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Women Labour Migrant Returnees and their Changing Roles in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper examines how the women foreign labour migrant looking at shifts in gender roles after returning to the home from the standpoint of family structure, public roles and factors to bring changes. It also explores how returnee women are perceived in society. Chautara and Duwachaur villages of Sindhupalchowk district were selected as the studied area. Data were collected from forty female who have returned from foreign labor. Informations were collected from household survey, interviews and key informant interview methods. Drastically change in the means of communication and its accessibility, higher level of income and economic empowerment are the key for shifting in gender role. It has not been a drastic difference between women roles after returning from abroad. Thus, family structure and ethnicity of the migrant family are key determinant factors for the changing role. In nuclear family gender roles was seen a significant change in comparison to joint families. Women of ethnic groups enjoy relatively more social freedom compared to women of higher-caste groups such as Brahmins and Chhetri. The major challenge for returnee women migration is the image of creating female workers as “victims” and deeply rooted in the socio-economic structures of Nepal.

Keywords: gender role, migrant returnee, women labor migration

Introduction

Labour migration has become one of the key features of the global economy in the 21st century. ILO estimates, there are 150.3 million migrant workers in the world comprising 83.7 million men and 66.6 million women, corresponding to 55.7 per cent and 44.3 per cent of the total respectively (ILO, 2015). In recent days, the number of women migrants in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region is on the rise, both absolutely and proportionately (Sijapati, 2016). Among these countries, Nepal is one of them which has issued over 4 million labour approvals to Nepali workers in the last decade since 2008/09 (MOLESS, 2020). And it is estimated 2.5 million Nepalese women are currently working outside of Nepal, in countries that include Malaysia and the Middle East (WOREC, 2012). The current movement of Nepalese female labour on a large scale to third countries other than India is relatively new (Bhadra, 2007). Further, Nepal Labor Migration Report 2020 reported that female migrant workers was about 5 per cent in the last decade but increased around 8.5 per cent in the fiscal year 2018/19 (MOLESS, 2020). In addition, it is estimated 90% of female Nepalese migrant workers are undocumented; and the number of female migrants is highest in Saudi Arabia, followed by Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and the UAE (WOREC, 2012).

The effects of migration on family structure and function are numerous, and these have been extensively studied in terms of migrant families in the host country (Dumon, 1989). Considering gender as an important aspect, studies have been carried to analyse the impact on gender roles household level as well as community level and found mixed result. For instance, women who take on the role of household head gained more decision-making power and experience an increase in social participation, however, those left under the supervision of other members (usually their in-laws) suffered from reduced decision-making ability and increased restrictions on their mobility (Rajkarnikar, 2020). Further, it is determined on remittance amount received, larger remittances supported increase decision-making roles, thus empowering the women left behind but low remittances had the opposite impact (Maharjan et al., 2012). At the community level it was found an increase in women's participation in the groups' general assemblies, but not in decision making bodies (Lama et al., 2017). But these studies attempt to look at gender roles when the men are away, but as the number of women migrations is rising, it is vital to study the impact when women members are away from home.

Recent studies on women migration have focused on impacts on households, policy, obstacles and perception towards migration. Kharel (2016) investigated the impact of women's migration their experiences of and challenges after working as housemaids abroad. Similarly, Sijapati et al. (2019) studied on the policy and regulatory frameworks of Nepal related to female labour migration indicated working conditions abroad are not affected by sending country policies. A recent study by Sapkota (2020) on International female labour migration and its impact on the left behind family members in their home in the Tanahun district of Nepal and considered more work required in this aspect. Against this backdrop, this article attempts to analyse changes in gender roles and impact on women family members as well as the attitudes towards women migration. This becomes more important as Labour Force Survey 2017/18 shows that an analysis of the profile of recent returnee migrant workers in Nepal shows that 42.8 per cent are employed, 13.4 per cent are unemployed and 43.8 per cent are out of the labour force (CBS, 2019). It can be anticipated females might be more unemployed status as only 22.5 per cent of working-age women are employed (CBS, 2019).

Research Methods and study site

Labour migration has become one of the defining characteristics of Nepal's socio-economic landscape. Sindhupalchowk district is one district along with Jhapa, Makawanpur, Morang, Kathmandu, Kavrepalanchok, Ilam, Nuwakot, Sunsari and Chitwan which accounts for 50 percent of female migrant workers of the country (MOLESS, 2020). Chautara and Duwachaur area of Sindhupalchowk district were purposefully selected for the study.

This study used a qualitative and quantitative approach for data collection. Forty female in the village from family members with women labour migration were selected through snowball sampling for the study. Data were collected using interview, questionnaire and observation methods. In addition, Key informant interview was carried with school teachers and local political leaders for detailed information. Few purposive interviews were done with the elder female of the study area. Finally, descriptive analysis for quantitative data was carried on with the support of qualitative data.

Findings and discussion

Socio-Demographic characters of the respondents

The data showed a higher percentage of ethnic groups (janajati) were among the respondents. Second to janajati, almost 35 % of respondents preferred to call themselves Tamangs followed by Nepali and Chhetri. This is also due to the higher percentage of the Tamang community in Sindhupalchowk district, especially in the community where the study was conducted. The study showed that a majority of female foreign labour migrant belonged to low-income groups. The respondent households reported of lack of any property in the name of the female migrant. The households that were interviewed mostly belonged to either Janajati or Dalit community with the majority being from the Tamang community.

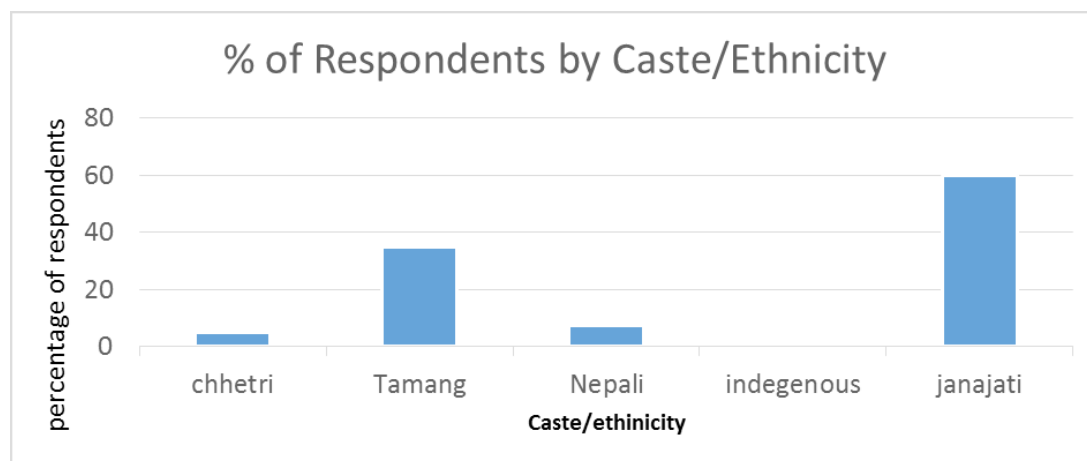


Figure 1: Women migrating based on caste and ethnicity

Source: Field Survey, 2018

Destination for Labor Migration

Most of the households (90%) mentioned that most of the women in Sindhupalchowk had migrated to Kuwait for employment and they thought that the destination was much safer for women compared to other destinations. However, this result different from national reports (MOLESS, 2020) which mentioned Kuwait is one of the major destination but not the top country for migration. However, a study in Tanahun Nepal reported Kuwait was among the top three countries preferred by women migration without significant difference among the top three destination countries (Sapkota, 2020). This may be due to an understanding of little or limited awareness and education regarding foreign labour migration. It was also verified as one of the key informant interviewees explained that more households mentioned Kuwait because all they have heard about is Kuwait.

The majority of women from Sindhupalchowk due to reasons like poverty, unemployment, family problems, family loan. Poverty (70.4%) was the main reason for them to leave for foreign labour migration followed by family problems such as domestic violence. Pointing out similar trends, Bhadra (2007) was reported that the majority of the women migrated due to financial difficulties at home as well as the lack of employment and income opportunities within the country.

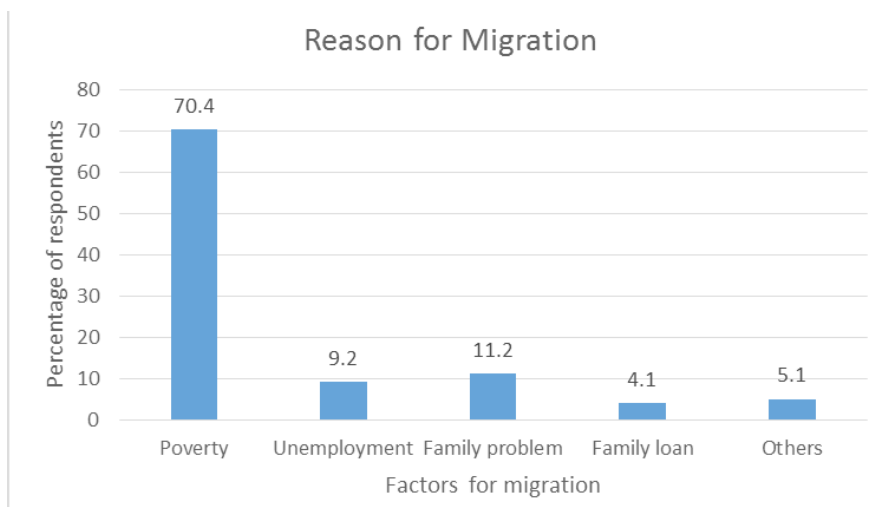


Figure 2: Reason for foreign migration

Source: Field Survey 2018

Access and Frequency of Communication

The communication between family members and women migrant workers was found to be frequent (Figure 3). This implies a regular flow of information that families receive about their migrant family members along with a social value it creates as the families feel relaxed and content when they get to talk often with their migrated family member. Almost 58% of the respondents reported owning a mobile phone. Such a high number of mobile phone users give an impression of the development of communication in Nepal that can connect the unconnected parts of the country nationally and globally.

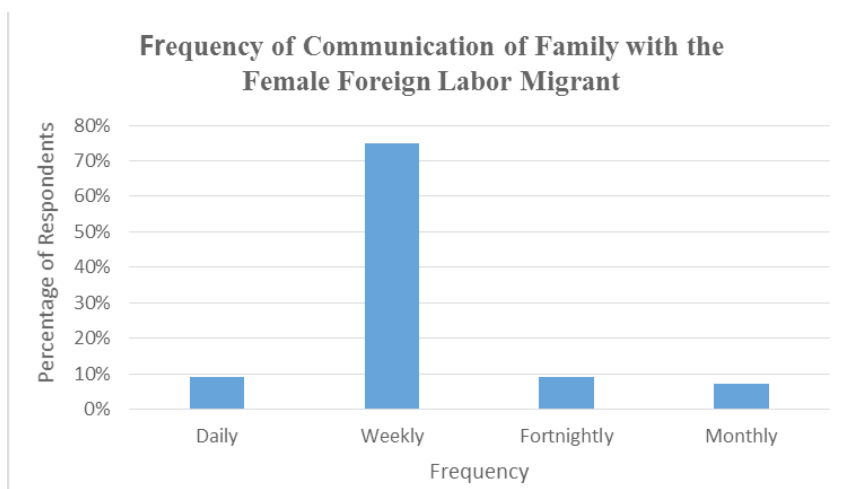


Figure 3: Frequency of Communication of Family with the Female Foreign Labor Migrant

Source: Field Survey 2018

Gender Roles and Division of Work

Percentage of Households Having Defined Work Division

83% of the households' respondents stated that the household chores and child-rearing and caring activities were understood by everyone in the family to be women's roles. Female respondents who had a female foreign labour migrant responded that they would share their workloads previously, but had been taking care of such chores alone or along with other female members after the incumbent left. This result can be referred to as a common case of South Asia and referred "transitory experience," where women migrants that upon return, migrant women passively reassume the traditional roles of women such as housewives and this usually happens in societies where patriarchy is deeply rooted (Thimoty and Sasikumar, 2012; Sijapati, 2016). Economic planning and budgeting were found to be non-existent or insignificant. In case there was any, it was handled by the daughter-in-law previously and later by an elderly female in her absence. However, the major decisions were still taken by the male head of the family.

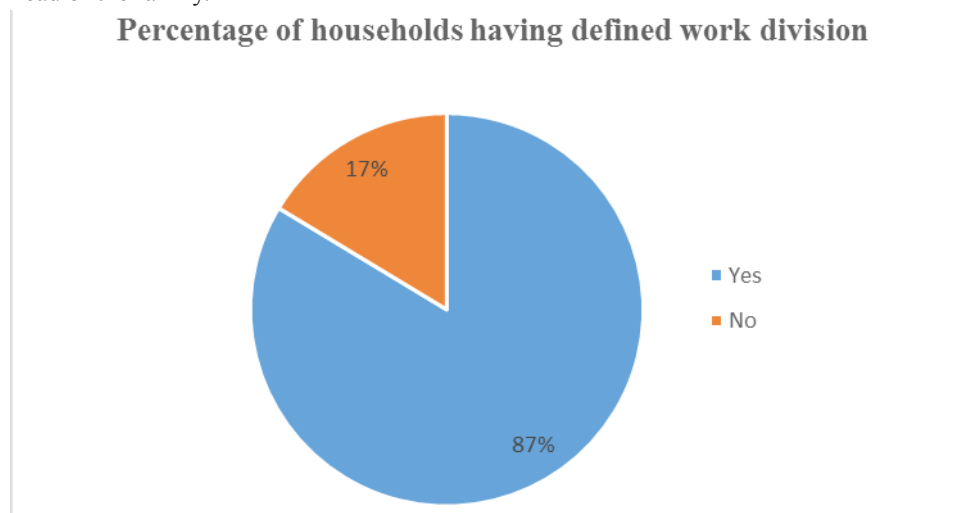


Figure 4: Percentage of Households having defined work division

Women's workload for migrant households has increased in both male and female migrant families. The workload is borne by a female no matter who migrates. The absence of mothers or older sisters has burdened daughters and younger sisters with household work and/or childcare, thus hampering their schooling (Bhadra, 2007). In the case of families with male migrants, women are responsible for budgeting and spending on household ration and marketing.

Further, it is determined on family structure either woman belong to a nuclear family or a joint family. It has observed male counterparts from nuclear family take more responsibilities of women or activities like cooking cleaning which were considered to be the work of women in the past (Table 1). This finding aligns with findings on a study of Indian and Nepal find that women in nuclear families enjoy higher autonomy but also experience an increase in workload, while women in extended families don't see much change in their workload but lose their autonomy (Desai & Banerji, 2008; Joshi & Rajkarnikar, 2017).

Table 1: Work Division, Work Load and Decision-Making Role in a Female Migrant Household

		Joint family		Nuclear Family	
		Before (5 years ago)	Now	Before (5 Years ago)	Now
Farming	Ploughing	Male	Male	Male	Male
	Sowing seeds	Male & Female both	Male & Female	Male & Female	HM & Male
	Harvesting	Male & Female	HM & Female	Male & Female	HM & Male
Household	Cooking	Female	Female	Male & Female	Male
	Cleaning	Female	Female	Female	Male
	Washing	Female	Female	Female	Female
	Child rearing	Female	Female	Female	Female and Male
Marketing	Selling and buying in the market	Male	Male	Male	Male and Female

Source: Field survey, 2018

Impact of Foreign Labor Migration on Gender Roles

The majority of the respondents reported that they included their female migrant member in discussions about major decisions in the family like family expenses. It was also the case that since these women sent money back home, they had a say whether their children should be sent to a government school or a private (English medium) school, building or repairing houses and paying debts. But it was not clear if her view was equally considered in every other matter of household. It was also observed that the foreign labour migration of one female member in the family had no or little impact on the way other female members were treated.

Mobility

Women's mobility is restricted in Sindhupalchowk. Many respondents reported that the FM before leaving for foreign employment needed to be escorted (mostly by a male member) up to the Melamchi market. Similar to the case of Sindhupalchowk was found in a study of Chitwan district, where many, a male family member or husband accompanied the female emigrants until the transit cities of Kathmandu or Delhi/Mumbai (Kharel, 2016). However, now, the fact that their daughters/sisters could fly in aeroplanes.

Females are considered vulnerable to sexual abuse and the stigma attached to sexually harassed women is enough to restrict their mobility under the term 'security'. As a result, the mobility of many other women staying back in the village is still restricted. Recently, the concept of working women and their ability to step outside the four walls of their homes to work has been accepted in Nepal. This is all the more relevant in the case of the foreign labour migration of women. Nepali women travel to the Middle East in thousands of numbers in search of employment.

Many residents of Sindhupalchowk are sceptical about women's mobility in terms of foreign employment. However, in recent days it has been changing and consider getting prior information on the work as an important element. One of the respondents stated,

Earlier I did not like women to leave for foreign employment. I did not know that they could work in foreign countries as well. I got to know that it is important to have proper information before leaving. However, if my nieces wish to go abroad, I shall advise them to go for higher studies.

Interview note with a female, 2018.

Household Chores

In absence of a female member, there was no significant change in their roles played by the male members. and it was still considered to be the job of the remaining women of the house. Many women, especially from joint families, stressed that the foreign labour migration of women had created a “double burden” for other women in the house. Still, it was either the daughter or daughter-in-law who looked after household works in the absence of any other female member. However, in the case of a nuclear family where a wife was abroad and the husband stayed back with their children, he was found to be taking care of household chores like cooking, cleaning, washing as well as animal rearing. Thus, as much as it might seem to have a positive effect on a nuclear family causing a paradigm shift in gender role, its impact is equally varied and counter-productive for women in joint families. Thus, the impact of foreign labour migration on gender roles is as much dependent on the kind of family structure as anything else.

Other studies carried in Nepal also indicated that gender roles are dependent on the family structure. At the household level, it was found that women who take on the role of household head gained more decision-making power and experience an increase in social participation, however, those left under the supervision of other members (usually their in-laws) suffered from reduced decision-making ability and increased restrictions on their mobility (Rajnikar, 2017).

Respondents viewed that throughout the year it was most difficult during plantation and harvesting season without the female migrant. An absence of a helping hand was accompanied by emotional difficulties for a mother. Many stressed the difficulty in managing household activities without a female member in the house, thus, a common belief was that a woman is responsible for taking care of household chores.

Child Rearing

Children who stayed with grandparents or in a joint family were looked after by them. Only in nuclear families were they totally under the care and guidance of their father. 90% of all elderly female respondents said that it was them who took care of the children and not their fathers. Such a situation highlights the predicament of the elderly population in the district. In a society where handing over the household responsibility to daughter-in-law once the son gets married is a tradition, having to look after their grandchildren and household chores even at old age has become part of family life due to female foreign labour migration. Such a change is often looked upon as it creates a double burden to the ageing population, especially, females. This phenomenon where grandmothers rear children referred “grandmothering” increases where the mothers have left home for employment, the responsibility of raising children falls onto grandmother (Sijapati, 2016).

Community’s Perception on Foreign Labor Migration of Women

Sindhupalchowk has been known for labour migration for a long. While then it used to be India, today they are leaving for the gulf and the middle east. This includes both men and women. Migration

to India by women for employment was mostly looked upon by people due to the perception that any women leaving for India were involved in prostitution. Social activists in the district said that people perceived 'India' as a synonym for 'Bombay' and that was again the synonym for 'prostitution'. Such a perception was the result of the high rate of trafficking among women in the district who were lured by agents for employment in India and, sadly, ended up in brothels. The reason for this kind of perception is due to discourses created such as "no woman returns pure" and all-female workers are "victims" of sex trafficking and/or sexual abuses and these types of messages are disseminated by the media, returned male workers, and governmental policies (Kharel, 2016). Further, women were trafficked to brothel in Bombay from SindhuPalchowk district(Shrestha, 2018)

Social class and caste of people largely determined their perception towards foreign labour migration. social perception regarding foreign employment of women still suffers from social stigma and women leaving or gulf or the middle-east are looked upon by high-caste people in the district. Countries like Australia, Japan and the US, however, are thought to be more respectable destinations. In Nepal, gender discrimination differs based on caste and ethnicity, as Stark high caste women from the Indo-Aryan background who face strict gender norms, and that of women from middle or lower castes from Tibeto-Burman background who enjoy higher freedom in terms of their physical mobility, marriage/re-marriage options, and decision-making abilities(Tamang, 2009).

Foreign labour migration of women has given the migrant women some degree of authority over decision making regarding their child's education in terms of whether their children should go to private schools with an increased income of the family. Many of them even enjoy a certain degree of respect caused by their employed status and a much greater income compared to their spouse or male counterparts in the country. However, much of the major decisions were still made by men of the house.

Female Perception on Labor Migration and Gender Roles

While most of the respondents were female as the men were either out for work or not at home due to other reasons during the day, their views regarding female foreign labour migration went both ways. Almost all agreed that it was beneficial for the family's economic status as they were receiving money from the migrant member. Many families were able to pay off their debts already and could send children to good schools (private schools for that matter). Such perceptions were of the families where the incumbent was a daughter. However, families, where a daughter-in-law had left for foreign employment, viewed that it caused an added burden of child-rearing and caring activities and taking care of household chores for the elderly in-laws of the incumbent. According to them, the male members, even if they had no jobs, were little or no help and it was the females either the mother or sister who took care of household chores.

It is not good for women to leave their homes for foreign employment. Society also looks down upon women who chose to migrate. We also think that it is not a girl's job as she is entitled to leave her parent's home and live with her in-laws. She has her responsibility towards her in-laws It is better for girls to not opt for foreign labour migration. However, we cannot stop them whatsoever.

Interview note with mid age female, 2018

Conclusion

Nepal is observing the rise in the number of women out-migration to support the family economically. In this paper, we present the stories of women migrants and their impact on changing dynamics of gender roles during their stay in the workplace and after returning to the home using the data gathered from two villages of Sindhupalchowk district. The study reveals that there are positive changes in gender roles with economic empowerment but that does not last long after they come back to their domestic household chores as they did in the past. Further, shifting gender roles are also determined by the family structure like they live in the joint or nuclear family. It can be concluded that clear shifting in roles can be observed in the nuclear families as responsibilities are taken by male family members, but in joint family members, the work burden is shifted to other women member of the family. The perception towards female migration has changed in comparison to past and but still fear exits on family members, therefore, they are often patrolled till the transit points. The women migration has brought some minor changes in the gender roles but a long way from making a major shift due to the socio-economic condition of the society.

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