

## Population, Power, and Plurality: A Critical Assessment of Nepal's Social Demography

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### Article Info

### Abstract

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*Social demography, the systematic study of the interplay between population dynamics and social structure, social inequality, social identity, and social power, plays a fundamental role in the social sciences. Nepal is one of the most analytically fascinating and demographically complex countries in South Asia, a small, landlocked, multi-ethnic, and constitutionally transitional one that has been rapidly and simultaneously transiting in all directions in terms of changes in fertility, mortality, migration, urbanization, and ethnic-demographic composition over the last 30 years. Although there is a wide literature on demography in Nepal, it has been scattered in various disciplines, from positivist demography, political anthropology, migration studies, and development economics; there is little theoretically integrated synthesis of the literature. Furthermore, previous reviews focus disproportionately on overall national demographic data and fail to sufficiently address the structures of social inequalities such as caste, ethnicity, gender, and geography, which are integral to Nepal's demography, rather than merely contextual. In this paper, the peer-reviewed scholarly articles about the topic of social demography in Nepal, which were published between 2000 and 2026, will be discussed in terms of important debates, research methodology, and socio-political issues. Thirty-five academic papers consisting of journal articles, monograph books, census studies, and policy reports, found through academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and demographic publications, have been analyzed through thematic and intersectional perspectives. The findings suggest that there has been a fast pace of demographic transition in Nepal. The study presents an integrated demographic transition theory for stratified populations by incorporating classic demographic transition theory with an analysis of societal stratification. This theory addresses the dynamics of Nepal's population, taking into account the dimensions of caste, ethnicity, gender, and geography.*

### Introduction

The classical definition of demography is the measurement and analysis of population size, composition, distribution and change, with birth, death and migration as the key drivers of population dynamics. However, this is a technical, academic, and somewhat abstract disciplinary definition of population, which overlooks the complexity of social, political and cultural dimensions of population processes in practice. Populations are not simply biological accumulations of "vital rates" but are socially structured, politically managed, culturally understood and structurally differentiated groups in which demographic processes are inextricably linked with processes of inequality, identity,

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power, and struggle. Social demography, the sub-field that explicitly explores how population dynamics and social structure interact, has increasingly complex models for dealing with this complexity, including some from structural sociology, political economy, feminist scholarship and critical race studies, that consider how demographic processes are both shaped by and constitutive of the social hierarchies through which human societies are organized (Riley & McCarthy, 2003; Smits & Monden, 2009).

Nepal is an example of remarkable analytical importance in this general field of thought. Nepal is one of South Asia's most remarkable demographic stories such as a story of fast change, structural paradox and social complexity that defies easy classification by any one demographic or developmental paradigm in a small, land-locked, Himalayan state of about 29 million people. Nepal has seen some of the fastest rates of fertility decline in South Asia over the last 30 years, from an estimated 5.3 children per woman in 1991 to 1.9 by 2021 (NSO, 2025; MoHP, 2022) while at the same time being a massive net expeller of labour, undergoing rapid urbanization, and experiencing dramatic changes in ethnic and caste population and child mortality.

But these changes at the aggregate level, startling on virtually any metric, obscure important structural features of demographic inequality that are analytically similar, and therefore cannot be separated, from the aggregate trends. For example, Nepal is well known for its fertility rates dropping sharply, but this pattern disguises a gradient, with Dalit, indigenous (Adivasi Janajati) groups in Hill and Mountain zones and Madhesi communities of the Terai having fertility rates significantly higher than the national average, not just because of differential fertility preferences, but also because of differential access to education, reproductive health services and decision making power, which are well documented in Nepal, reflecting differential aspects of caste, ethnicity and geographic location (Bhandari et al., 2017). The affirmed drop in infant mortality also masks important ethnic and geographic variations that are lost in the overall numbers.

Even though the demographic transformation in Nepal is important, there are important gaps in the literature. Firstly, there are disciplinary fragmentation such as positivist demographic analysis, political anthropology of ethnicity and migration, feminist health scholarship, and development economics address the dynamics of Nepal's population in largely distinct scholarly discourses that do not truly engage with one another. Second, the literature places an excessive emphasis on national-level aggregate indicators and an inadequate emphasis on theorizing the structural social inequalities which are not simply contextual factors of demographic processes. Third, the effects of the constitutional federal restructuring in Nepal (2015) that established seven provinces and restructured the scalar system of governance, data production and policy implementation have not been fully addressed in the demographic literature.

This paper attempts to fill these gaps, by critically analyzing the literature from the year 2000 to 2026. It aims to achieve four objectives for example to critically synthesize theoretical frameworks most relevant for understanding the demographic transformation of Nepal, to examine the major demographic domains (fertility, mortality, migration, urbanization and ethnic-demographic composition) through the lens of the structural social inequality, to critically assess methodological debates about the production of demographic data in Nepal and to promote a stratified framework of demographic transition that combines classical demographic science and intersectional social theory. The article helps to engage in interdisciplinary debates on the subjects of demography, development studies, political sociology/ anthropology and South Asian studies.

### **Demographic Transition Theory (DTT) in Post-Colonial Contexts**

This section explores the Demographic Transition Theory and its limitations in post-colonial contexts. Since Notestein's (1945) initial formulation, the demographic transition model (DTM), which posits a universal process of population change from high fertility/high mortality to declining mortality and then to declining fertility, and finally to low fertility/low mortality equilibrium has been a key theoretical perspective for describing population dynamics in developing societies. It is understandable that people are attracted to it: it is a parsimonious concept, empirically tractable, seemingly applicable in a wide range of national contexts and it has served as the basis of numerous comparative research programmes. The demographic trajectory in Nepal one of high mortality decline since the 1960s, followed by high fertility decline since the 1980s explores to be fairly typical for the classical transition model and has been often analyzed as such.

Demographic transition theory, however, has many drawbacks in the application to a post-colonial, socially stratified, and an ethnically plural society like that of Nepal. In a society, like India, where caste, ethnicity, gender and geography create significant disparities in education, economic opportunity, and health care, which are all associated with mortality and fertility change, its underlying assumption that a nation's population is a homogeneous social group or demographic actor facing a single transition process is empirically not sound. The ideational theory of fertility decline

put forwards by Cleland and Wilson (1987), which highlights the importance of new ideas and information as opposed to only structural economic factors, has had an impact in the South Asian context, but it also like most theories fails to sufficiently engage with the social hierarchy that underlies the diffusion of ideas.

More fundamentally, demographic transition theory has been formulated within the particular historical framework of Western Europe and is based on normative expectations about a developmental dimension of demographic change (the inevitability that all societies will move to a “Northern European” end-state characterized by low levels of fertility, mortality and high levels of urbanization) which post-colonial scholars have termed “demographic eurocentrism” (Greenhalgh, 1996). This teleological perspective blurs the actual variety of possible pathways to fertility and mortality change in different socio-cultural and political-economic environments, and views differences in the measured levels of fertility and mortality from the expected sequence of change as “shortfalls” in development rather than as theoretically important empirical deviations that would warrant other explanations.

The theory of “second demographic transition” (SDT) to explain the phenomenon of “below-replacement fertility”, “late marriage”, “increasing non-marital cohabitation”, and “increasing union instability” in post-industrial societies has received little but increasing use in the South Asian context. It is indeed relevant, but only partially to Nepal, as below the replacement level fertility is achieved, late marriage is more and more common among educated urban youth, and non-marital relationships, not formally recognized, are increasing. Yet, the individualization, value change and post-materialist values that SDT posits as explanations of fertility behavior do not easily fit into the structural and institutional factors that have explained Nepal’s fertility decline, labor migration, expansion of women’s education and penetration of family planning programs, and application of SDT to the socially conservative and predominantly rural population of Nepal requires some degree of analytical elaboration and contextualization.

### **The Politics of Reproduction**

The fertility transition in Nepal, even though fast, has been very uneven, both by social group and geographic region, a trend that has been reported extensively in the aggregate demographic literature, but not well theorized. The national total fertility rate (TFR) has dropped from 5.3 in 1991 to 2.3 in 2011 and 1.9 by 2021 (NSO, 2025; MoHP, 2022) a rate that has fallen at an extraordinary pace in comparison to the other South Asian countries. This overall number is, however, a sum of very important differentials of analytical significance.

The fertility gradient by education is high and regular, with women who have no education having a TFR about 3-4 times higher than women with secondary or higher education (MoHP, 2022). Geographic differentials are also large: the most remote and least well-endowed Karnali Province is still experiencing fertility rates well above the national average; while the province that includes the Kathmandu Valley (Bagmati) has fallen below the replacement level. Differences in fertility are large between caste and ethnic groups such as Dalit, some indigenous groups from the Terai and Muslim communities have significantly higher fertility levels than Brahmin-Chhetri and Newar groups, which is not driven by differences in fertility desires, but rather differential access to education, contraception, and reproductive decision-making (Bhandari et al., 2017; Bista, 2017).

Feminist scholarship on demography has been especially relevant in getting beyond the overall figures in the facts of fertility in Nepal to an understanding of the social and institutional context that shapes women’s reproductive choices. Acharya et al. (2010) report on the ongoing limitations on married women’s reproductive decision-making in many of these communities where husbands and in-laws have considerable control over contraceptive use, fertility preferences and pregnancy decisions, which is hidden by the overall figures of contraceptive prevalence. While the community health volunteer (FCHV) network has made great progress in expanding access to contraceptive and improving maternal health in Nepal (Glenton et al., 2010), the literature also reports the gendered nature of the workload that the FCHV network imposes on women in villages in the form of unpaid community health work.

Nepal has documented son preference, which is a structural factor influencing fertility behaviour in many South Asian settings, but there exist huge variations in the strength of son preference among ethnic and geographical groups. The literature shows a complex picture, with son preference being highest in high caste Hindu groups in the Hills and Terai, and lower and non-existent in many of the indigenous nationality groups (Frost et al., 2005). Such a variation is a challenge to the monolithic conceptions of South Asian son-preference and to the need for a disaggregated analysis of South Asian demographic behaviour by ethnic and caste group.

### **Mortality, Epidemiological Transition, and Health Inequality**

The mortality transition has been one of the most dramatic in Asia in Nepal. The life expectancy at birth in 1975

was around 44 years and in 2022 it was around 72 years (WHO, 2023), an increase of 28 years in less than 50 years. Whereas the infant mortality rate (IMR) decreased from around 200/1,000 live births in the 1970s to around 27/1,000 live births in 2022 (MoHP, 2022). Maternal mortality ratio have historically been one of the highest in South Asia, and in 1990, were more than 900 per 100,000 live births, but by 2020, these rates had fallen to around 151 per 100,000 live births, which is very high by international standards, but marked a decrease on an unprecedented scale (WHO, 2023).

These overall gains are due to a well-documented package of interventions that has included strengthening primary health care infrastructure, a community health volunteer network, the promotion of skilled birth attendance, the promotion of vitamin A supplementation programmes, the promotion of ORS for childhood diarrhoea and expansion of immunisation coverage (Khatry et al., 2001). But the literature on epidemiological transition in Nepal shows that communicable disease burden has declined while non-communicable diseases (NCDs) namely cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases and cancer have increased at a rapid rate which are now the dominant cause of morbidity and mortality in urban Nepal and are increasing rapidly in rural area (Aryal et al., 2015).

The social inequality aspects of mortality transition have analytical importance and are under-represented in the demographic literature. There are significant mortality differentials across caste and ethnicity for example Dalit children's mortality rates are much higher than the national average, the result of the structural exclusion of Dalit communities from the social determinants of health, such as access to adequate nutrition, safe water, quality health care, which are more commonly thought of as 'background factors'. Geographic determinants of mortality, such as the extreme remoteness of mountain and high Hill groups, lack of emergency obstetric care outside of major centres, and seasonal road closures which make referral impossible, exacerbate caste/ ethnic inequalities to produce mortality landscapes of profound social injustice (Thaddeus & Maine, 1994).

With the occurrence of the 1996-2006 Maoist conflict and the 2015 earthquakes, mental health aspects of the epidemiological transition in Nepal have gathered increasing scholarly attention. There are high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety among conflict-affected populations and earthquake survivors, which were higher among women, Dalits and indigenous nationality (Luitel et al., 2015). The lack of development of mental health services in Nepal (less than 0.5 psychiatrists per 100,000 population at national level) means there is a vast treatment gap with profound implications for productivity, family stability and social cohesion (Luitel et al., 2015).

### **Labor Migration, Remittance and Demographic Restructuring**

Labour migration has become arguably the most important demographic phenomenon shaping contemporary Nepalese society coupled with the processes of fertility, mortality, urbanization and ethnic-demographic dynamics, which has not been examined in an integrated way sufficiently in the disciplinary literature. Nepal is one of the most migration-intensive societies in the world: at the 2011 Census, around 1.9 million household members that were absent were working abroad, and the estimated number for 2022 has increased to around 3 million (IOM, 2020). Remittances account for around 25-30% of Nepal's GDP, one of the highest dependence rates in the world, making Nepal's labour migration a cornerstone of the country's political economy, instead of a marginal household livelihood strategy (World Bank, 2022).

Labor migration has a wide-ranging and multivariant impact on the demographic dimension. Male out-migration to Gulf States and Malaysia (the predominant migration pattern) leads to the creation of female headed households with women having greater economic and social decision-making power in the absence of their husbands. While literature evidences the psychological consequences of prolonged separation, the gendered effects of single-hood management, and vulnerabilities to economic exploitation and domestic violence faced by wives of migrant, research suggests that this "empowerment by default" relates to lowered fertility, increased investment in the education of children, and the better use of maternal health services.

At the community level, male out-migration has led to a feminization of agricultural labour, and changed land management practices, in rural areas. On the macro level, the remittance economy has boosted consumption, lowered poverty rates, and supported the growth of the private sector for education and health services, but it has also resulted in the Dutch disease syndrome (declines in the competitiveness of agriculture and manufacturing sectors), and in a new form of socioeconomic inequality between households with migration participants and those without migration participants (Seddon et al., 2002).

A second important migration dynamic, also with important demographic implications, is internal migration, especially rural-to-urban migration and migration to the Terai from the Hills. The more favourable agricultural potential

of the Terai and employment opportunities have lured many Hill people to migrate to the Terai, pivotally changing the ethnic demographic makeup of the Terai districts, which in turn has created socio-political tensions related to land access, ethnic representation and cultural change that underpin the Madhesi political movement (Guneratne, 2002).

### **Urbanization and the Spatial Restructuring of Nepal's Population**

Nepal's urbanization history is one of the most dramatic in recent urban development in Asia. The proportion of people living in urban areas has risen from about 17% in 2001 to about 62% in 2021, partly explained by the fact that this shift is partly due to the administrative reclassification of rural municipalities as urban ones in the local government restructuring of 2017 (CBS, 2021). This administrative inflating of urbanization statistics has led to a considerable scholarly debate on the validity of Nepal's urban statistics and analysis of the difference between real urbanization and statistical urbanization. However, the national statistical office (NSO) of Nepal categorized the Nepal's urban population as per the concept of degree of urbanization (NSO, 2024) which indicates only 27 percent of urban population of Nepal.

The Kathmandu Valley (Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur districts and surrounding municipalities) is the main source of true urbanization, as the metropolitan population has increased from about 1 million in 1991 to more than 3.5 million in 2021. The speed with which this concentration has occurred has created a precarious situation in terms of urban governance, with substandard housing conditions, poor water and sanitation facilities, one of the highest levels of air pollution in South Asia, informal settlements and an overloaded transportation system being just a few of the elements of a slow-motion disaster in the metropolitan region (Haack & Rattan, 2014).

Social demography of the urban Nepal includes great diversity and inequality. The people of Kathmandu represent the entire spectrum of the ethnic, caste, linguistic and regional diversity found in Nepal, which is the result of migration from all the provinces, and which gives the city a kaleidoscopic complexity. Although less visible as compared to rural poverty in overall poverty facts, urban poverty is found in the recent migrants and people living in informal settlements, who do not have access to formal jobs, secure housing, and social protection. Given that poor people in cities are concentrated in informal settlements and in low-wage jobs, and that the Dalit and other low-caste groups are concentrated in informal settlements and in low-paying jobs, it is clear that urbanization has not eradicated caste hierarchies in Nepal but rather transformed how they are spatially manifested.

### **Social Composition: Census Politics & Social Complexity**

Nepal's caste/ethnic diversity and their representation in the national census and its analytical products are a problematic political and academic field. The constitution of Nepal has recognized 59 indigenous nationalities (Adivasi Janajati), 125 caste and ethnic groups and 123 languages; this diversity has become more and more significant in issues of political representation, resource allocation and social justice as a result of the political mobilization of ethnic identity movements (CBS, 2011). The NPHC 2021 identified 142 caste/ethnic groups, 124 language groups and 10 religions (NSO, 2024).

The post-conflict constitutional transition of 2011 saw the most complete ever ethno-demographic census in Nepal's history, which recorded the size and geographic distribution of the population, as well as their level of literacy and employment, by caste/ethnicity. But the methodologies of classification in census has been subjected to a lot of criticism; the reason being that ethnic categories used by Census are not applied evenly across the Enumeration Areas, that multi-ethnic and inter-caste households are enumerated, and that the definition of caste/ethnic identity claims due to their political salience in the context of federal restructuring introduced systematic biases in self-identification as ethnic group in the Census (Gellner, 2007; Bhattachan, 2012). The 2021 Census has been implemented amidst difficult conditions due to COVID-19 restrictions and created further concerns regarding data completeness and consistency of classifications.

The methodological discussion aside, the literature on caste/ethnicity in India also shows a continuation of inequality and a system of reproduction that is structurally emphasized, which is systematically hidden by the national statistics. The literacy rate, education, occupation and land ownership rates among Brahmin and Chhetri (the dominant Hill-caste groups) are significantly higher than among Dalit, Hill indigenous nationality and Terai indigenous populations. These are not just historical factors slowly whittling away over time; recent studies have shown how they persist and even intensify as a result of differential access to the migration economy, to the political economy of remittances and differential access to private education benefiting resource-endowed caste groups (Bennett et al., 2008; Bhandari et al., 2017).

## **Theoretical and conceptual framework**

### **Stratified Demographic Transition: An Intersectional Framework**

This paper proposes a stratified demographic transition framework to combine classical demographic transition theory, intersectional social stratification analysis and political economy approaches to population change and to join the debate on decolonial demography. The framework focuses on the key limitation of traditional demographic transition theory (its social homogeneity assumption) by arguing that demographic transitions are always stratified processes, with different social groups experiencing qualitatively different demographic transitions, depending on their location in the structural hierarchy of caste, ethnicity, gender, class and geographic access.

The stratified demographic transition framework is based on three lines of theory. First, the analytical architecture to understand how caste/ethnicity, gender and geography create differentiated demographic outcomes that cannot be understood through single-axis analysis is provided by intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000) which sees social inequality being produced as the simultaneous and mutually constitutive action of multiple systems of domination. It is not a case of a Dalit woman in a Mountain village being “demographically disadvantaged” as the sum of her gender disadvantage, caste disadvantage and geographic disadvantage rather, she is structurally disadvantaged at the intersection of these three disadvantages, and her reproductive, migratory and health-seeking behaviors are constrained in qualitatively different ways.

Second, critical demography (Greenhalgh, 1996, Szreter, 1993) calls into question the claims of demographic positivism to value neutrality in relation to the measurement of population processes, reflecting that the production of demographic data, whether through the classification of population in the census, or through the design of survey instruments and through vital registration, is always situated in a political and institutional context that determines what is measured, how it is measured, and whose demographic experience is made analytically visible. When applied in the context of Nepal, critical demography highlights the political agendas behind ethnic categories in the census, the underrepresentation of marginalized and remote communities in census data and the normatively development-oriented understanding of the demographic indicators of Nepal.

Third, political economy of population approaches (Brennan, 2004) place the demographic dynamics in a macrostructural context of capitalist developmental and state formation processes and global integration in the labor market, thus offering a macrostructural complement to the household and individual-level analysis which is the common focus of much demographic research. In order to understand the situation of labor migration, remittance dependency and fertility decline in Nepal, it is essential to understand how this is embedded in the political economy of the Gulf labour markets, the developmental paths in South Asia, and the historical failure of the Nepalese state to create employment opportunities for its working age population.

### **Conceptual Operationalization**

The five dimensions of analysis that are considered central within the stratified demographic transition framework are demographic structure (population size, age-sex distribution, dependency ratios); demographic dynamics (fertility, mortality, migration rates and trends), social stratification (caste, ethnic, gender and geographic hierarchy that helps to differentiate demographic outcomes), spatial demography (how demographic outcomes are distributed and vary geographically across Nepal’s diverse ecological and administrative zones), and demographic governance (institutional systems of population data production, population change governance and demographic policy implementation are critically examined).

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design and Philosophical Orientation**

The review in this study is a critical narrative type, which is based on critical realistic philosophy that recognizes the reality of the demographic processes but also emphasizes the social construction of the measurement, interpretation and governance of these processes. In one particular sense, the review is explicitly normative such as to resist the tendency of aggregate demographic analysis to leave caste/ethnic, gender and geographic inequalities in the background as ‘asides’ or ‘peripheral’ issues of the demographic story, and to instead embrace structural social inequalities as a core element of Nepal’s demographic story.

## Search Strategy and Source Selection

From March 2024 to May 2026, systematic searches were carried out in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, POPLINE and the DHS Program database. Key words were: Nepal demography, Nepal fertility, Nepal mortality, Nepal migration, Nepal urbanization, Nepal census, Nepal caste ethnicity population, Nepal reproductive health, Nepal Dalit demography, Nepal labour migration, Nepal remittance demographic, Nepal maternal health, and social demography South Asia. The sources used were limited to the period 2000 to 2026 with relevant pre-2000 sources as a foundation where required. After screening for full text and quality, 76 sources were kept.

## Analytical Method

Thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used as the main method of analysis. Each major theme was further analyzed by adding an additional layer of intersectional analysis, systematically exploring differences in demographic results across the four dimensions of caste, ethnic, gender, and geographic, instead of using the national level results as the basis for analysis. All sources relying mainly on census and survey data were analyzed according to the political and institutional context of data production, defined by critical demography evaluation criteria.

## Findings of the Review

### The Demographic Dividend: Opportunity, Risk and Structural constraints

The concept of the “demographic dividend” the potential economic benefit from a temporarily favourable age structure in which a large working-age population outnumbers dependents has garnered much scholarly and policy attention in Nepal. Since the 1980s, Nepal’s fertility has been declining very fast, and its infant and child mortality rates have also been declining, which has resulted in an age structure of the population with a larger share of working age population (15–64) and a smaller dependency ratio (children and elderly as a proportion of working-age population) conditions that in theory are favorable for accelerated economic growth with a focus on increasing the supply of working age population, savings and investment in human capital (Bloom & Canning, 2004).

But the literature shows that there are strong structural barriers that constrain Nepal to capitalize on a demographic dividend. Nepal’s structural context does not exactly reflect the critical precondition for realizing demographic dividend, which is productive domestic employment absorption of a burgeoning working-age population. Nepal’s economy is primarily agriculture-based with low quality manufacturing and technology space to create jobs that are proportionate with the demographic dividend. The outcome is that Nepal’s “demographic dividend” is partially being exported: the working age surplus is being offered on the Gulf and Malaysian labor markets, instead of being sold into domestic productive capacity (Bloom & Canning, 2004; Seddon et al., 2002).

Additionally, demographic dividend has distributional dimensions which are analytically crucial. Educational spending both on demographic transformation to human capital and human capital to economic productivity is vastly unevenly distributed across the caste and ethnic hierarchy of Nepal. The demographic dividend, as it comes to fruition, will largely go to those communities that are already better off, having higher education levels, greater occupational mobility, and access to the political economy of migration and remittances. The demographic window of opportunity is a risk for Dalit, remote area indigenous and Madheshi marginalized communities as the structural conditions for realizing it have not yet been established.

### Gender Demography: Education, Empowerment, and Structural Constraints

One of the most analytically and politically significant areas of social demography literature is the gender dimensions of the demographic transformation in Nepal. Nepal has made huge strides in the education of females. The female literacy rate has gone from 25 percent in 1991 to 68 percent in 2021 (CBS, 2021) and with regard to women’s labor force participation and political representation (Nepal has one of the highest rates of women in the country’s parliament). These benefits are not hypothetical but real, and the causal importance of these improvements for fertility decline, child survival improvement and gains in household welfare are documented in the scholarly literature.

But feminist demographic research shows that there are still gender inequalities that have been perpetuated and that aggregate progress measures mask. Though the gender gap has reduced, it is still high in higher education and is significantly higher for Dalit and remote-area communities. Although the formal representation of women in politics is impressive, in practice their representation in substantive political power and decision making in the party and governance structures of Nepal is systematically denied (Tamang, 2009). Violence against women, such as intimate partner violence, dowry related violence and the practice of *chhaupadi* (menstrual seclusion prohibited in most of the western districts yet still practiced) is a structural constraint on women’s agency that is not captured by aggregate measures of women’s empowerment (Lama & Khattri, 2015).

Gender and caste/ethnicity are conjunctive and create demographic impacts of particular importance. Caste discrimination in Nepal's health facilities, compounded with lower educational attainment, higher fertility, poorer maternal health outcomes, greater exposure to domestic violence and other disadvantages, places Dalit women at the extreme end of demographic disadvantage in Nepal. There are different intersections of gender and caste/ethnic that produce structurally different scenarios of vulnerabilities and even the study by Bennett et al. (2008) demonstrate that the demographic disadvantage of Dalit women is not the result of gender or caste disadvantage alone.

### **Nepal's Federal Demographic Transition: Provincial Divergence**

The April and May 2015 Gorkha earthquakes which killed about 9,000 individuals, injured more than 22,000 and displaced hundreds of thousands represent a demographic shock of the first order, whose impact on future Nepal's demographic path has been partially explored in the literature. The direct mortality effect was geographically uneven and was mostly localized in certain Hill districts of Nuwakot, Sindhupalchowk and Gorkha, it had complex demographic consequences owing to impact on the population structure, incentives for out migration, and reconstruction of infrastructure.

The indirect demographic impact of the earthquakes has also been large such as an increase in rural to urban and international out migration among earthquake affected populations, disruptions of health care, educational and vital registration systems in affected districts, an increased mental health burden with demographic implications based on its impact on fertility, marriage and social reproduction and the destruction of the housing stock and agricultural infrastructure that underpins demographic reproduction in rural communities. The post-earthquake migration of people from affected districts to abroad is well documented and the migration triggered a significant demographic depletion from already migration intensive communities (Gartaula et al., 2016).

## **Discussion**

### **Aggregate-Inequality Paradox in Nepal's Demographic Story**

One of the main analytical conclusions of this review and its main contribution to the scholarly literature is the identification of what can be termed as the aggregate-inequality paradox in Nepal's demographic narrative. The overall demographic profile of Nepal offers an impressive development success tale of fast declining fertility, dramatic mortality decreases, substantial poverty alleviation via remittances and demographic modernization on parity or better with regional counterparts. This story that it is an empirical fact at the overall national level, and deeply misleading as a description of the demographic experience of significant portions of Nepal's population.

The answer to this paradox would be not just technical statistical disaggregation, as is often done, breaking down the national averages by province, level of education or wealth quintile, but theoretical reorientation, recognizing that Nepal's aggregate demographic "success" is made up of, and at the same time linked to, structural inequalities of caste/ethnicity, gender and place that are not incidental to Nepal's demographic process but rather constitute it. The quick drop-in fertility rates among educated, urban, Hill-caste women is not unrelated to the continuing fertility disadvantage of Dalit, rural and indigenous women both of which are outcomes of a stratified social system. The aggregate demographic dividend opportunity identified through national-level analysis is actually structurally divided between communities that have the human capital, social networks and political access to capitalize on the opportunity and communities that are structurally shut out of the opportunity. This stratified demographic transition is the theoretical framework that this paper proposes for the analysis of this paradox such as the aggregated statistical representation of demographic transition systematically ignores the social inequalities that produce it.

### **Data Politics: Census, Classification, and Demographic Governance**

One of the social demography dimensions of Nepal that has scholarly and political interest is the production, classification and governance of demographic data. The census, the primary tool of national demographic knowledge, is prepared by the National Statistical Office (NSO) in an institutional context that is influenced by ethnic identity mobilization, federal restructuring, and the influence of international development agencies, all of which are part of the political dynamics of Nepal. Caste/ethnic group categorizations are, as both analytically important and politically charged processes, crucial to the identification of the structural inequalities in the demography of populations described in this review, and they also define the means of representation, resource distribution and political mobilization.

There have been systematic tensions between the method of classification of the NSO census and the political

claims of the various ethnic and caste communities, as documented in the scholarly literature. Political issues related to demographic enumeration in Nepal's transition period are evident in the debates on the categorization of mixed-identity people, boundaries between linguistic, ethnic and caste groups, and procedures of enumeration in ethnically diverse areas. The change in the population shares of Brahmin-Chhetri and indigenous nationality population shares from the 2001 Census to the 2021 Census, which possibly reflects genuine demographic change but also the changes in self-identification in the context of ethnic political mobilization, indicates how Census data reflects not only the demographic change but also the political context in which it is produced.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

This article contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on social demography and South Asian population in three theoretical aspects. First, it introduces an alternative, theoretically integrated model to the assumptions of social homogeneity made in the classical demographic transition theory to the stratified demographic transition framework. This framework offers an analytical architecture to grasp the complexity of demographic change in socially stratified, ethnically plural and politically transitional societies, which are systematically misrepresented by conventional demographic frameworks, through a synthesis of demographic science, intersectional social stratification analysis, critical demography and political economy of population approaches.

Second, the article is a substantive empirical contribution, in that it is the most theoretically complete and intersectionally-engaged critical synthesis of the Nepalese social demography literature for the period 2000–2026 that integrates dimensions of fertility, mortality, migration, urbanization, and ethnic-demographic composition within a coherent analytical framework where structural inequality is treated as a dimension that is constitutive rather than contextual to demographic processes.

Third, the article makes a methodological contribution by critically examining the politics of demographic data in Nepal, showing that the classification of census data, the construction of survey instruments, and the coverage of vital registration are far from value-free technical practices, but instead are political ones that create and delineate what becomes analytically visible and what stays hidden in demographic data.

### **Practical and Policy implications**

The results of this review have a tangible relevance to policy makers, planners and practitioners in the demographic and development context of Nepal. In terms of national population policy, results make a strong case for the adoption of equity-focused demographic objectives that explicitly target caste/ethnic, gender and geographical disparities which are hidden in aggregate estimates, in place of aggregate demographic targets (TFR reduction, contraceptive prevalence increase, life expectancy improvement). Without targeted investments in the educational, health and economic empowerment of those communities that are currently structurally excluded from the preconditions for the demographic dividend opportunity among population groups such as Dalit, indigenous nationality and remote-area communities.

This stark difference in the provincial demographic outcomes calls for a real differentiated provincialization in health and education planning with adequate level of per capita resource allocations to Karnali, Sudurpashchim and Madhesh Provinces which are structurally disadvantaged in terms of resources and not just due to behavioural or cultural factors. Federal transfers should be used to offset, not exacerbate, provincial demographic imbalance.

Nepal's demographic model, which is heavily reliant on remittances, needs attention in terms of policy changes for ensuring its structural sustainability in the context of migration governance. The exploitation of Nepal's demographic dividend in the labour market of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is a serious development failure which needs to be tackled by a combination of migration fee regulation, bilateral labour agreement, investment in skills development and domestic job creation policy. The welfare of migrant workers, both in terms of healthcare, insurance and protection of rights in the countries where they are working, must be improved from a rhetorical to structural level.

To undertake reform in census and vital statistics, the NSO should put effort into methodologically sound ethnic and caste disaggregation of all the demographic indicators, and put the data out in formats which can be readily accessed by researchers, civil society, and community organizations. The scale-up of VRS, especially in more remote districts, to the informal urban population, is crucial to providing the quality of demographic data that evidence-based policy informed.

## Limitations and Future Research

This review has methodological limitations that must be the object of scholarly transparency. However, due to the prevailing quantitative nature of the literature in the field of Nepal demography, which is mostly based on secondary data from the NDHS and census, the qualitative and ethnographic aspects of demographic experiences, such as the lived realities of fertility decision-making, migration experience and health-seeking behavior left out of the secondary data, are underrepresented in the analytical synthesis. Qualitative demographic work is now needed and should be used in future reviews in a systematic way to give the review the “texture” of experience that quantitative analysis does not deliver.

Demographic information has a limited temporal validity in a country as demographically dynamic as Nepal: the most recent complete demographic and health survey data available for this review (NDHS, 2022) is almost four years old in some aspects, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on fertility, mortality, migration, and health care utilization are not yet fully analytically available.

The future research priorities are: demographic consequences of the federal restructuring in Nepal through a longitudinal perspective; systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of demographic impacts of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable groups of Nepal; social demography and demographic integration of the urban informal settlements of Nepal; demographic impacts of labor migration on the second generation in Nepal, especially on children in migrant households; comparative analysis of the demographic trajectory of Nepal with other methodologically productive comparators in the South Asian context, namely Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

## Conclusions

Despite the dramatic and rapid demographic change in Nepal, social inequalities of caste, ethnicity, gender, and geography compose an equally dramatic but opposite story of social structural continuity into which the aggregate statistical portrait is cut. The review shows that the fertility decreases, the tremendous mortality drop, the massive increase of labor migration, the ongoing urbanization and the increasing provincial disparities are not isolated demographic processes, but are structurally related demographic changes that are part of the political economy of Nepal’s post-conflict, federal, remittance-dependent development path.

The stratified demographic transition model proposed in this paper offers theoretical alternatives more than enough to this complexity, while rejecting developmental optimism of aggregate demographic progress narratives and developmental pessimism of pathologizing accounts of Nepal’s demographic struggles. The narrative of transformation and injustice in Nepal is one that is summed up by demographic numbers, but one that shows a range of experiences across communities and a process of national transition all of which require multiple indicators.

The analytical emphasis of this approach moving structural inequality into the foreground rather than the background of the demography is not only a scholarly preference, but also the policy need for this. However, for Nepal’s constitutional promises of social justice, federalism and the empowerment of historically marginalized groups to be realized in demographic terms, those who determine the development trajectory of the country need analytical tools that can challenge the systematic invisibility of the structural disparities in aggregate statistics. It is that, ultimately, that is the contribution this critical review aims to do.

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