further illuminates how overlapping identities of caste, indigeneity, and gender exacerbate reintegration challenges. These narratives, compounded by limited access to education and resources (Bhadra, 2007), create what Collins (2019) terms a "matrix of domination", where systemic invisibility in policy spaces (such as municipal budgets) reinforces economic exclusion. The study's cases of psychological distress under stigma also align with Kharel's (2016) work on how intersectional discrimination manifests as mental health burdens for returnee women.

These theoretical lenses reveal a critical tension: while migration policies, such as Nepal's Foreign Employment Act (2007), nominally protect women, their implementation often overlooks intersectional realities. For instance, skill-training programs, rooted in homogenised notions of "empowerment", fail to address Tamang and Newar women's specific market barriers (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012). A feminist political economy approach would instead demand redistributive measures (such as land rights, childcare support) to disrupt dependency on cyclical migration. At the same time, intersectionality calls for participatory policymaking that centres Indigenous women's voices (Tamang, 2011). Without such reforms, reintegration risks replicating the very inequalities that drive women to migrate.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the economic and social reintegration experiences of returnee migrant women (RMWs) in Chautara-5, Sindhupalchowk, revealing a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and institutional challenges. While foreign employment offered short-term financial relief for many women, their post-return livelihoods were marked by economic instability, limited market access, and minimal institutional support. Most RMWs returned to informal, low-paying work such as agriculture and wage labour, underscoring the lack of sustainable reintegration mechanisms.

Socially, returnee women faced stigma, suspicion, and psychological stress rooted in patriarchal norms and community perceptions. Reintegration efforts were further hindered by weak policy implementation, low awareness of available support programs, and poor coordination between local governments and NGOs. Women from Indigenous and marginalised backgrounds were particularly vulnerable, often internalising discrimination and lacking confidence to engage with support structures.

The findings affirm that reintegration is not merely a logistical process but a deeply gendered and social challenge. Without targeted, inclusive, and culturally responsive interventions, the return of women migrant workers risks reproducing the very inequalities that prompted their migration. Reintegration must therefore be reimagined as a transformative process, one that ensures economic empowerment, social dignity, and policy accountability.

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