

Channels of Exit: Education-Led Vs. Labor-Led Out-Migration Pathways among Youth in Nepal

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Abstract

International migration has become a defining livelihood strategy and mobility pathway for Nepali youth. It is particularly structured into two distinct streams: an education-led departure to the Global North and a labor-led flow to the Gulf and Southeast Asia. This study compares these channels to examine how they operate as a stratified system that allocates youths according to pre-existing socioeconomic resources and shapes diverse life projects. Using a qualitative, comparative case study design, I conducted in-depth interviews with 24 Nepali youths (12 from each channel), recruited through educational consultancies and manpower agencies in Kathmandu. Guided by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Education-led migrants, typically having the luxury of higher economic and cultural capital, framed migration as an individual 'self-project' for long-term career advancement and global mobility. In contrast, labor-led migrants, driven by immediate economic pressures, approached migration as a familial 'survival project', often financing it through high-risk debt that mortgaged family assets. These different logics of aspiration and risk were reinforced by intermediaries, particularly educational consultancies and manpower agencies, which served as field-specific gatekeepers. The study concludes that these are not parallel pathways but a hierarchical system that globalizes domestic inequality. Rather than governing these flows separately, the study argues for an integrated policy lens that addresses the structural roots of this stratification.

Keywords: migration channels, youth aspirations, social stratification, Bourdieu, Nepal

1. Introduction

International migration has become a central pillar of Nepal's socio-economic structure, shaping household livelihoods, national revenue, and youth imaginaries. For a country facing political transition, a limited industrial base, and chronic underemployment, out-migration is not merely a demographic shift but a critical livelihood strategy deeply ingrained in cultural discourse (Adhikari, 2017). This outflow is organized into two dominant, yet fundamentally different, streams. The first stream is channelled through educational consultancies facilitating enrollment in universities, primarily in the Global North, and the second stream is managed by manpower agencies that place labor, particularly in (GCC) countries and Southeast Asia. While both streams sustain a remittance economy constituting over 23% of GDP (World Bank, 2023), they raise critical questions about equity, opportunity, and social stratification. The participants in, and destinations of, these parallel movements occupy vastly different social and geopolitical spheres. This paper explores how local intermediaries of global forces influence the creation of diverse life opportunities for young people in Nepal at this crucial moment.

The study's significance is threefold. First, theoretically, it contributes to migration sociology in the South Asian context by linking the frequently disparate investigations into high- and low-skilled migration using a Bourdieusian perspective. By analysing how local circumstances and global systems interact to determine life projects, it engages the sociology of youth. Second, in terms of policy, the results can guide more comprehensive national labor, immigration, and education strategies to handle the specific risks associated with each channel and go beyond the fragmented control of these flows. And third, methodologically, it centres the voices of youth, methodologically, thereby humanizing macro-level migration data and contributing to a more nuanced public understanding.

The study focuses on Nepali youths (aged 18-30) in the active pre-departure stage, recruited through consultancies and manpower agencies in Kathmandu. While this study excludes those who migrate via informal networks or direct application, it captures the dominant institutionalized mechanisms controlling migration for a significant portion of the population. The research provides an in-depth, comparative qualitative analysis of the stratified nature of global mobility from Nepal.

2. Literature Review

Although these different types of migration are growing at the same time, experts and policymakers often study and manage them as largely separate issues, creating a "scholarly divide" that matches the way they are handled in the real world. Literature on student migration often focuses on human capital development and the experiences of an urban elite, framing the process as an investment in future career capital (Sharma & Khadka, 2021). While valuable, this body of work may inadvertently normalize elite mobility without critically analysing its contribution to the reinforcement of class privilege or its reliance on the growing consultancy businesses. Conversely, academic research on labor migration centres on remittances, their unsafe or unstable jobs, and the struggles of rural families, contextualizing these moves as a desperate search for economic necessity and survival (Seddon et al., 2002; Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015). Such studies provide vital documentation of exploitation but less frequently interrogate the systemic architecture of the labor brokerage system itself.

This bifurcation of the streams creates a significant analytical blind spot. A few studies explicitly compare the aspirational worlds, preparatory stages, and institutional intermediaries as two aspects of a single, socially stratified exit system (Gurung, 2019). A particular gap exists in qualitative, youth-oriented studies that clarify the decision-making sequence where personal ambitions tackle structural constraints. The pre-departure stage is critical, as it is where social inequalities are activated and future trajectories are set. Consequently, there is a lack of a robust understanding of how pre-existing social inequalities in Nepal determine access to these divergent global pathways, and how these pathways, in turn, reproduce and globalize those inequalities.

3. Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu's Theory of Capital

To analyse the stratification, this study employs Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital as its central theoretical framework. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes capital as accumulated labor in embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms. It exists as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic resources, which are convertible and deployable within specific social fields to maintain or advance one's position.

This framework is suitable for three reasons. First, it clarifies why prospective migrants with varying endowments enter the process of migration in unequal starting positions. A pathway's affordability is determined by economic capital; eligibility is shaped by cultural capital (such as academic credentials); vital information and access to intermediaries provided by social capital; and prestige and differential social value

assigned by symbolic capital. Second, it theorizes channel selection as a strategy shaped by one's portfolio of capital. A youth possessing substantial cultural and economic capital may pursue education-led migration to acquire globally recognized cultural capital. In contrast, a youth whose primary asset is physical labor capacity may pursue labor migration to obtain immediate economic capital (remittances). This choice is not a free-market decision but a strategic response to a constrained and unequal structure of opportunities. Third, the framework enables an examination of the migration system as a mechanism of social reproduction, whereby the elite channel perpetuates pre-existing advantage, while the non-elite channel offers subsistence with limited prospects for upward mobility. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' explains that personal dreams and goals—like wanting to be a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) versus wanting to run a small tea shop—are not merely individual choices but are shaped by social background and structural position (Bourdieu, 1990).

4. Research Questions and Objectives

This study addresses three core research questions:

- i. How do the socio-demographic profiles, familial backgrounds, and future aspirations of youths differ between education-led and labor-led migration?
- ii. How do intermediaries (educational consultancies and manpower agencies) influence migrants' preparations, imaginaries, and perceived destinations?
- iii. How do these differentiated pathways constitute unequal access to global opportunities and shape prospects for social mobility in Nepal?

The study conducts a comparative sociological analysis of Nepal's two principal migration channels, focusing on the critical pre-departure phase where aspirations, decisions, and institutional coverage. It examines how youths' goals and choices vary depending on which path they take, how institutional intermediaries guide their journeys and self-perceptions, and how these differentiated paths reproduce and worsen existing social inequalities.

5. Methodology

The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative research design grounded in ontological position that social realities such as motivation for migration are not fixed facts but are constructed through individuals' experiences and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm is appropriate for uncovering the complex, experiential aspects of potential migrants' lives, prioritizing depth and contextual insight over

broad general claims. A comparative case study design (Yin, 2018) is employed, treating the education-led and labor-led migration channels as the two primary cases.

The research was conducted in the Kathmandu Valley, the primary hub of licenced educational consultancies and manpower agencies. The study population consisted of Nepali men and women aged 18-30 who were in the active pre-departure stage of international migration via these formal channels. Active pre-departure was operationally defined as the period following the signing of a service agreement with an agency and payment of an initial fee, but prior to visa issuance or departure. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich cases relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). To ensure diversity within each channel and avoid bias toward a single institution, participants were recruited from multiple agencies.

For the education-led channel, three consultancies specializing in different destination clusters (North America, Australia, United Kingdom and Japan) were recruited, in which each consultancy referring four participants. Similarly, for the labor-led channel, four participants were recruited from each of three manpower agencies servicing key markets (Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] countries, Malaysia, South Korea). This strategy yielded a total sample of $n=24$ (12 per channel), considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation for core themes within each group (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

6. Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed in line with the study's aims and theoretical framework. The guide contained open-ended questions organized into four thematic sections: (a) Personal and Familial Background, (b) The Decision to Migrate, (c) Navigating the Institutional Channel, and (d) Resources, Calculations, and Futures.

Agency management provided consent prior to data collection. A written informed consent form, a thorough explanation of the study, and an in-person approach were given to eligible participants. The interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes, were conducted in Nepali in a private location, and were audio recorded with consent. Contextual observations and nonverbal clues were recorded in detailed field notes.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, which is analytically compatible with a Bourdieusian framework. First, interviews were transcribed precisely in Nepali and translated into English with meticulous attention to preserving meaning. I immersed myself in the data through repeated

reading. Preliminary codes were generated using a combined inductive-deductive strategy, capturing both emergent meanings, including family pressure to earn, and theoretically informed concepts such as conversion of economic capital. These codes were organized into preliminary themes separately for each channel. Themes were systematically reviewed, refined, and clearly defined. Finally, a comparative analytical lens was applied to contrast thematic patterns across the two channels, identifying key convergences and divergences.

The study adhered to international ethical standards and Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines. Written informed consent was obtained in simple Nepali. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through pseudonyms, and participants could withdraw at any time. To enhance qualitative rigor, I employed thick description, maintenance of transparent audit trail, and critical researcher reflexivity regarding my positionality as an educated Nepali youth.

7. Limitations

This study offers rich comparative insights but has several limitations. First, recruiting only in Kathmandu may overrepresent youth with greater resource access, underrepresenting those in remote areas who rely on local sub-agents. Second, the data capture the pre-departure phase; therefore, a longitudinal design is needed to trace how expectations shift upon arrival abroad. Third, the purposive sample size (n=24) enables thematic depth but preclude statistical generalization. Fourth, my positionality as an educated Nepali researcher may have influenced participant rapport and interpretation despite reflexive practices. Finally, the analysis focuses on migrant aspirations and brokerage within Nepal, offering a less detailed examination of the destination-country policies that structurally shape these channels.

8. Results and Discussion

The analysis of 24 in-depth interviews, evenly distributed between education-led and labor-led pathways, reveals an extreme stratified system. Findings are organized around four themes, analyzed through Bourdieu's framework and the broader literature on stratified migration.

8.1. The Social Genesis of Aspiration: Self-Project Vs. Family Project

The results revealed sharply divergent orientations toward migration that clustered distinctly by channels. Among education-led participants, migration was articulated as a 'self project'-an enterprise of personal cultivation, career construction and

cosmopolitan becoming. For example, a participant bound for United States stated: *'I want to work for a leading tech company. A US MS is the direct ticket.'* (EDU_01, male, 22, destined for the USA). This narrative framed migration as proactive step in a long-term personal project. Another participant explained, *'It's about being a global citizen, someone who can work anywhere. The degree is just the start of that kind of freedom and respect.'* (EDU_05, female 24, destined for Australia). Across the education-led sample, 10 out of 12 participants, articulated this self-project orientation, framing migration as a means of gaining autonomy, global belonging, and professional control.

In contrast, labor-led participants framed migration as a 'family project'- a duty-bound strategy of collective survival and intergenerational care. It includes household expectations economic necessity. A participant bound for Qatar explained: *"My goal is to send money every month. Build a proper house. Save for my son's school fees. That's the dream."* (LAB_01, Male, 26, destined for Qatar). In this account, migration was constructed as a reactive strategy to address critical family commitments. Similarly, another participant articulated this with stark clarity: *"This isn't my choice. It's for them [his family]. My life here is done; theirs can be better."* (LAB_09, Male, 28, destined for Malaysia). It indicates that the migrant's identity was often rhetorically pushed aside or ignored, as they were viewed simply as a means to ensure their family's survival and gradual progress. Across labour-led sample, 11 of 12 participants positioned the migrant as a means to family survival and gradual progress rather than as an end in themselves. However, remaining two participants had hybrid positions claiming it as not universal pattern.

This contrast powerfully emphasises Bourdieu's concept of habitus—the ingrained dispositions that shape how individuals perceive and act upon the world. Aspiration is not natural but a social product (Appadurai, 2004) sculpted by one's position in the social structure. For urban, educated youth possessing cultural capital, the international sphere appears as an arena for career-building and self-improvement. A habitus shaped by educational success and relative financial stability orients toward a personal mission—a biographical narrative of self-growth and development. For those from economically uncertain backgrounds, the international sphere is viewed as a site of resource extraction. A habitus formed through family duties and livelihoods tied to physical labour orients as an effort to improve the family's situation rather than personal development. This finding critically reflects theories of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000), which may describe a globalized elite's experience while concealing the constrained, obligation-heavy mobility of the majority.

8.2. Institutional Intermediation: Guided Conversion Vs. Gatekept Access

The institutional pathways operated on fundamentally different logics. Educational consultancies were viewed as expert partners in enhancing their cultural capital and professional status by collaborating to refine their personal credentials. A participant bound for the United Kingdom explained: *“The consultancy matched my grades to potential universities and helped me craft a story about my research interests. They showed me how to sell myself.”* (EDU_04, male, 23, destined for UK). In this account, the relationship was a commercial partnership characterized by knowledge exchange, aimed at perfecting and converting existing academic capital into a globally competitive form. This orientation was articulated by 9 of 12 education-led participants.

Manpower agencies, however, were constructed by participants through a fundamental institutional logic. Across the labour-led sample, 10 of 12 participants described agencies as necessary gatekeepers to economic capital. They work as intermediaries who control the access to opportunities. The process was characterized by dependency, standardization, and a profound information gap between the two parties. A participant bound for Qatar articulated his experience: *“The company and salary are fixed by the agent. We have to trust; we can’t verify. We just submit our papers and wait.”* (LAB_05, male, 27, destined for Qatar). This account reveals the structural position into which labour migrants are inserted. The agency’s power is absolute; it determines both destination and salary. It regulates entry into a commodified labor contract. Furthermore, trust is not a moral choice but a structural necessity imposed by the migrant’s exclusion from knowledge. This dependency on manpower companies are compounded by a sense of anonymity and interchangeability articulated by another participant: *“They hold all the keys. We’re just one file in a stack of hundreds.”* A participant (LAB_07, male, 25, destined for Saudi Arabia). It reveals that the agency controls access, and the migrant has no alternative route. Where educational consultancies cultivated individuality and narrative distinctiveness while manpower agencies processed migrants as identical units in a high-volume operation.

These intermediaries are field-specific institutions that reflect and reinforce the specific rules and mindset of the migration path they represent. In the field of educational migration, where the currency is cultural capital, consultancies act as cultural translators and strategists, assisting in the conversion of national academic capital into internationally recognized credentials. This aligns with Bourdieu’s “officializing strategies,” where experts certify and enhance value. In the field of labor migration, where the immediate currency is an economic contract, agencies

operate through bureaucratic control and network monopolies. They embody the highly transactional and often exploitative brokerage system prevalent in South Asian migration (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015). Consequently, the channel a person selects determines not only the destination but the entire dynamic with the intermediary; shifting from a collaborative partnership for students to a purely commercial and asymmetrical transaction for laborers.

8.3. The Calculus of Risk: Invested Futures Vs. Mortgaged Presents

Financial strategies revealed profound inequalities in risk perception and capital conversion. Among education-led participants, 10 of 12 framed migration as an investment- a calculated deployment of resources in expectation of future returns. They described their financial arrangements in the language of strategic planning, risk calculation, and anticipated appreciation. A participant bound for the United States explains: *“My parents have saved. We see it as investing in my future earning potential. It’s like a business—you invest to earn more later.”* (EDU_07, male, 23, destined for USA). It indicates that the risk was framed as a calculable career risk with a high potential Return on Investment (ROI).

For labor-led migrants, financing often required mortgaging productive family assets and taking informal debts, forcing the household into high financial risk prior to departure. For 8 of 12 labour-led participants, financing required mortgaging productive family assets mainly land had higher potentiality of dispossession of entire family. A participant for Qatar explained, *“I borrowed against a small piece of land with a moneylender. The interest was high, but there was no choice. If I fail, we lose the land.”* (LAB_08, male, 27, destined for Qatar). It shows that risk was existential and immediate. The failure meant not only disappointing returns but catastrophic loss for the family. Another participant added: *“The interest clock starts the day I sign. I’m half-drowned before I even get on the plane.”* (LAB_12, male, 24, destined for Qatar). It reveals that indebtedness is experienced not as a future obligation but also an immediate condition. It shows the migrants struggles that begun before the journey of foreign employment started.

From Bourdieu’s theory of capital, the education-led channel represents a classic accumulative strategy to build status. It involves converting stored economic capital into advanced cultural capital as a foreign degree, with the goal of future turning that prestigious degree into high-paying jobs, framing as an investment potential. The labor-led channel represents an unsafe, extractive conversion: liquidating essential productive capital (land) into cash to pay fees that is exchanged only for the promise

of future wages. This is not an investment but collateralized speculation, exemplifying what Bourdieu described as the urgency which makes the poor sell their arms and their time (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 228). The financial risk of the journey is very deeply rooted, creating a cycle of compulsory mobility where one must migrate and continue working abroad to repay the debt incurred to get there in the first place.

8.4. Imagined Geographies: Transnational Careers and Temporary Exile

The study sharply polarized constructions of destination countries and of migrants' anticipated relationships with Nepal. Among education led participants, 10 of 12 participants, constructed the United States, Canada, or Australia as sites of innovation, career development, and open societies. They envisioned these countries not merely as location of migration but as symbolic landscapes of opportunities and self-realization. Flexible transnationalism was part of their envisioned futures; several discussed becoming professionals with the option to travel between continents. A participant bound for Canada articulated this vision: *"I'll work there for maybe ten years, gain experience, then come back and start something. The world is connected now; you don't have to pick just one place."* (EDU_03, male, 24, destined for Canada). It constructs migration as a strategic investment in human capital that will be redeployed entrepreneurially upon return embodying; termed as flexible transnationalism.

Labor migrants argued Qatar, the UAE, or Malaysia primarily as "sites of labor and earning," defined by salary, contract length, and strict regulation. Their envisioned future was one of temporary exile, with a fixed goal of return upon achieving a specific financial target. A participant bound for Malaysia explained: *"I'll work five years, save, come back and open a tea shop. I don't want to stay a day longer than I have to. It's not a home; it's a worksite."* (LAB_11, male, 29, destined for Malaysia). This orientation is articulated by 10 of 12 participants. For these migrants, home - place of belonging, family, emotions and future day's plans are directly associated to labour migration as well. The aspiration for self-employment upon return reflects a desire for autonomy and agency that migration itself cannot provide.

Each pathway is associated with distinct symbolic capital within its "imagined geography" (Said, 1978). The education-led pathway is inspired by the symbolic capital of prestige, modernity, and intellectual growth, facilitating an alignment with cosmopolitan capital (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). The labor-led pathway is stigmatized, associated with pure physical effort and limited rights, promising no imaginary transformation. This reinforces the theory of the segmented global labor market (Piore, 1979). Consequently, transnational experiences bifurcate: one group may

develop fluid, professional networks; the other's connection is primarily extractive, experienced as an "extractive sojourn" with minimal socio-cultural exchange.

8.5. Channels of Exit as Engines of Social Reproduction

The integrated analysis demonstrates that the education-led and labour led pathways form a structured, top-down system for sending Nepali youths abroad. This system functions less as an open marketplace and more as a social sorting machine, allocating individuals to specific global roles and jobs based on wealth and status they were born into.

The implications for social reproduction are stark. The education-led channel provides a mechanism for urban elites to transnationalize their privilege, converting national capital into globally recognized credentials. This pathway facilitates what sociologists term "maximally maintained inequality," (Raftery & Hout, 1993) where the ultimate spoils of expanded opportunity (top jobs, permanent residency) to those already advantaged. Conversely, while the labor-led channel provides vital livelihood security, it often constitutes a precarious reproduction circuit.

Remittances are typically spent on consumption, debt repayment, or non-productive assets like concrete houses, which are not easily converted into the cultural or social capital needed for intergenerational channel switching. This creates a "sticky floor," confining families to a cycle of dependent mobility. As a participant poignantly asked, *"I'm doing this so my son won't have to. But his school fees are so expensive... what if he ends up here [at the agency] in 20 years?"* (LAB_10, male, 26, destined for United Arab Emirates). His fear underscores how the migration system is designed to reproduce existing social classes and inequalities across generations.

In conclusion, the two faces of Nepali migration constitute a single stratified system, driven by global demand for both professionals and disposable labor, and mediated by local institutions finely connected to the class profiles of their clients. The resulting pathways are not merely evidence of inequality; they are active mechanisms for its renewal and globalization. To understand the reality of Nepali migration, we must therefore stop to view it as an aggregate of individual choices. Instead, we must look at it as an architecture of opportunity, a rigid structure that intentionally distributes individuals to separate and unequal global stages.

9. Conclusion

This study has provided a comparative analysis of education-led and labor-led migration pathways among Nepali youth, demonstrating how socio-demographics, aspirations, and institutional mediation shape pre-departure strategies. Education

migrants, typically younger, urban, and from educated families, pursue individualistic, career-oriented goals. Labor migrants, often older, rural, and from less-educated households, focus on family survival and debt repayment. Educational consultancies and manpower agencies act as field-specific gatekeepers, converting different forms of capital and reinforcing inequalities between the streams.

The findings demonstrate that migration operates as a hierarchically structured system that reproduces domestic inequality on a global scale. The education channel converts economic capital into globally valued cultural capital, sustaining elite privilege. The labor channel, while providing subsistence, often perpetuates cycles of precarity and limits upward mobility. Viewed through Bourdieu's framework, migration emerges not as a matter of choice alone but as a capital-conditioned trajectory that shapes life chances across generations.

Policy interventions must address these stratified dynamics through integrated measures, such as, enforcing strict regulation on labor agencies, implementing financial literacy programs, establishing ethical oversight of consultancies, and creating incentives for productive knowledge transfer. Critically, awareness-raising and the creation of viable economic alternatives within Nepal are essential to reduce an overreliance on stratified outward migration.

Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to track post-migration outcomes, expand sampling for greater representativeness, and investigate gender-specific experiences within both the education and labor sectors. Such work would deepen our understanding of how migration pathways shape life trajectories and intergenerational mobility, offering grounded evidence for more equitable migration and development strategies.

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