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Temporary Shifts or Lasting Change? Gender Roles after Women's Return From Foreign Labour Migration

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Abstract

This study explores how women's return from foreign labour migration affects traditional genders roles and household decision making in rural Nepal, examining whether these changes are temporary adjustments or enduring transformations. This research, conducted in Dupcheshwor Rural Municipality, Nuwakot Nepal, employed a qualitative interpretive design with 24 purposively selected households, including returnee women and other household members. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observation, and secondary sources, and analyzed thematically to understand household labour division, decision making dynamics and continuity or change in gender roles. Findings reveal that before migration, household labour followed a clear gendered division in which women primarily managed in-house tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and livestock care, while men handled out-of-house responsibilities including farming, wage labour, and community engagements. During migration, household responsibilities were temporarily redistributed to husbands and children in nuclear households, and mothers-in-law or other female relatives in extended households assumed domestic duties. However, these shifts largely transferred workload rather than challenging patriarchal structures. Upon return, most women resumed their pre-migration roles, with limited increases in household decision making participation. Male household heads continued to dominate financial and strategic decisions, reflecting the persistence of traditional gender norms. The migration period also had intergenerational implications, increasing the workload of senior female members and affecting children's emotional well being and educational outcomes. Overall, women's foreign labour migration created temporary household adjustments without substantially transforming traditional gender roles or authority structures. The study highlights the resilience of patriarchal norms and emphasizes the need for policies addressing both economic and social dimensions of women's empowerment.

Keywords

Women, Labour migration, Household, Gender roles, Decision making, Returnees, Rural Nepal.

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1. Introduction

Foreign labour migration has long shaped Nepal's social and economic landscape, yet its gendered dimensions remain unevenly understood. While substantial body of research has explored male out-migration and its impact on women left behind, far less attention has been paid to what happens when women migrate and more importantly, when they return. Existing studies acknowledge that women's earnings from foreign employment can enhance their economic standing and self-perception, but there is limited in-depth analysis of whether such economic mobility leads to lasting transformations in household decision making and gender roles. The central problem this paper addresses is thus not simply whether a woman's foreign labour migration disrupts traditional norms, but whether these disruptions endure after women return to their respective home.

Migration, broadly defined as the structural or geographical movement of people between locations (UN, 1956), has historically been categorized into internal and international forms (Bhende and Kanitkar, 2006). In Nepal, international migration has become a dominant livelihood strategy, driven by poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, and uneven development (KC, 2003; Shrestha, 2004, 2008). Although labour migration from Nepal dates back two centuries, it gained formal recognition after the Foreign Employment Act 1985. Since then, foreign labour migration has steadily increased (Sijapati, Mak, Zimmerman, and Kiss, 2019). Traditionally, men dominated these flows, particularly to India and later to the Gulf States and Malaysia. However, the last few decades have witnessed a significant rise in women's participation. Official records show that only 161 women migrated for foreign employment between 1985 and 2001, but this number rose dramatically to 21,421 by 2014-2015 (Government of Nepal, 2014; Gioli *et al.*, 2017). Between 2008/09 and 2017/18, labour permits issued to women increased by 160 percent, compared to 56 percent for men. Globally, women now account for nearly 45 percent of international migrants (UN, 1995). Feminist scholarship has emphasized that gender is socially constructed and shapes migration decisions, networks, risks, and outcomes (Lim, 1995). Gender roles influence who migrate, under what conditions, and with what consequences. In patriarchal societies like Nepal, where men are typically positioned as breadwinners and decision-makers and women as caregivers and homemakers (Kasper, 2005; Acharya *et al.*, 2010), migration can disrupt deeply embedded power structures. Women's absence from the household challenges the conventional

division of labour, compelling husbands, in-laws, and children to assume responsibilities traditionally carried out by women (Hugo, 2002; Thao, 2015).

To examine the household gender dynamics of women after their return from foreign labour migration, this study focuses on whether migration leads to changes in gender roles, decision making power, and division of household labour within the household, or whether these arrangements remain similar to those before migration. Understanding this requires a clear grasp of the concept of gender, gender roles, and household labour division, as discussed in global literatures and theoretical frameworks. Such a foundation provides a lens to analyze how migration may influence, challenge, or reinforce existing gender roles within the households.

Gender is widely understood as a socially constructed concept that shapes the distinctions between women and men in various spheres of life, including work, social roles and responsibilities. Although the term gender has been interpreted in different ways across academic discussions, it generally refers to the social and cultural processes through which differences between women and men are defined and organized. As noted by Kamla Bhasin, gender refers to the socio-cultural understanding of women and men, and the ways in which societies distinguish between them and assign corresponding social roles and responsibilities. According to Kamla Bhasin (2000), argued, in many societies, men have traditionally been viewed as the heads of households, primary breadwinners, and controllers of property, and are more actively involved in spheres such as politics, religion, business, and professional life. Women on the other hand, are generally expected to take responsibility for child care, elderly care, and managing household chores. However, the extent of such role differentiation varies across societies, and in some contexts temporary shifts in roles may occur without strong social resistance. From an early age, girls and boys are often socialized into different types of work. In gender analysis, these activities are commonly categorized into three types: productive work, which generates income or goods; reproductive work, which involves domestic labour and care giving; and community work, which includes activities carried out for the benefit of the wider community (Bhasin, 2000).

One of the foundational sociological explanations of gender roles within the family was proposed by Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, who offered a functionalist perspective on family organization. According to Parsons and Bales (1955), argued that the modern nuclear family is structured through a clear differentiation of roles between men and women. Within this framework, men are typically assigned instrumental roles, which encompass economic provision and engagement with the external environment, while women are generally assigned expressive roles, which include emotional support, care giving, and the management of household tasks. This gender-based division of labour was functional, serving to maintain stability and cohesion within the family system. Ann Oakely (1974), argued that domestic labour and care giving responsibilities assigned to women are socially constructed rather than biologically determined.

She demonstrated that housework constitutes a form of labour that has historically been undervalued and disproportionately imposed women in patriarchal societies. Okelay's analysis emphasized the ways in which the gendered division of household labour reinforces broader structures of gender inequality.

Another significant theoretical contribution to understanding household power relations is provided by Amratya Sen through his intra-household bargaining perspective. Sen's concept of "cooperative conflict" explains that relationships within the household involve both cooperation and negotiation over the distribution of resources and responsibilities. According to this framework, the bargaining position of each household member is shaped by factors such as control over income, access to employment, and availability of economic and social resources. When women obtain independent sources of income such as paid through employment or labour migration, their bargaining position within the household may improve, thereby increasing their ability to participate in and influence household decision making processes (Sen, 1990).

Several studies suggest that migration may increase women's autonomy and decision making power, particularly when they contribute economically through remittances (Sikod, 2007).

However, this empowerment is not uniform. In nuclear households, women may gain greater authority, whereas in extended families, decision making often remains under the control of senior household members, such as in-laws (Rajkarnikar, 2017). In addition to, research indicates that role reversals are frequently temporary, upon return, women often resume childcare and domestic duties in line with prevailing social norms (Hugo, 2002). The persistence of patriarchal expectations may also generate tension, especially when women's earnings surpass those of their husbands, potentially leading to feelings of emasculation or conflict (Thao, 2015). In Nepal, traditional gender roles remain strongly institutionalized. National survey data show that married women have limited authority over major household purchases, with only 38 percent participating in key household decisions (NDHS, 2016). Even when men migrate, financial decisions are often made by male relatives (Sherpa, 2010). These patterns raise critical questions about whether women's own migration can fundamentally recognized women as active agents in migration processes, much of the existing research in Nepal focuses on economic outcomes or the experiences of women left behind. There is a clear research gap regarding how women's return from foreign labour migration reshapes or fails to reshape household gender dynamics. Specifically, limited attention has been given to how returning women renegotiable domestic responsibilities, decision making power, and their relationships with husbands and in-laws. Furthermore, there is insufficient analysis of how masculinity is reconstructed when men temporarily assume domestic roles and whether these adjustments persist after women resume their presence in the household.

Addressing this gap is significant both academically and socially. Understanding whether migration leads to structural transformation or merely temporary adjustment can inform gender sensitive migration policies and family support mechanism. It also contributes to broader sociological debates about the flexibility of gender norms under economic pressure. By exploring the experiences of women who have returned from foreign labour migration, this study seeks to assess whether economic empowerment translates into lasting change in household power relations or whether traditional gender roles reassert themselves once migration ends. Thus, the primary objective of this research is to explore the extent to which traditional gender roles change within the household upon women's return from foreign labour migration. Through this process, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between migration, gender, and household dynamics in rural Nepal, going beyond economic indicators to examine the lived realities of power, responsibility, and identity within the household.

2. Methods and Materials

This study was grounded in an interpretive research paradigm. It proceeded from the ontological assumption that household gender roles and decision-making power are not fixed structures but socially constructed and continuously negotiated through everyday interactions. Women's engagement in foreign labour migration was understood as a social process that may destabilize established gender norms, particularly when women assume the role of income earners and men temporarily engage in domestic responsibilities. The study therefore recognized multiple realities shaped by the diverse experiences, emotions, and perceptions of the participants. Epistemologically, it adopted an interpretive stance, treating respondents' lived experiences and subjective meanings as the primary source of knowledge.

Fieldwork was conducted in Dupcheshwor Rural Municipality, Nuwakot Nepal. Two wards Samudratar and Gaukharka were purposively selected due to the relatively high incidence of women's foreign labour migration, particularly to Gulf countries. The selection was further guided by practical considerations of time and resource availability. Secondary information regarding the study area, including education status, occupation patterns, and local economic activities, was drawn from the village profile of Dupcheshwor Rural Municipality and relevant published literature, while primary data were generated through field survey.

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the lived experiences of women engaged in foreign labour migration and its implications for household gender dynamics. The unit of analysis was the household in which at least one married women had engaged in foreign employment for a minimum one year. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents who met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. A total of 24 households were purposively selected for the study, comprising 10 households of women returnees from foreign labour migration and 14 households of families with currently absent women migrants.

Both primary and secondary data were utilized. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and field observation. Interview checklists were developed for returnee women. Interviews explored themes such as division of household labour before, during and after migration; patterns of decision making; perceptions of traditional gender roles; and experiences of renegotiation within the household. Interviews were conducted in person during the fieldwork period. Conversations were recorded in written notes, and a field diary was maintained to document observations and informal discussions. Observation complemented interview data by providing contextual insights into daily household routines and interactions.

Secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and official documents, were reviewed to contextualize the empirical findings and verify local socioeconomic information.

Data analysis followed an interpretive and thematic approach. Interview notes were organized and translated where necessary. Relevant information was entered into an Excel sheet for systematic classification. Responses were coded thematically around key areas such as labour division, decision making authority, and continuity or change in traditional gender roles.

The analysis involved identifying patterns, similarities, and contrasts across households and respondent categories. Selected narratives were presented to retain the voice of participants and to reflect the complexity of their lived realities. The findings were interpreted in dialogue with relevant theoretical perspectives and empirical literature, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in both field evidence and broader sociological debates. Overall, the methodological design prioritized depth over breadth, aiming to capture the nuanced and sometimes contradictory ways in which women's foreign labour migration reshaped temporarily or enduringly -household gender dynamics in rural Nepal.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Socioeconomic Context of the Study Area

Dupcheshwor Rural Municipality, located in Nuwakot district of Bagmati Province Nepal, represents a predominantly rural and indigenous setting where agriculture remains the backbone of everyday life. The municipality covers 131.62 square km and, according to the 2021 census, has a population of over 21,000 with a nearly equal distribution of men and women. A significant proportion of the population belongs to the Tamang community, and Buddhism is the dominant religion among the households.

The demographic profile of the 10 sampled households reflects this broader structure. The average household size was 6.33 members, and 75 percent of households were extended in nature. Although 67.1 percent of the population fell within the economically active group, 39.47 percent were dependents, indicating considerable household responsibility on working members. Agriculture engaged

37.5 percent of the sample population, while 11.18 percent were involved in foreign employment. These figures situate women's migration within a context of limited local employment opportunities, persistent poverty (over half of households facing marginalization), and strong kinship-based living arrangements. The destination pattern of migrant women further illustrates the feminization of labour migration in this area. Around 70.8 percent of women were employed in Kuwait, followed, followed by Qatar (20.8 %), with smaller numbers in Dubai and Lebanon. These destinations, largely in the Gulf region, are consistent with national trends of female migration into domestic and care work sectors.

3.2 Division of Household Labour: Continuity and Adjustment

Before migration, household labour followed a clear gendered division. Women were primarily responsible for in-house chores such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, laundry, manure collection, and livestock care. Men on the other hand, handled out-house roles and responsibilities including plough fields, irrigation, marketing, wage labour, and participation in community meetings and programs. While there was occasional cooperation, the underlying structure was patriarchal and role-specific.

When women migrated, some redistribution of tasks became necessary. In nuclear households, husbands temporarily assumed responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, often with support from older children. In extended households, mother in-law or other female relatives absorbed most of the household responsibilities previously handled by the migrant women. This shift, however, did not necessarily challenge the gendered nature of labour; instead, it often transferred the burden from one woman to another.

These findings resonate with Thao (2015), who argued that husbands may take on domestic duties in the absence of migrant wives, yet such challenges are frequently pragmatic rather than ideological. Similarly Hugo (2002) observed that shifts in household roles during female migration often remain temporary, with traditional norms reasserting themselves once women return. In rural village Dupcheshwor, the evidence suggests a pattern of adjustment rather than transformation. An important dimension that emerged from interviews was the emotional and educational vulnerability of children left behind. One child's account of missing his mother and struggling academically reflects the hidden social cost of migration. While remittances may strengthen household income, the psychological impact on children requires closer attention in future research.

3.3 Women's Involvement in Household Decision Making

The major objective of this study was to explore whether women's engagement in foreign employment altered their decision making power within household. The findings indicate limited structural change. Before migration, only 14.3 percent of women were actively involved in household decision making. During migration, this increased to 33.3 percent, largely through communication

and remittance management. After returning, involvement rose slightly to 40 percent. Although this progression suggests some improvement, the majority of women (60 percent) remained excluded from major household decisions even after contributing economically.

In extended households, senior male members, particularly fathers-in-law, continued to dominate financial and strategic household decisions. In few nuclear households, women who had previously exercised influence resumed decision making roles after return from foreign labour migration. However, these cases were exceptions rather than the norm. These findings challenge the assumption that earning income automatically translates into empowerment. Acharya *et al.* (2010) noted that traditional gender norms often restrict women's influence over household resources despite their economic contributions. Likewise, Sikod (2007) observed that women with earning power may be consulted more frequently, yet structural authority often remains male-dominated. The Dupcheshwor case aligns with these arguments: migration created moments of consultation but did not fundamentally reconfigure patriarchal authority.

3·4 Return Migration & the Persistence of Traditional Gender Roles

The most striking pattern emerged in the post-return phase. Regardless of having worked abroad and contributed remittances, most women resumed their previous domestic responsibilities upon return. Their participation in community meetings and financial decision making either declined or remained unchanged. One returnee's narrative illustrates this dynamic vividly. Her husband's insistence that he remained "the head of the house" despite her overseas employment reflects the persistence of male authority. Her temporary role as breadwinner did not permanently alter her subordinate position within the household hierarchy.

This pattern supports Hugo's (2002) argument that gender role reversals during migration often revert once the migrant returns home. While migration may create a temporary disruption in gender norms, deeply embedded cultural expectations tend to restore previous arrangements. In Dupcheshwor, women's economic contribution did not automatically lead to sustained empowerment or renegotiation of authority. However, it would be simplistic to conclude that migration had no impact. Exposure to foreign environments, independent earnings, and mobility appeared to influence women's self perception and confidence, even if these shifts were not fully institutionalized within the household. The tension between personal transformation and structural continuity remains a key insight of this study.

4. Conclusion

This research examines whether women's return from foreign labour migration brings significant change to traditional gender roles within the household. Based on qualitative evidence from the study area- Dupcheshwor Rural Municipality, the findings suggest that while women's foreign labour migration temporarily disrupts established divisions of labour, these disruptions rarely

translate into lasting structural transformation after their return. During women's absence, household were compelled to adjust. In nuclear households, husbands and teenage children assumed domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. In extended households, mothers-in-law largely assumed the domestic workload. These adjustments demonstrate that gendered roles are not biologically fixed but socially organized and practically negotiable when circumstances demand it. However, the redistribution of labour often shifted responsibilities from one woman to another than fundamentally challenging patriarchal norms.

The most critical finding emerges in the post-return phase. Upon returning home, most women resumed the same domestic roles and responsibilities they had performed prior to migration. Their participation in household decision making showed only marginal improvement compared to the pre-migration period. Although involvement increased slightly during migration, largely through remittance management and consultation, male household heads, particularly husbands and fathers-in-law, continued to dominate major financial and household strategic decisions. This indicates that women's economic contribution alone did not substantially alter institutionalized hierarchies of authority.

From a structural functionalist perspective, the household appears to absorb temporary disruptions in order to restore equilibrium. Gender roles, deeply embedded in cultural expectations, reassert themselves to maintain continuity and perceived stability. At the same time, insights from socialist feminist theory help to explain why economic participation did not automatically translate into empowerment. Women's unpaid domestic labour resumed upon return, reinforcing patterns of economic and symbolic dependence despite their previous status as income earners overseas.

The findings also reveal intergenerational consequences. Elderly women, particularly mothers-in-law, experienced increased workloads during migration periods, and children, especially adolescents took on additional responsibilities that sometimes affected their emotional wellbeing and educational performance. These outcomes complicate the common narrative that migration solely strengthens household welfare through remittances. Overall, the study concludes that women's return from foreign labour migration in this rural context resulted in temporary adjustments rather than enduring transformation of traditional gender roles. While migration created moments of negotiation and modest increases in women's voice, it did not significantly restructure household power relations. Traditional gender norms persisted, especially in extended household settings where senior male authority remained strong. These findings emphasize that economic mobility alone is insufficient to dismantle deeply rooted patriarchal arrangements. By highlighting women's experiences after return, not only during migration, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gender, labour, and family intersect in rural Nepal, and it highlights the need for policies that address both economic and social dimensions of women's empowerment.

5. Implications and Directions for Further Research

The findings contribute to existing knowledge by illustrating that women's foreign labour migration in rural Nepal leads primarily to adaptive adjustments rather than enduring transformation of traditional gender roles. Decision making power increased marginally but remained structurally constrained, especially in extended households. These results highlight the resilience of patriarchal norms even under conditions of economic change. At the same time, subtle shifts in attitudes and intergenerational dynamics suggest that long-term effects may not be immediately visible. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to explore whether repeated cycles of migration gradually reshape gender relations. Comparative studies between nuclear and extended households may also reveal differing trajectories of change. Additionally, more focused research on children's psychological wellbeing in migrant households is necessary to understand the broader social consequences of female migration. Overall, the study suggests that women's return from foreign labour migration in Dupcheshowr produced temporary adjustments in household roles but limited structural transformations. The persistence of traditional gender hierarchies indicates that economic participation alone is insufficient to dismantle deeply rooted social and gender norms.

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