



## Effect of Parental Seasonal Labor Migration on Children's Care and Educational Performance in Rural Nepal

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### *Abstract*

This article focuses on the effect of parental migration on the care and educational performance of left-behind children of migrant families. This ethnographic study was conducted among the Kham people in Kankri, Rukum East district of the western mid-hill region of rural Nepal. Information was collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and living in the community in their setting. Income from parental labor migration provided families with food, clothing, access to basic health services, and investment in their children's education. Left-behind children lacked parental care with proper guidance and emotional support, so they started taking alcohol, Charash (marijuana resin), and showing violent behavior. Children from migrant households have school absences and poorer educational performance as they are required to help with household work and lack guided learning at home. Children lose interest in studying, and those who miss upper-class admission because of seasonal migration drop out of school and join the migration. Parents select private or government schools for their children depending on remittance, quality of education, network availability, and future opportunities. Parents who had hardships during their migration are determined to educate their children in school, but they do not provide equal educational opportunities for boys and girls. Seasonal migrant workers anticipate that their children will engage in seasonal work during school breaks so that they can contribute to their schooling costs.

*Keywords:* labor migration, left-behind children, parents, educational performance, Nepal.

### 1. Introduction

Rural people in Nepal have a long history of migration (Gurung, 2011). Migration remains an important livelihood strategy for millions of food-insecure and poor people across Nepal (WFP & NDRI, 2008), and it has contributed to alleviating poverty in one way (Chen et al., 2009). Sherpa (2010) mentions that almost half the population of the far-western and mid-western development regions migrate seasonally every year in search of work because of poverty and food insecurity. The majority of migration remittances are spent on daily living expenses, loan

repayment, house renovation, asset purchase, and only then on education (IOM, 2019). Sherpa (2010) conducted a study in mid-western and far-western Nepal and finds that migrants from India send only 18% of their earnings as monetary remittances to their families, which are further divided into expenditures related to clothing, food, health, loan repayment, and education. In recent years, there has been growing concern about the effect of migration on the educational performance of left-behind school-age children at the destination (Chen et al., 2009).

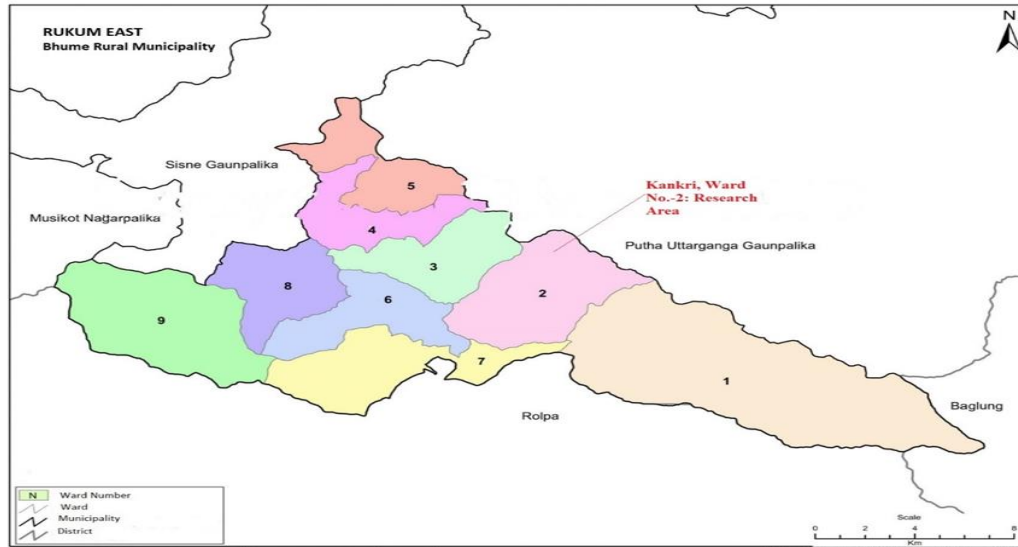
The positive effect of remittances received from migrants is that families can invest in their children’s education. However, the study also revealed that children must spend time on household chores and fill labor gaps by dropping out of school (Rai & Dangal, 2021). The effects of migration on childcare are conflicting because remittances and material support may contribute to improving access to better child health care as these families are better resourced for health, nutritional and educational indicators, but children from non-migrant families receive care from both parents (Rai & Dangal, 2021; Zhou et al., 2015). According to Islam et al. (2019), remittances from parental migration give families more purchasing power for food and health care, which may aid in child nutritional development but harm psychological development because parents do not provide direct care to their children. Furthermore, Sapkota (2020) adds that left-behind children from migrant families face a variety of negative consequences, including issues related to the caring deficit, psychological problems, health, education, violent behavior, physical abuse, and anti-social activities due to a lack of encouragement from others at home, but the positive aspects include poverty alleviation, education quality improvement, better lifestyle, and access to health care services.

Less is known about how migration and remittances affect the educational performance of left-behind children (Kunwar, 2022), and it is crucial to identify the effect of parental migration on children’s education and protection in developing countries (Dunusingha, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to examine the effect of migration on the care and educational performance of children from seasonal migrant families in rural Nepal. The ethnographic study is linked with the theoretical model proposed by McKenzie and Rapoport. This model identifies three different effects of migration and remittance that affect a household’s investment in human capital, namely the remittance effect, the disruptive family effect, and immediate substitution. According to Khan (2016) and McKenzie and Rapoport (2006), this theoretical framework asserts that remittances reduce poverty, allowing families to invest in their children’s education and care (*remittance effect*). The absence of parents, on the other hand, disturbs the educational performance of left-behind children (*disruptive family effect*) and increases the likelihood that children may choose to become migrants rather than complete education because of migratory parents and migrant networks (*immediate substitution*). The sections below describe the research methods, results, and discussion and conclude the paper.

## 2. Research methods

### 2.1 Study area

The field study was conducted in the Gabang, Saipatung, Budhadedda, Khabang, and Janga villages of Bhume Rural Municipality in the Rukum East District of western Nepal, where families have experienced migration. The majority of the population is inhabited by the Kham Magar, an indigenous community. The families are heavily involved in seasonal and pastoral migration in the designated area and labor migration in India.



## 2.2 Sampling

Information was obtained from 35 people who were themselves experienced seasonal migrants. The field study was conducted in four different phases. Among them, 19 individuals were male (54%) and 16 were female (46%). The first phase of the field study for data collection occurred in April-May 2021, the second phase in August-September 2021, the third phase in March-April 2022, and the fourth and final phase in November 2022. During these periods, interviews and observations were conducted. After explaining the purpose of the study and obtaining consent from all participants, the participants were purposively chosen and interviewed. However, pseudonyms are used to protect and maintain the participants' privacy.

## 2.3 Research design and tools

This study applied a relational ethnographic qualitative research approach, which consisted of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and living with the community members in their natural environment to collect data. Relational ethnography focuses on the processes and configurations of interactions among agents, actors, or institutions rather than groups or places. Therefore, fieldwork demonstrates linkages, associations, and interactions among people, migration, educational performance, and the care of left-behind children. In-depth interviews were conducted with diverse migrants of different ages, educational backgrounds, and economic and social statuses. The interviewees included pastoral migrants, seasonal migrants to India, short-term job seekers in construction and industries, and the migrants' family members. The required interview guideline was prepared, and the interviews were expanded as necessary. Observations were conducted to determine how families care for their children and support their education. During the field trips and study, researchers learned about the family's background, daily life, seasonal migration reasons and condition of the left-behind children. The assistance of the gatekeeper from the local community made it easy to introduce the researcher to the villagers, so facilitating conversations, interviews, and translations with the locals.

## 2.4 Data analysis and interpretation

In-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and discussions were recorded using an audio recorder, while field observations and field visits were recorded in a notebook that was

organized and safely archived. After information gathering and field research were completed, all interviews, observation notes, and memos were translated and transcribed into the proper format. The data was then coded to assess and construct the themes. Based on the gathered data, a theoretical or thematic analysis was conducted on the best-represented participant narratives, and the outcome was validated using observation, key informant interviews, and field notes.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1 *Migration trends and their impact on education and care of the left-behind children*

Jaquet et al. (2019) and Sapkota (2018) discuss several types of migration, such as internal, international, seasonal, and labor migration. Comparably, four types of migrations are found in the study area, such as international labor migration, seasonal labor migration to India, internal labor migration within the country, and pastoral migration within the specific local region with their cattle supported by a small portion of agricultural activities. Those who can pay for the cost of travel, documents, and agency services prefer migrating to Malaysia and Gulf countries from the Kankri. Short-term seasonal migration as a livelihood option is pursued by both male and female members of the family. Outmigration takes place based on the season of the year, which will contribute to the livelihoods of the families by earning cash and reducing food consumption in the family. The seasonal migration to India is mostly connected with labor work in the construction field, farming, marijuana plantations, and harvesting. Internal seasonal labor migrants are involved in road construction, house construction, masonry work, and hydroelectricity construction within the country. In pastoral migration, also known as transhumance migration, local people migrate to a specific place during a fixed time for cattle rearing and marijuana cultivation, with minimal agricultural activities such as corn, beans, potato, and wheat plantations.

Migration has monetary and non-monetary costs and benefits (Piché, 2013), which will impact the care and educational performance of left-behind children. The positive side of migration is that parents or older siblings of the family have the earning opportunity to provide food, clothing, and support their children and younger siblings for school education. Deepak Gharti (30 years old), who worked in India and Malaysia, explains that:

*“Our agriculture production was not enough to feed our family, and there was no opportunity to earn cash income. I followed my brother-in-law to work in the hydroelectricity construction field and later migrated to Malaysia because I needed money for the care and education of my daughter. I could support my family for subsistence living, basic health expenses, and schooling costs.”*

Migration has decreased the number of school students in the origin areas but increased in destination emerging towns. Intra-migration increased the number of students in lowland schools and decreased in the highland areas in Kankri. Ganesh Budha Magar (34 years old), an intra-village migrant and primary school teacher explain:

*“In my village, families are migrating to the nearby town for the school education of their children. This has decreased the number of students in the primary school where I work as the school headmaster. I had meetings with parents and political leaders and organized a campaign to enroll and continue school. Our school also changed teaching methods and introduced a new class, Kindergarten, between early childhood development and grade one, which has helped us to mitigate further student dropouts.”*

One of the positive outcomes of migration is that migrants have donated some amount of money to the school fund. This locally raised fund will help the school appoint one local teacher

from internal resources. Migrants also supported local government schools with sports equipment and blackboards. Bhangintha Budha (43 years old) a local resident, said that:

*“I worked in India as a seasonal migrant in the marijuana plantations field, then went to Saudi Arabia for seven years. After my return, I could make my small contribution to the school by purchasing two blackboards and contributing cash to the local school’s fund in my village. Two of my friends also donated money to the fund for local schools and clubs.”*

Migration affects the health, physical and emotional care of the children left behind by migrant parents. Migration has contributed to food, clothing, and the school education of the children. Remittances have also helped families send children to schools in their small hometowns, district cities, and other major cities in the country. However, children lack parental care, discipline, emotional support, guidance, and a sober lifestyle. Dunusingha (2020) finds that left-behind children’s protection is at risk in mother-migrant households because mothers are involved in several ways to improve children’s educational achievement and protection, and their absence at home exposes children to greater physical and physiological risks. Children who have had to accompany their parents while they migrate seasonally suffer from illnesses such as pneumonia, colds, and diarrhoea as a result of the unsanitary conditions in which they live in the working areas, and it is difficult to take them to health centers. According to Birendra Budha Magar (43 years old), a health post employee:

*“Children from migrant families are not receiving enough care and guidance from their parents, so children, especially teenage children, start smoking, consuming alcohol, taking Charash (marijuana resin), and showing violent behavior such as disobedience, quarrelling, and being involved in stealing.”*

As a result of migration, families have been able to meet their basic needs for food, clothing, support for their children's education, and access to health care. Former students who migrated for employment also contributed to the school financially and in kind. On the other hand, left behind children lack parental care, discipline, guidance, and emotional support.

### *3.2 Seasonal labor migration, school attendance, and educational performance*

Temporary and seasonal migrations are quite prominent in developing countries where it plays a crucial role in household survival, especially in rural areas (Shah, 2021). Lean seasons can occur as a result of agricultural downturns, and seasonal or temporary migration is an important coping strategy for a large number of poor rural households in developing countries (Shonchoy, 2015). Seasonal migrants have often been employed in seasonal jobs, such as planting, harvesting, and pruning, warehouses, restaurants, and construction sites (Plewa, 2013). Low-income families from the study area migrate seasonally to India, Nepali cities, and hillside pastoral lands for marijuana plantations, herb collections, construction work, and seasonal agricultural activities.

Children who migrate with their parents or remain in the source village without one or both parents, face hindrances to educational progress (Shah, 2021). Mckenzie and Rapoport (2006) mention that family migration depresses educational attainment affecting school attendance and completing fewer total years of schooling than children in non-migrant households because they need to work in the household work or are not valuing education due to future migration plans. Regarding school attendance, one school teacher (Nishan, 21 years), and a high school student (Aakash, 18 years), respectively say:

*“Children of parental seasonal labor migrants to India have a higher absence rate in school than the children of intra-village migrant families. Intra-village migrants*

*leave their children at home for school education while parents migrate to the pastoral land.”*

*“We had difficulty maintaining our agricultural activities and attending school while my elder brother was in Malaysia and my elder sister was working seasonally in India. As a result, our parents occasionally asked us to assist them with agricultural work or to look after cattle, which caused us to be absent from school.”*

Seasonal migration has not only increased low school attendance but also led to the poor educational performance of the students in class and on the final examination. School students who missed the class as they joined their parents or whose parents are migrants have found it difficult to understand the lesson or have forgotten what they studied in the class. This has resulted in a loss of study interest and poor performance in the examination. A secondary school teacher (Bimal, 25 years) explains that:

*“Many students who migrate to work seasonally or miss class because their parents migrated forget what they learned; they also lack parental supervision and a learning environment at home.”*

Similarly, Sharma and Dangal (2019) mention that both children who dropped out of school and school-enrolled child laborers were found to be spending a large portion of their earnings on education, be it their own or that of their siblings. This can be explained by the fact that a majority of children who had dropped out of school still had younger siblings enrolled in school. Students who migrated seasonally to earn money for their families failed examinations, missed out on upper-class admission, and became international labor migrants. Especially for boys, labor migration serves as a backup plan in the event of failing the high school examination (Chiang et al., 2012). When we inquired about school dropout, a school dropped-out person (Shyam, 25 years), shares his story:

*“I followed my village friends to find a job as a laborer and worked for six months. I returned to my village for upper-class admission, but I missed the admission deadline. It was a waste of time to stay at home, so I decided to increase my age in the documents to acquire a passport and landed in Dubai.”*

While earning from migration allows families to continue their children's education, there is also absenteeism and poor performance in the classroom. Rai and Dangal (2022) also mention that the majority of students who migrate for seasonal work drop out because they missed the school admission time, and some are more concerned with earning money than studying.

### *3.3 Parental migration and choice of private and government schools*

When rural parents decide to migrate, they consider the impact of that decision on family members and whether to enroll their children in local urban public schools, rural public schools, or private schools (Wang et al., 2017). Working poor parents also have the option of sending their children to a low-cost budget private school in Nepali cities (Chen, 2012). Suppramaniam et al. (2019) find that choice of school is made on the environment of the school, the quality of education, future options for their children, and the income level of the parents. The remittance from the earnings of parental migration has played a significant role in deciding to enroll children in a public government school or private English medium school (profit-making school). Families in Kankri migrated to the lowland areas (known as Bang in local dialects) from the hillside to send children to better-resourced government schools. Those who migrated to the countries like Malaysia, Gulf countries, and Nepali cities and have stable incomes send their children to the private English medium school available in their locality. One of the former private English school teachers (Madan, 30 years) explained that:

*“Quickly generated remittance from seasonal migration and earnings from the Gulf Country’s employment enabled families to finance the education of their children in private schools. Around 75% of the students enrolled in English medium private school where I was a teacher were children of intra-migrants, whose family members are involved in international migration.”*

Likewise, family networks and friends’ circles play a role in selecting schools for the children. Those who studied outside of their village suggest sending their children to comparatively better-resourced government schools in the other cities or getting them enrolled in English medium private schools available in the region. Families also dream of having their children learn English so that they can later get jobs in bigger cities. Families have a perception that those who speak better English and Nepali are smart and well educated as the Kham people speak their dialects and are not fluent in the Nepali language.

Farre et al. (2018) mention that migrant households are the most likely to switch to private schools from public schools. Migrant households want to make a strong foundation for their children’s education and later they want their children to go to public schools when they reach grades eight to ten, by considering the cost and priority given to employment by the government of Nepal to those who studied at public schools. One of the government secondary school teachers (Ganesh, 34 years) says:

*“Migrant families make choices about schools for their children based on their income and hope for the future employment of their children. Migrant households also consider the rising cost of their children’s education for higher classes in school and switch them from public government schools to private English schools and back again.”*

Thus, it was found that migrant parents choose the type of school for their children’s education depending on their remittances, financial stability, and support from other migrated family members and switch schools to decrease the costs and take advantage of government-provided opportunities.

### *3.4 Parent’s attitudes towards migration and school education*

Parents play a vital role in educating their children and those who perceive positively that there can be future returns from education are more likely to send their children to school compared to those who want an immediate economic return (Sharma & Dangal, 2019). One important motivation for families migrating to urban areas among rural households having members abroad is the search for a better education for their children (Acharya & Leon-Gonzalez, 2019). Parents who migrated for employment have gone through various trials, toils, and difficulties because of their illiteracy and unskilled capacity. They have a greater realization of the value of education and a determination that they will educate their children. Shreeman Budha, a 60-year-old person who has been involved in seasonal migration for several years mentioned that:

*“I realized the importance of education during my employment search and decided to send my children to school for education. My earnings made it possible to purchase land for agriculture and continue supporting the school education costs of four children.”*

However, it is found that families do not give equal priority to the education of their children. Those intra-village migrants maintaining residence in two places left their daughters with their grandparents enrolling them at the village schools where quality and resources are poor, while their sons are enrolled in comparatively good schools in the small towns. It is also found that sons are enrolled in private English medium schools while daughters are enrolled in public government schools. Tandukar et al. (2015) find from their study in Rolpa, the neighboring district

of this present study location, that there was no direct gender discrimination by the school but gender discrimination as parents opted to send girls to public schools, which are far cheaper than private schools, and the evidence is that the number of girls was higher in public schools. Parents cannot still see the return on their investment in educating their daughters. One of the primary school teachers (Harka Budha, 43 years) mentions that:

*“Apart from my teaching profession, I run small shops with my wife in a roadside town. My daughter lives with her grandparents and attends public schools in the village while my son attends a private English school.”*

While the earnings of the migrant husband are not good, the wives in the family have to decide to either work extra or decide to migrate for seasonal work so that they can pay for their children's education. The wife of the seasonal migrant husband (Dipti Roka, 22 years old) says:

*“My husband is in India and has a hearing problem. I am concerned about him because he transports cement on the construction site and may involve in an accident due to his hearing impairment. Since his earnings are not good, he asks me to send our only son to a public school, but I am determined to send him to a private English school in our small town so that he will have a good future. I run a small shop, do agricultural work, and also migrate seasonally to India, leaving my son in a relative’s house.”*

Parents who are supporting their children’s education also expect that their older children will migrate for seasonal work to earn for themselves so that they can pay their school expenses and support their younger siblings. It is also the intention of the parents that they do not want to go into additional debt because of taking loans from local money lenders for their children’s education costs. For example, Sharmila Roka (22 years old) a senior secondary female school student who has just returned from India said:

*“During a family discussion about studies in my family, my parents stated that if I wanted to continue my education, I must earn it. I thought of taking this challenge so that my parents do not need to borrow money from local lenders. I went to Kullu in India and earned around rupees 40,000 which was enough to pay the due fees for grade twelve, purchase clothes for my parents, and have a small portion of savings for my new enrollment.”*

Migrant parents have more awareness and determination to send their children for education, but they are not giving equal opportunity to both male and female children. Parents expect that if their children can work seasonally available jobs, then they will permit them to migrate so that they can support themselves for the cost of school education.

#### 4. Conclusion

Parental migration and its effect on left-behind children’s care and educational performance is a globally growing concern. This study aimed to explore how parental labor migration affects the care and educational performance of children left behind among migrant families in Kankri, Rukum East district of western Nepal. The remittance received from parental labor migration has helped families to provide food, clothing, access to health services, and invest in the education of their children. Adversely, children from migrant families lack parental care and discipline. They develop smoking and alcoholic behaviors and perform poorly in school because of low school attendance, improper learning environment at home, and lack of educational guidance. The migration of families is increasing the number of students in new emerging towns, while in remote areas, rural schools are facing a low number of students. Many students who accompany their parents on seasonal migration or engage in seasonal earning work perform poorly in class, lose interest in studying in favor of earning, and those students who miss the upper-class admission time become labor migrants. Likewise, migrant parents select private or



government schools for their children based on their income, quality education and networks, and switch schools considering the future opportunities for their children. As the less educated parents suffered during their migration, they had the realization and determination to send their children to school for education. Parents who are involved in seasonal migration expect their children to be involved in seasonal work to earn money so that they can support the cost of their younger siblings and their studies.

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