



CLIMATE MIGRATION AMPLIFIES GENDER INEQUALITIES

Nepal is one of the countries in the world most vulnerable to climate change. International labour migration has become a strategy to secure funds to protect against the consequences of climate change, but for women it is not so simple.

Women living in poverty are widely assumed to be particularly vulnerable to environmental risks and climate change. In Nepal, the rising number of men migrating across borders to find work, leaving women with all the care and household responsibilities, is considered to be one of the main factors contributing to this climate vulnerability for women. However, the links between migration, climate change and gender are complex.

KEY FINDINGS

- Both 'everyday' climate adaption, such as securing livelihoods, and long-term climate adaption, such as investing in and building robust houses, require funds. Labour migration contributes to financing both types.
- It is important to consider how climate change intersects with traditional and gendered dynamics, such as dowry. Crucially, due to traditional gender dynamics, men's climate mobility can amplify women's immobility.
- When men's labour migration fails or the stream of remittances ends, there are often no other ways for women to finance climate adaption. Therefore, alternative ways to finance long-term climate investments at the local level are needed.

As one Nepalese woman, whose husband has been working in Saudi Arabia for the past five years explained, his migration meant that she had no one to take care of her and to share the burdens of daily life with. As a woman living without a husband, she was exposed to stigma from community members and her movement was constrained by strict gendered norms about where and when women can go without a male companion. She feared being alone at night and during weather disasters like floods, which were now common in the area, she was responsible for moving their family to a safe house. At the same time, his migration meant that she did not have to beg for money, and that she could feed their five children. She had used the remittances he sent monthly to secure their house from floods by raising it, and to buy a portable metal stove that she could use during floods when the clay stove on the ground was waterlogged. Her husband's migration was therefore a source of new risks, but also a solution to a set of other challenges.

Climate change, migration, and gender in Madhesh province

The study focused on Madhesh province in south-eastern Nepal, on the border with India. In this area floods and droughts are becoming increasingly

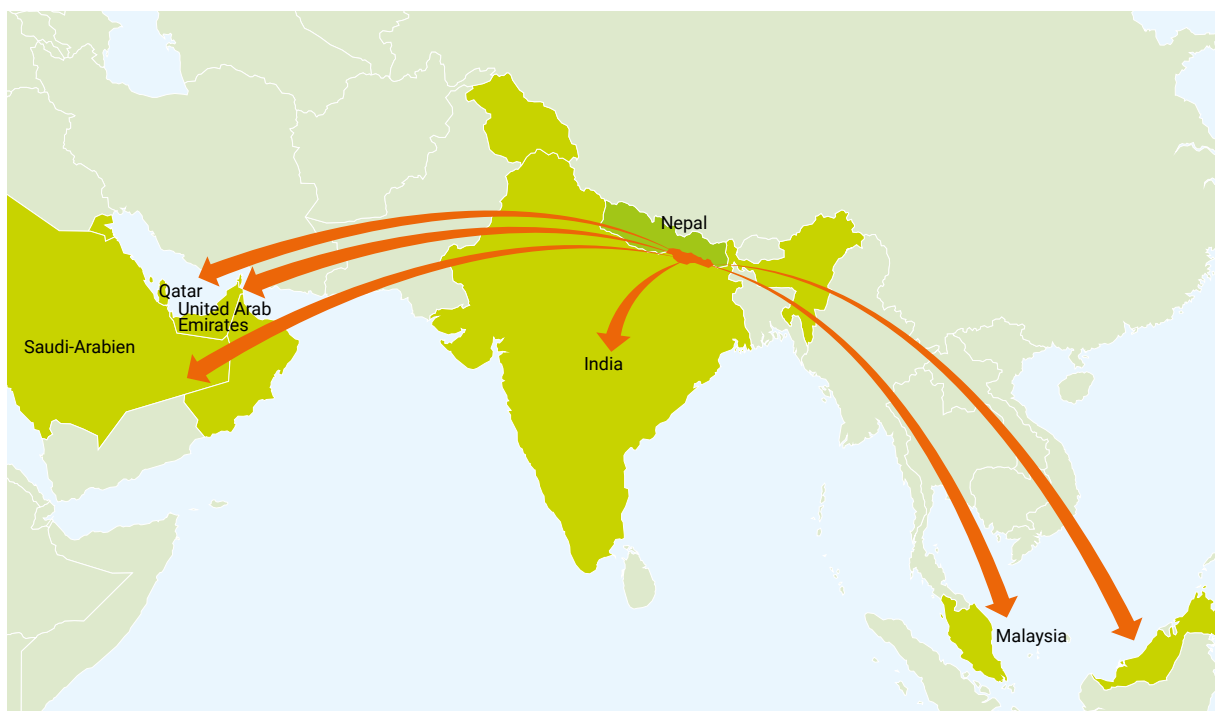
CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION, AND WOMEN'S WORK

- This brief is based on the pilot study 'Climate change, migration and women's work', a collaboration between DIIS and the Danish Red Cross (DRC), with assistance from the Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) and funded by the DRC.
- The study included a desk review of literature, reports, and statistics.
- Data collection and analysis were based on seven days of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 19 women and 6 community stakeholders in the Dhanusha district of Madhesh province in Nepal.
- Based on the study, a short documentary called *Somehow She is Managing* has been produced.

frequent, and the unpredictable weather puts pressure on agriculture, a primary source of livelihood in the region.

This province exemplifies a complex web of gendered, socio-economic and environmental risk factors that require an intersectional lens. Newer research on how gender, environment and mobility influence one another has pushed the general understanding away

Map 1. Migration from Madhesh



MADHESH PROVINCE

- In 2021/22 the majority of Nepalese international labour migrants with formal labour permits were from Madhesh. Top destinations are Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE.
- Despite this high number of migrant workers, Madhesh province has one of the lowest proportions of women migrants (only 4% of migrants from the region are women). This stark contrast is likely due to socio-economic conditions as well as strict gendered and cultural norms specific to the Madhesh region.
- It has the highest number of people living below the poverty line and the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) of all Nepalese provinces.

Sources: Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022 (pp. 66–68); Nepal Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021.

from viewing climate change as the cause of migration but instead as a modifier that amplifies already existing dynamics and vulnerabilities. Supporting existing research, our study also found that the vulnerabilities experienced by Madhesi Dalit women, at the bottom of Nepal's class, caste and gender hierarchies,¹ are rooted in the complex ways that climate change intersects with traditional and gendered dynamics.

'Everybody wants a brick house'

When asked what they would wish for, if they could ask for three things to help their situation, one woman replied: 'a secure job, a water pump, and a brick house.' The house she was currently living in was made of clay, mud and bamboo, and as she explained, 'nobody wants to live in this house, everybody wants a brick house.' Oftentimes the women we interviewed initially had very little to say about climate change as they did not understand themselves as being affected by such a global phenomenon. As one woman said, 'I don't have any idea about climate change, but yeah, definitely something is changing. There is no rain at times, and everything is disturbed'. However, their wishes for the future often reflected the local and everyday realities of living under conditions of climate change, such as the growing need for a robust house, a steady income and access to water. Thus, any change in the climate is primarily understood through its consequences. One example is

that the changing rain pattern is not seen as a problem in itself, but rather because agricultural day labour becomes scarcer.

One woman explained that a recent drought had reduced the opportunities for work in the surrounding fields, which resulted in her 'sleeping with hunger' because she suddenly had no income. Because these women rarely own land and rely on day-to-day labour, climate change was mainly experienced as a decline in work opportunities due to floods and droughts and thereby a deepening of poverty. The effects of climate change were felt as economic uncertainty, which resulted in fears about the future for themselves and their children.

Remittances and debt as climate 'solutions'

Of the 19 women we interviewed, 15 had a husband and/or sons who were currently or had previously been abroad for work, most often in Malaysia, Qatar or India. They had all left due to a lack of work opportunities in Nepal. Remittances were therefore a critical source of income for these women and their families.

Remittances from labour migrants abroad have seen a steady increase in Nepal in recent decades. In 2020 and 2021, Nepal received more than EUR 7 billion in remittances.²

For Madhesi Dalit women, the remittances are on the one hand used to buy food and household supplies and on the other to build new and safer houses that can withstand floods. An older woman, whose son had worked in Qatar, explained, 'we had a house of mud that used to get destroyed when the floods came, so we made this house with my son's money'. As such, men's international labour migration makes it possible for these families to invest in climate adaptation.

Remittances were also crucial to managing debt. Of the women we spoke to, at least 11 were in debt and struggling to pay it off. They had usually taken loans from wealthier people in their communities to pay dowries for their daughters' marriages, to finance their husbands' or sons' migration, to cover healthcare expenses, or simply to survive. In this way climate change not only created new expenses (such as new houses or metal stoves), but also made it more difficult to secure money for traditional expenses such as dowry payments.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

- The women in our study received approx. EUR 35–280 per month in remittances.
- Most women reported that they could make EUR 1–3 per day doing crop cultivation or household labour, if daily jobs were available.
- The loans held by the women in our study ranged from approx. EUR 1,400 to 5,600.
- Installing a water pump costs more than EUR 700, while borrowing someone else's pump costs approx. EUR 2 per hour.

Men's mobility and women's immobility

Among the 19 women, only one had migrated abroad. In all other cases the women felt that migration was not a possibility for them because of social and gendered expectations, the burden of their care responsibilities, lack of education and job opportunities, and their families' debts. The women had very limited freedom of movement and often had to stay in the house unless accompanied by their mothers-in-law, with whom they often live. While families increasingly depend on the remittances from men's migration due to fewer work opportunities at home, women experience increased immobility because they often cannot leave their houses when the men are gone.

The role of debt in this dynamic is double-edged: on the one hand, taking loans enables the mobility of the husbands and sons. On the other hand, the burden of debt enhances the immobility of the women left behind. This was especially the case for women whose husbands or sons were injured, fell ill, or died during their work abroad. Between 2008 and 2022, 10,666 Nepalese migrant workers were reported dead, the majority of these in destinations in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.³ Most of these deceased migrant workers came from Madhesh province.

Five of the nineteen women in our study had husbands or sons that had become ill, died, or disappeared abroad. In these tragic cases, the women could no longer rely on remittances and were also left to pay off the debt on their own. One woman whose husband had died working in India told us that everyone around her had husbands abroad who sent them money. She explained that 'if my husband were still alive, then he would also have sent everything. I would have finished my loans and lived a better life.'

The everyday effects of climate change

Understanding and addressing the vulnerabilities experienced by Madhesi Dalit women, and other marginalised women exposed to climate risks, requires an intersectional perspective on the structural violence and discrimination that women experience in the form of immobility, stigma and isolation.

This implies, for instance, that while migration and loans are often the only options for Madhesi Dalit women to manage climate-related challenges such as a lack of work and weather hazards, debt and men's migration often expose these women to increased risks. Thus, in this context, climate change amplifies the already highly uneven patterns of mobility between men and women.

Notes:

1. UN RCHCO 2012. "Field Bulletin: Violence against Madhesi Dalit Women in Dhanusa & Mahottari districts." RCHC Office Nepal, Issue 39, April 2012.
2. Government of Nepal 2022. "Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022". Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, page 119.
3. Government of Nepal 2022. "Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022". Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, page 109-110.



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Cover photo: Woman standing next to a raised, brick-built house she constructed herself.
Photo: Benedikte Raft

