



Gender Dynamics in Migration: Case studies from Bangladesh and Nepal

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Abstract

The growing trend of women migrating across borders not only creates a new discourse in the global labour market, but it also helps to shape social gender norms. The study investigates gender disparities and vulnerabilities in migration, including the effects of societal norms and economic concerns, as well as policy responses and interdisciplinary influences on migrants' experiences. The article utilizes an exploratory approach, integrating governmental and non-governmental documents, alongside extensive literature, to examine migration dynamics between Bangladesh and Nepal. This method combines official reports, academic research, and non-governmental publications for a comprehensive analysis of the evolving migration landscape. The study reveals that addressing gender dynamics in migration policies and interventions is vital as it ensures that the unique needs of women migrants are recognized and met, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. By tailoring support mechanisms to women's specific challenges, policies can enhance social cohesion and economic development while fostering inclusive and sustainable migration systems. This approach benefits both migrants and host communities, promoting a more equitable and just society overall.

I. Introduction:

Around the world people are on the move, people from various genders are migrating from one place to another in search of better job opportunities, resources seeking a better and quality life. Migration helps people gain symbolic and economic advantages. According to the World Migration report of 2020, 3.6% of world's population or 281 people, live outside their country of birth. This includes people who have migrated for choice or necessity.

With the increase in trend of migration, research shows that throughout history the percentage of male migrants is larger than the

percentage of women migrants. The most recent record of The Migration Data Portal 2020 shows that by 2020 the percentage of male migrants have increased from 50.6 per cent at mid-year 2000 to 51.9 per cent at mid-year 2020 and the percentage of female migrations has declined from 49.4 per cent at mid-year 2000 to 48.1 per cent at mid-year 2020. The number of male and female migrants vary from region to region For example, sub-Saharan Africa has more male migrants, while the Philippines has more female migrants.

With the increasing opportunity and economic stability for women, traditional gender roles are changing. More women are becoming bread-winners and earning their own money, which changes their role in families and societies. The demand of labour in the global market is increasing and the percentage of women migrating to escape from poverty and limiting opportunity for economic security is also increasing. According to the United Nations migration report, 48.1% of international migrants were female in 2020, down from 49.4% in 2000.

Female Migration Trends in Bangladesh and Nepal:

Bangladesh has witnessed significant growth in female migration since its inception in 1991. Policy amendments in 2003 and 2006 contributed to this rise by expanding opportunities for unskilled and semi-skilled female workers. Despite fluctuations until 2002, there's been a notable increase in female migrants, particularly in the 31-40 age group. However, educational attainment remains modest, with many lacking formal schoolings. Family dynamics influence migration decisions, and despite concentration in low-skilled occupations, female migrants prioritize remittances for household essentials. It is seen that, female migration in Bangladesh reflects evolving policy dynamics, demographic trends, and economic imperatives, highlighting the crucial role of women in both domestic and international economies.



In Nepal female migration has emerged as a growing trend, although it remains a minority phenomenon compared to male migration. The feminization of poverty, globalization, and limited economic prospects are key drivers pushing Nepali women to seek employment opportunities abroad, particularly in domestic care services. Historically, India was a primary destination, but there has been a shift towards Southeast and East Asia, and more recently, the Arab States. Female migrants predominantly engage in domestic and service sectors, contributing to the economy through remittances. Despite challenges, including gender disparities and legal documentation issues, female migration in Nepal presents opportunities for women to improve their economic status and contribute to national development.

Gender as a social construct:

Gender profoundly shapes the migration experience at every stage of the process. From influencing decisions to migrate to determining access to resources and opportunities, gender norms and expectations play a significant role. In societies where traditional gender roles prevail, expectations regarding mobility and economic participation differ for men and women. These norms often limit women's opportunities for migration, constraining their access to education, employment, and other resources necessary for successful migration. Conversely, men may face pressure to migrate to fulfil provider roles or seek employment opportunities in sectors traditionally dominated by men. The division of labour along gender lines further reinforces migration patterns, with men and women often occupying different roles within and outside the household. This division extends to migration opportunities, where men may be more prevalent in certain sectors like construction or agriculture, while women may be more likely to engage in domestic or care work abroad. Moreover, gendered social networks and support systems influence individuals' ability to navigate the migration process. Women and men may have different access to migration-related information and resources, affecting their decision-making and migration outcomes.

However, gendered experiences of migration also expose individuals to different vulnerabilities and risks. Women migrants, for example, may face higher risks of exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence, while men may encounter challenges related to hazardous working conditions or discrimination. Migration can also impact gender relations within households

and communities, challenging or reinforcing existing norms and power dynamics. Women's migration, in particular, may lead to shifts in gender roles and decision-making processes, empowering them economically but also potentially exacerbating tensions within families. Addressing gender as a social construct in migration requires recognizing and addressing the diverse needs and realities of migrants of all genders. Policies and interventions must be inclusive and equitable, considering the complex interplay between gender norms, power dynamics, and individual experiences in the migration process.

Intersectionality in migration studies:

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, aims to address the complexity of discrimination experienced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. Initially, Crenshaw developed this concept within the context of black women workers facing unfair treatment within the legal justice system in the United States. Traditionally, legal cases of discrimination were often viewed through a singular lens, focusing solely on race or gender. However, Crenshaw observed that black women workers faced unique forms of discrimination that could not be fully understood by examining race or gender separately. Instead, their experiences of discrimination were shaped by the intersection of both racial and gendered inequalities. Crenshaw used the metaphor of an "intersection" to illustrate how these multiple forms of discrimination interact and reinforce each other. Just as roads intersect and overlap, the experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups are influenced by the intersecting forces of race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and other social identities. By highlighting intersectionality, Crenshaw emphasized that individuals do not experience oppression in isolation but rather face overlapping systems of discrimination. This framework sheds light on how marginalized groups experience unique forms of discrimination that cannot be adequately addressed through single-axis approaches. It underscores the importance of considering the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression in understanding and addressing inequality.

As a mobile concept and framing device, intersectionality has become increasingly popular in migration studies (Lutz et al. 2011). In fact, it could be argued that migration as a field of study popularised the use of intersectionality in certain European contexts and that key scholars advancing this approach were of migrant backgrounds or grew



up in immigrant households (Bastia, 2014; Stasiulis, Jinnah and Rutherford, 2020).

Intersectional analysis in migration studies highlights how social identities intersect to shape migrants' experiences and opportunities. It underscores that migrants are not a monolithic group but rather navigate various social axes of difference, influencing their access to rights and resources. Moreover, intersectionality challenges essentialist interpretations of femininities and masculinities, recognizing the diverse disadvantages and social structures that shape migrants' lives.

Feminist Perspectives on migration:

Feminist scholars argue the understanding of diverse experiences of men and women in internal and external migration is crucial for comprehensively interpreting the gender dynamics in migration. Feminist researchers like Chant and Radcliffe emphasize that traditional gender roles and divisions of labour within households significantly shape migration patterns. Women's roles in reproductive work and household responsibilities often constrain their mobility compared to men, who may have more autonomy to migrate independently for employment opportunities. This perspective challenges the notion of migration as a gender-neutral phenomenon and highlights the intersecting factors of gender, class, and race that influence individuals' migration experiences. For instance, the temporary absence of migrant men from domestic spaces may afford women some autonomy but can also lead to increased responsibilities and challenges in managing households in their absence. Understanding these gendered power dynamics is essential for crafting policies and interventions that address the diverse needs and experiences of migrant populations.

II. Methodology:

For our research on gender dynamics in migration, we carefully selected Bangladesh and Nepal as our case study areas. These countries were chosen due to their significant migration flows, diverse migration patterns, distinct socio-cultural contexts, and geographical variability. Additionally, their relevance to policymaking and interventions aimed at promoting gender equality and empowerment further justified our choice. By focusing on these countries, we aim to provide comprehensive insights into the intersection of gender and migration dynamics.

The methodology employed in this dissertation adopts an exploratory approach, integrating diverse sources encompassing governmental and non-governmental documents alongside extensive literature pertinent to the migration dynamics between Bangladesh and Nepal. This multifaceted method draws upon various resources, including official reports, policy documents, academic research, and reputable non-governmental publications. This inclusive methodology allows for a holistic exploration of migration phenomena, synthesizing diverse perspectives and insights to inform the analysis and discussion on the gender dynamics in migration.

Gendered Patterns of migration in Bangladesh:

Labour migration in Bangladesh has been seen as a predominantly male affair, with official records reflecting minimal female participation until relatively recent years. Government-imposed restrictions further reinforced this trend, limiting women's ability to migrate for work abroad until 2003. The dominance of men in migration for work abroad can be attributed to various factors, including cultural norms, societal expectations, and economic opportunities. Traditionally, men have been viewed as the primary breadwinners in Bangladeshi society, tasked with providing for their families. This expectation has led to a societal preference for men to seek employment opportunities outside the country, particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and agriculture.

Furthermore, economic conditions and employment opportunities abroad have often been more conducive for men, with higher demand for male labour in certain sectors and countries. This demand, coupled with lower migration costs and fewer social barriers, has made it more feasible for men to pursue opportunities for work overseas. The perception of migration as a means of fulfilling traditional gender roles and responsibilities has also contributed to male domination in this domain. Men are often encouraged to migrate as a means of supporting their families financially, while women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities and caregiving duties.

The impact of this male dominated migration on women has been multifaceted encompassing various aspects of their lives. In accordance with findings from the comprehensive survey conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on the theme of Migration and Gender in Bangladesh: An Irregular Landscape it is evident that with a substantial number of men



migrating, women often find themselves shouldering increased economic responsibilities within their households. They become the primary breadwinners, tasked with managing finances and providing for their families' needs, which may initially pose challenges but also present opportunities for asserting their autonomy. However, this shift in responsibilities challenges traditional gender roles and exposes women to social pressure and criticism for intruding into traditionally male-dominated spaces. Despite assuming new roles, women face scrutiny and judgment, leading them to justify their migration through narratives of sacrifice and duty to the family. Moreover, educational, and socioeconomic disparities among migrant women highlight the challenges they face, with limited educational backgrounds and occupations associated with low status and modest pay. Nevertheless, migration offers opportunities for women to increase their economic independence and delay marriage, yet, amidst structural inequalities and social pressures that must be addressed to promote gender equality and empower women.

The female migration in Bangladesh has historically been low with negligible number of women migrating alone or without family or their male counter parts. This scarcity can be attributed to stringent restrictions of home and family. After 2003 these restrictions started to ease and gradually the proportion of female migration started to increase. Based on the comprehensive analysis provided in the [UN Women country overview report on Women and migration in Bangladesh](#), it can be observed that the proportion of female migrant workers began to rise reaching around 4 percent of all Bangladeshi migrants by 2004. In the subsequent years, there was a notable upward trajectory in female migration rates, with women constituting almost 19 percent of all Bangladeshi migrant workers by 2015. Despite this increase, the percentage of female migrants from Bangladesh remains comparatively low compared to other nations that export significant numbers of female labourers.

Poverty, gender discrimination, and limited livelihood options in rural areas contribute to the continuous supply of women entering the domestic work sector abroad. These women perceive migration as a means to escape poverty and fulfil personal and family needs, albeit temporarily. The driving force behind female migration from Bangladesh predominantly stems from economic factors, including poverty alleviation and the pursuit of better employment

opportunities unavailable domestically. Women migrate in search of livelihoods that offer higher wages and improved working conditions, seeking to escape the constraints of limited job prospects and financial instability in their home country.

Case Study: Runu's Journey as a Migrant Worker:

This case study follows the journey of Runu, a migrant worker from Bangladesh, who ventured abroad to seek employment in the garment industry. In addition to exploring her migration experience, this study examines the role of remittances in empowering women in rural Bangladesh.

Runu hailed from a family of three and had always felt the burden of responsibility to provide for her family. Despite being talented, her education was interrupted, and she could not continue her studies. However, she was part of the World Vision school program, which provided her with some educational support and guidance. Runu's life took a turn when her mother learned about opportunities for women to work abroad. Recognizing the potential for Runu to improve their family's financial situation, her mother encouraged her to consider migrating for work. Intrigued by the possibility of a better future, Runu decided to take a chance and explore the option of migrating abroad. After making the decision to migrate, Runu embarked on a journey to work in the garment industry abroad. Despite initial apprehensions and uncertainties, she arrived in the destination country and began her employment in a garment factory. The transition to life in a new country and work environment was challenging, but Runu remained resilient and determined to succeed.

Throughout her migration journey, Runu encountered various challenges. Adapting to a new culture and language posed difficulties, and she often felt isolated and homesick. Additionally, the demanding nature of her work in the garment industry took a toll on her physical and mental well-being. Despite the challenges, Runu's migration experience also brought opportunities for empowerment and growth. Through her work in the garment industry, she gained financial independence and stability, which allowed her to support her family back home. Moreover, her exposure to new environments and experiences broadened her perspective and enhanced her skills. Runu's remittances played a crucial role in empowering women in rural Bangladesh. By sending a significant portion of her earnings back home, Runu contributed to her family's financial



security and well-being. The remittances enabled her family to invest in education, healthcare, and other essential needs, thereby enhancing their overall quality of life. Furthermore, Runu's financial support empowered the women in her family, providing them with opportunities for economic independence and self-reliance.

Runu's story exemplifies the transformative impact of migration and remittances on women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. Her journey abroad not only provided her with economic opportunities but also enabled her to uplift her family and community. By recognizing the critical role of remittances, policymakers and stakeholders can support initiatives that harness the potential of migration to empower women and promote sustainable development in Bangladesh.

Gendered Patterns of migration in Nepal:

Migration plays a pivotal role in shaping socio-economic dynamics and livelihood strategies in Nepal, with male labour migration emerging as a prominent feature of the country's migration landscape. Historically, Nepali men have sought employment opportunities abroad to support their families and improve their economic prospects. The Gulf countries, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, have emerged as major destinations for Nepali migrant workers due to their booming construction, infrastructure, and service industries. The allure of higher wages and employment prospects in the Gulf region has attracted a large number of Nepali men, particularly from rural areas with limited economic opportunities. Many of these migrants are employed in construction projects, hospitality, and domestic work, contributing to the rapid development and growth of the Gulf economies.

India also has long been a destination for Nepali migrant labour, given its close geographical proximity and historical ties between the two countries. Nepali men migrate to various parts of India for employment in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services. The demand for Nepali workers in India is driven by factors such as seasonal labour requirements, infrastructure development projects, and the informal economy.

The domination of migration trend by men in Nepal has brought about significant consequences in intra-household power dynamics, leading to notable changes in women's roles and responsibilities within both domestic and socio-economic sphere. One of the key consequences of male migration is a shift in the gender division of labour, with women often taking on increased

responsibilities in domestic and subsistence farming activities while experiencing lower participation in the formal labour market. While male migration may lead to increased autonomy and decision-making power for some women, particularly those who undertake the responsibility of household heads, others may experience constraints due to their financial dependence on men and prevailing social norms. Women's ability to participate in household decision-making often hinges on their position within the household, with those under the supervision of other family members, such as in-laws, facing greater challenges in asserting their autonomy. While many women left behind by their male counterparts experienced potential gains in social participation, others encountered heightened scrutiny and vulnerabilities, especially when navigating public spaces. Regional disparities accentuated the diverse experiences of women, as those in the Terai region grappled with more stringent gender norms compared to their counterparts in the Hill region.

Female migration in Nepal has become increasingly significant in recent years, reflecting a global trend of women participating more actively in labour migration. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that women constitute nearly 45 percent of migrant workers worldwide, with a growing number migrating independently for employment. This shift, often referred to as the "feminization" of labour migration, is driven by various factors including evolving labour markets, economic globalization, and the prevalence of gendered low-skilled sectors such as domestic work, manufacturing, and caregiving roles.

Official records show a substantial increase from just 161 women migrating between 1985 and 2001 to over 21,000 women by 2014–2015. Nepal stands out in Southern Asia with the highest proportion of feminized migrant stock, with 70 percent of migrants being women, primarily migrating to countries like India and Saudi Arabia.

The primary drivers behind Nepalese women's migration include poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and the promise of higher remuneration in destination countries. Many Nepalese female migrants find employment in low-skilled service sectors, particularly in domestic work, which is attributed to factors such as increasing life expectancy and declining fertility rates in destination countries.

Despite facing challenges such as structural stigma and discriminatory migration policies, women in Nepal demonstrate agency by



actively choosing to migrate as a means of improving their lives and contributing to their household's financial stability. Migration is often viewed as a proactive step towards self-reliance and financial independence, with women recognizing the importance of securing their future through earning and saving money. This highlights the evolving role of women in migration processes and their resilience in navigating the complexities of labour migration.

Case Study: The Vulnerability of Female Migrant Workers in Nepal

Usha Rai, a 42-year-old poor and illiterate woman from a village in Nepal, found herself in a dire situation living in a one-room dwelling with her two teenage children. Her husband worked in Kuwait, and they relied on the money he sent back home for survival. However, facing financial difficulties and enticed by promises of better earnings, Usha made the decision to seek employment in the Gulf region in 2008. In order to finance her journey, Usha had to borrow a significant sum of nearly \$1000, which was more than three times the annual average income in her village. To secure this loan, she had to offer her only possession, her land, as collateral. Once she arrived in the Gulf, Usha quickly realized that the promised wages were insufficient to cover her living expenses. This left her in a state of panic and uncertainty, unsure whether to use the little money she had for basic necessities like food or to invest in her children's education.

Usha's story exemplifies the vulnerability faced by female migrant workers from Nepal. Lured by promises of financial rewards, they often find themselves trapped in exploitative situations with limited recourse. The exorbitant costs associated with migration, coupled with the lack of adequate support and protection mechanisms, leave women like Usha financially strained and emotionally distressed.

The case of Usha Rai underscores the urgent need for policies and interventions aimed at protecting the rights and well-being of female migrant workers in Nepal. Addressing the root causes of vulnerability, such as exorbitant migration costs and inadequate wages, is essential to ensuring the dignity and security of women like Usha who contribute significantly to the global workforce.

Policy Implications and Recommendations: Nepal and Bangladesh

The policies and implications relating to women worker in Bangladesh and Nepal addresses the rights of women relating to legal protection, socio economic empowerment, training support and standard terms of employment.

In Bangladesh, there are number of laws and policies to protect female workers both within the country and abroad. The Government says international migrant workers need legal and social protection and training so they can take advantage of new employment opportunities and sustain their remittances (Bangladesh GED, 2012). Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) is providing training programs for female migrant workers, especially in sectors like domestic work that can enhance their skills and knowledge, leading to better employment opportunities and improved working conditions.

Primarily, there is a critical need to improve the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data on labour migration. This entails enhancing the capacity of relevant ministries, including Women and Children Affairs, Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, and Planning, to gather, record, and analyse such data regularly. Collaboration among these ministries is essential to ensure the effective implementation of policies that cater to the gender-differentiated needs of migrant workers. Further it is crucial for the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics to emphasize the importance of robust data collection and analysis, working collaboratively with the relevant ministries and department. This collaboration aims to ensure the regular updating of sex-disaggregated data on labour migration, with a specific focus on women's migration experiences. Additionally, promoting a participatory approach in reporting on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is highlighted as essential. This involves engaging various stakeholders, including government bodies, civil society organizations, and international agencies, to foster transparency and accountability in achieving SDG targets. By implementing these policy measures, Bangladesh can effectively address gender disparities in labour migration, advance gender equality, and contribute to broader sustainable development objectives.

In 2007 the Nepal government introduced the innovative new foreign policy act, which specifically protect both economic and social rights of women working abroad. These women proved themselves as contributors, they strengthened the



household economy as well as the national economy.

Policies targeting women migrating from Nepal should be meticulously crafted to safeguard their rights, well-being, and empowerment throughout the migration process. First and foremost, gender-responsive migration policies must be established, recognizing the unique challenges faced by women migrants and ensuring their protection in both origin and destination countries. These policies should prioritize the elimination of discriminatory practices within recruitment and employment, guaranteeing equal opportunities and fair treatment for women. Additionally, robust pre-departure orientation programs should be implemented, equipping women with comprehensive information about their rights, legal protections, and available support mechanisms. Moreover, skills training and capacity-building initiatives tailored to women's needs should be developed to enhance their employability and economic opportunities abroad. Importantly, safe migration channels must be established through bilateral agreements with destination countries to mitigate risks such as exploitation and trafficking. Furthermore, access to financial services should be facilitated to empower women economically, enabling them to contribute to the development of their families and communities both abroad and upon return. Post-migration reintegration support should also be provided to assist returning women migrants in readjusting to their home communities and accessing education, employment, and psychosocial services. Collaboration with civil society organizations and NGOs working on migration issues is paramount to ensure the effective implementation of policies and programs aimed at protecting and empowering women migrants. Through these comprehensive policy measures, Nepal can create an enabling environment that maximizes the benefits of migration for women while minimizing its risks and vulnerabilities.

III. Conclusion:

Both studies shed light on the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by female migrant workers in Nepal and Bangladesh. Usha's case study highlights the financial desperation and risks associated with borrowing large sums of money to pursue opportunities abroad. Despite aspirations for improved livelihoods, Usha's experience in the Gulf exemplifies the harsh reality of inadequate wages and the struggle to provide for

her family amidst financial burdens and uncertainty. In contrast, Runu's case study from Bangladesh underscores the transformational impact of migration on women's lives. Motivated by the prospect of economic empowerment, Runu seized the opportunity to work in the garment industry abroad, showcasing the potential for migration to elevate women's socio-economic status. However, despite contributing to the income of both her family and her employer's family, Runu's story also highlights the challenges faced by female migrant workers, including isolation, discrimination, and exploitation in the labour market.

Both these studies emphasize the importance of addressing the structural and systemic barriers that perpetuate the vulnerabilities of female migrant workers. They underscore the need for comprehensive policies and initiatives aimed at protecting the rights, ensuring the well-being, and empowering women engaged in labour migration in both Nepal and Bangladesh.

It is imperative that gender dynamics be considered in migration policies and interventions for various reasons. Primarily, it guarantees that the distinct requirements, susceptibilities, and encounters of female migrants are acknowledged and catered. Women frequently encounter unique challenges when migrating, such as prejudice, exploitation, and restricted access to opportunities and resources. Governments and organisations can more effectively adapt support mechanisms to address the unique requirements of women migrants by incorporating a gender perspective into their policies and activities. Addressing gender dynamics advances women's empowerment and gender equality. While migration might help women advance their social and economic standing, it can also worsen or maintain current gender disparities. Women's agency, autonomy, and access to decision-making, work, education, and other opportunities can all be enhanced by gender-responsive policies and actions, which can help minimise these disparities. It is crucial to consider gender dynamics in migration policies and interventions to foster inclusive and sustainable development and promote social justice.

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