

DISCUSSION PAPER

# NEITHER HEROINES NOR VICTIMS:

Women Migrant Workers and Changing Family  
and Community Relations in Nepal



No. 18, October 2017

**GIOVANNA GIOLI, AMINA MAHARJAN AND MANJU GURUNG**  
PROGRESS OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN 2018

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# SUMMARY

Circular labour migration is frequently portrayed as a gender-neutral phenomenon. Despite the growing literature on the feminization of migration, scholarly and policy literature is often gender blind. In Nepal, over the last decade, the share of women migrant workers has significantly increased. The National Population Census 2011 shows that about 13 per cent of the absentee population is composed of women. Due to prevailing patriarchal norms and values and skewed policy, female labour migration is traditionally stigmatized and associated with sex work or equated to trafficking. However, with rising demands for cheap labour (particularly domestic work) in destination countries (e.g., the Persian Gulf), continued inadequacy of rural employment opportunities and changing aspirations, women are increasingly migrating independently. Pourakhi, an organization established by women returnees in 2003, has collected over 1,700 case studies on returnee women migrant workers in Nepal. This paper delves into 307 of these, collected between July 2015 and June 2016.

In addition, a consultation with 14 returnee migrant women from 14 districts was held in September 2016 in Kathmandu in order to better understand the reintegration process. Following the focus group discussion, five in-depth interviews were conducted to further consolidate the data. Using triangulation and discourse analysis, the paper specifically looks at the narratives emerging from the voices of women migrant workers. Rather than focusing on a (necessary) critique of labour markets and on the high human, social and financial costs of migration, this study aims at giving voice to the subjectivities of migrant women in Nepal, as less attention has been paid to this aspect. It unpacks their reasons for undertaking international migration and their struggle for capability to secure a livelihood in the context of globalization. Their experiences reveal how the migratory experience is harnessed for (re) negotiating their role in their families and communities and challenge the stigma and the mystification that still accompany women's migration.

# RÉSUMÉ

Les migrations de main d'œuvre circulaires sont fréquemment décrites comme des phénomènes non discriminatoires envers les femmes. Malgré une documentation croissante sur la féminisation des migrations, les articles universitaires et politiques ne tiennent souvent pas compte du genre des migrants. Au Népal, le nombre de travailleuses migrantes a considérablement augmenté au cours de la dernière décennie. Le recensement national de la population de 2011 indique que les femmes représentent environ 13 % de la population absente. Les normes et valeurs patriarcales et les politiques déséquilibrées mises en œuvre dans ces pays font que les migrations de main d'œuvre féminines sont généralement stigmatisées

et assimilées aux mouvements liés à l'industrie du sexe ou à la traite des personnes. Toutefois, au vu de l'augmentation de la demande de main d'œuvre bon marché (concernant notamment les tâches ménagères) dans les pays d'accueil (par exemple dans le golfe Persique), de l'insuffisance des perspectives d'emploi ruraux et des nouvelles aspirations collectives, les femmes sont de plus en plus nombreuses à migrer individuellement. Pourakhi, une organisation créée par des femmes rapatriées en 2003, a rassemblé plus de 1 700 études de cas sur les travailleuses rapatriées au Népal. Ce document s'intéresse à 307 d'entre eux, recueillis entre juillet 2015 et juin 2016. En outre, des consultations regroupant 14 femmes rapatriées

issues de 14 districts différents ont été organisées en septembre 2016 à Kathmandou afin de mieux comprendre les processus de réinsertion. Suite à la tenue de discussions de groupe, cinq entretiens de fond ont été organisés afin de consolider les données. En s'appuyant sur la triangulation et l'analyse de discours, ce document met en lumière les récits des travailleuses migrantes. Au lieu de se concentrer sur la critique (pourtant nécessaire) des marchés du travail et les coûts humains, sociaux et financiers élevés des migrations, cette étude s'emploie à donner la parole aux

migrantes installées au Népal, car cette dimension a à ce jour retenu peu d'attention. Ce document énumère les raisons qui les ont poussées à entreprendre des migrations internationales et décrit leur combat pour subvenir à leurs besoins dans le contexte de la mondialisation. Leurs expériences témoignent de la manière dont les expériences migratoires peuvent servir à re(négocier) les rôles des femmes dans leurs familles et communautés et à lutter contre la stigmatisation et les mensonges qui caractérisent toujours les migrations des femmes.

## RESUMEN

Con frecuencia se describe la migración laboral circular como un fenómeno neutral desde el punto de vista del género. A pesar del creciente corpus de literatura sobre la feminización de la migración, la bibliografía académica y la documentación normativa suelen carecer de enfoque de género. En Nepal, la proporción de trabajadoras migrantes ha aumentado de manera significativa a lo largo del último decenio. El Censo Nacional de Población elaborado en 2011 muestra que en torno a un 13% de la población ausente está formado por mujeres. Debido a las normas y los valores patriarcales dominantes y a una política sesgada, la migración laboral femenina está tradicionalmente estigmatizada y se asocia al trabajo sexual o se considera sinónimo de trata. No obstante, debido a la creciente demanda de mano de obra barata (en particular en el sector del trabajo de hogar) en los países de destino (por ejemplo, en el Golfo Pérsico), la persistente falta de adecuación de las oportunidades de empleo en el ámbito rural y las aspiraciones cambiantes, cada vez es más habitual que las mujeres migren de manera independiente. Pourakhi, una organización creada por mujeres retornadas en 2003, ha recopilado más de 1.700 estudios de casos sobre las trabajadoras migrantes retornadas a Nepal. En este artículo se profundiza en 307 de ellos, recabados

entre julio de 2015 y junio de 2016. Además, en septiembre de 2016 se celebró en Katmandú una consulta con 14 mujeres migrantes retornadas procedentes de 14 distritos, a fin de comprender mejor el proceso de reintegración. Tras el debate de los grupos de discusión, se realizaron cinco entrevistas en profundidad para consolidar los datos obtenidos. Utilizando la triangulación y el análisis de discursos, el artículo analiza específicamente las narrativas que emergen de las voces de las trabajadoras migrantes. En lugar de centrarse en una crítica (por otro lado muy necesaria) de los mercados de trabajo y en los elevados costos humanos, sociales y financieros de la migración, este estudio pretende dar voz a las subjetividades de las mujeres migrantes en Nepal, dado que, por el momento, este aspecto no ha recibido tanta atención. El estudio pone de manifiesto las razones que tienen estas mujeres para emprender la migración internacional y sus esfuerzos por adquirir capacidades que les permitan ganarse la vida en el contexto de la globalización. Sus experiencias revelan cómo se aprovecha la experiencia migratoria para (re) negociar el papel de estas mujeres en el seno de sus familias y comunidades, así como para cuestionar el estigma y la mistificación que todavía hoy acompañan a la migración de las mujeres.





1.

# INTRODUCTION: GENDERING MIGRATION IN SOUTH ASIA

Research on gender and migration in the Global South, especially in South Asia, has focused on agrarian transition and the consequent “feminization of agriculture”.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, with rising new demands for cheap labour worldwide, along with the continued inadequacy of rural employment opportunities and increased connectivity, increased male outmigration has brought transformation at many levels, including in gender power relations. Some studies tend to glorify the role of financial remittances and the increased autonomy and power for women who – in the absence of men – have become the de facto head of the household.<sup>2</sup>

Other studies focus on the increased drudgery and mobility challenges for women who stayed behind and their families.<sup>3</sup> Several studies have addressed the issue of feminization of agriculture in Nepal,<sup>4</sup> with similar mixed outcomes. Increased well-being and assets gained through financial remittances are often accompanied by transnational practices that tend to reproduce or even exacerbate gendered power structures, especially when control over financial remittances rests with men.<sup>5</sup>

Circular labour migration (especially South to North, including labour migration to countries in the Persian Gulf)<sup>6</sup> has often been portrayed as a gender-neutral phenomenon. Studies focusing on the role of migration for development and sustainable livelihoods have taken the household as the unit of analysis, hence

ignoring intra-household and inter-generational dynamics,<sup>7</sup> which are crucial for gender analysis. Critiques to approaches such as the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) have shown how unequal gendered power relations in both the migration process and the broader migrant networks have been overlooked.<sup>8</sup> The lack of gender analysis in the transnational migration literature has also been highlighted,<sup>9</sup> even though attention to gender dynamics in transnationalism has progressively increased,<sup>10</sup> pointing at the complex interplay of gender, class and normative constraints in shaping women’s social personhood in a transnational field.<sup>11</sup>

1. Kelkar 2009.

2. E.g., Verma et al. 2011; Lahiri-Dutt 2014; Sugden 2014.

3. Shrestha and Bhandari 2007; Massey et al. 2007; Bohra-Mishra and Massey 2011; Gioli et al. 2014.

4. Kaspar 2005; Thieme and Mueller-Boeker 2010; Adhikari and Hobley 2011; Maharjan et al. 2012.

5. Pessar and Mahler 2003; King et al. 2006. See also Adhikari and Hobley 2011 for Nepal.

6. In standard classification, migration to the Gulf is considered as a South-South type of movement. However, there would be much to discuss as to what makes the countries of the Persian Gulf, “South”. As global governance bodies are increasingly advocating for the virtues of South-South circulation, the way such types of circulation are classified has important consequences on the types of policy and the regime of protection for migrant workers

7. Thieme 2011.

8. Arango 2000; de Haas 2010; Lindley 2009.

9. Pessar and Mahler 2003; Kunz 2011.

10. E.g., Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Gamburd 2000.

11. See, for example, the case of Morocco–Italy (Salih 2001).

Policy-oriented literature is often gender blind, despite the growing literature on the feminization of migration<sup>12</sup> and the long-established fact that ‘birds of passage’ are also women.<sup>13</sup> In Nepal, over the last decade, the share of women migrant workers has significantly increased. The National Population Census 2011 shows that about 13 per cent of the absentee population is composed of women, almost 3 fold increase in absolute number since the 2001 census.<sup>14</sup>

In the Persian Gulf, the majority of women migrant workers are occupied in low-skilled jobs – mostly as domestic workers and low-end service providers.<sup>15</sup> The violations of human rights (and workers’ rights) in the Gulf countries are well known and have been documented by many prominent human rights orga-

nizations. Many of these violations are linked to the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which requires workers to have a sponsor – usually the employer herself – who is responsible for their visa and legal status and hence ‘owns’ the employee, since (s)he is not allowed to change workplace or employer. This system has been heavily criticized for creating opportunities for the exploitation of workers and being a de facto slave market, depriving migrants of the most basic rights.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than focusing on a (necessary) critique of labour markets and on the high human, social and financial costs of migration, this paper aims at giving voice to the subjectivities of migrant women in Nepal, as less attention has been paid to this aspect.

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12. E.g., Silvey 2006; Piper 2008. See also IOM 2009, 2012; World Bank 2012.

13. Morokvasic 1987.

14. CBS 2014.

15. Rakkee and Sasikumar 2012.

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16. Schwenken 2005; Shah and Fargues 2011; Pande 2013.

2.

## BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND AGENCY: 'CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK'?<sup>17</sup>

The existing literature on women migrant workers is polarized: on the one hand (feminist) structural studies underscore how structural global inequalities result in the commodification of domestic labour, which becomes a slave-like servitude in a context where the livelihoods of those based in the Global South are increasingly tied to international labour migration.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, agency-based studies pivot around the 'entrepreneurial' mindset of individual migrants and foreground the gains of migration, with a dominant focus on financial and social remittances.<sup>18</sup>

The narratives on migrant women oscillate between portraying them as "victims of global economic restructuring and, as such, a vulnerable group among the growing streams of poor migrants from the global South, to heroines accountable for development processes in their countries of origin".<sup>19</sup> Migrant women are often depicted as 'heroines of development' for the alleged 'altruistic' nature of their remitting habits.<sup>20</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, women are 'victims' (fragile, vulnerable subjects with little agency), which often leads to the stigmatization of women's labour migration, and even to equating it to trafficking.<sup>21</sup>

The present paper steps back and does not engage with either of the binary essentialized narratives on 'migration empowers/exploits women' or 'women remit more/less than men', etc., and the underlying

policy imperative of answering the question of whether migration is good or bad for women (where 'women' are often cast as a homogenous, undifferentiated and essentialist category). Rather, it focuses on the lived subjectivities of migrant women from Nepal, trying to unpack the multi-faceted experiences of their journeys.

(Feminist) cultural geography has been particularly important in foregrounding the role of place, scale<sup>22</sup> and power geometries.<sup>23</sup> These studies have contributed to understanding how the multi-local lives and time compression that the migratory experience entails contribute to new geographies of power, where patriarchal relations are reinforced, transformed or challenged and re-articulated. The transnational migrant has become the living embodiment of the contradictions of globalization, playing out her fears and hopes, aspirations and struggle for capabilities in the context of global structural inequality and gendered fluxes of labour.

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17. The title comes from an influential essay on G.C. Spivak (1988).

18. E.g., Sassen 2002; Constable 1997; Pratt 1997; Piper 2004, 2006.

19. Tacoli and Mabala 2010; Rahman 2009, 2012; Semyonov and Gorodzeisky 2005. See Thieme and Wyss 2005 on Nepal.

20. Dannecker and Sieveking 2009: 4.

21. See Collinson et al. 2006 on South Africa or Curran and Saguy 2001 on Thailand and Orozco et al. 2006.

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22. See de Haas 2007a.

23. See Silvey 2013 for an overview.

The polarized oscillation between structure and agency in the literature on migration and development<sup>24</sup> – between an enthusiastic account of ‘migration for development’ and the subsequent glorification of the agency of the migrants (they are heroes!) and the macro-scale attention to global chains of exploitation (they are victims!) somehow hampers the emergence of the contradiction itself, as it is experienced in the lived subjectivities of migrant women and in the complex geographies of power that they are navigating.

This paper therefore attempts to move beyond the “simple heuristic dichotomisation of the interpretation of migration as a potentially liberating and transformative experience” or as a negative one “whereby migration is yet another layer added to the multiple oppression”.<sup>25</sup>

As argued above, migration always comes with both structure and agency. It is good and bad, like virtually everything in life. As lived subjectivities, embodying a range of contradictions, low-skilled migrant women from Nepal select cross-border circular labour migration as a strategy to confront, challenge and, at times, change what they perceive as unbearable in their lives. The paper unpacks their reasons for undertaking international migration, and their struggles for capability to secure a livelihood and a future in the context of globalization,<sup>26</sup> by letting their voices emerge.

Their experiences reveal how the migratory experience is harnessed for (re)negotiating their role in their families and communities and challenge societal taboos as well as the stigma and mystification that accompany women’s mobility and independence.

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24. Massey 1994.

25. See Gamlen 2014.

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26. King et al. 2006: 420.

### 3.

# BACKGROUND AND METHODS

## 3.1

### The context: Migration and gender in Nepal

Nepali people have historically migrated for labour to many destinations, from the Gurkhas' engagement in the British Army to the persistent flows to India facilitated by the fact that the two countries share an open border.<sup>27</sup> Since the 1990s, the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia have become major destinations. This has brought a surge in the magnitude of remittances inflow that constituted about 28.8 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014.<sup>28</sup> From 2008 to 2014, more than 2 million labour permits were issued by the Government of Nepal.<sup>29</sup>

Initially, as in most of South Asia with the exception of Sri Lanka, labour migration to the Gulf and Malaysia was

heavily gendered and almost exclusively dominated by men. All over South Asia, the ideal of *purdah* (seclusion of women) – which assigns a symbolic capital of honour and respectability to the control over women's realms of action<sup>30</sup> – has hampered women's mobility. Only in recent years have India (e.g., Kerala) and Nepal witnessed a feminization of international migration, linked to a global demand for domestic workers reproducing the traditional gendered division of labour.<sup>31</sup> The Government of Nepal issued temporary bans on women's labour migration in 2012 and 2015. This last ban was eventually lifted in 2016.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as compared to other countries in the region (see Table 3-1), in Nepal there are fewer age restrictions, and in 2012 women officially accounted for 13 per cent of the total absentee population.<sup>33</sup> This figure certainly underestimates the magnitude of female migration, as it does not account for cross-border migration to India, and restrictive provisions on the mobility of women migrants often increase undocumented migration.

**TABLE 3-1**  
Age restriction imposed on international migration of female domestic workers

| Country    | Condition   |
|------------|---|
| Bangladesh | Women must be at least 25 years old                       |
| India      | Women must be at least 25 or have completed matriculation |
| Nepal      | Women must be at least 18; 24 since 2016                  |
| Pakistan   | Women must be at least 35                                 |
| Sri Lanka  | Women must be at least 21                                 |

Source: Rakkee and Sasikumar 2012.

27. See Briones 2009.

28. It has to be noted that due to the 'open border' between the two countries, migration is not documented in terms of collection information/data on the flow.

29. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/nepal> [Accessed: 9th December 2014].

30. MoFE 2014.

31. Siegmann and Thieme 2010.

32. Agrawal 2006.

33. For a comprehensive analysis of the consequences of the ban, see ILO 2015.

Nepal is a diverse and fast-transforming society, with high level of urbanization, increasing education rates and an on-going constitutional process, initiated in 2007 at the end of the Maoist conflict. Traditional family structures have undergone big transformations, especially in urban areas; however, they remain grounded in patriarchal norms. Patriarchal practices such as the dowry system, early marriage, son-preference, *purdah* and segregation of women during menstruation (*chhapaudi*) are still widespread and disadvantage women. Nepal ranks 145th of 187 countries on the 2014 Human Development Index (HDI), placing it in the 'low human development' category,<sup>34</sup> and the 2015 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report ranked Nepal 110th among 145 countries, behind Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India.

## 3.2

### Methods

Mixed methods have been employed in the study. The cases studies of 307 women migrant returnees who stayed at the shelter house run by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Pourakhi<sup>35</sup> in Kathmandu during the period from July 2015 to June 2016 were coded and analysed. In addition, a consultation with 14 returnee migrant women from 14 districts was held in September 2016 in Kathmandu in order to better understand the reintegration process. The interaction focused on the challenges and opportunities of reintegration after women's migration journeys. Following the focus group discussion, five in-depth interviews were conducted to further consolidate the data.

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34. CBS 2014.

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35. UNDP 2014.

## 4.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1

## Women migrant workers: A socio-economic profile

Pourakhi's database for the period July 2015 to June 2016 contains the profiles and stories of 307 women from 56 districts of Nepal (out of a total of 75 districts). Most of the migrant women hailed from rural districts. There were no cases from Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur – the three districts with the highest urban populations.

This section presents some key trends and socio-economic characteristics emerging from the analysed profiles. The average age of the migrant was 35 years; however, there were four cases of underage migration. Most of the women (68 per cent) were married, 16 per cent were unmarried, 10 per cent were separated or divorced and 6 per cent were widows. Their educational status is reported in Table 4-1.

**TABLE 4-1**  
**Level of education of migrant women**

| Education level        | Number of respondents | % of respondents |
|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Illiterate             | 73                    | 24               |
| Just literate          | 124                   | 40               |
| Primary school level   | 48                    | 16               |
| Lower secondary level  | 24                    | 8                |
| Secondary school level | 24                    | 8                |
| Higher secondary level | 14                    | 5                |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>307</b>            |                  |

Another salient characteristic of the socio-economic background of migrant women is early marriage: Of the 259 married women, 56 per cent were married under the legal age. In Nepal, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 years, but many of the women in the sample were married when they were only 14 years old. Similarly, 34 per cent of the respondents mentioned facing violence at home (verbal, physical and sexual abuse). On average, they had two children and only 6 per cent had no children.

The major destination countries were Kuwait (42 per cent), Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (15 per cent), Lebanon (7 per cent), Oman (15 per cent), and Malaysia and Qatar (2 per cent). A few women migrated to Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Cyprus and Hong Kong. The average duration of their stay in the destination countries was 25 months. About 70 per cent were documented migrants, and the majority resorted to an agent. The top occupation (94 per cent) was domestic work, with the rest employed in factories.

The shelter staff meticulously documented the pre-migration socio-economic situation of the migrant workers' households. From an analysis of this information, five main factors can be singled out: (i) a difficult and deteriorating economic situation (e.g., due to death, illness or economic loss and debt); (ii) gender-based violence at the family level, especially from the husband's family; (iii) lack of support from the husband or family for the basic needs of women/children, thus forcing them to earn their own income; (iv) underage marriage (below the legal age of 18 years); and (v) a desire to provide a better future for their children. About 63 per cent of the migrant women perceived their economic situation to be poor, 27 per cent reported hard but acceptable conditions and only 9 per cent said that their economic situation had been fair before the migration process.

About 88 per cent of married women mentioned their wish to provide a better future for their children as a main reason for undertaking labour migration, as they considered the limited opportunities back home as insufficient to meet their children's needs and hopes. For unmarried women, the reasons for migration ranged

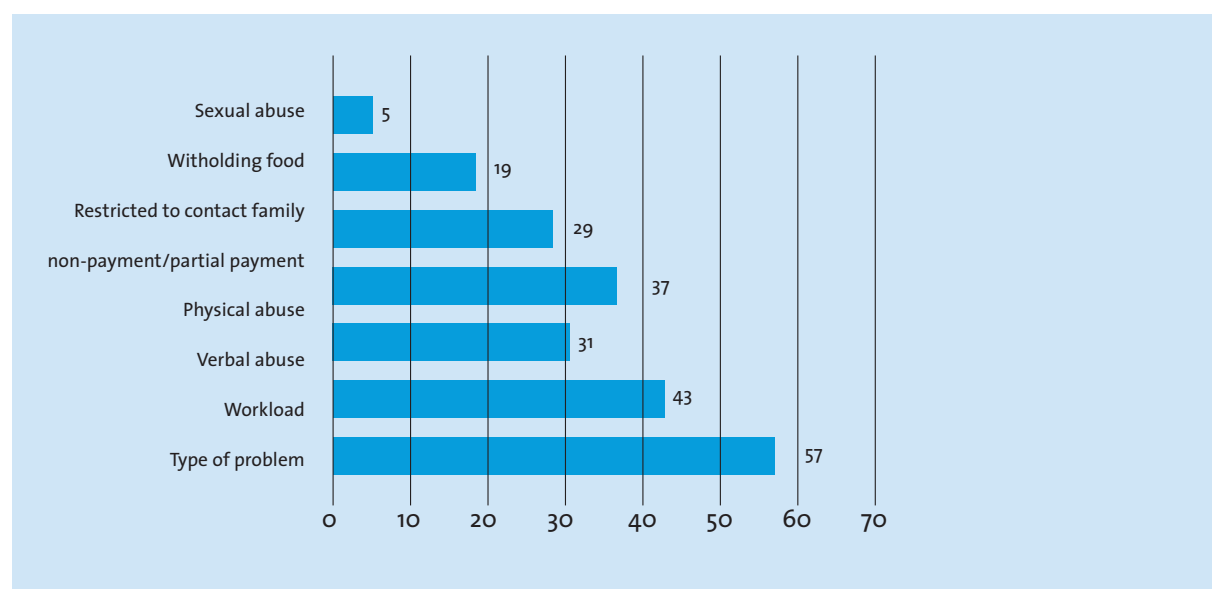
from providing economic security for family and siblings to aspirations of an opportunity to have financial independence. Migration was also used as a means to escape early marriage. The repayment of family debts (e.g., health-related expenditure, gambling debts or investment loans) was a driver for 6 per cent of the sample.

## 4.2

### The journey

A significant number of migrant women (59 per cent) reported having faced problems in the destination country, especially those employed as domestic workers. A common problem reported is drudgery and long working hours, including night shifts, which are particularly hard for Nepali women who are used to working from early morning but also going to sleep early. As reported by one migrant worker: *"Social life in the Gulf starts at 10 pm, which is already past the sleeping time back home. So adjusting to this new life is extremely difficult as, even if allowed, we could simply not sleep during the day"*.

**FIGURE 4-1**  
Major issues faced by migrant women in destination countries





Other issues are physical and verbal abuse, delay or interruption in the salary payment, inability to be in contact with family members back home, lack of food, and mental and sexual abuse (which might be under-reported for fear of stigmatization) (see Figure 4-1).

The problems faced by migrant women who were employed in factories are different from those of domestic workers. Of the small sample in the study (17 migrants), only five women reported problems – one was not paid her salary, one was deported (due to visa expiry), two had health problems and one mentioned workload as an issue.

Due to the length of their stay, a strong emotional bond often developed between the domestic workers and their host families. Migrant women shared their pride in what they had taught the children of the families they worked for and at having imported what they identified as ‘good practices’ that are common in Nepal but not in the receiving countries,<sup>36</sup> such as encouraging breastfeeding and teaching children the importance of work.

Women also expressed their joy in sharing language, food and culture with their host families. They somewhat felt like ‘goodwill ambassadors’ for their country. As shared in the focus group discussions: *“We are teaching Nepali language, culture, food to people who have never heard about them before. Women in the Gulf live a very restricted life. So, it is an opportunity for them to learn about different cultures and food, and we feel proud to have introduced them to all of this!”*

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36. Pourakhi was established in 2003 by Nepalese returnee migrant women, whose objective is to make migration safer, organized and beneficial for women migrants and their families. It runs a shelter in Kathmandu where women migrants can receive psychological, medical and legal counselling, as well as support on how to reintegrate in their society and communities. Pourakhi also runs a migration information booth at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu and, over the years, has developed an extensive network including the Embassies of Nepal and Nepali associations/groups (both formal and informal) in major destination countries. These networks are another source of information about the shelter home in Kathmandu for women migrants returnees that need a safe place of transit before going back to their homes or finding a suitable alternative. Pourakhi keeps a detailed database of the shelters, where systematic information on the different stages of the migratory process is recorded, including women’s socio-economic background prior to migration, their stay in destination, and the reasons for returning. <http://www.pourakhi.org.np/>.

## 4.3

### The return: Conquering independence, breaking stereotypes

Advocacy organizations – for obvious reasons – predominantly focus on reconstructing the history of abuses and violation of rights that migrants face during their journey. Fewer data are generally available on how the migratory experience is leveraged in order to escape and eventually alter the geographies of power that were experienced as unbearable back home.

The migration journey has profoundly changed the subjectivities of migrant women, who described it as a transformatory experience<sup>37</sup> that allowed them to counter hegemonic practices and openly challenge the patriarchal oppression that they were escaping from in the first place.

Drawing from the hundreds of case studies and the results of the consultation and in-depth interviews, the study distilled eight key areas where women felt that their migration journey – the new dimensions of space (physical and imagined) and the capabilities that it unfolded – had made a difference for them, their families and communities and helped them to renegotiate their space back in Nepal.

#### 4.3.1 Access to education

One of the primary investments of remitted money by migrant women is in the field of education. This finding is in line with much of the literature on remittances and development. Regardless of the sex of the migrant, remitted money invested in education often improves education for girls, and hence the impact

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37. As shared by a returnee: *“While migrating I had to leave my two children behind under others’ care and I missed them terribly initially. But the bonding with the children under my care helped me to settle in destination. Taking care of the children was my major duty, and we developed a strong bond. Children are generally very much pampered in the Gulf countries, particularly male children. I am very proud that I have managed to instil some discipline in the children under my care. I taught them to respect household work and the contribution of the domestic help. Both the children under my care used to help me with work. I believe that this will help them to grow up as responsible adults who respect work and workers and not look down on them.”*

of migration on the transformations of patriarchal power structures is often viewed as intergenerational.<sup>38</sup> Improved education for children emerged as a top priority in this study too, and some women also invested in their own education.

One migrant worker from Sarlahi District stated that:

*“I had discontinued my study mostly due to lack of interest and partly to reduce the financial burden on my parents. After marriage (mine was a love marriage) there was no way to study further and I was not very keen either. But after having two children – and the need to feed them and school them – I suddenly realized my mistake of not pursuing my study. Without proper education, there were very little that I could do to help financially in providing a good education to my children. That was the reason why I went for foreign employment. Upon return, I decided to continue my study. I had completed 10 years of schooling, so I joined high school, which I have completed successfully. I am positive that with my work experience and qualification I can get a good job and provide a good future to my children.”*

### 4.3.2 Freedom of mobility

To various degrees, depending on the local context, the concept of *purdah* in South Asia is still a normative one. As noted above, a symbolic capital of honour<sup>39</sup> is attached to household ability to control women’s mobility: the higher the status of the household, the less the freedom to leave it and be seen outside alone. In Nepal, things are changing fast and women have always been involved in agriculture at the farmhouse level. However, especially in rural settings, restrictions and stigma still persist. Gender difference in Nepal varies across communities and regions. In more traditional Hindu communities in the Terai (the Gangetic plain in southern Nepal), women’s role tends to be more confined to the household’s sphere, as compared

to the Newari and Tibeto-Burman communities, where women tend to be more economically active.

The migratory experience has given women the courage to challenge a set of restrictions that they had internalized and the alleged ‘danger’ and ‘stigma’ of free mobility. As Manita (from Chitwan, Terai) shared:

*“Before migration I would wait for my husband to go to the nearby market. I cannot even think of travelling to Kathmandu alone from my home in Chitwan. I just did not have the confidence to go anywhere on my own. And it never struck me as a limitation either, as that is how things were for women in my village. But after my migration experience, sometimes I look at myself and cannot relate to my earlier self. I do not understand why I hesitated so much in going out of the village and what I was afraid of. Now I have no problems commuting to Kathmandu or any other place on my own.”*

The migration experience has boosted women’s courage and confidence to move freely and unaccompanied. A majority of returnees shared this feeling and reported having undergone a radical transformation in their mobility behaviours. While, before migration, even a short visit to nearby areas was challenging due to patriarchal norms and *purdah*, after their journeys, their perceptions of place and scale have been profoundly transformed.

In the case of Tika, increased confidence in her own capabilities (*“I can move freely alone. My communities demand my services”*) led her to successfully challenge gender stereotypes (‘good women do not ride a motorbike’) and purchase a motorbike:

*“I have always been involved in social work, even while I was in school. I used to run adult literacy classes in my community while I was a student myself. So after returning from migration, I was thinking of ways to engage myself. Initially, I used remittances to open a small grocery shop near the village school, which made good business. But running a shop took a lot of my time. As my aspirations were always on community work, I*

38. Phizacklea 1998.

39. See, e.g., King et al. 2006 for Albania; de Haas 2007b for Morocco, Thieme and Wyss 2005 for Nepal; Gioli et al. 2014 for Pakistan.

*decided to sell that shop and devote more time to social work instead. In my community, education is not a priority for girls. As I am educated and I have also worked abroad, my community really trusts me and listens to my advice. The demand for my services in various community committees started to increase with time. With this increased workload, I could not manage to just walk, hence I have purchased a motorbike. I am the first and only woman to ride a motorbike here. Even in cities, you would not see women on motorbikes, those who have a vehicle would rather drive a scooter.”*

### 4.3.3 Decision-making power

Ideals and norms around the subservient daughter-in-law (*buhari* in Nepali) are still widespread in Nepalese society. When a girl is married, she moves to the husband’s household, where it is customary for senior women to occupy the top position in a hierarchical family network, exercising authority and power over daughters-in-law, who are expected to bear the biggest burden in terms of workload within the household and be obedient. Decisions about the management of pregnancy and childbirth also usually come within the purview of the in-laws, especially mothers-in-law. A daughter-in-law has normally very little space in the household decision-making process and is not supposed to interfere. The control over *buhari* can escalate into violence, and the journey of many migrant women was motivated by gender-based violence at the family level, especially from the husband’s family (see section 4.1).

After the experience of taking – often very difficult – decisions in destination countries, with no support and without understanding the language or the legal and social context, returnee women shared that they now feel much less threatened by their families and communities. The feeling of being powerless and annihilated vis-à-vis their husbands’ families has been replaced by an emerging inner confidence that allows for negotiation (without confrontation). Returnees during the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews shared having learnt what they labelled

as “strategic thinking”, i.e., influencing decisions by avoiding conflict as much as possible.

Purna comes from the Terai region, where the role of a daughter-in-law is even more restricted compared to the hills. She thinks that she has obtained a voice in the family through her migratory experience. Both her husband and in-laws now consult her regarding the household management, and her opinions are taken into due account. She also feels that she is playing an important role in maintaining peace in her household. As she puts it:

*“In every family there are conflicts and dissent... in my family too. But in family conflict mitigation, a wife hardly has any role, particularly a buhari. My migration experience has helped me gain respect from my family elders. I have gained two things from migration: I have contributed to my family’s income and learnt problem-solving. When living in a foreign land you need to learn to deal with situations strategically. After living in destination for more than four years, it has become a kind of natural reflex for me to think strategically. Upon my return, I have solved and prevented family feuds with my strategic thinking. My objective is to try and understand everybody’s perspective and offer solutions that are least conflicting or confrontational. My father-in-law has come to respect this, and now consults me not only on family feuds but also on community issues. This is the biggest learning from my migration experience.”*

### 4.3.4 Financial independence

Agency-based studies tend to argue that economic independence gained through the migratory experience is the most salient factor enabling transformation of gender relations. For instance, in South Asia, Dannecker documents how the migration of women from Bangladesh to Malaysia led to increased economic independence and changes in social practices.<sup>40</sup>

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40. See Siegmann and Thieme 2010

A recurrent pattern in the stories analysed for this study is the struggle to secure economic independence, usually in the form of investment in small business activities. Before migration, many women depended completely on their parents, brothers or husbands for even very minor purchases and decisions. Migration and remittance was their way of breaking what they perceived as a state of subservience. As shared by a returnee during the focus group discussion:

*“We can keep talking about mahila ko adhikar (women’s rights), but when one has to depend on husband, father and brother for even small money to purchase a packet of salt or a bangle, there is never going to be empowerment. It is important to have financial independence, or better contribute to the family’s income, so that we can actually feel equal.”*

Some returnees have not only gained financial independence but also challenged existing gender norms and taken up employment in male-dominated sectors. A returnee from Kaski District now works as a tourist guide. She acquired confidence in travelling and speaking foreign languages during her migration experience. This has helped her have the courage to engage in a male-dominated profession. In her words:

*“I was very keen to learn the English language. I was interested in the language while in school but never got much opportunity to learn. While I was working abroad, my family in destination country encouraged me to learn the language during my free time. My employer and their children also helped me with books and corrected my mistakes. After returning, I was in a dilemma as to what to do. I come from a beautiful part of Nepal, well known for famous trek routes like the Annapurna Base Camp and others. Tourism was flourishing after the conflict. This is why I decided to utilize my experience and started working as a tourist guide. I had to take training and get a certificate, but it’s a very satisfying job and it pays well. The language skills that I learnt in destination and the confidence to interact with people have helped me build my confidence.”*

### 4.3.5 Access to land and property

In Nepal, land is customarily transmitted along patriarchal lines. Only 19.7 per cent of women own around 5 per cent of land throughout the country, and only around 11 per cent have effective control over their property.<sup>41</sup> In rural areas, from which the majority of migrant women originate, inheritance is a major means of acquiring land ownership in a context where livelihoods are mostly based on subsistence farming and there is limited opportunity for cash income. Remittances hence constitute an important source of cash that is often invested in acquiring land and other property.<sup>42</sup> Many women shared that they had invested remittance in purchasing land or to build/renovate their houses.

A returnee from Bardiya district (south-western Nepal) has supported her family with remittances for years. Due to this, her father decided that she should also inherit the family land and has split it equally between her and her two brothers. She has also built her own house with her savings, where she is now taking care of her old parents. This is customarily the responsibility of a son, as women – once married – are supposed to work for their husbands’ families. Dozens of similar stories were shared by other migrant women, both during the focus group discussions and in the shelter cases. In this way, migration has helped challenge a well-entrenched customary system of discrimination that deprives women of strategic assets and access to resources.

### 4.3.6 Migration as an alternative to early marriage

Earlier research in transnationalism has shown how women’s migration from North Africa to Europe has contributed to increasing the age of marriage,<sup>43</sup> as well as to the diffusion of a different pattern of marriage. Women have used migration as a way of postponing or re-negotiating their marriages.<sup>44</sup> In Nepal, it is common for women to work and study in

41. Dannecker 2005.

42. IOM 2016; see Figure 2.

43. Nepal 2013.

44. Fargues 2006.

their parental home until the age of 18, and then get married and move out to the in-laws house. Moving outside the parental house without being married comes with great stigma in Nepalese society.

Girls' access to education has improved over the years, but if there are financial constraints and the girl does not prove herself in her study, little options remain but to get married and move to the husband's family, where she is expected to take care of the household. Migration offers an alternative. The money earned abroad allows women to postpone their marriage and better negotiate their role and space in their new home.

Having experienced the importance of financial independence and the emotional maturity required to have a better role in the in-laws family after marriage, women returnees are very strongly against child marriage and shared that this is one social evil that they consistently struggle to redress. This negative attitude towards child marriage is sometimes also a result of their own personal experience of being forced into marriage too young, unprepared and scared.

A returnee woman from Sarlahi district came to know about a marriage within her community where both the bride and groom were below the age of 16 years. She took a very non-confrontational approach to stop this marriage. Instead of getting legal help or taking a strong stance against the families, she calmly explained that such marriages are illegal and elaborated on the consequences of breaking the law. She convinced her own family and other relatives to not participate in such marriages, as they could all be held responsible and arrested. After hearing details on the legal implications of underage marriage, many families decided to boycott the wedding and informed the parents of the couple about the risks. The wedding was eventually cancelled.

It is worth mentioning that in some of the stories collected, the practice that allows a husband to take a second wife also played a role in the decision to migrate. For instance, J.G. from Rupehendi district got married only to find out that her husband was already married. After a couple of years, his previous marriage had produced no children. Hence, his

family had decided to marry him to a second wife, based on the superstition that this would help him overcome his bad *graha* (phase). Upon discovering the truth, J.G. decided to migrate and found a job as a domestic worker in Bahrain. She worked as a cook and came back after 15 months. She currently works in the hospitality sector and wishes to pursue a hotel management level-2 certificate course.

### 4.3.7 Chhapaudi: Challenging the notion of impurity

Another patriarchal practice still prevalent in rural Nepal (known as *chhapaudi*: untouchable being) prescribes that girls and women stay in isolation during their menstruation or post-partum, as they are considered impure during this period. Despite several interventions from international NGOs, and a formal ban in 2005,<sup>45</sup> this monthly forced exile is still in place in the most western districts of the country. Besides its psychological consequences, this practice is also dangerous for health and hygiene, and more than once has resulted in death.<sup>46</sup> The migratory experience has helped women gain enough confidence to challenge this custom. In destination countries, women migrant workers worked as usual while menstruating, and they came to consider this as perfectly possible, normal and socially acceptable: “*We do not believe in this superstition anymore*”. Out of respect, back in Nepal, they still refrain from entering temples and the kitchen during their periods, but they no longer stay in isolation or refrain from their normal working activities. The example of migrant women could have a great impact on young girls and do more to stop period shaming than many development interventions. This is evidence of how the social remittances<sup>47</sup> that the returnee migrants have brought with them work to transform norms and practices.

45. See Salih 2001; de Haas 2007b.

46. Although *Chhapaudi* was outlawed by Nepal's Supreme Court in 2005, the practice is still widely observed in the western parts of the country.

47. Preiss 2016.

### 4.3.8 Fighting against the stigmatization of female migration

Women returnees are also actively fighting the stigma that is still attached to women's labour migration. In Nepal, women's migration has long been associated with sex work and is highly stigmatized. Media reports on migrant women facing sexual violence in destination countries are further fuelling the equation between women's migration and trafficking/prostitution.<sup>48</sup> Male migrant workers also face extreme abuses and sexual violence in destination countries, but while their sacrifices are glorified and appreciated by both families and communities, women are constantly victimized due to the patriarchal belief that they symbolize the honour of the family. As shared by a woman returnee: *"I lied about my migration to my neighbours for a number of years, as migrant women were considered as spineless, easy, and I did not want to face the stigma."* Many unmarried women shy away from revealing their migration experience, as they are afraid of encountering problems in finding a partner. Women feel that people tend to equate migrant women with victims of sexual violence or prostitutes. It has to be noted that rape in Nepal is still largely not considered as violence against women but rather as something for which women are to be blamed.<sup>49</sup> Thus, people do not want to marry a returnee who has certainly been *Arabi le bhyayeko* (already used by an Arab).

Upon return, some women returnees have organized themselves in groups and tried to give a more nuanced picture of their journey – not one of violence and exploitation but rather a story of opportunities, struggle and emancipation. On top of this, they are also putting their efforts into advising prospective migrants on safe migration and preventing trafficking and exploitation. Janaki decided to migrate to escape domestic violence, after she was forced into marriage when she was only 13 years old. With six sisters and one brother, her parents could not afford to educate her and hence opted for marrying her off at that young age, following a rather common practice in rural Nepal. Migration gave her the opportunity to change her life and improve the lives of her sisters. After having invested the money she earned in her own education, she is now working as a safe migration counsellor under an International Labour Organization (ILO) project in her district. Similarly, Chetana from Sunsari district is now active in preventing trafficking in her community. She has mobilized the media and national stakeholders, including higher authorities in the police, to rescue trafficked women from her village.

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48. New ideas, images, beliefs and values brought by the migrants to their community (Levitt 1998).

49. Maharjan et al. 2016.

## 5.

# CONCLUSIONS

A great deal of policy literature has focused on the vulnerability of low-skilled women's migrant workers. This is an important aspect of it, necessary for advocating for better rights and working conditions. On the other hand, scholarly research on migration and development has also focused on the agency of migrants, mostly through the glorification of the role of remittances for development. The policy field is populated by simplistic storylines (e.g., 'women remit more', 'women are agents of development') that have very little to do with women's realities, aspirations and struggles in the Global South. While de-contextualizing and de-personalizing their experiences, such headlines also silence the global structural inequalities that are foregrounded by human rights-focused literature in the name of 'development'.

It is hence paramount to move beyond a simple heuristic dichotomization that portrays women migrants as victims or heroines of development. While recognizing and partially documenting the high human cost of cross-border circular labour migration (for both women and men) from Nepal, this paper focused on how Nepalese migrant women are caught in a complex struggle for capabilities as well as a process of emancipation, leading them to break social norms, taboos and gender stereotypes.

The stories distilled here, organized around main recurrent themes, bear witness to the struggle of Nepalese women who are undertaking migration to break a vicious circle of poverty, patriarchy, illiteracy and dispossession. Labour migration opens up a set of counterhegemonic practices<sup>50</sup> where the marginal reclaim a space for assertion, re-invent their social personhood and notions of space and place through their engagement in a transnational field and renegotiate their roles in society while attempting to transform

patriarchal practices that they have experienced as unbearable.

Women decided to migrate to break free from a reality of poverty, violence and subjugation. They escaped from their subservient role in the families of their husbands, which often involved psychological and physical violence. Many were forced into early marriages and harnessed migration to escape this reality and renegotiate their role in the families and communities. Some underage women migrants also migrated to escape early marriage.

Rural Nepalese women undertake migration to escape a context of violence and poverty and pay immense human costs for their decisions. The present study shows that migrant women's transnational subjectivities are also in a complex process of emancipation, whereby the exposure (for the first time – alone) to a challenging and new reality has helped them overcome entrenched fears and taboos, such as freedom of mobility and segregation during menstruation. Financial independence has often resulted in a means for bargaining for their right to basic assets (e.g., land) and to play a greater role in the management of the household and – at times – also in their communities. The voices of Nepalese migrant women bear witness to the complex layers of emancipation and oppression that should not be simplified but rather further investigated and understood as a set of lived contradictions at several levels.

50. A 2000 study shows that 67 per cent of judges think that women share the blame for violence committed against them (Pyakuryal 2000, cited in Sharma and Tamang 2016).

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