

Tracing the Feminization of Internal Migration in Nepal Through Census Data

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Abstract

The gender dimension of migration not only indicates a growing number of female migrants but also demands for a gender-sensitive analysis. While the trend has been increasingly identified by international migration studies, internal female migration in Nepal remains under researched. This study has traced gender aspect of internal migration by analysing trends in sex ratios of five consecutive national censuses—1981, 1991, 2001, 2011, and 2021—disaggregated by ecological zones (Mountain, Hill, and Tarai). This is termed as feminization of migration in this paper. The finding shows a consistent declining trend in sex ratio, especially in the Mountain and Hill zones, suggesting a rise in female migration. Using sex ratio as a proxy, this study explores process and perspective both in terms of sex ratio trend and reasons of migration. Drawing on Mahler and Pessar’s gendered geographies of power framework, this study highlights how structural forces, such as labor demands, education and shifting norms, interact with women’s agencies in shaping migration trajectories. The finding emphasized the necessity of gender-sensitive migration policy that identify women’s diverse motivations and vulnerabilities in Nepal’s shifting demographics.

Keywords: *internal-migration, gender dimension, feminization, disaggregation & census*

Introduction

Gender dimension of migration is neither a new nor a universal trend (Donato *et al.*, 2011). Shifting patterns of international and internal migration place this issue on the agenda of policymakers, politicians and researchers. As Mansouri and Tittensor (2017) said, migration and gender are increasingly prominent issues in global policy dialogues, particularly as we see a simultaneous rise in overall human mobility and a growing

diversity in the female migration flows—both in terms of regional clustering and occupational specialization which is also supported by Anastasiadou *et al.* (2023) who claimed that migration is a highly gendered process. The scholar's this claim is termed as feminization in this study.

In last decades, the number of migrant women has been increasing along with their social and political visibility, which is known as the gender dimension of migration (Magliano *et al.*, 2009). Historically, female migration was understudied and underrepresented (Alemam, 2020). However, this shift, in turn, has encouraged the development of more gender-sensitive research agenda as well as policy interventions that better address the unique experiences and needs of migrating women. Female migration patterns associated with factors like marriage is often discussed in the current trend of international migration. A recent pattern observed in Nepal is that international migration triggers internal migration inside the country. For example, when male members of a family go abroad in search of work and send back remittances, their wives and the family members with children decide to purchase land in the cities or nearby towns. They build house, educate children and contribute intrinsically family split (Fernández-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020; Singh, 2019; Gurung & Shrestha, 2024).

Migration is not all about mobility, but also the movement of body and mind, and their evolving relationship with their place. Stenbacka and Forsberg (2020) made observations on how gender norms are navigated as individuals move through different cultural and geographical contexts, especially in international migration. They argue that people adapt their gendered behaviours to fit into new places, and they call this “going gender” which is continuously redefined by reflexive and strategic practice as people encounter different gendered expectations at different places. In this context, Alemam 2020 and Philip, 2019 emphasize that feminization of migration involves both process (increase in the number of female migrants) and perspective (gender sensitive analysis).

Luca Stanus Ghib (2018) adds a different dimension to this discourse by taking in the changing pattern of female migrants. Gouws (2007), he further defines it as the migration of women independent of male counterparts, highlighting a vital transformation in traditional migration dynamics. However, this shift is not entirely new. Analyses of historical migration flow data, Greefs and Winter (2016), have revealed that women have been participating actively in migration, also in-dependently. Migration studies have traditionally focused on male migrants, viewing women as secondary movers, mainly for family related reasons (Pedraza 1991). Ravenstein's laws of migration (1889), observed that women are more likely to migrate short distances, often for domestic services or marriage. Yet this perception has evolved. It is the least understood

trend in migration literature (Hofmann & Buckley, 2013). By the 1980s, significant works emerged highlighting women's agency in migration while recognizing gender differences in the process and settlement. Finally, "feminization of migration" became commonly used term from the late 1990s to describe the increasing participation of women in migration flows, with recognition of the increasing number of female migrants as well as the need for gender-sensitive analysis (Casas & Garson, 2005; Christou & Kofman, 2022).

Despite these global shifts, internal female migration remains understudied, especially in the context of Nepal. Before 1990, female migration and its concern in policy and periodic plans in Nepal were less prominent, since the focus was on infrastructure and rural development. Male migration was dominant, and the women migrated as dependents - a trend that ignored gender dynamics. After reformation of democracy, there was a wave of male-dominated rural to urban migration. But after this era, women began migrating independently for education and work. In addition, women's involvement in informal labor and caregiving sectors has greatly increased after earthquake, expanding women's representation from the traditional marriage-related moves only in labor migration. Anastasiadou *et al.* (2023) and Teodorescu (2024) pointed out the double burden of discrimination that experienced by migrant women closely associated with gender aspects and migration status as discussed above.

Migration studies based on gender disaggregated data have received most attention in the literature followed by the comparison of determinants. The feminization of internal migration has come to become as an important discourse in Nepal, signifying the increased mobility of women in recent times. According to Gurung and Shrestha (2024), this shift has a significant impact in reshaping the local demographics and family structures, often leading to feminizing effect in urban population due to male migration. This trend is a response to economic and environmental pressures, which can result in potential social fragmentation and increased vulnerability for those left behind. As highlighted by GiHA (2021) and Khatiwada, *et al.* (2024) women trapped at home often sustained tension especially those staying with abusive family members. They are compelled to live lives with depleted family resources, increased care burden, loss of livelihoods, return of migrant family members, fear of infection, and uncertainties about the future (GiHA-TT, 2021; Khatiwada, *et al.*, 2024). Due to these factors, Nepal needs to recognize these linkages and undertake policies that are favourable to migrant households and strengthen local adaptation process.

Yet, despite these changes, internal female migration remains understudied, and the data limitations- particularly the lack of age and sex disaggregated time-series migration data- hinder comprehensive analysis (Anastasiadou *et al.*, 2024). This study addresses

this gap by using sex-ratio trends from five national censuses (1981-2021) as a proxy to trace the feminization of internal migration in Nepal. While sex ratio alone cannot capture the full complexity of gendered migration, its spatial and temporal shifts offer valuable insights into changing dynamics and the need for more inclusive, gender sensitive migration policies.

Material and Method

This study analyses process of gender dimension of internal migration in Nepal using sex ratio data from five consecutive national censuses of Nepal—1981, 1991, 2001, 2011, and 2021. The data are disaggregated by ecological zones (Mountain, Hill, and Tarai). This study also incorporates the perspective in terms of why women migrate (reasons). Process is described in terms of sex ratio- defined as the number of males per 100 females. Sex ratio is measured to trace the feminization of migration, its changes over time. It is true that sex ratio alone cannot fully explain the feminization, but its geographical shifts provide insights into changing gender migration dynamics. Such changes are analysed through Mahler and Pessar's (2001) gendered geographies of power framework to understand how structural forces—such as labor demands, ecological constraints, and social norms—shape gendered migration trajectories.

This study employs census data published by the National Statistics Office (NSO), limitations such as the absence of disaggregation by caste and ethnicity, marital status, and migration purpose restrict a fully intersectional analysis. But it also believes that sex ratio trends offer a meaningful entry point for reviewing existing policy gaps, especially in the context of Nepal's internal migration.

Results

Regional Variation in Lifetime Migration by Sex, 2001-2021

Lifetime migration refers to the movement of individuals whose place of birth is different from their current place of residence. As shown in Table 1 migration from Mountain and Hill zones to Tarai zone remains dominant across all census years. Tarai consistently accounts for the highest proportion of lifetime in-migration for both males and females, although male in-migration remains slightly higher than female in-migration in Hill and Tarai zones. In contrast, female in-migration exceed male in-migration in the Mountain zone across all years. However, the gender gap in in-migration has gradually narrowed between 2001 and 2021, particularly in the Hill and Tarai zones. On the other hand, Hill zone consistently accounts for the highest proportion of inter zonal lifetime out migration for both male and females across all census years. Male lifetime out-migration is higher than female out migration in Mountain and Tarai zones whereas. female lifetime out-migration is more concentrated in Hill zone.

Table 1

Inter-zonal Lifetime Migration by Sex, 2001-2021 Censuses

Year	In-migration					
	Male			Female		
	Mountain	Hill	Tarai	Mountain	Hill	Tarai
2001	1.7	21.1	77.2	2.9	20.6	76.4
2011	1.4	30.0	68.6	2.8	26.7	70.5
2021	1.8	30.9	67.2	3.0	28.6	68.4
	Out-migration					
	Male			Female		
	Mountain	Hill	Tarai	Mountain	Hill	Tarai
2001	16.8	68.4	14.8	17.4	69.4	14.2
2011	19.4	60.5	20.1	18.4	64.7	16.8
2021	20.7	60.1	19.2	19.8	63.1	17.1

Source: Gurung and Shrestha (2025), Table 3.3

Sex Ratio

Sex ratio, that is, the number of males per 100 females is a vital demographic indicator which shows how the society is being changed in terms of gender dynamics and societal structure. Regarding migration, it complements a critical lens to understand the gendered migration patterns. Table 2 shows the sex ratio of life-time migrants by ecological zone from 1981 to 2021. Within four decade the sex ratio of in- and out-migrants has experienced a consistent decline over the four decades. This indicates a more females are migrating internally than before, remarkably a gender dimension of internal migration.

Among the in-migrants, Mountain zone shows the sharpest decline in sex ratio than Hill and Tarai. For instance, the sex ratio was 72.2 in 1981 and it is only 49.9 in 2021 whereas in Hill the sex ratio was 98.7 in 1981 and it is 88.1 in 2001. Regarding out migration, Mountain zone displays a distinct trend in sex ratio compared to Hill and Tarai. Though the sex ratio of Mountain has declined from 107.1 in 1981 to 85.2 in 2021 but followed fluctuating pattern. In contrast, Hill's sex ratio shows the increasing female out migration over the four decades. Within same period Tarai stands out for its rise in male out migration between 1991 (105.3) to 2011 (100.4) and followed by declined in 2021(Table 2).

Table 2

Sex ratio of Life-time Migrants (in and out) by Ecological Zones, 1981-2021

Year	In-migrants			Out-migrants			Total
	Mountain	Hill	Tarai	Mountain	Hill	Tarai	
1981	72.2	98.7	111.5	107.1	108.2	95.3	107.3
1991	53.9	86.9	98.5	88.1	95.6	105.3	95.1
2001	55.3	98.1	96.7	92.5	94.4	107.2	95.8
2011	42.3	94.7	81.7	88.4	78.6	100.4	84.0
2021	49.9	88.0	80.1	85.2	77.6	91.5	81.5

Source: CBS, 1987, Table 7.15, Niraula (1995), Table 6; Gurung and Shrestha (2025), Table 5.3

Reasons for Migration

Table 3 presents reasons for migration by sex across four census year 1981-2021), indicating that internal migration in Nepal is influence by different factors beyond marriage. A noticeable trend is the sharp decline in migration for agriculture purposes, especially among males-from 36.3 percent in 1981 to just 2.3 percent in 2021. This suggests a shift away from traditional rural livelihood. Whereas migration for economic reasons has increased by nearly 14 percentage points among males and by 1 percentage point among females over the same decades. The percentage change is higher among male though females are also in increasing, indicating a growing female labour participation.

Table 3

Reasons for Migration by Sex, 1981, 2001, 2011, 2021 Censuses

Reasons for migration	Male					% Change	Female				
	1981	2001	2011	2021			1981	2001	2011	2021	% Change
Economic migration	22.8	29.7	30.1	36.6	13.8	12.1	6.5	6.9	13.1	1.0	
Agriculture	36.3	22.8	19.6	2.3	-34.0	19.4	14.1	11.4	1.6	-17.8	
Education	4.0	14.7	18.9	18.9	14.9	1.6	6.7	9.3	10.9	9.3	
Marriage	1.0	0.0	0.9	0.9	-0.1	30.3	42.1	40.4	40.3	10.0	
Dependency/dependent			19.0	28.2	28.2			21.4	24.4	3.0	
Conflict			0.7					0.5			
Returnee				4.4						2.2	
Natural disaster				0.6						0.4	
Others		32.7	5.9	7.8			30.6	3.8	6.8		
Not reported		36.0		5.0			36.6		6.3		

Source: Gurung and Shrestha (2025), Table 5.5

Similarly, another most remarkable reason is migration for education. Over the three decades, reporting of education as reasons for migration among females has increased by almost 10 times—from 1.6 percent in 1981 to 10.9 percent in 2021— whereas it is almost about 5 times among males. This indicates changing aspiration among females to acquire education. However, despite these shifts, female migration continues to be shaped by traditional gender norms as reflected in the concepts of “going gender” where women navigate and adapt their roles within societal expectation. Despite these shifts, marriage remain the dominant reasons for female migration. Almost 10 in 4 females reported of it, which is consistent since 2001.

Discussion

The gender dimension of internal migration in Nepal is a growing and complex phenomenon that reflects not only the broader socio-economic transformations but also demands gender sensitive policy. The declining sex ratio of migrants across ecological zones supports this trend. This shift is influenced by broader structural changes, including improved access to education, changing gender norms, and the growing demand for female labor in urban and informal sectors. The outcome of this is clearly visible in various forms such as identified by 2021 population census which indicated by National Statistics Office (NSO) thematic report on housing and household dynamics which showed that many buildings are being vacant in Nepal due to out-migration especially from the rural areas. In Mountain, around 12 percent of these buildings were found empty (Khatiwada & Lamichhane, 2024).

This study examined gender dimension of internal migration both as a process (increasing number of female migrants) and perspective (a gender-sensitive lens that examine the socio culture dynamic behind migration) (Alemam, 2020). Thus, gender dimension generally refers to a relative change in the gender composition of migration flows. Declining sex ratio clearly reflects the gender dimension of internal migration in Nepal which can also be understood as a process which is termed as feminisation in this paper. Male migration, especially in hilly areas of Nepal has been a tradition for livelihood where land does not provide enough for year-round subsistence. In the early days, women were less in number from these areas but now this number is being increased (Jaquet *et al.*, 2019). Camlin *et al.*, (2014) highlighted that multiple generations and are geographically expanded family, and where marriage rate is low, in this context young women are more likely to mobile than their male counterparts to seek opportunities. Tabassum (2023) also highlighted that women are migrating independently for their economic reasons, sometimes as primary breadwinners. These studies further suggest that women’s migration patterns have challenging the traditional

norms as a dependent and migrate only with their families. This evidence aligns with the growing trend of women migration in Nepal.

The sex ratio data from 1981 to 2021 shows that women are increasingly migrating, particularly in Mountain and Hill zones, where sex ratio of in-migrants dropped which is align with global pattern observed by Castles and Miller (1998), who noted that females are playing a vital role in all types of migration flow.

Yet this issue is the most overlooked in discussions on development and policy agenda. The feminization of migration changes the family structures, as women assign new roles and responsibilities that reshape the traditional gender norms along with challenges (Madondo, 2024) Result shows female dominated internal migration as dependent or independent. This shift is further described by the concepts of “doing gender” and “going gender” (Stenbacka & Forsberg, 2020). Doing gender in terms of migration refers it conforms to traditional roles-such as marriage, which continues to be the main reasons for female migration (about 40 % since 2001). Differing from going gender is a survival strategy of women who move independently for education, or employment. Results reveal a growing trend of women asserting agency in their mobility decisions.

These findings have concrete policy implication. Since all migrants are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation but female migrants particularly at risk, they face double discrimination-as women and as migrants. As Anastasiadou *et al.* (2024) indicate that there is a lack of gender sensitive migration research. They also indicated in addition that sex-disaggregated information would not be sufficient to fully capture the complex nature of female migration experience. Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate this gap using sex ratio as a proxy and interpreting it based on gendered geographic power frameworks. The emphasis of this framework (Mahler & Pessar, 2001) on the interaction between individual agencies, and structural forces such as labour markets, education access and cultural norms across geographic and social scales, provides a useful lens to this perspective. This perspective aligns with the idea that migration is not just a physical transition but also a deeply embodied and gendered experience, shaped by the interplay between individual agency and the socio-cultural expectations of different places. That is why, there need the urgent and critical reassessment of migration theories and methodologies through the lens of gender biases for more inclusive and accurate migration predictions as said by Athina Anastasiadou *et al.* (2025).

However, this trend also brings new challenges. Piper (2003, 2008) emphasized that migration brings a challenge for researchers and policy makers concerning women’s rights, development and citizenship. At both social and policy levels, a deeper understanding is needed, particularly within specific geographic or cultural context.

Female migrants will face structural barriers and vulnerabilities that are not yet countered by current policies. National and local planning must include gender-sensitive strategies so that migration is channelled towards inclusive development. The decline in sex ratio across Nepal's ecological zones is not just a demographic fact—it reflects a gendered transformation in migration patterns. More women are migrating for diverse reasons other than marriage, including education, economic opportunities, and care work. Such change demand gender-sensitive policy response that recognize women's agency and address their double vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

The feminization of internal migration in Nepal indicates a paradigm shift from numeric presence to the notion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Simultaneously, the shift raises awareness to the structural vulnerabilities and challenges that female migrants face. Addressing these challenges, we need inclusive and gender-sensitive policies which are vital for creating a more equitable future ensuring migrant women's contributions. The narrative of female internal migration is not only the issue to converge on declining or increasing the number of women migrants, but it also specifically gives a living experience of migrant women both in formal and informal sectors. Understanding the nuances of their experiences in relation to psychological, economic, and social aspects are instrumental to policy formulation which can be taken as the evolving process of policy initiatives. As Thebe (2019) highlighted it is essential to maximize the benefits by minimizing the potential challenges, In the context of Nepal, evidence demands the robust gender sensitive migration governance to visualize the gender dimension of migration. As in other fields, the field of women migration is to be looked through inclusive, perspective accepting and recognizing women's unique needs and aspirations.

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