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# “Everyone is Leaving – Who Will Sow Our Fields?” The Livelihood Effects on Women of Male Migration from Khotang and Udaypur Districts, Nepal, to the Gulf Countries and Malaysia

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Over the last ten years, the massive outmigration for foreign employment, mostly to the Gulf and Malaysia, has changed the livelihoods and social structure of rural Nepal. The remittance inflows into rural districts dwarf other flows of finance, and the absence of men from the agricultural and other labor forces has severe effects on agricultural production and gender relations.

A study undertaken in the Khotang and Udaypur districts in the hills of Nepal indicates a complex series of social, economic, and ecological effects of migration at household and community level. This paper presents these findings, focusing on the gendered and class effects of migration. It looks at the changes within households and communities, including effects on labor force and labor patterns, shifts in male-female ownership of productive assets, and changes in areas of authority and decision-making. All of these

have longer-term effects on social dynamics as well as on the agrarian landscape, including wide-ranging impacts on women’s and children’s lives.

**Keywords:** migration, well-being, social mobility, gender relations, class, work-load.

## Introduction

This study aims to enhance our understanding of the impact of male migration—specifically the new form of long-distance migration from Nepal for contract work to Malaysia and the Gulf states—on left-behind women. The variables explored include: well-being of the household as a whole and that of women within the household, psycho-social conditions, workload, and decision-making roles within the household and public spheres. These impacts are examined from a wealth, class, and caste/ethnicity perspective.

As foreign labor migration, especially by men, has now become a ubiquitous phenomenon in Nepal, it has tremendous impact on women. It is estimated that about 3 million Nepali men are working in foreign countries including India. They received \$5.1 billion as remittance in 2012, contributing to 22.3 percent of the GDP (MoLTM and IoM 2010; World Bank 2013; NRB 2013: 94). This new form of migration to Malaysia and the Gulf states has tremendous impact on the Nepali economy and society; it started in 1990 after the Nepal government adopted liberal economic policies. Nepal is also not an isolated case in this respect; foreign labor migration is a global phenomenon now. The officially recorded remittances to developing countries were estimated at \$401 billion in 2012, and are expected to reach \$515 billion in 2015, sustaining growth and development in emerging markets, and serving as a lifeline to the poor (World Bank 2013: 1). Migration and remittances have also contributed significantly in the reduction in poverty rates in Nepal: the poverty rate reduced from 42 percent in 1995-96 to 32 percent in 2003-04 and 25 percent in 2010-11, thanks largely to remittances (CBS 2012a). The proportion of households receiving remittances has increased rapidly in the last fifteen years – from 23.4 percent in 1993-94 to 31.9 percent in 2003-04 and 55.8 percent in 2010-11 (CBS 2012b: 80). The volume of remittances each household received was Rs 15,160 in 1993-94, Rs 34,698 in 2003-04, and Rs 80,436 in 2010-11 (CBS 2012b: 80).

There are several reasons for the increase in foreign labor migration from Nepal, which cannot be explained from a single theory's perspective (Gurung and Adhikari 2013). In the past, attempts were made to explain this migration mainly as a result of 'push' and 'pull' factors. Lack of job opportunities for the growing population and decline in food production and food security due to fragmentation and splitting of land holdings are considered important push factors (Gautam 1999; Acharya 1978). Relatively better employment and income opportunities, wage rates and possibility of increased commodity consumption in foreign

lands are considered as important pull factors (Sharma 2008; Yamanaka 2000; Gill 2003). In recent times, attempts have been made to explain migration from a livelihoods approach, which postulates that assets and capabilities are important in combination with institutional factors (rules and regulations, norms, migration networks, and development of infrastructure such as roads and transportation) to determine the strategies a particular household undertakes for livelihood improvement or minimize risks to the livelihood (DFID 2002; Ellis 2003; Hoermann et al. 2010). Migration here is considered a way to diversify the household (rather than individual) livelihood opportunities, and thereby improve as well as minimize the risks of failure for the overall well-being of the household. The structural forces operating at the national and international levels also shape the decisions to migrate (Massey et al. 1993). These decisions generally take place at the household level (Stark 1991; Ellis 2003; Herzog 2004). In Nepal's case, our study also concurs with the finding that there is some social pressure for men to migrate, and thus migration has also become socially embedded (Sharma 2008). Thieme (2006) includes social networking and social pressure as parts of social capital, to explain the ways in which people connect to livelihood assets; this also helps in explaining the social relationships underpinning migration and determining its success in improving livelihoods. Several studies conducted in Nepal do recognize the importance of migration as a way to improve household livelihood in the context of increased population pressure on resources, decline in resource base, and the need to consume modern amenities to express modernity through the generation of additional cash income (Macfarlane 1976; Adhikari 1996; Bishop 1998).

This study also uses the livelihood approach to understand the impact on women left behind. The question of differential access to assets of men and women has important implications on who migrates, who stays behind, and their respective livelihood outcomes. A structural context of institutional rules and regulations including local practices like gendered work-division determines access to this capital and to migration as a livelihood strategy. Accordingly, while studying the impact on left-behind women, this study also examines the impact of migration on livelihood assets and institutions—both formal and informal. Thus, variables such as wellbeing (composite of income, land ownership, education, and health status), work-load, psycho-social change, and decision-making roles have been included, as these determine the improvement in the livelihood of men and women in families.

## Labor Migration and Left-Behind Women

Most research concurs that there is a significant impact of male migration on women and other left-behind family members. However, there are diverse findings as to the nature of the impact and its various consequences. As a result, there is still limited understanding of the impacts. For example, some studies reveal male out-migration decreases the workload of left-behind women, as the remittances thus generated enable them to hire wage laborers for household farm and non-farm work (Van Rooij 2000). However, viewers should also consider that receipt of remittance is generally preceded by a period without remittance, due to difficulty in getting work immediately or in saving money. Moreover, there is a need to pay the debt incurred for migration first, and, so whatever remittance is received prior to redeeming of the debt, it cannot be used for other activities including hiring of workers to reduce work burden. This could force the left-behind women to increase their workload as they cannot afford to hire in labor during this period of debt repayment. This was revealed in a study of rice-producing villages in Uttar Pradesh, India, where it was shown that the workload of women increased when remittances were not large enough (Paris et al. 2005). Therefore, there are both short-term and long-term impacts of male labor migration on the workload of women. Several other studies have revealed that this workload change depends upon the economic sector. For example, a study undertaken in Albania reveals that women's paid labor supply decreased while their supply of unpaid work increased in the absence of a male family member (Mendola and Carletto 2009). Binzel and Assaad (2011) examine the effects of male labor migration from Egypt to foreign countries on the supply of female labor and found that there is a decline in wage work for left-behind women, but an increase in their participation in unpaid family work and subsistence work, such as agricultural activities for the purpose of their own consumption. Mu and van de Walle (2011) found similar results in the case of China.

Like the debate on male migration's impact on workload of women, there are also debates about the impact of male migration on the socio-economic and political empowerment of women, or their ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied them (Kabeer 1999: 437). Some studies have shown that male migration abroad leads to changes in the gender division of labor, which, in turn, leads to an increase in women's mobility, autonomy, and overall empowerment by providing new fill roles, skills, opportunities, and decision-making powers over the use of resources (Con-

nell 1984; Bever 2002; Chant and Craske 2003; Quisumbing 2003). On the other hand, studies have demonstrated, as in the case of Mexico, that though male out-migration has forced women to take on labor tasks that are associated with new spatial and mobility patterns, these changes have produced ambiguous results for women's empowerment (McEvoy et al. 2012: 369). The authors argue that while these patterns have potential to increase empowerment for women, they also call the women's morality into question, resulting in a policing of the women's behavior and a simultaneous restriction of their mobility by themselves and others. In the same line, another study conducted in Gambia reveals that there is neither an increase in economic empowerment of women nor their social or political empowerment after their husbands migrate.

Economically, wives of migrant husbands became dependent on their relatives who received the remittances, and thus women lost overall control over the resources. On the other hand, they were pressured by their surrounding communities for money and help because of a belief that their husbands were sending them sufficient remittances. As a result, women may find that their relationships with male relatives and with other women in their networks worsen because of tensions after their husbands migrate (Gunnarsson 2011: 127). The impact of male migration on women is also contingent on family structure, particularly whether that be a nuclear family headed by the wife of the migrant husband or a joint family where some other family member is the head of the household. Generally, in nuclear families, male migration has increased the woman's autonomy and decision-making responsibility (Desai and Banerji 2008; Louhichi 1997). Most of these studies look into the impacts of contemporary migration; however, a study that looked into the long history of the impact of male migration on women revealed that migration could lead to demographic change, as well as change in marriage customs and illegitimate relations (Brettell 1986). This study shows that male migration in Portugal contributed to impacts such as high illegitimacy rates, late marriage, moderated fertility, and high frequency of female celibacy.

Studies on migration in Nepal are mainly concerned with economic contribution, even though a few have also looked at the impact of male migration on women. Most recent studies on migration are concerned with remittances inflow, economic costs of migration, savings, contribution to household income, and, at a macro-economic level, contribution to GDP, poverty reduction, and foreign exchange. A few studies that examined the impact on women in Nepal reveal that male-dominated migration has adversely affected the workload of women, as they also start

to get involved in traditionally male-dominated domains of work such as ploughing, threshing, and maintaining terraces (Nandini 1999; Kasper 2005; Lokshin and Glinskaya 2009; Maharjan et al. 2012). Although the women take on more decision-making power during their husbands' absence, it is often assumed that the migration will be temporary and the husband will resume his role upon return (Kasper 2005: 86-87). A study conducted in two villages of the Kavrepalanchok district in 1999 revealed that male migration doubled women's physical work burden and also increased women's community activities, especially where there were no sons (Nandini, 1999).

Maharjan et al. (2012) suggest that migration has helped women broaden and deepen their involvement in rural society as a result of male out-migration, which could lead to either the empowerment or disempowerment of women, depending on the migration pattern and remittances received by the household. Larger remittances generally helped to reduce the physical work burden and to increase decision-making roles, thus empowering the women left behind. Low remittances, however, had the opposite impact, and saddled them with a greater physical workload.

The impact on women within Nepal is also dependent on the position of women in society. For example, in Manang, Watkins (1996) has shown that the market economy associated with male migration and modernization did not subordinate women because in this society women were aligned with the 'sacred' domain. The women's roles increased, as they were the bringers of peace and harmony in the family. Here women owned land, controlled households, and had the right to divorce. However, even in a similar society of Helambu, male migration had created problems for the elderly (Goldstein and Beall 1980). Given this situation, there is still not a full understanding of the impact of migration in various aspects of women's lives such as their socio-political empowerment, including social and psychological impacts on their children, and particularly girls, in Nepal. This study attempts to contribute towards filling this gap and argues that it is still hard to make a firm conclusion given that the new form of migration involving long-distance contract work is still in the early stages of the migration cycle, i.e., the migrants are still thinking about continuing their migration.

### Methodology and the Study Area

This study used several different methods to build an understanding of the multiple effects of male migration on left behind women. The field study was conducted primarily in Khotang district. In addition, we also visited Gaighat in the Udaypur district to gain an understanding of the

impact of foreign labor migration from Khotang on the shift of people from Khotang to Udaypur and the condition of left-behind women in an urban context. Khotang was one of the sites for a project on safe migration, which sponsored this research.

First, researchers purposively identified two Village Development Committees (VDCs—the lowest political/administrative unit of the government) in Khotang on the basis of the following criteria: high level of migration to the Gulf countries and Malaysia; distance from the market center (Diktel, the headquarters of the district); and existence of baseline data. Based on these criteria, the Bamrang and Patheca VDCs were selected for the study. Within these two VDCs, two wards (Wards 3 and 9 in Bamrang and Wards 3 and 5 in Patheca) were selected for study; in the case of Patheca, a separate hamlet of *dalit* or 'low caste' was also studied as an example of settlement of a disadvantaged group. Together, the five wards studied for this research represented different socio-economic and cultural groups (caste groups included *brahmin*, *chettri*, and *dalit*, and ethnic groups (*janajati*) included *rai*). The study focuses on those households sending migrants to countries other than India.

Researchers rapidly assessed all households in each study to establish how their wellbeing had changed over ten years and the reasons for its decline, improvement, or consistency (data covered a total of 321 households). A group of key informants (five in each ward of these two VDCs) representing different socio-economic backgrounds who knew the socio-economic status of households in their community were asked to categorize the wellbeing ranking of the households into four classes ('very poor,' 'poor,' 'medium,' and 'non-poor') based on the land and production, income, housing condition, education and health status of household members. Class category on the indicators for each household was developed based on available data (for land holding), as well as on the subjective opinions of the key informants (if there was no consensus, then a middle ground was considered) for other indicators like income, housing condition, education, and health condition of family members. A household's 'wellbeing' status was then computed based on the average of these indicators. The baseline household data already collected in 2009 through a project implemented by Swiss Development Corporation (SDC) had used these four wellbeing categories for that situation, and thus, the same pattern was followed for this study. Here, the 'non-poor' category was used to indicate that even the relatively wealthy households were not more than just a little comfortable in terms of feeding the family, sending the children to school, and generating a small surplus.

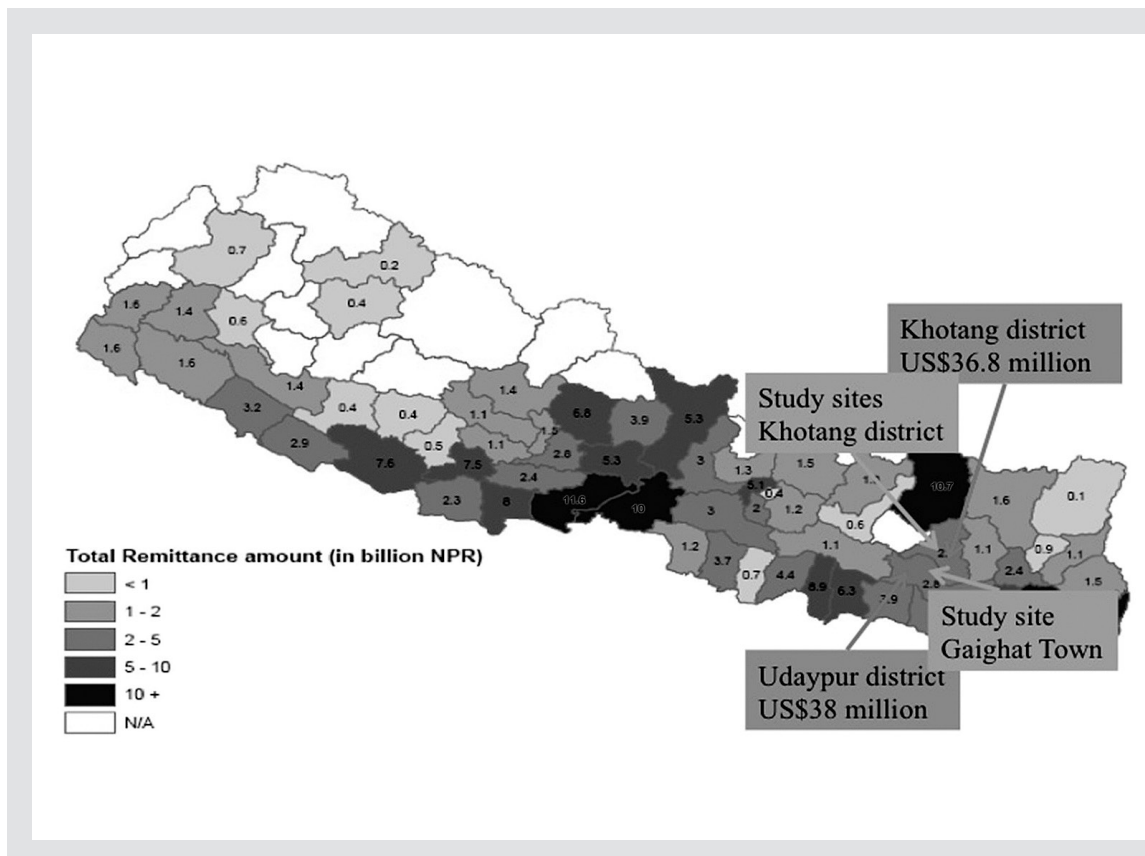


Figure 1. Total remittances by district.  
(World Bank, 2011)

The baseline data were used to understand the migration pattern, but the understanding of the impact of male migration on women was largely based on information collected from detailed qualitative interviews with fourteen migrants' wives in each of the five wards selected for the study. In addition, focus group discussions were held with women from migrant and non-migrant families, elderly people, male and female students, and a range of other service providers such as money transfer agencies, banks, and government organizations. Households that had moved from Khotang to the Gaighat town, Udaypur district, which had relatively high access to health and educational services, were tracked and eleven women—all with migrant husbands—were interviewed.

Migration has been a long-established livelihood strategy in the study districts. However, the nature and magnitude of migration has changed in recent times, especially since 1990. In the past, a few ethnic groups like the *rai* from the Khotang district were recruited into the British and Indian armies; this practice continues to this day but to a limited extent. People also went to India, particularly to north-east India (Silong) for work—seasonally or temporarily. At present, the most popular form of migration is through contract migration to countries such as Malaysia and the Gulf

states. In the year 2009-2010, 3,230 people (3,196 males and 34 females) from Khotang migrated to countries other than India for work—41 percent to Malaysia, 31 percent to Saudi Arabia, 15 percent to Qatar, and 8 percent to UAE (FEPB 2010). In addition to these formally recorded migrants, key informants make a rough estimation that as much as 40 percent of these formal migrants leave Khotang for foreign work through informal channels. The total remittance in Khotang in 2010-2011 was about USD 33-51 million as the preliminary part of this study revealed. This was also in line with the World Bank study in 2009 (Fig. 1).

The household surveys conducted in 15 VDCs of Khotang by Swiss Development Corporation (SDC) in 2009 show that the migration rate (percentage of household having at least one current migrant in the family) varies from 26 percent to 52 percent. On average, about 38 percent of households were found to have current migrants in their families. Caste and ethnicity status were also found to relate to migration rate. For example, there is a high migration rate among the *dalit* (40.1 percent), followed by *janajati* (ethnic groups)—mainly *rais*—(38.9 percent) and then *brahmin* and *chettri* (34.5 percent). The analysis of migration rate by wellbeing ranking shows that the migration rate is highest among the 'middle' class, followed by 'non-poor and 'poor.'

The rate amongst the very poor is low compared to the other groups (irrespective of caste or ethnicity). This is a common pattern across Nepal, where the very poor do not have sufficient assets to access loans for foreign migration (Seddon et al. 2001). For them migration is rarely an option that they can take to improve their economic status and increase their social mobility.

### Findings and Analysis

Most households in the study were still in the migration cycle, with migrants either starting or on their second or third two or three-year contract. There were no households with migrants who had returned for good. It will be another ten years before significant numbers of migrants return to their villages at the end of their migration lives.

### Household Well-Being Change and Impact on Women

Data on changes in wellbeing in the villages of Khotang in the last ten years clearly reveal improvement in wellbeing in 44 percent of households with migrants, 53 percent of households maintaining the same level of wellbeing, and three percent of migrant households with a decline in wellbeing. For non-migrant households, however, it is a very different picture: only 13 percent of households showed any wellbeing improvements. Amongst the migrant households, 42 percent of 'middle' class households bene-

fited from remittance in improving their well-being status. This was the case with 20 percent of migrant households in 'very poor' and 32 percent in 'poor' groups. A major cause for improvement in the wellbeing of migrant households, as reported by key informants, was remittances (see Adhikari and Hobley 2012 for details). Remittance earnings ranged from a few households indicating complete failure to the more common situation of low monthly remittances between Rs 6,000-10,000 per month. Only three households considered to have successful migrants in these five villages sent Rs 50,000-100,000 per month. Overall, it was the poor and medium households that benefitted the most from migration. Using the same household survey data to look at change over ten years (Fig. 2), patterns emerge in regards to caste and ethnicity and well-being changes. There is greater mobility in wellbeing amongst the very poor to poor *dalit* (42 percent) than amongst the *brahmin* and *chettri* (33 percent) or the *rai* (12 percent). This increased mobility brought about by migration has had a major impact on women, particularly *dalit* women whose husbands have migrated; they felt a reduced dependence on higher caste households in economic matters such as wage labor, food support and land or livestock leasing. Consequently, they said they are enjoying this new-found relative freedom. Moreover, these women expressed satisfaction over the fact that they have started to own land—partly as a result of their husbands' migration and

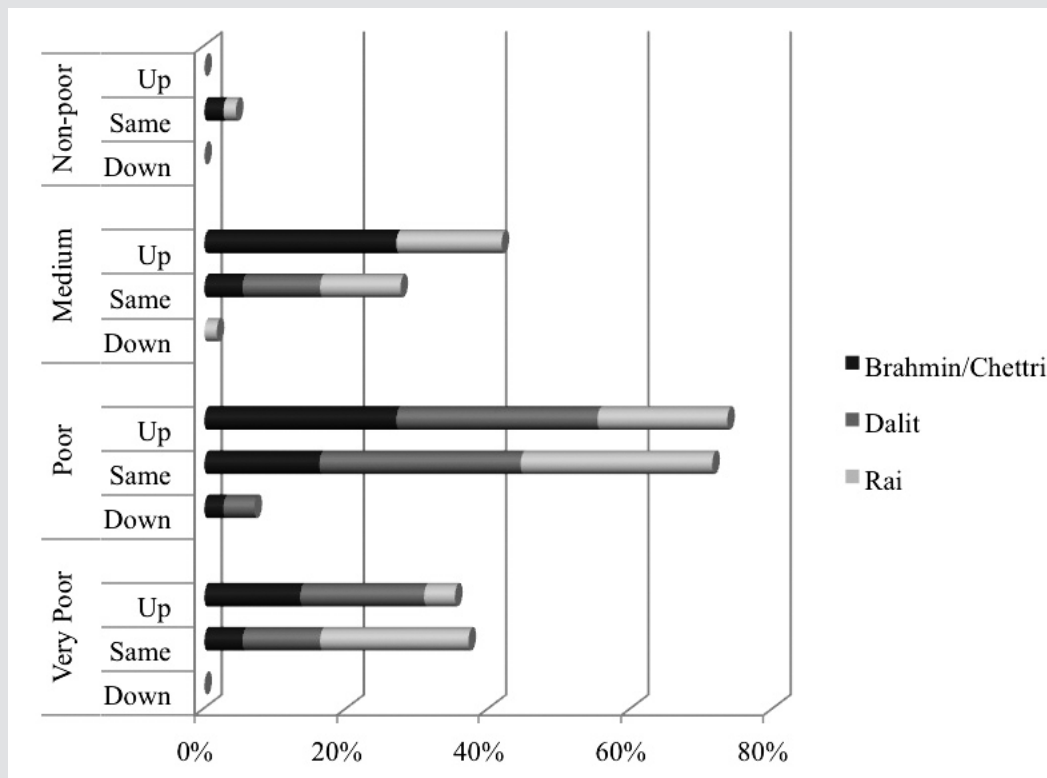


Figure 2. Well-being changes by caste/ethnicity in Khotang study villages - migrant households (the total of same color, i.e. representing each ethnic/caste group, is 100%).

(Field study, 2011)



the inflow of remittances, as well as the government policy of giving tax concession (by 25 percent) if the land is purchased under women's names. As the person needs to be present at the time of purchase to receive the land-ownership certificate (*lal purja*), absent husbands tend to buy land in their wives' names so that the whole process of purchase is completed; otherwise, these husbands would only get the *lal purja* (land-ownership certificate) when they present themselves in person at the Land Revenue Office. Accordingly, the migration of men has some impact on land purchase under women's names. The data collected from the Land Revenue Office in Khotang as a part of this study revealed that there were 1,231 land purchases under women's names in 2009-2010, which was 25 percent of the total land sales that year. Among the *dalit*, 161 men and 50 women bought land in that year. In the Udaypur district, 49 percent of land purchases in urban areas (Ghaighat) and 25 percent in rural areas were made under the names of women. Considering that land was not generally bought under women's names in the past, this new trend triggered by migration and remittances is an interesting change in terms of asset ownership for women; however, it does not indicate that women have decision-making authority over the land.

One immediate impact of improvement in wellbeing was the ability to send children to school, particularly girls. However, discussions with teachers and students in Khotang revealed that quality of education is low because female students have little time to study; this is because they are needed to share the workload of their mothers, which has increased because of the migration of fathers and male students, many of whom leave school after eighth grade to go abroad for work. Accordingly, there are higher levels of female student retention in and after ninth grade. In private schools, which were located mainly in the district headquarters, there were mainly boys. Girls were not sent to these expensive schools. As reported by officials in Khotang District Education Office, the result of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination, the government's examination, in this district has been poor (less than 38 percent, far lower than the national average), and most female students fail this examination, preventing them from further study. In private schools in Khotang, where mainly boys were sent, SLC pass rate was 100 percent.

### **Psycho-Social Changes Among Women**

For women there were a range of subtle and not so subtle wellbeing effects, from those imposed by an additional range of work activities, to managing the pressure for repayment of loans, to dealing with the many problems of

growing children, including those associated with teenage behaviors. Perhaps one of the most interesting challenges handling the compulsion to migrate that so many women mentioned; it appeared migration was not an option for most households. Most women indicated they would rather have their husbands at home helping them to bring up the children and to farm the land. However, in all cases, it was not just men wanting to migrate to earn new sources of income, but rather a social expectation in their community that they should migrate. One woman noted: "villagers in fact press men to migrate. If they don't migrate they ask why they have not gone and suggest they should go now because if they wait it becomes more difficult."

In the interviews, we aimed to explore many of the personal problems married women face due to migration of their husbands. However, it was difficult to get women to share these personal problems with the interviewers, even when interviews were conducted in private within the house by female interviewers. This level of personal disclosure required a high level of trust, greater than could be developed during a short interview process. However, women were prepared to openly discuss problems they faced with their children. Women heading households because of their husbands out-migration all reported difficulties with managing teenage behaviors in the absence of their husbands, and in particular being able to ensure that children attend school and study effectively. This increased stress levels inside the household, which were already quite high, particularly where there were low levels of remittance or, in some cases, no remittance coming in. Almost all women with migrant husbands and heading their households expressed that they had suffered hard times at least for the initial six months when money did not come from their husbands for the payment of loan instalments. This problem continued for those women whose husbands were not able to send enough money for this purpose. Women living in joint families stated that moneylenders would pressure the male members of the family such as their fathers-in-law or brothers.

There was also scrutiny from moneylenders and the wider community of the women's behavior and conduct. In one of the focus group discussions, the participating women expressed: "Close kin members as well as moneylenders constantly monitor our movement, including our visits to markets for buying goods and collecting remittances." "They also want to find out whether we have started spending money." "We needed to carry out the activities that our husbands usually conducted like contacting male workers, hiring them and communicating with them. We need to be constantly careful so that others in the vil-

lage do not suspect of us having affairs with these men.” Interestingly, with high access to mobiles in the village and cheaper phone calls, these women also suspected that their neighbors and kin-members would report their behavior to their husbands. Husbands had similar suspicions. During the fieldwork, researchers came across cases of women whose husbands did not permit them to do wage laboring in road construction, suspecting that it would provide opportunities for affairs with other men who came for work. This level of external scrutiny gave these women a considerable level of psycho-social stress, forcing them to adopt a degree of self-censorship in their external relations, particularly with other men.

The effects of migration on women’s behavior varied according to the length of time they had been married. Women who were married for a shorter period of time faced higher levels of mistrust and their behavior was commented on when they went out to the *haat bazaar* (seasonal market) for wage labor or to the district headquarters to collect remittances from their husbands. In the study area, most key informants reported an increase in family breakdown (wife eloping with another man) in recent times in families where husband had migrated. Furthermore, there are stresses for women for readjustment with husbands when they return after a long period of time. For example, women in a focus group discussion reported: “We are used to doing things on our own, eating what I like when I like. I am scared for a while when he comes back what he is going to say.” “It takes at least eight to ten days to readjust to each other again and to relax.” “When you have been on your own it is difficult to readjust to be being together.”

Regular communication between husbands and wives was an important feature of migrant households. For some this occurred on a daily basis, for others it was weekly or fortnightly. In all cases there was a high level of mobile phone contact between the husband and wife, which was not solely concerned with decisions about use of money, but also the children and other family matters. In many cases, fathers talked directly to their children to maintain some form of contact with them. Wives whose husbands had been overseas for many years indicated that the mobile phones and cheaper calling charges improved communication and contact, and made it far easier for children to maintain a relationship with their fathers. Most women valued this contact and said that it reduced the psychological stress they felt, particularly when dealing with problems with the children. However, when most women had immediate problems they did not turn to their husbands, but found support either from their own natal families or from their close neighbors.

### **Changes in Workload**

The study revealed that there are marked changes in women’s workload as a consequence of migration of their husbands and other male family members. There were very few households in the study area that had been sufficiently successful to be able to leave farming completely and invest in non-farming activities in an urban area, for example. Women in such cases (in Diktel of Khhotang and Gahighat of Udaypur) stated that their workload had decreased as they focused on running petty businesses such as tailoring, knitting woolen clothes, and running grocery shops. In Khotang, however, women respondents, especially from poorer backgrounds who were not making enough progress with small remittances, considered agricultural workload to be a major burden. They had adopted coping strategies such as reducing livestock numbers, but even in such cases they were reliant on their own labor and hired-in labor to continue the farming practice. These women reported that they had to bear additional burdens of increased inputs into exchange labor (*parma*) to get access to labor for ploughing and other male-dominated activities. This required a woman to work for three to four days in the ploughman’s house to pay for the costs of a day’s ploughing. In more successful households, women did not exchange labor because they could afford to pay for it, but managing this labor included hiring men, working with laborers to ensure quality of inputs, and cooking for them, all of which were themselves time-consuming. With increased wage labor rates and shortage of skilled labor at the appropriate times, even the non-poor households were hesitant to hire labor, preferring to use their own labor and save the costs, as those costs were not recouped through the sale of surplus production.

The absence of adult male family members created significant problems related to finding help during emergencies. For example, one woman living with a small son and a daughter in Bamrang stated the following:

I was sick and vomiting in June last year. Then, I fell down on the floor all of a sudden. The children were crying. Then the neighbor came to see what had happened. He brought others for help. There were about ten to twelve neighbors, only four were males and the rest were females. They brought a stretcher and had to carry me to the hospital in Diktel. Women carried the stretcher. It was hard for me to look after the children and look after the animals. If my husband was at home, it would have been different.

These impacts were also dependent on the nature of the household. For example, women in joint households stated that they do not have much pressure to perform male tasks such as digging, and that elderly household members can look after the children and grazing of animals.

These changes in work pressures as a result of the absence of men are also leading to changes in social networks. For some, investment in informal collective action such as exchange labor is a necessity rather than a desired action. For those that do not need to rely on others outside the household, either because they are better off or because they are in a joint household, the need to engage in external collective and mutual exchange relations shows a strong decline.

### ***Changes in Decision-Making and Women's Voice Within and Outside the Household***

Understanding changes in decision-making within the household due to the absence of male members of the family was one of the areas of inquiry of this study. We assumed there would be differences in levels of empowerment depending on whether the woman was part of a joint or nuclear household. We were interested in two main areas: 1) whether there had been a change of voice internally within the household, or if the woman had more authority over decisions; and 2) whether women's voice had increased its influence in the external context.

To investigate this we looked at different areas of decision-making and who had primary control over those decisions. What we found is that women had responsibilities for the household, but rarely had sole or main decision-making power, so they had limited authority. Their husbands retained control over decision-making for major items, such as land purchase and other large domestic items, construction of new buildings or improvements of existing ones, purchase of large livestock, and decisions concerning school selection for the children. In some cases, decisions over all financial matters were given to a close male relative, for example, for the purchase of land. Women did, however, have decision-making control over what crops to grow, when to hire workers, or whether to go out for waged labor herself. Women also made decisions on renting in and renting out land and sale of small livestock. They informed their husbands of these decisions, but had the authority to make and implement them on their own.

Major decisions were made over the phone with their husbands, where the wife was then asked to implement the

decision. In some cases, women had decided to invest money in small businesses that provided additional sources of income that could be used to fill the gaps between irregular flows of remittance. These included setting up small poultry farms, tailoring services, neighborhood shops, and a small rice mill. For women who had moved to urban areas (in Diktel and Ghaighat) whilst their husbands migrated, additional and regular sources of income were derived from renting out rooms in their houses to women who had recently moved to these areas because they wanted access to better educational opportunities for their children.

Generally decisions on petty business were joint decisions, but several women also reported that their husbands disapproved of them developing a business, as they expected their wives to remain within the household as a mark of their husbands' financial success. At the same time, a few women reported that they ran minor businesses without informing their husbands. Accordingly, there was an interesting push and pull within the domestic sphere, with some women wishing to move outside the domestic environment and secure a regular source of income over which they could have decision-making control, and on the other hand the pressure from husbands, who felt women should be retreating back into the domestic environment as an indicator of their success overseas and their ability to support their families without their wives having to earn extra income. The husbands' demand for retreat of wives into the households originated in fear that their wives working outside the home and mixing with men could increase their chance of eloping or having extra-marital affairs. This push and pull was dependent on both the nature of work available and whether wives lived in an urban or rural settlement. The pressure to remain within the household was more extreme in urban than in rural areas. For example, a woman in Gaighat (urban area) stated, "here the attitude is women shouldn't work, they should look beautiful, make sure the house looks good, ensure the children study well." Families moving to urban areas like Gaighat were relatively successful migrant families, and the main reason to move here was, as stated in the focus group discussions of women, the children's education. In this environment, pressure to stay within the home was high. For women in rural Khotang, agricultural responsibilities forced them to continue to work outside the domestic environment, and thus there was not the same pressure to remain inside the home.

The structure of the household in which the woman lived also affected the level of authority she had in the absence of her husband. Women within joint households had far less control over decisions than women heading house-

holds without their parents-in-law. In joint households the husband usually sent the remittance money to his father rather than to his wife, and the money then became an asset to be shared within the joint household and was not solely for the benefit of the wife. However, women in joint households also had less domestic burden, as there were other adult males to share the agricultural work. Where households had recently split from the joint household there were signs of tensions when the wife received all the remittance and made decisions about its use for the sole benefit for her nuclear household. There were cases of jealousy between the wider family and the nuclear family when remittance was not shared. For example, a woman in Gaighat stated that she came to this place from a rural area to become anonymous and removed from her close kin members, who were demanding a share from her husband's remittances. These kin members followed her to this place and created problems, but through the help of a women's group in Gaighat, she was able to deal with the problem.

In all migrant households, there was a noted increase in women's mobility outside the home, whether for marketing purposes, hiring labor, or participation in collective action groups. Women's participation in social and community organizations increased in the absence of their husbands; in the VDCs studied, 85 percent of participation in community groups was from women. Consequently, women were able to increase their exposure to knowledge, new ideas, and external service providers. However, women also found it increasingly difficult to participate in these groups as their workload increased in the absence of men. Women tended to see the value of investing time in a particular group when it provided access to small loans and a source of solidarity and mutual support.

Religious and festive activities were also increasingly dominated by women, marking a significant shift in the social relations that governed men and women's interactions. In an interesting set of reflections, women noted that the absence of young men means that festivals were not such fun, perhaps indicating a more worrying longer term trend of a potential failure to reproduce social organizations that maintained and supported social structures into the future. Some of the changes in social relations were, of course, important and positive (particularly shifts in patron-client relations, especially the decline in higher caste households' semi-bonded employment of *dalit* men and women for caste-based works like ploughing and tailoring, and the rise in wage rates for these works) but in other ways there were questions that our informants raised about the undermining of mutuality within a village and

the maintenance of social support networks. There were interesting patterns emerging of women who, through the success of their husbands in migration, were retreating into the private domain, and conversely women who had to take on a greater public domain role whilst their husbands were absent.

Women had greater voice, exposure, and influence in the public arena, but it was unclear whether this was simply an artifact of the absence of men or a sustained change that could continue beyond the time when their husbands returned. Some women indicated that when their husbands return from migration they tend to take back the participation in collective action groups. A woman stated, "I get the money as I am the head....once he comes back he is the head again."

## Conclusion

The study clearly shows that male contract migration to work in Malaysia and the Gulf countries profoundly impacts left-behind women. These women experienced both positive and negative consequences of this migration depending on the nature of the household they live in.

In terms of family wellbeing, migration has clearly improved the wellbeing of households. This has benefitted poor and medium families the most, particularly *dalit* families. *Dalit* women experienced freedom from this improved wellbeing because their dependence on higher caste households declined in relation to economic matters such as wage labor, food support, and land and livestock leasing. This wellbeing included the ability to send more girls to school, but their quality of education did not improve significantly because they needed to share the increased workload of their mothers—the result of male migration.

Male migration has increased the workload of women and girls in all types of domains, including farm and non-farm work within the household, religious and ritual activities within the male domain, and social and public works. There has been significant change in women's public roles, but overall empowerment effects are still unclear. Some women are able to increase their voice outside the home and take up new employment opportunities, whereas others are forced back into the domestic sphere and forbidden by their husbands from taking up a wider economic role outside the home. This also led to psychosocial stress on women, which forced them to self-censor their outside contacts. Major decisions are generally still made by migrant men using mobile phones for communication. The partial increase in authority in decision-making and

voice outside the home appears to be temporary for many women, since migrant males tend to resume their positions as patriarchs when they return home. However, since most men are still in the migration cycle and migrants are still thinking of undertaking migration so far as possible, it is not yet possible to test whether there will be sustained or only temporary changes in women's roles and relationships within the home and outside. If there are sustained changes in women's ownership of resources and in their educational levels, we can expect that women's say in decision-making may improve, as Watkins (1996) found it in Manang where women were not subordinated because of their control on resources and household decision-making, which improved as a result of the inflow of cash and induced modernization by migration. But, this study shows that as of now there is no sustained women empowerment, and it could be less likely in a different cultural context of the middle hills or may take a long time for this to happen. Understanding these impacts certainly calls for regular studies of this type in areas from where there is high rate of out-migration, which is a likely scenario for a long time to come.

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