



# The Effect of Migration on Family in Nepal: A Review on the Family Structure, Livelihood, Education, Aging Parents, Reproductive Health and Marital Relationship

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## *Abstract*

This study analyzes the effect of migration on the left-behind family members in Nepal especially focusing on the family structure, livelihood, education, aging parents, reproductive health, and marital relationship. The review was done based on the published journal articles, dissertations, and organizational reports from 2015-2020 to explore the areas impacted by the migration. Seven thematic areas emerged and found both positive and adverse effects and association of migration on left behind family members of the migrants. The review also found the need for further research on the ways of communicating and supporting between migrants and left behind family members to reduce the adverse effect of the migration on the left behind members of the family. Furthermore, field studies can concentrate on ways to enable women to learn skills, techniques and technology to increase production and diversify livelihoods.

**Keywords:** migration, remittance, left-behind family, livelihood, family structure, education, aging parents.

## 1. Introduction

This study is about the effect of migration on families left behind by the migrants. Individuals and families decide to diversify the family income and reduce household consumption during the less work demand at the family land. About a billion people worldwide live and work outside their country of birth or outside their region of birth within their country (Démurger, 2015) by leaving their family members. The poverty, unemployment, harsh effect of climate change, conflict, insecurity, political instability (Schwilch et al., 2017; Dhital et al., 2015), marital issues, familial tensions (Limbu, 2016) and high expectation of young people (Thapa et al., 2019) have encouraged people to decide internal and international migration to cities and industrial foreign countries to seek better quality life. Migration is often the result of a combination of push factors such as conflict, poverty, disaster, and pull factors, e.g., job opportunities (Jaquet et al., 2016). In this context, it is beneficial to review the various effects of migration on the left behind family

members in Nepal focusing on the family structure, children, aging parents, health, marital relationship, and livelihood.

The review was performed based on materials available from 2015-2020 over a five-year period. This study provides thematic analysis from the internal and external migration and its effect on the household structure, livelihood, and left behind family members from the literature available in Nepal and South Asia to explore the factors that migration is associated with the left-behind members of the migrant families. Both positive and adverse effects of migration on left-behind families are explored and presented.

### *1.1 Situation of migration in Nepal*

Migration is well experienced by Nepali people. Migration from the rural mountains to urban areas or foreign countries is not a new phenomenon (Speck, 2017). Nepal has a movement history of more than 200 years that includes pilgrims, devotees, political refugees, soldiers and now Nepal is the major labor exporting country (Shattuck et al., 2019). The 2011 census revealed that one in every four households (25.4%; 1.38 million households) had at least one absent or migrant member, making internal migration rate of 18% from rural to urban areas and 3.8 million Nepalese obtained international work permits in 2014/2015 fiscal year (S. Ghimire et al., 2018). However, Mehata et al. (2020) mention that about a third of the households (30%) had a least one member of the family migrated and the proportion of migration is higher in the rural and disadvantaged regions of Nepal. Employment is the main reason for migration (70%), with remittances from international migrants the primary income source for many households (Thapa et al., 2020).

Malaysia is the primary destination of Nepali migrants workers followed by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE and others respectively that ranks Nepal in the 19th position of top remittance-receiving countries of the world and 4th position when the remittance is compared as a percentage of GDP (Katuwal Chhetri et al., 2020). In the last decade, migration and remittances continuously increased, with remittances counting for almost 26.923% of Nepal's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019 (The World Bank, 2016).

## 2. Methods

The review was conducted during October 2020-February 2021 using a library database and various published articles related to migration, households' structure, livelihood strategy and left behind family members of the migrants. The key terms migration, effect of migration, remittance, left-behind children, elderly people, livelihood, land management, education, health, left behind families and Nepal were used to search the relevant study materials. Similarly, the variation of these keywords was also used to search the published materials.

The published journal articles, thesis and organizational reports within the period of 2015-2020 were used for the literature review. Seven themes for a thematic analysis have been created from the study. The searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, Research Gate, Academia, ELSEVIER and reference list of previous studies to find out the research articles published in English. The filtered search was specific to Nepalese migration; however, searches were also made from South Asian countries and others, which is similar to the context of Nepal.

A total of 50 published scholarly papers consisting of 44 journal articles, 4 theses, and 2 organizational reports were referred in the review. There were limited articles that were empirically conducted related to the effect of migration of family structure and left behind families in Nepal.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 *Nepalese out-migration and left-behind families*

International migrants and internal migrants together account for one in seven people worldwide (Démurger, 2015) and many of these migrants leave their families in their home location. In Nepal, the estimated 1.92 million migrants are predominantly men and 32% of married women have husbands working abroad and the decision to migrate for work comes with great challenges that include leaving behind wives and other family members (Shattuck et al., 2019).

The income and condition of these migrants in destination places bring negative or positive effects on the household's structure and livelihood. Similarly, migration can impact the physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing of migrants themselves, on those left behind in the place of origin and on those at the destination (Ghimire et al., 2018). The trend of migration is highly increasing in Nepal and families left behind have to adjust socially, financially and always concern about the work situation (physical and mental) and worried about their relationship and who migrate also leave a huge amount of loans for families hoping to build happy family and easing of their livelihood (Thapa et al., 2019).

The remittances sent by migrants who worked as laborers in the country and abroad directly support the left-behind families. Migration has been a source of survival, for better access to nutrition, health care which ultimately led to the improvement in the standard of living and played a crucial role in poverty alleviation (Bhattarai et al., 2020). The separation of families, however, has had both a positive and a negative impact on the members of a family that have not migrated. Migration has numerous effects on the socio-economic aspects of families, such as incomes, health, education, household roles/relationships and the participation of women in community involvement. Migration also affects the psycho-social and emotional well-being of the left-behind family members (Kaimal & Paul, 2021). In the subsequent discussion, both the positive and negative effects of migration on families are discussed.

#### 3.2 *Migration shifts the household structure and alters the role in the family*

Migration brings changes in the family structure. Migration is reshaping household structures in tangible and intangible ways by necessitating alterations in existing arrangements for domestic work, care, reproduction, production activities and configures the roles of who stays at home (Singh, 2019). Migration of men has an important influence on reshaping family and gender roles in left-behind wives, as they increasingly participate in farming activities and increase daily activities outside the home (Ghimire et al., 2019). Compared to women in households with no current migrants, women in households with migrants in Nepal have increasing responsibilities and decision-making on the family farm (World bank, 2018). As a result of men's migration, when men start sending remittances then the family or wife with children moves to the city or nearby towns for the education of children splitting the family into small fragmented size or women left living with their in-laws and the families become transnational families with their distinct features (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2020; Singh, 2019).

The role of women is usually seen as a reproductive and domestic role that is not explicitly counted in monetary value, but the migration of the husband adds to the wife's managerial role, household headship, and unpaid role in farming work. Capagain (2015) mentions that more than two-thirds of women in nuclear families, and one-quarter in joint families, reported that they had increased their money management roles after their husband's migration but women in joint families had relatively less money management roles because other members of families may take that role. The functions of the money management role include the decision and budgeting on the use of family income and the remittance received for family use, payback loan and investment.

The migrated husband's wife has to play several roles in the small families because in the absence of the husband they would have more workload. To engage in household tasks, voluntary service, self-help groups, livestock and agricultural activities, they must determine and control their time. Husband's out-migration and remittance status are also associated with an increase in wives' number of daily activities outside the home, promoting freedom of movement, leisure activities and media use (Ghimire et al., 2019).

In a traditional Nepali family, the wife takes care of the house, children, and livestock. When her husband is away, she has to manage the land and make important decisions that he would usually make (Jaquet et al., 2016). Fernández-Sánchez et al. (2020) report that autonomy of the decision making, movement, purchasing power, self-determination, independence and financial autonomy has increased and responsibilities and obligations such as agricultural work, caretaker of the children and elderly also increased. However, the migration of man will not always provide the opportunity for the wife to take the role of the household head. Rajkarnikar (2017) mentions that Women who take the household head role is more likely to gain decision-making power, experience and increase in social participation, while those left under the supervision of other members (usually their in-laws) may suffer from reduced decision-making ability and increased restrictions on their mobility in public places.

### *3.3 Migration, remittance and education of the left-behind children*

Another direct effect of migration on the families is seen from the impact of remittance and parental absence on the education and wellbeing of the children. Both positive and adverse effects are found from the various studies conducted to examine the relationship between remittance and the education of the children. According to the Nepal Rastra Bank (2019), Nepal received 879.27 billion remittances in the fiscal year of 2018-2019 and at the household level, 52 percent of households are remittance recipients (Raut & Tanaka, 2018). The majority of the remittances are being spent on daily consumption expenses, repayment of loans, house renovation, purchase of assets and then only on education (IOM, 2019).

The positive side of the remittance helps to reduce household credits and encourage investment in their children's education, continue the school who are already enrolled as there is good migration prospects for highly educated and skilled labor moving abroad (Khan & Khan, 2016). Raut and Tanaka (2018) mention that the positive impact of remittance increases the probability of school enrollment by 3.8 percentage with a 25.3 percent increase in the education expenditure. However, IOM (2019) reports that 51 percent of migrant workers reported that improved access to education of children was a positive impact on the remittance received from the migration. Similarly, Khan and Jehangir Khan (2016) find that impact of remittances on child school enrollment is positive and even strong impact on girl's enrollment in Pakistan. Interestingly, Adhikari and Deshingkar (2015) find that there was a greater investment of remittances from internal construction migrant workers in the education of girls in the Terai village than hills area and there has been a change in attitudes towards the education of girls as a result of migration. Acharya and Leon-Gonzalez (2019) mention that international remittances help finance the cost of both rural-urban migration for the children education and cost of children's education and rural-urban migrant families spend three times more on education of their budgets to education than urban-natives. This shows that migrating parents have seen and exposed the value of education in the labor market for migrants.

There is a negative side of the migration as the older members from the family migrate, children may have to spend on household chores and fulfill the gap of labor by discontinuing the school. Karki Nepal (2016) mentions that there is no such significant effect of remittances on child schooling due to rigidities in the education system such as yearly admission system and difficulty in transferring students from public to private schools but remittance affects the expenditure

related to education like private tutoring on education. Children of seasonal migrants, who are left behind gradually leave schools and enter into the labor force with older children from deprived backgrounds not attending schools due to caring for the sibling, preparing foods and lack of access (Daly et al., 2020). The study also found that children as child migrant workers join their parents to the brick kilns in the urban areas. Sharma and Dangal (2019) describe that both children who dropped out of school and school enrolled child laborers were found spending a large portion of their earnings on education, be it their own or that of their siblings but the negative side is that many of these children lost their interest in studies and performed poorly in class after generating income from activities. Raut and Tanaka (2018) also mention that parent's migration is a factor with a 39% probability of low school enrollment compared with those children who live with parents and those children who accompany parents for the work dropout of school and enter the labor force. The remittance-receiving families who do not spend for children's education cannot break the cycle of migration work and their children continue to be migrant workers (Daly et al., 2020).

### *3.4 Change in the family's livelihood and land management*

Many migrating persons to cities and abroad leave their wives, children, and elderly parents. The movement of the people from rural to urban areas represents a significant livelihood strategy for the poor to maximize family income and minimize the environmental risk (Adger et al., 2015; IOM & Save the Children, 2017; Sapkota, 2020; Singh, 2019). Similarly, Sapkota (2018) claims that 62 percent of rural households migrate for work to earn more and have better livelihoods and the other 20 percent migrate because they are only employed seasonally at their native place and the rest want to save money for the social and cultural obligation.

Livelihoods, as well as the management of land, are affected by a change of labor force, traditional knowledge, remittances and other consequences of migration (Schwilch et al., 2017). Ojha and others (2017) mention that agricultural land is being abandoned in Nepal at an unprecedented rate by being a food-importing nation and the reason behind this is the migration of the youth, unattractive income from farm cultivation, better jobs outside, short of labor, and instability of the government for the agrarian change. A high risk of food insecurity in Nepal is likely to be exacerbated if the current trajectory of underutilization and abandonment of farmland continues (Bhawana et al., 2017). Remittances received from migrants are an important source of income in many developing nations at both national and household levels forcing families to replace paddy fields with cash crops because of labor and water shortage that is a positive impact on land management and land use (Jaquet et al., 2016). However, the negative side of the effect of migration is the unavailability of household labor due to less population on the land use so the family lands are abandoned or degraded because of un-cultivation, soil erosion and landslides.

Out-migration has become a key livelihood strategy for an increasing number of rural households, which in turn has a profound effect on land management (Bhawana et al., 2017). Schwilch and others find in their studies in Kaski, Nepal many households mainly live from and depend on remittances, whether in the form of financial or material support, which is used primarily for food and education and further they mention only 75% of families are generating smaller part of family income from families (Schwilch et al., 2017). Time and labor constraints, availability of remittances, and low productivity of the land can thus lead households to leave their land fallow or to stop investing in terrace maintenance and irrigation which is commonly observed in Nepal (Jaquet et al., 2016). The less cultivation of agricultural land is because of unavailability of labor and women left at the families cannot till the land as forbidden by the gender role as well as women are already overburdened by the work as husband migrated. Local religious traditions forbid women to plow and roof, and if they undertook such tasks, they could be accused of creating misfortune for the village (Jaquet et al., 2016; IOM, 2019). Thus, people seek alternative sources

of income and prefer livestock raising over crop farming to manage the land by feminizing agriculture and reduce the workload pressure of the women.

### *3.5 The life situation of the elderly people of migrant families*

The census data from the Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal shows an aging population 60 years and above has reached 8% of the total population, these people are left behind to look after the family and children while the middle generation seeks employment opportunities (Dhital et al., 2015). This makes more burden to the left behind elderly people as the responsibility of taking care of family is added to their isolated living condition. When young people migrate for work, the most likely left behind is elderly people with children and women, who are actually in need of personal care but elderly people also need to take responsibility for work, household chores and farm work among family members (Démurger, 2015). Additionally, the elderly population is forced to live in a care center or alone because of the migration of children or even need to take care of the family members when migrant worker fall illness, depression, suicide and deaths (Dhital et al., 2015).

However, the effect of migration on elderly people is always not negative. They also receive income and care from other family members in the family. Ghimire et al. (2018), conduct a study to examine if adult children's migration was associated with the physical, mental and social well-being of the left-behind elderly parents and found that except for loneliness other indicators of well-being were not significantly associated with the adult children's migration but their study was conducted among the majority of the participants lived in a joint/extended family, the urban area of Kanchanpur District in Nepal. We can assume that the different results may come if the studies are taken from small or nuclear families. Similarly, the study on the children's migration and its effect on the elderly people among the old age home in Kathmandu was conducted by Khanal et al. (2018) and they find that 80% of the respondents were living in old age home because there was no one to take care of them and the study also reveals that almost three fourth of the respondents had emotional problems including the feeling of loneliness (25.8%), extreme desire to visit their children (12.9%), insomnia (11.3%), and missing their children badly (6.5%). The study was also carried out not only on the left-behind elderly people in the destination but there is also study conducted among the migrant elders. Li et al. (2017) find in their study on the effect of migration on social capital and depression among older adults in China that showed rural-to-urban elderly migrants have worse social capital (trust and reciprocity) and depression than urban-to-urban migrant elderly.

The more recent study by Thapa et al. (2020) finds the different result that quality of life among the parents with internal migrant children is better due to their frequent interaction with and visits from their children during family rituals and at times of labor demand for agricultural work, especially sowing and harvesting which will provide both monetary and emotional support to the elderly people.

### *3.6 Effect of migration on reproductive health and marital relationship*

The literature on migration and health presents the complex relationship of migration on health and fertility. Spousal separation is more common among married women of reproductive age in rural areas (37%) than their urban counterparts (32%) (Mehata et al., 2020). Shattuck et al. (2019) describe that there are health disparities among women with migrant husbands, and negative consequences of migration on the health of other family members including mental health issues such as the feeling of loneliness, isolation depression, and higher levels of reproductive morbidity, sexually transmitted infections than women married to non-migrants. It was also found that visiting reproductive health-related services were mostly decided

by the mother-in-law or other family members and they receive less counseling from the female community health volunteers on pregnancies and contraceptive and many reported that they have poor or delayed communication about family planning and childbearing until the husband's return (Shattuck et al., 2019; Rajkarnikar, 2017). As men migrate in the search of economic opportunities to improve themselves and their families, reproduction, and responsibility for children are often reinforced to the women (Hendrickson, 2017). There is also a lack of sexual and reproductive health knowledge among left behind wives and their partners (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2020) which will affect their reproductive health and marital relationship.

According to Dhital et al. (2015), migration may help to distance from the violent and sexually abusive partners but providing care for the dependent and fulfilling emotional needs remains a huge challenge in the long-term absence of a partner makes them prone to marital conflict and dissolution of marriage. Thapa et al. (2019) mention that marital relationship is based on trust, emotion and respect and is surrounded by social numbers and hard to uncover the reality and they found spousal separation had a substantial impact on delaying pregnancy, difficulties in conceiving a pregnancy after returning and disrupted marital relations. Left behind wives are in constant fear of their partner's infidelity, fear divorce, experienced divorce while their partners are away and express anger toward their partners having family left behind (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2020).

There is also a different view to look at women returned migrants, they are estranged from the children and are looked at with suspicion by husband, family members and society of being involved in sex work and that has led to separation, divorce as well as deterioration of family relations due to the long absence (Limbu, 2016). Other negative consequences of migration are loss of fatherhood, use of luxury items, extramarital relationship, increasing alcohol consumption by the spouse left behind, going on tour, having parties also created huge misunderstanding between the married couple (Thapa et al., 2019). However, migration of husband does not always affect wife's marital quality in a rural agricultural setting, temporary labor migration may improve it as remittances from a migrant husband play a potential pathway through which women may enjoy new financial and social opportunities and receive emotional support from close family or neighbors (Compernelle, 2017).

### *3.7 Impact of migration on the left-behind children's health and caretaker*

South Asia is primarily an origin region: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are source countries of migrant workers mostly to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries making parental labor migration is a common phenomenon in South Asian countries (Antia et al., 2020; Asis & Feranil, 2020). The effects of migration on the health condition of children are conflicting because remittance and material support may contribute to the improvement of the health and provide access to health care and education but other studies suggest the worse outcome of the migration on left-behind children than the children living with parents. In regards to mental health, left-behind children and adolescents had a 52% increased risk of depression, 70% increase of risk of suicidal ideation, and 85% increased risk of anxiety, 13% risk of wasting, stunting 12% and substance abuse 24% (Fellmeth et al., 2018).

Similarly, Antia et al. (2020) mention that labor migration reduces unemployment and increase economic efficiency in migrants' home countries and the impact of parental migration on left-behind children is not purely negative and very much depends on the characteristics of the transnational families such as gender and age of the children, the gender of the migrant parent, stability of care, parental relation and living condition influence the mental health and well-being.

Graham et al. (2015) find that some care-taker of children in transnational households are more likely than care-takers in non-migrant households are to experience mental health problem which is common in families with low household income because of reconfiguration of the role, gender expectation of good parenting, and intermittent sending of remittances, the emotional gap between the children and migrated parents.

However, Zhou et al. (2015) conduct a study among 141,000 children in China and find that children from non-migrants families receive care from both parents but children from migrant families are better resourced, perform equally with or even slightly better than children living with both parents on the health, nutrition and education indicators. Islam et al. (2019) state that remittances from parental migration to families left behind have more purchasing power for foods, health care that may help in child nutritional development but have an adverse effect on psychological development as there is no direct care by the parents and their conclusion is there is no negative impact on nutrition of parental migration on left-behind children.

There is very little literature available on the impact of female migration to the left behind families, especially concerning the children. The recent study by Sapkota (2020) reveals that left-behind children face numerous adverse effects of female migration including problems related to the caring deficit, psychological problem, health, education, aggressive behavior, physical abuse and anti-social activities due to the lack of motivation from others at home but the positive side is the alleviation of poverty, improvement of education quality improvement, improve lifestyle, and health care services. Despite the high level of parental international labor migration from Nepal, Kunwar et al. (2020) find that children of migrants had a similar level of health care seeking and nutritional status to children of non-migrants because of the improved household economic condition by remittance and less migration number of mothers. Similarly, Adhikari (2018) concludes that left behind girls of international mother migrant households were negatively influenced by their mother's out-migration on education, health and psychosocial development because of the house environment, physical weakness, girl's preference, tolerance capacity, less communication with mothers and unsupportive family members. The reasons behind the outcome on the effect of migration are study based on a different location, ethnicity, local vs international migration, culture, and tradition.

#### 4. Conclusion

The poverty, unemployment, harsh effect of climate change, conflict, familial tensions, and high expectations of young people have encouraged to decide for migration to seek a better quality of life and diversify the family income. Around 1.92 million migrants from Nepal make hard decisions to leave their family members behind for internal and international migration. Both the positive and adverse effects of migration on family structure, role in the family, livelihood, health, education, marital relationship, parenting, condition of children and elderly people have been presented in this review.

The migration of men reshaped the family into fragmentation and increased the role of left-behind wives by allowing their participation in farming and activities outside of the home. This has empowered women but also overloaded by the play of several roles in the absence of the migrant husband. The positive effect of the remittance received from the migrants to the left-behind children is that families could invest in education but the study also revealed that children have to spend on household chores and fulfill the gap of labor by dropping out the school.

The migration has provided opportunities to diversify and maximize the family livelihoods and generate saving for the social and cultural needs. The study also revealed that remittance is used to replace paddy fields with cash crops and livestock rearing but arable lands



are exponentially abandoned because of the unattractive income from the farming, shortage of labor and religious tradition forbid women to plow the land.

The migration of young adults also added a burden to the left behind elderly people as they need to take care of the family and live-in isolation, loneliness, and face health issues. However, the quality of life of left-behind parents of internal migrant children is better as they get the opportunity for frequent interaction by visits during rituals, festivities and seasonal agricultural work.

Migration also adversely affects the mental as well as reproductive health of the left behind wives and disrupted marital relations resulting in separation. The effects of migration on the health of children are conflicting as remittance received from migration support for the improvement of health, purchase foods and provide access to the health care facilities but negatively effect on psychological development by increasing the risk of depression, anxiety, care deficit, aggressive behavior, anti-social activities and substance abuse.

Future research may focus on how both migrants and left behind family members interact and help each other to reduce the adverse effect of migration on the family. The participation of left-behind children, wives and elderly people in the study will help to understand and explore more of their own protection, right and seek ways to reduce the difficulties faced by left-behind families of the migrants in the future. Since, the migration is outnumbered by the male by leaving their wives behind as female workers in domestic and agriculture activities, field studies should concentrate on providing women's empowerment program to learn new skills, techniques and technologies to increase productivity and generate more income and diversify livelihoods.

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