

# Impacts of COVID-19 on Wives of Nepali Migrants and Future Foreign Employment Decision-making

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*Abstract:* With over 55% of households having labour migrants and over 25% of the GDP attributable to migrants' remittance, migration plays an important role in economic development of Nepal but also in overall wellbeing of the Nepali households. While there have been considerable studies on the impact of migration both from social and economic perspectives, little is known about how migrants and their households make decisions to migrate. Moreover, there is limited research on how crisis in destination countries affect migration decision-making among migrants and their left-behind household members. Taking the example of the current COVID-19 crisis, this article discusses the context within which people are taking migration decisions and how the experiences of crisis affects decision-making about pursuing foreign employment for people who have previous migration experience. This article discusses the experience of migrants' wives during the pandemic in relation to their husband's migration, alternative livelihood experience of migrants (returnees, those on a holiday and aspiring migrants) in the home country, impacts of COVID-19 ban on aspiring migrants, and aspiring migrants and their wives' perspectives towards future foreign employment. The article argues that given a high interest amongst the returnees and their spouses to work in Nepal, current employment programmes brought forward by the government should take the opportunity as a way of retaining the human resources in Nepal.

## Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout are having a regressive effect on gender equality. McKinsey Global Institute's (MGI's) Power of Parity work since 2015 found that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, tangible progress toward gender parity has been uneven and that large gender gaps remain across the world<sup>1</sup>. Several studies including in Nepal<sup>2</sup> have shown that the pandemic has disproportionate impact on women than men: for example, women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to the crisis than men's and violence against women has increased globally during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study by McKinsey mentioned above indicates that if this negative impact of COVID-19 on women is not addressed, there are both social and economic risks: gender equality achieved so far is going to reverse and a negative impact on global economy will lead the GDP growth to be \$1 trillion less in 2030 than if women's employment was not affected.<sup>3</sup>

The above studies however only calculate potential loss from a direct economic impact. This might be because the unit of calculation is individual rather than in relation to the family. The

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<sup>1</sup> MGI 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, CARE et al. 2020; Ghimire et al. 2020; MGI 2015.

<sup>3</sup> MGI 2015.

studies discount what migration theories have long highlighted: the fact that in more traditional societies, such as what we term in MIDEQ as Global South, the purpose of lives are largely family oriented and considers welfare not only of self and immediate spouse and children but also fathers, sisters and brothers, all of whom are dependent on the migrant. This also includes the purpose of earning. In such cases, employment choices are often directly or indirectly influenced by aspirations of and for the family, and experience of a crisis (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) and individual decisions of the family members in solving that crisis cannot be isolated from the experience of the crisis by the family as a whole.

Migration is a progressive and frequently changing practice: the decision to migrate is re-thought and re-considered many times as it is related to people’s wants and desires which change every time followed by the aspirations for a better future<sup>4</sup>. Every act of migration includes an origin, a destination and an intervening set of obstacles and support factors. All the choices, decisions and the destination preferences which the migrant workers make are mainly associated and framed by their family, country of origin, age, gender, their socio-economic status, their education status and, above all, their social relationships through which their migration journey opens up through people who can help and facilitate them whenever and wherever possible for their future.<sup>5</sup> The migrants’ decision making may change or differ according to their experience, particular events, and their choices. These factors play a significant role in changing and shaping a migrant’s decision-making process. Migrants choose to leave their country and go to another country for work mainly because of the hope for a better future for themselves and their families, Destination preference is very much interlinked with the decision of leaving and the circumstances within which the particular choice is being made.<sup>6</sup>

Decisions to migrate usually involve perceived better opportunities for migrants and their family members<sup>7</sup> and these opportunities can be shaped by the conditions of labour market in the destination and home countries. Studies have indicated that the current COVID-19 pandemic will have strong impacts on the labour market in destination countries and on aspiring migrants’ decisions around migration<sup>8</sup>. However, these studies rarely take the decision from a family point of view and view migration as individual decisions. In particular, they do not take into account the experience of migrant’s wives during the pandemic in relation to migration decisions.. In many countries of the Global South, migration decisions however take family into consideration. Indeed the majority of the decisions are made by the migrants for the family members. There are no studies on the impact of COVID-19 from this lens. By taking migration as a case study and looking at how the wives of migrants who stay back at home experienced the pandemic and affects foreign employment prospectus of the husbands, the study contributes to addressing that gap.

Similarly, while there are studies on impact of COVID-19 on current migrants, there are no studies on those aspiring migrants who had incurred costs and taken necessary procedures for migration but were stopped due to travel restriction and the economic downturn associated with

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<sup>4</sup> Hagen Zanker 2019 (1).

<sup>5</sup> Crawley and Hagen Zanker 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Crawley 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Hagen Zanker et al. 2014.

<sup>8</sup> IOM 2020; ILO 2020.

the COVID-19 pandemic. This study contributes to this gap as well. It looks at how migrant's wives experienced the estrangement of their migrant husband during the COVID-19 pandemic, the livelihood initiatives taken by aspiring migrants, the impacts of the travel ban due to COVID-19 on aspiring migrants and their future perspectives towards foreign employment.

## **Conceptual Framing**

Migration is an essentially gendered phenomenon and crisis such as the pandemic often reinforces gendered roles and power relations in families and societies.<sup>9</sup> To start with, when it comes to labour migration to a foreign country, men outnumber women by far. This is because men are expected to uphold the economy of the household and fulfil the needs of family members from an economic perspective).<sup>10</sup> Women, on the other hand, are expected to care and manage the household and the children and elderly in the household (ibid). Apart from the above financial roles, there are also defined social roles for both men and women. Because men are expected to be “guardians” of the households, there are social roles ascribed to them in the households relating to the protection and welfare of the family. It is expected that, as guardians, men take the decisions for the family and take into account the larger family welfare in all their actions.<sup>11</sup> Because decisions for household members to take up foreign employment are most directly related to economic aspects of the household, it is accepted that final decisions for both the act of foreign employment and decisions around it are taken primarily by men.<sup>12</sup>

However, by the same prerogatives of guardianship, the man is expected to take family welfare into account in his decision-making and this should supersede his individual interests and welfare. Thus, while decisions are taken by men, women, children and elderly are the primary focus of the decisions even if they are not decision-makers themselves. Thus in decision-making around migration, men take the decisions while not necessarily thinking about their own welfare (for example, taking high risks of migrating to a risky country knowingly. Whilst women are often not directly involved in decision-making, the decisions taken are often in relation to their welfare and that of their children, at least economically. This involvement of the family in migration decision-making has long ago been highlighted by the new economics of migration model (NEM), a theory propounded by Stark and Bloom in 1985.

The NEM theory offered an alternative to the neoclassical theory of migration by shifting the focus from individual independence to mutual interdependence.<sup>13</sup> The key argument is that migration decisions are not made by isolated individual actors but typically by families or households. Further, the decisions of migrants are influenced by a comprehensive set of factors which are shaped by conditions in the home country. As such, migrant decisions are not based purely on individual utility-maximizing calculations but are rather a household response to both income risk and to the failures of a variety of markets – labour market, credit market, or insurance

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<sup>9</sup> Ghimire 2019; CARE 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Ghimire and Samuels, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Rajkarnikar 2020; Ghimire and Samuels 2018; Shrestha and Gartaula 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Hagen Zanker et al. 2014; Ghimire et al. 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Stark 1995.

market.<sup>14</sup> In this article we have used the concept of “family decision making” to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on wives of migrants and its influence on livelihood initiatives and future migration of migrant families.

Using the framing of the NEM theory, we look at family as a unit for the analysis of migration decisions. However, this article only uses the concept and does not use formula and derivations of the theory. Also, while we are aware about other modern and classical social and economic theories around migrants’ decision-making and shortcomings of the NEM theory itself as outlined by succeeding new theories<sup>15</sup>, we do not address or discuss them in detail in this article. This is an empirical article which aims to show how, apart from direct influence, gender has indirect influence on migration and that the experience of families left behind play an important role in framing return and remigration. We start by briefly describing the labour migration trends and impacts of COVID-19 on Nepali labour migrants as background information for the readers to understand the labour migration context of Nepal.

## Labour Migration from Nepal

The total population of Nepal in the latest census (2011) was 26.5 million. According to the latest labour force survey, the working age population (15 + years) constituted 71.5% (20.7 million) of the total population<sup>16</sup>. The absent population reported in 2011 was 1,921,494 which is 9.28% of the working population. The emigration rate - the number of emigrants (out movers) per thousand population - stood at 10.77 in 2011.

According to the latest census there are a total of 4,466,931 household units in Nepal.<sup>17</sup> Among them, over 55% of households have people migrating for foreign employment. Remittances further contribute to an average of 27.95% of Nepal’s GDP. Hence, out-migration for employment plays an important role both in the economy of the Nepali households as well as that of the country.<sup>18</sup> While cross border migration to India through marriage or work is a traditional phenomenon and outmigration of students for higher education to countries like Europe and North America is on the rise, labour migration particularly to the Gulf countries and Malaysia is the most common form of international out-migration in Nepal.

According to the latest data from the Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment, the government body which is responsible for management of foreign employment, there were a total of 236,208 migrants who took labour approvals for foreign employment in 2018/19 for the Gulf Countries.<sup>19</sup> Labour migration to these destinations is time-bound (2-5 years in length) and contractual in nature, and largely involves recruitment agencies as middlemen to link the migrant to the employers. There are only a few countries (such as Israel, South Korea and Jordan) where the government plays the chief role in sending labour force through a government-to-government

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<sup>14</sup> Massey et al. 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Massey et al. 1993; De Haas 2021.

<sup>16</sup> NPC, CBS and ILO 2018.

<sup>17</sup> NPC and CBS 2014

<sup>18</sup> MoLESS 2020 (1).

<sup>19</sup> MoLESS 2020 (2).

contract.

The sex ratio of Nepal is 94 (94 males per 100 females) in 2011, the lowest in the SAARC region but due to socio-economic reasons inhibiting female mobility and access to resources, this is not reflected in the migration figures. While there has been a significant increase in the number of Nepali women migrating for foreign employment within Asia, Nepali labour migration is predominantly a male phenomenon. Over the last decade, female migrants made only a little over 5% of labour migrants. While this has increased to 8.5% in 2019/2020, the reason is due to decrease of male migrants than increase of female migration.<sup>20</sup>

Studies which look at the reasons for migration<sup>21</sup> show that the reasons for migration are usually associated with increasing household income and an aspiration to contribute to families wellbeing. Investment of remittances in quality education of children, upgrading infrastructure of house (such as from thatched to cemented ones), accessing better health services, food and other general wellbeing also attests to the fact that migration is family oriented in Nepal. There are significant gender differences in reasons for migration, however, with female migrants (particularly those who are married) also opting for migration to escape abuse and domestic violence.<sup>22</sup>

Even though the government of Nepal has approved 110 destinations for Nepalis to go for foreign employment, their most preferred destination is seen to be the Gulf countries and Malaysia. Destinations are gendered as is the nature of work. The overall the four main foreign employment destinations are Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait but destinations like Jordan and Cyprus where there is also a greater demand for care work are most popular among women.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on data collected as part of an on-going research project entitled Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) Hub (2019-2024), the main objective of which is to understand the relationships between migration, inequality and development in the Global South. The data was collected in three provinces (among the seven provinces of Nepal) where migration rates are highest: Jhapa district in Province 1, Saptari in Madhesh Province, and Bardiya in the Lumbini Province. These sites were chosen in order to obtain a sample of different caste and ethnic groups and to capture the gendered aspects of migration. This article is based on 13 in-depth telephone interviews and 15 face-to-face-interviews with wives of migrants, 15 interviews (all male) with aspiring migrants who were preparing to go to different destinations including Malaysia, 10 interviews with migrants who have returned from foreign employment (all female), 114 key informant interviews, consisting of 10 (5 male and 5 female respondents) telephone based and 4 face-to-face interviews at the local level. Interviews were recorded upon consent of the respondents. The recordings were transcribed and translated into English (from Nepali). All due ethical processes such as briefing about the interview process and objectives, protocols on anonymity and non-disclosure etc. were explained to the respondents prior to the interview. The

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<sup>20</sup> MoLESS 2020 (3)

<sup>21</sup> Hangen Zanker et al. 2014; SaMi 2018; Premchander et al. 2019; Sapkota 2019

<sup>22</sup> Hangen Zanker et al. 2014, Dhungana et al. forthcoming.

research proposal was approved by Coventry University ethics committee which leads the MIDEQ Hub and the local implementing partner Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research’s ethical review board.

We accessed the respondents through our local facilitators who are based in the study sites. They explained the process and purpose of the interviews to the respondents beforehand. If the respondents were willing, the study team went for the interview and took a formal consent for the interview. The men were available only early morning and in the evenings while women found it comfortable to speak during the day when they had free time from their household chores.

## The Context of Foreign Employment for Nepali Households

The social and economic context of life in Nepal makes employment in the countries of the Gulf and Malaysia a desirable livelihood strategy for poorer Nepali households for several reasons. As discussed in the introduction, taking up foreign employment is often related to the welfare of the household than individual welfare. Returnee migrants often refer to their roles as breadwinners for the larger family or their economic responsibilities for the family when they talk about their reasons for migration. They would like to re-migrate for work again because it is very difficult for them to save money to fulfil the household needs and uplift the household economically from the earnings they would make in Nepal. This perception is not unfounded. With the kind of skills and qualifications they have, most of the workers would either have taken up jobs in daily wage labour in household agriculture and small agribusiness or own petty trades where they are largely paid on a daily basis or in 15-days’ time. Agriculture is largely subsistence and is neither reliable (affected by shocks such as floods, competitive market price, pest infestations) nor provides sufficient enough cash income. Hence, the daily income for most of the aspiring migrants is barely enough to fulfil their daily needs.

Due to the lack of income, they also cannot stock up necessities such as rice, lentil and oil to last for a few months as is usual among Nepali households whose incomes are higher. The income means that they always have challenges going beyond basic needs to expending on education, healthcare and to deal with other household shocks. This low income of the workers, when coupled with the way social life is organised in Nepal, additionally creates an environment where saving is impossible. In the experience of migrants, if they stay in Nepal, a considerable part of their income is also spent in hanging out with friends, giving treats to extended family members and friends customs usually known as *pauna pasa palne*, *chadparba ma kharcha garne* and *sathi bhai lai chiya pani khuwaune*. Spending on gifts during marriage and other ceremonies of neighbours and extended family members, organising dinners for relatives during festivals and so on is important aspect of social life in Nepal.<sup>23</sup>

Migrants told us that while the customs are maintained even if the family members migrate, the costs are usually low as family members left behind have to fill in for the work done by the migrant family member and have less time to attend such social functions or carry out elaborate functions themselves. For the migrant himself, when one is abroad, there is a lot of time pressure and

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<sup>23</sup> SaMi 2018; Hagen Zanker et al. 2014.

so expenditure on hanging out with friends cuts down costs significantly. Further, in the destination country migrants are paid once a month and so they have more accumulated cash and send this to the family members. With the accumulated cash, the households have propensity for saving and can go further than daily expenses to usually getting more significant things done such as mending/rebuilding houses, paying school fees in bulk and buying land or houses. Furthermore, over the years a system of collecting money between fellow migrants in the form of a revolving fund and sending it as remittances has developed in the destination countries. In this system, usually, friends living together and those who find each other reliable enough to trust with money form a group and when they receive their monthly salary, they collect money from all the group members and send it in rotation to the household of each members. This means that while the money is sent in a few months gap, the amount is much larger. For example, if a migrant has 30,000 Nepali rupees that he can send from his salary, four such migrants pool their cash together and send Nepali rupees 120,000 (30,000 x4) to migrant A's house in the first month and the same process means they will send another 120,000 to the second migrants house next month. As shown by the quote below, this pulling of money together means that households are able to go beyond meeting daily needs and do a more significant work back home which is not possible with the kind of employment they have at home:

They usually are groups of friends. We look for who is trustworthy and make groups with them. So, when we get salary this month, we will collect the salary of all people and send it to the house of one member. Next month, we send it to the house of another member and so on. So, if only send my salary, it will be a mere 30,000 in a month. But if I am a group member and my group has 5 people, I will send 150000 in a month. You can get a significant work done at home with that money.<sup>24</sup>

Besides the above, we found that once they have migrated and seen a different way of life abroad, people seemed to favour their more disciplined life in the destination country and were proud of it and so liked to migrate again. "In foreign country you really just focus on your work, you become much more disciplined and work very effectively. There you have to follow specific rules and regulation which makes you very disciplined. You cannot find that kind of rules and discipline here in Nepal."<sup>25</sup>

For all the above reasons, and because aspiring migrants and their families see these outcomes and hear about it from their friends and neighbours, they find migration as a viable alternative to being employed in Nepal.

## **Impacts of COVID-19 on Current and Aspiring Labour Migrants from Nepal**

The most visible impact of the pandemic on Nepali migration was on the outflow of migrants. Due to the COVID-19 travel ban, the outflow of labour migrants stopped for almost two years from March 2020 to the first quarter of 2021. According to the Department of Foreign Employment,

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<sup>24</sup> In-depth interview, returnee, 38 years, male, Saptari.

<sup>25</sup> In-depth interview, returnee migrant, 42 years, Bardiya.

a total of 36,433 labour permits were issued to aspiring migrant workers during 2019/2020, compared to 508,828 during the previous fiscal 2018/2019.<sup>26</sup>

Existing studies<sup>27</sup> show that, as in the case of migrants from other south Asian countries, COVID-19 has had significant impacts on current migrants who are in the destination resulting particularly in relation to the loss of jobs, threats to physical safety and human rights violations, and increased surveillance from the host country government. Due to the expiration of the two-year contract period and the inability to renew it due to the COVID-19 lockdown, many migrants have become illegal. The government initially (starting from 20 June 2020) sent free repatriation flights to 30 countries but stopped later as it was not financially viable. Thus those who wanted to return after the government scheme ended had financial challenges to fund their return. Aspiring migrants were at different stages of migration when the lockdown was imposed. Some were in the process of applying for work when the pandemic happened which meant they were discontinuing their job in Nepal but had incurred loans for starting the migration process. Due to the pandemic all of the visa processing works were halted and they were left in a limbo. Others were further down the process such as had appeared for interviews taken by employers. Since they had already made up their mind to take a job abroad and were thinking of leaving as soon as possible for work, they had left their job or were not doing any income generating activities in Nepal. After the lockdown and even during occasional ease of the lockdown, they did not look for jobs due to the uncertainty of travel and the fatigue of uncertainty and were found to have just stayed home. Since everybody was very fearful of the virus, all the markets were closed and there were also not many avenues for finding employment.

The aspiring migrants had two main challenges. First, those who had started the migration process, most importantly, paid fees to the recruitment agencies for the visa and other documents, were stranded at home due to the COVID-19 travel ban. They had given up their earlier job for migration and so had no source of income back home to go to during the travel ban as shown by expression from a migrant below:

I had a small grocery shop. I sold it to go to Qatar as the job there looked lucrative. Then COVID-19 happened and I could not travel. So since the last year, I neither have the earning from shop nor from foreign employment. I have used up almost all my savings and don't know what to do further.<sup>28</sup>

Second, they had taken loans, often with high interest rates (commonly 36%) for funding migration. Since they were not been able to migrate, the interest on the borrowed money is on steadily rising and has increased their anxiety exponentially as shown by quote below:

My head swings when I think of loans. I took loans to pay the recruitment fees. I had to buy essentials like suitcase etc. in preparations for migration.

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<sup>26</sup> Nepal Labour Migration Report 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Such as Baniya et al. 2020; Mishra and Kunwar 2020.

<sup>28</sup> In-depth interview with aspiring migrant, 26 years, male, Saptari.



The agency called me in Kathmandu on Sunday (of another week) and the travel ban started from Friday. I have not been able to go to Saudi and I don't have a job here. My loans are increasing with each passing day. I cannot sleep at night if I think about it.<sup>29</sup>

Many of them are now not in contact with their agent or the employer either so they are not sure what is happening to their processing and if they will be hired for the job. Since there is higher demand for outmigration, aspiring migrants also shared their experiences of increased fees. "After the lock-down the recruitment agencies are charging more fees. As due to the lock-down their business was down so now maybe they are trying to recover their money after the lock-down which is not fair on us."<sup>30</sup>

Labour migrants who had returned to Nepal during the holidays but were stranded in Nepal due to the lockdown also cited similar financial challenges and anxiety:

I had come on a month's holiday after two years. Then a week before my travel time, the government declared ban on travel. I keep in touch with my supervisor but he says the company is cutting down people due to COVID-19 and does not need me back. I don't know what to do? I have asked an agent to find me a new job in Malaysia itself so I can go back and still look for the same company if it is profitable.<sup>31</sup>

Some others who had returned during holidays have lost contact with their supervisors as time lapsed. During COVID-19 some of them stayed idle whilst others worked in different odd jobs:

I started working in a nearby factory (plywood factory). The work was not easy, it was hard. The work also needed a lot of time. But comparing to the time invested and the hard work, the salary was too low. So I just worked there for 2-3 months. The rate per day was Rs. 500. After working for 2-3 months I left and started doing agriculture. I grew seasonal vegetables. And now I am waiting for my visa very eagerly.<sup>32</sup>

Some long term migrants had recently returned after the end of the contractual period and had been processing the application for their foreign employment in hope of saving money to finally return back permanently, as shown by quote below:

I was trying to go to Dubai and suddenly lock-down happened. This is my third time migrating abroad for work. Firstly I had gone to Dubai for five years and then went to Malaysia and worked in Malaysia for three years. During the lock down my visa was in processing. I was about to receive

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> In-depth interview with aspiring migrant, 30 years, Jhapa.

<sup>31</sup> In depth interview with migrant on a holiday 32 years, male, Saptari.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

my visa but pandemic happened. I had not gotten the chance to have an interview with the company. Now I am not in touch with the agent currently and I am confused about will I be employed or not. I could not save money even after working for eight years abroad. I was able to build a house and now I am looking after my family and my daughter’s education.<sup>33</sup>

## **Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant’s Wives**

As of 20 July 2021, 670,953 people (2.26 % of the population) had been affected by the COVID-19 virus and 9,607 people had died. As citizens of Nepal and as residents of a particular province, the general life situation of the wives of migrants was not very different from that of the others in the area. This includes curtailments in movement, impediment in access to daily services and utilities, increased food insecurity and rising prices of goods and services. Here we discuss the specific challenges due to their status of being a migrant’s wife and due to the fact that their husbands are far away from their homes in this crisis.

## **Impact on Day to Day Life and Household Economy and Coping Strategies**

A major impact of COVID-19 for wives of migrants was having to cope with financial challenges as their husbands were unable to send remittances immediately. The lockdown started in Nepal on March 24th 2020 and there have been phases of relaxing and complete lockdown until the writing of this paper in June 2021. The first phase was a lockdown period between 24th March and 21st July 2020. The fieldwork was carried after the first phase of the lockdown ended. During the peak of the first phase of lockdown, many of the wives of migrants had to take loans to manage their home and day-to-day expenses as their husbands were not able to send money home due to lockdown and hence the closure of jobs in the destination country. The banks were also closed so they could not access the bank for remitting money as well. Most wives of the migrants in our study do not have an earnings of their own and are fully dependent on their husband’s remittance money. The findings show that when they have to take a small amount of loans, they would ask from their neighbours who could lend them money. This was not very difficult for the wife in the initial phase. According to the wives of migrants, people lend their money easily to the wife of a migrant because they believe that their husbands are earning well abroad so they can easily pay back their money with interest.

Some wives also resorted to earning an income on their own when the husbands were unable to send money. There were cases where wives who did not work before started to make an income, such as by making local beer and selling locally. They were able to do this despite lockdown as they make it in their homes and sell it within the village. “During the lockdown he was not able to send the money. So, I had to take a little loan here. Sometimes I brewed some rice beer and sold. We have a woman saving committee so from there we can take out money up to 2-3 thousand. So,

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<sup>33</sup> In-depth interview with returnee migration, Saptari.

I took 2-3 thousand from there and managed.”<sup>34</sup>

Some wives also sold their assets as a coping strategy to deal with the loss of remittances. Respondents told us that they sold their goats and chickens and thus managed their day-to-day household expenses in absence of remittances. “I had to sell goats and chicken as I was short of money during the pandemic and used that money to handle my household expense.”<sup>35</sup>

Others who had animals but still had some money to meet household needs were also planning to sell their animals if the need arose. “I have 3 goats and 2 pigs. In the need of money I will sell and use that money.”<sup>36</sup>

Some of the wives have used their savings during the pandemic. Usually women had savings in the local women saving groups which are semi-formal local revolving funds where interest rates are very low and determined by the members themselves. Women are members of such saving groups and so they do not need collateral to get money from such groups as in the case of banks. When the husband could not send the money, the wife shared that this was an important source for them to deal with daily household expenses.

For wives of migrants who have/had some jobs of their own, the lockdown meant that they could not incur income from such sources. Some of the wives of the migrants were involved in sewing or had small grocery shops of their own, but because of the lock down there work was stopped and hence they could not manage households from their own income when their husbands were not sending money. These women also had to take a loan to handle their day-to-day expenses. Besides this, some women had just started taking tailoring training to open a shop later but could not do so due to the lockdown.

These coping strategies seemed to work well in the immediate present when households did not meet with other additional shocks. Almost all of the wives of migrants said that they had no problem for managing the morning and evening meals. They had a kitchen garden and used vegetables from there so they did not had to buy the vegetables and kept other income to bare necessary only while using assets that are in the households (such as grains, lentils etc.). But for those that had additional shocks added to loss of livelihoods or income, their problems magnified and brought more implications. Some had chronic illness and had to take medical services during the lockdown, while others became sick during the lockdown and had to go to the capital city or they had to meet costs of treatment of other family members in the absence of remittances during the lockdown. In such cases, the wives of migrants had to take help from local relatives and moneylenders to meet the additional financial needs.

The other challenge that made women acutely aware of the absence of husbands was in taking care of children and discipline and managing them during COVID-19. During the lockdown period the workload of the wives of migrants increased significantly mainly in terms of preparing and managing food for their family and taking care of their children. Since the school was also closed for a long period of time, it was very difficult for the wives of migrants to manage the children, keep them concentrated in their studies and their assignments. Apart from studies, it was also difficult for them to take general control of the children: children often would run amok

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<sup>34</sup> In-depth interview, wife of migrant, 23 years, Bardiya.

<sup>35</sup> Focus Group Discussion, wives of migrants, Saptari.

<sup>36</sup> In-depth interview with wife of migrant, 24 years, Jhapa.

and wanted to go to their friends place or play outside etc. During this time they felt that if their husband would be there with them then the children would fear the father and it would have been much easier to keep them under control as shown by quote from one of our respondents. “During this time I felt like it would be so much better if he could be with us. We together would have handled the house more nicely.”<sup>37</sup>

There was a general sense that the children would have listened to their father, would concentrate better on their classes and homework and would not rebel so much to go outside of their house, to meet their friends and to play with them had the fathers been here.

The wives of migrants had to look after all the household chores, take care of the elderly members and engage in household agriculture as there were no way to hire labour. This would make them very busy and so the additional burden of having to manage free-willed children all through the day as they would not go to school was a significant burden to them. They also felt that they could not give enough time to their children. “At present I have to handle everything by myself. From looking at the fields to doing household chores, I have to do everything by myself.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the respondents said: “So during the lockdown I felt like my work was increased. This is because before we could make people work in the field to grow vegetables and all. But now I had to do all the things by myself and also my son was home so had to look after him as well.”<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, some of the wives said that they got sick during the lock-down and had to travel to Kathmandu for the treatment. One of them was a heart patient and her problem became acute during the lockdown. She had to spend 120 thousand Nepali rupees (USD 1,000) altogether for her treatment including her travel expenses. She has a small cosmetic shop and used to handle her household expenses from the cosmetic shop but during the lock-down her shop was closed. She also shared that fact that having to leave the children in care of elderly in-laws, not having her husband to accompany her to the capital for treatment and having to depend on neighbourly help for accompanying her for the travel and treatment made her more sensitive to estrangement of a husband.

## **Psycho-Social Impact Due to the Absence of Husbands**

The other most important impacts on the wives of migrants were related to stress and anxiety. Respondents attributed three main reasons for a heightened stress during the pandemic, namely the fact that their husbands were not with them, challenges in paying loans and challenges in managing household expenses. We describe them briefly below.

Stress and anxiety due to financial problems for running day-to-day households chores was acutely felt during the pandemic. Due to the lack of money, wives of migrants faced anxiety. They had already incurred loans to fund husband’s migration and to keep up the household initially when the husband had not started an income in the destination. As mentioned previously, the interest rates are usually high (36%) and so when the loan amount is high it adds to considerable amount of money of the household budget. Due to loss of their husband’s income, wives were not

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<sup>37</sup> In-depth interview, wife of migrant, 22 years, Jhapa.

<sup>38</sup> Phone interview, wife of migrant, 24 years, Bardiya.

<sup>39</sup> In-depth interview, wife of migrant, 27 years, Jhapa.

able to pay off the money and so the interest was accumulating. In addition they had taken loans at other occasions from the same network and since there were already considerable loans without them being able to pay, they felt uncomfortable asking again for loans but had no other options. This greatly added to their anxiety particularly as they have to face the moneylenders every day in their daily lives (as they live in the same community) and also as they see the payable amount increasing exponentially.

Stress and anxiety due to financial problems related to additional shocks (for example, illness) was another big challenge for wives of migrants who had to deal with these alone. Migrant's wives who were suffering from chronic disease which had affected their expenses even before the lockdown reported feeling even more stressed and guilty due to the additional expenses their disease brought on the family. They had three main concerns. Firstly, due to the need to purchase regular medication for their health, the family expenses were high and when there was no remittances, this became a significant burden. Secondly, some who had chronic ailments got sick during the lockdown. They had to face unforeseen costs such as costs of travelling to Kathmandu the capital city for treatment, treatment cost, food and accommodation related costs of living in Kathmandu when undergoing treatment and high medical costs due not only to inflated price during lockdown but also due to additional tests they had to do for COVID-19. They also had fear of contracting COVID-19 during their travel. Also in such cases, they missed their husbands as they had to depend on neighbours for taking them for treatment. This also meant that they had to take care of the neighbours while in the journey and bear all their travel and living expenses. They were weak and could not work hard and earn or help in family earning. This also adds to their guilt feeling. In addition, they also expressed concerns and fear that if anything happened to them, the husbands would not be able to come immediately and so the children would have to fend for themselves and might also face risks of violence exploitation due to absence of both the parents.

Stress and anxiety due to a lack of information is a part of their daily life but it seems to become heightened during the pandemic for the wives of migrants. First, they have not thought about what could happen to the husband as the situation of pandemic is new: they only knew from hearsay or social media to some extent that the situation is bad for the migrants. Second, they do not know how to support the husbands in case of any challenges. Third, they do not know about the legal and formal mechanisms that are available to them to be able to support the husbands.

We found that the wives of migrants have extremely limited understanding of the processes of foreign employment i.e. legal procedures, pathways, documentation required and process of safe migration. Similarly they are also unaware about the course of action needed to take if something happens to their spouse in the destination country. These women argued that it is not because they are not concerned about this matter but in the very first place, they have no idea there is a place to receive such information or even that such information exists. Surprisingly, left behind women think that passport is the only document required for labor migration and the majority of them do not know whether or not her husband has his passport with him or if it has been confiscated by the employer. This shows that they have very unequal information regarding migration and the safe migration pathways compared to their husbands. This means that the wives cannot help much in case anything happens to their husbands during the pandemic. Thus this unequal access of information by migrant's wives has been highlighted during the pandemic.

The pandemic has also highlighted gendered nature of communication behaviours and

access to resources that fosters communication between men and women. Calls to the family are usually done through social media (IMO- an instant being the most common) and requires access to the internet. Migrants usually buy data packs and initiate calls but wives do not buy data packs or initiate calls themselves unless it is very urgent. As income dwindled in the destination country, migrants resorted to making shorter and less frequent calls back home to save money for food and daily survival when they had no income due to the lockdown. Thus even if they are highly stressed, wives are not used to buying data and placing the call themselves and would rather wait for the husband to call. Heightened stress due to less communication and accepting it as a saving strategy came up frequently in conversation with the wives of migrants. “Previously our talk would go for half an hour or more but after COVID 19 we do talk not more than 15-20 minutes. If he spends all money on buying data pack, he would left with no money as he had no earning during lockdown.”<sup>40</sup>

Only some wives reported that their husbands called them more than before the COVID-19 lockdown. They thought this was the case because they were trying to cope with the stress by speaking to the distant family or because they had more leisure time due to lockdown. Thus wives were in dark about the living condition of husband in host country: few women talked about the living conditions of their partner and only a few spouses gave details about the actual living conditions and their hardships during COVID-19 to their wives. It is common practice among male migrants, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, to give limited information to their spouse so as they do not want them to be stressed or anxious. In any case, most discussions between migrant husbands and their wives were usually about COVID-19 impacts in the respective places and casual conversations rather than a personal sharing of their own stress.

Wives know from experience that the husbands do not tell them about their personal problems and try to portray those things are going well. The wives on the other hand hear of deteriorated living conditions and security risks during to the pandemic. They fear of violence and human rights violation in the destination country which they hear from their networks and social media and the fear of their husbands getting the disease. Wives of migrants shared that when they ask the husbands about these issues the husbands try to divert the conversation and ask about the household and children. This adds to worry of the wives as for them it is an indicator that their husbands are facing more challenging times than usual in the destination country. They described always being anxious as they are unable to get the real picture of the lives of their husbands during the pandemic and have no way-out to help and support them. Due to this, their anxiety increases, and they shared that the imagination of husbands facing a lot of trouble, possible physical and emotional harm constantly hangs in their mind.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that even if women do not take part in foreign employment themselves and do not have much say in migration related decision-making of the husband, migration is an essentially gendered phenomenon in Nepal. In societies such as in Nepal, where lives are family oriented than individualistic, migration is a family affair and the decisions, experiences and impacts of migration

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<sup>40</sup> In-depth interview, wife of migrant, 26 years, Bardiya.

are borne not only the migrant but the larger family as a whole. As a result, migration reinforces traditionally set gendered roles in a profound way and has impacts not only on women but also on men. It also furthers already existing inequality within the households which might not necessarily be beneficial as such gendered roles are often unequal for both men and women. For example, men who are ascribed the roles of breadwinners are likely to be pushed to take riskier pathways to migration as households experience debts and loss of assets or they might opt to stay in the destination even when there is high risks associated with the stay such as illegal status due to ending of contract or potential human right abuses. For women, who are ascribed roles of caretakers in the family and are used to having men as guardians even if from the destination country, additional challenges they have to bear during crisis such as the pandemic gets discounted in future migration decision-making or return migration as it is not directly related to household economy. This means that while there are social, psychosocial and economic impacts on women due to their husband's migration that are exacerbated during crisis such as the pandemic, this gets side-lined.

It is important that we collect robust data to understand this impact, the economic and non-economic repercussion it has on the wellbeing of the women in question, the migrant and the households. Policies on migration should aim at reducing the gendered impacts of migration such as by making pre-employment orientations to all family members mandatory. Such orientations should ensure that migrants and their families fully discuss the impacts of migration on the left behind family members and devise coping strategies to minimise negative impacts.

Besides this, migration for foreign employment to the Gulf and Malaysia continues to be an important livelihoods strategy for many Nepalis and so will feature prominently in the development discussion of Nepal. Natural disasters, pandemics and other crisis are a part of today's world. Understanding how families cope with situations of crisis in midst of family separation and how everyday decisions are shaped by these context is important to leverage migration to benefit the migrants, their family members as well as communities of origin and destination.

Crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic which inhibits migrants' ability to be mobile prominently affects those that have already invested financially in the process. The most significant impact is accumulation of debt which has the propensity to push migrants to take riskier paths in desperation. Physical challenges to migrants in situations of crisis such as incidences of violence and human rights violations that have visible affects often get a quicker response. However, lesser attention is paid to the emotional challenges that crisis brings on estranged family members on either side. An important lesson from the pandemic is that crisis adds on the physical and emotional burdens of wives of migrants who are already vulnerable to psychosocial problems and work pressure due to their husband's migration.

The COVID-19 crisis has also presented a unique opportunity to understand the needs and aspirations of returnee and aspiring migrants and work towards policy and programmes that can leverage use of their skills in the country. While the study finds that it is likely that many migrants will again opt for foreign employment in the current situation, there is also a first time ever a graver weighting of the options by families and spouses on whether to take foreign employment or not rather than a compulsive decision taken based on peer/neighbour influence. These debates have also extended to families and thus providing a wider reflection and commonly owning of the issues. The pandemic has changed the psyche around migration and the reflection time aspiring migrants and the Nepali community had on whether to migrate or not has given opportunity to also think

what circumstances in the home country would stop people from migrating out of needs. Given that federalisation has provided local governments with the resources and decision making power to address the needs of their constituency, this opportunity should be used by government and non-government stakeholder to do a wider stocktaking of factors that will promote use of knowledge and skills of returnees to create employment opportunities and entrepreneurship within their own locality and also to prepare those that want to migrate better so they can take safe and better ways to migration and benefit more from migration.

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