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**Women's Participation in Foreign Labour Migration and Spousal Violence: A Study on Returnee Women Migrant Workers in Nepal**

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### Abstract

While existing studies point to a high degree of physical and sexual violence<sup>1</sup> against women in Nepal, there is a lack of studies assessing the extent of violence among women who participate in foreign labor migration. This paper tries to fill this research gap by assessing the prevalence of spousal violence against women in overseas employment by using survey and interview data from a non-probability sample of 138 returnee women migrant workers (WMWs). The data used in this paper was collected in Dhading and Rupandehi districts in 2017 by a team of researchers, including the authors of this paper, for a comprehensive study on gender-based violence against WMWs. The study found the rate of lifetime physical violence among WMWs ten percent higher than the national average of 22 percent (MOHP 2012). This rate was highest among Dalit women and women above 35. The physical and sexual violence rates were lowest among women with secondary or higher level of education. Similarly, the rates of physical and sexual violence were lowest among the WMWs whose husbands had secondary or higher levels of education, and the rates were highest among the WMWs whose husbands did not have a formal education. The study found only a weak relationship between women's participation in labor migration and violence from their husbands and family members. For many WMWs, the violence prevailed in the pre-migration and post-return phases, and some women had participated in labor migration due to the violence in the family itself.

*Keywords:* physical violence, sexual violence, gender-based violence, spousal violence, female labor migration, foreign employment

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<sup>1</sup> 'Physical violence' in this study includes any form of beating, hitting with the hand or an object, kicking, or hurting someone physically. This definition is consistent with the description of physical violence offered in Domestic Violence (Offense and Punishment) Act, 2009 of Nepal. 'Sexual violence' by husband in this study refers to involuntary/forceful sexual relation.

### **Women's Participation in Foreign Labour Migration and Spousal Violence: A Study on Returnee Women Migrant Workers in Nepal**

Despite the Nepal Government's recognition of GBV as a serious issue and its declaration of the year 2010 as a 'Year against Gender-Based Violence' and preparation of a 'national plan of action' in 2009 (Government of Nepal, 2009), the occurrence of gender-based violence (GBV) is still extremely high in Nepali. The types of GBV Nepali women experience range from physical, economic, and sexual to psychological (Paudel 2007). In a national health survey, more than a fifth (22 percent) of Nepali women aged 15-45 reported physical violence at least once from age 15 upwards (MOHP, 2012). In the same study, around 9 percent of women from the same age group reported having experienced violence in the year prior to the survey.

The rate of GBV varies in terms of geographic location and women's socio-economic status. Available studies indicate a higher rate of GBV among women in rural areas and women from underprivileged groups. In a study of married women aged 15 to 24 in the rural areas of Dang, Dolakha, Sindhupalchowk, and Kapilvastu districts, more than half the women (51.9 percent) had experienced either physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (Lamichhane et al., 2011). More than a third (about 36 percent) of the women had experienced such violence within a year prior to the survey in the same study. Studies also point to a higher rate of GBV among women from lower socioeconomic status and with lower education (Atteraya et al., 2014; Lamichhane et al., 2011; MOHP, 2012). Tarai women of systemically underprivileged castes and ethnicities are at the highest risk of violence by their intimate partners (Atteraya et al., 2014).

Women are also at a high risk of GBV in the workplace as women workers are concentrated in unregulated low-paying jobs. Studies find workplace

violence strikingly pronounced in the cases of women migrant workers and those employed in informal sectors (Kim et al., 2007), where workers have limited individual and collective bargaining power. A study finds women in informal sectors in Nepal, especially the construction and entertainment sectors, more vulnerable to verbal and sexual violence than those employed in formal sectors (Bradley & Sauvanet, 2017). A study on young migrant workers in carpet and garment factories in Nepal found one in ten young women experienced sexual coercion in the workplace (Puri & Cleland, 2007).

The perpetrators of the violence are usually familiar people. GBV against married women is usually perpetrated at home by husbands, husbands' parents, and other family members, while parents, siblings, and grandparents are the perpetrators of GBV against unmarried female adolescents (Paudel, 2007). Workplace violence is usually perpetrated by employers, supervisors, and co-workers (Bradley & Sauvanet, 2017; Pandey et al., 2018). In a study conducted with 200 nurses in Nepal, two-thirds (64.5 percent) of the respondents had faced some workplace violence within six months of the survey at the hands of relatives of patients, followed by in-house employees (Pandey et al., 2018). More than half the respondents (61.1 percent) faced verbal abuse, while 15.5 percent suffered from physical violence, and 9 percent faced sexual violence. Another study also indicates the prevalence of verbal harassment against female workers from their senior colleagues, even in formal sector jobs (Bradley & Sauvanet, 2017).

### **Context: Spousal Violence against Nepali Women Migrant Workers**

While there have been some studies on violence against women in Nepal in general, studies exploring the issue of violence against women migrant workers (WMWs) who have returned from foreign employment are negligible. Most Nepali women migrant workers travel to Malaysia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates for employment, and most of them are engaged in domestic

work (Kharel, 2016). This employment sector has a high incidence of abuse and exploitation. The informal nature of work, staying with the employer and providing round-the-clock services, and lack of support services are some factors that increase the risk of violence against women migrant workers (Kharel, 2016). Women domestic workers are at the risk of limited freedom of movement, lack of social protection, excessively long working hours, poor living and working conditions, harassment, violence, and mental illness (Simkhada et al., 2018). A study finds Nepali housemaids working on average for 15 hours a day while 29.3 percent of the respondents were physically abused and 5 percent were sexually abused in Saudi Arabia. Likewise, 54.4 percent of the respondents in Lebanon reported having experienced physical abuse, and another 5 percent had been sexually harassed (Simkhada et al., 2018).

Women workers' experience of violence is not limited to the workplace in foreign countries. Studies indicate spousal violence against women workers as a cause and consequence of migration. Many women participate in labor migration to escape violence from their husbands and husbands' family (Belanger & Rahman, 2013). The risk of violence against women increases with their participation in foreign employment due to the stigma associated with women's travel abroad. A few studies conducted on the issue highlight that WMWs experience violence in the family and community upon their return (Bhadra, 2013; Kharel, 2016). To make the matters worse, some WMWs face heightened violence after migrating for labor (Bhadra, 2013). Husbands and families of WMWs are likely to abuse WMWs, considering them 'impure' and 'damaged' due to their stay abroad (Kharel, 2016), particularly since they find it difficult to deal with societal norms that question the honor of WMWs due to their migration. Further, the stigmatization of WMWs is often exacerbated by the absence of a distinct boundary between migration and trafficking, which results in associating women's migration for work abroad with sex trafficking (Sijapati et al., 2011).

Studies conducted elsewhere also suggest a relationship between women's participation in labor migration and spousal violence (Belanger & Rahman, 2013; Rocca et al., 2009). Women's enhanced socio-economic resources, with earnings from foreign employment including exposure to employment programs and trainings, are noted to have repercussions; the change in traditional gender roles puts women at the potential risk of violence (Belanger & Rahman, 2013; Rocca et al., 2009). A study of left-behind men in Vietnam stressed that with the change in women taking up new roles of breadwinners as migrants, notions of masculinity, including their roles in household and care regime, are also subject to change (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011). The study also points out that men had to strike a balance between taking care of their children and household, on the one hand, and maintaining 'locally accepted masculinity ideals', on the other hand (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011). The change in gender roles at home but without it being socially acceptable can create conflicts and lead to spousal violence.

Thus, within this context, the paper explores: i) What is the prevalence of spousal violence among Nepali WMWs? ii) What factors are associated with women migrant workers' experience of violence? iii) What is the relationship between women's engagement in foreign labor migration and their experience of violence at home?)

#### **Factors Associated with Spousal Violence against Women: A Review of Literature**

This section discusses the major factors associated with spousal violence against women using studies conducted in and outside Nepal. The section specifically discusses the relationship of women's education, employment, and empowerment with the perpetration of violence against them and the role of social norms in normalizing violence against women.

### **Women's Education, Employment and Empowerment**

Studies suggest some relations between GBV and women's education, employment, and empowerment, although the nature of relationships is not always clear (MOHP, 2012; Rapp et al., 2012; Sida, 2015). A national survey finds an inverse relationship between women's education and GBV against them in Nepal (MOHP, 2012). Women without formal education are more likely to experience physical violence than those with at least some schooling, and women with higher levels of education (School Leaving Certificate and above) are least likely to experience physical violence (MOHP, 2012). The power imbalance between men and women is considered the main cause of GBV, and women's education contributes to balancing the power by increasing women's employment and socio-economic status (Sida, 2015). However, other studies (such as Rapp et al., 2012) indicate a positive relationship between women's increased education and the likelihood of violence. A study in Bangladesh finds women with an education higher than their husbands' to be more likely to experience violence as compared to equally educated couples (Rapp et al., 2012).

Studies conducted in and outside Nepal indicate an association between the occurrence of violence against women and their employment and economic empowerment, although the relationship between them is mixed: women's employment and consequent economic empowerment have reduced the occurrence of GBV in some contexts while it has increased the rate of violence in others. Women often face backlash at home and in society when they engage in economic activities to provide for themselves and their families. Some studies find women's income largely determines their exposure to domestic violence (Desilets et al., 2019). A study on gender-based violence in Nigeria finds economically-empowered women at a higher risk of violence from strangers as well as family members than those not engaged in employment (Qasim & Vemuru, 2020). Women who earned higher than their male counterparts faced a



higher risk of violence, and the situation would exacerbate if the husbands were unemployed: husbands were more likely to inflict violence upon their wives, considering the alteration in the gender roles as a threat to their manhood and existing patriarchal social norms (Desilets et al., 2019). The NDHS survey of 2011 found a similar trend in Nepal, with a higher rate of spousal beating reported among women with employment (37 percent) than those who were not employed for cash (30 percent) (MoHP, 2013). Women are also subjected to intimate partner violence (IPV) as their partners try to control finances and maintain economic dependencies (Camey et al., 2020).

However, a study in South Africa finds a negative relationship between women's employment (and economic empowerment enhanced through micro-finance support) and the rate of spousal violence against them (Kim et al., 2007). Micro-finance support provided a source of empowerment to women by giving them confidence and self-esteem to resolve conflict, make household decisions and build social networks, and this led to the eventual reduction in violence by men (Kim et al., 2007).

The relationship between women's empowerment, which is generally measured as women's involvement in decision-making, and the likelihood of violence against them is not always clear. Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) of 2011 finds no connection whatsoever in the relationship between women empowerment and spousal violence in Nepal; spousal violence was inflicted upon women even though they were active in decision-making (MoHP, 2013). Studies from elsewhere also suggest that women's empowerment through employment does not always contribute to reducing GBV, and more importantly, employment taken outside the home followed by informal and seasonal employment tends to increase women's likelihood of GBV (Dalal 2011; Vyas et al., 2015).

Women's challenge to the prevalent gender norms increases the likelihood of them experiencing GBV. Vyas et al. (2015) point out that women who own their businesses are more likely to face domestic violence compared to those who co-own businesses with their partners, as the former group of women more openly confront non-traditional gender roles. The economic empowerment programs, thus, will need to take into account the norms, roles, and sociocultural expectations pertaining to gender and work and address them in order to counter the negative impacts of such programs (Desilets et al., 2019).

### **Normalisation of Violence**

Gender-based violence is normalized in society. Many women consider GBV as normal due to exposure to and internalization of violence, and this tendency increases the risk of violence against them. Women who are unaware of their rights are more vulnerable to GBV (Hawkes et al., 2013). Men and women in many societies justify wife-beating for reasons such as going out without telling their husband, neglecting children, arguing with their husband, refusing to have sex with their husband, etc., and a study conducted in 49 countries found higher acceptability of wife-beating in Africa and South Asia than in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean (Sardinha & Catalán, 2018). The acceptance of wife-beating coincided with the countries ranking lower on Human Development Index and higher on Gender Inequality Index. Wife beating in Nepal is usually justified by respondents from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as belonging to the lowest wealth quintile, living in rural areas, and having limited formal education (MoHP, 2013).

Justification of violence contributes to the perpetration of violence on the one hand and discourages the victims from reporting on the other (MoHP, 2013; Sida 2015). Many women consider wife-beating as a 'legitimate reprisal' rather than 'violence' and essentially necessary to discipline women to serve men's best interest, thus further inciting GBV against women (Sardinha & Catalán, 2018).

Nepal Demographic Health Survey of 2012 found that 23 percent of men and even a higher percentage of women (29 percent) justify wife-beating under the conditions such as burning food, arguing with the husband, going out without the husband's permission, neglecting children, and refusing to have sex with husband (MoH, 2017). Another study in 2012 found even a higher rate of respondents (more than 50 percent) approving of wife-beating in the cases where the wife had been unfaithful (Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, 2012).

### **Research Methodology**

This paper is based on 138 surveys and 14 qualitative interviews conducted with returnee women migrant workers in Dhading and Rupandehi districts of Nepal. Snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used to reach the targeted number of the respondents as it was deemed implausible to prepare a comprehensive list of the WMWs in each area to draw a sample from. The criteria for the participation in the study were that the respondents had to be: i) women; ii) married at any point in their life; and iii) returned after working for any period of time in countries other than India. The data was collected in February-March of 2017.

Dhading and Rupandehi districts were selected for the study as they represented two geographically diverse districts - Dhading is a hilly district, while Rupandehi is in the plains of Tarai. Furthermore, an urban/semi-urban area and a rural area from each district were selected in order to make the sample more representative of both conditions. Furthermore, as per the 2011 census data, the female absentee population (i.e., female migrants traveling abroad) was high in the selected districts and local units. The data collection was facilitated by Pourakhi, a non-government organization working with WMWs in Nepal, which had information about WMWs and their families in these areas.

### **Discussion of the Findings: Prevalence of Physical and Sexual Violence from Husbands**

This section discusses the findings of the study based on the analysis of survey and interview data collected from the returnee women migrant workers.

#### **High Rate of Spousal Violence among WMWs**

There was a high degree of physical violence from husbands among the WMWs. About one-third of the WMWs (32 percent) had experienced physical abuse from their husbands in their lifetime, which is nine percentage points higher in comparison to the physical violence from husbands among all married women in Nepal (MOHP, 2012). This further suggests that WMWs are more vulnerable to spousal violence. Ten women (7.8 percent) reported having experienced violence in the year prior to the survey, which was slightly lower than the national average of 10.4 percent (MOHP, 2012) as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*WMWs' Experience of Physical and Sexual Violence in Nepal (N=128)*

Experiences	Lifetime		A year or less ago	
	Count	%	Count	%
Physical violence	41	32.0	10	7.8
Sexual violence	22	17.2	7	5.5

Five WMWs had experienced physical violence from their husbands' parents in their lifetime, and all of them had experienced it more than a year prior to the survey. The women whom their husbands abused seemed to be at a greater risk of violence from their in-laws: three women (out of five) who had experienced violence from their in-laws were also physically abused by their husbands. The experience of Sarala,<sup>2</sup> who was frequently abused by both her husband and in-laws, emphasizes this point further:

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<sup>2</sup> Only pseudonyms of the respondents are used in this paper to maintain confidentiality.

Unfortunately, I have faced physical violence from my husband and his parents. I will never forget that incident when my husband and his parents beat me very badly when my younger son was only 11 days old. They all beat me badly and broke my backbone. Then my mother came and took me from there and admitted me into a hospital...And, now, I am living in my mother's house.

It was also due to the violence from husband and his family that Sarala had participated in labor migration.

The rate of sexual violence from husbands was also significant among the women returnees. Seventeen percent of WMWs – slightly higher than the national average of 14.3 percent (MOHP 2012) – had experienced sexual violence from their husband in their lifetime, and nearly 6 percent of them had last experienced such violence a year or less ago. About 5 percent of the respondents had experienced sexual harassment from other family members, while 2 percent had also been sexually abused. Altogether, about a fifth (19.6 percent) of the women migrant workers had experienced at least one occurrence of sexual violence from their husbands or family members in their lifetime.

### **Higher Rate of Spousal Violence for Women from Underprivileged Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

The study finds the highest rate of physical violence from husbands among Dalit women; over half of the respondents (8 out of 15) from this group had experienced physical violence, and they also reported a high rate of sexual violence by husbands (20 percent).<sup>3</sup> It is also to be noted that Dalits rank the lowest on Human Development Index (GoN & UNDP, 2014),<sup>4</sup> and they also have a significantly higher share of the population living below the national poverty

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for more detailed information on the caste and ethnicity classification used in the study.

<sup>4</sup> The Human Development Index (HDI) is prepared on the basis of three indicators of human development: *a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living.*

line compared to other caste and ethnic groups in Nepal (CBS 2011; GoN & UNDP, 2014).

Although it was the lowest in comparison, a somewhat significant 24 percent of Hill Caste women suffered physical violence from their husbands, as seen in Table 2.

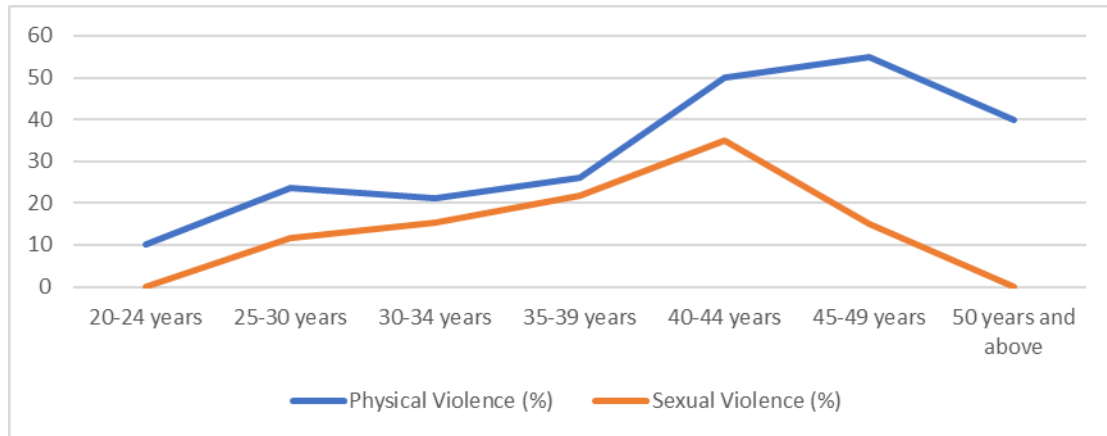
**Table 2**

*Women's Experience of Violence from Husbands by Caste/Ethnicity (N=128)*

Caste/Ethnicity	Physical Violence (%)	Sexual Violence (%)	Number of Respondents (N)
Hill Caste	24.0	16.0	25
Hill Janajati	30.7	14.7	75
Tarai Janajati	27.3	27.3	11
Tarai Caste	50.0	50.0	2
Dalit (Hill and Tarai)	53.3	20.0	15

### **Correlation of the Occurrence of Violence with Age and Conjugal Life Duration**

The occurrence of physical violence from husbands was highest among the age group of 40 to 49 years: half of the women in this age group had experienced at least one instance of physical violence in their lifetime. The experience of physical violence from husbands was lowest among the age group 20-24 years, followed by 25-34 years, as detailed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1***Occurrence of Violence from Husbands by WMWs' Age (N=128)*

The duration of conjugal life could partly explain the relationship between women's age and physical violence by husbands. The younger women's general reporting of the lower rate of physical violence can be attributed to the likelihood of them being married for a shorter period of time. The only exception is the highest age bracket of 50 years and above, which reported a lower rate of physical violence than the preceding two age groups.

In terms of the rate of sexual violence from husbands, women from 40-44 years of age ranked at the top, followed by the age group of 35-39. No cases of sexual violence were reported by women aged 20-24 years or 50 years and above, as expressed in Figure 1.

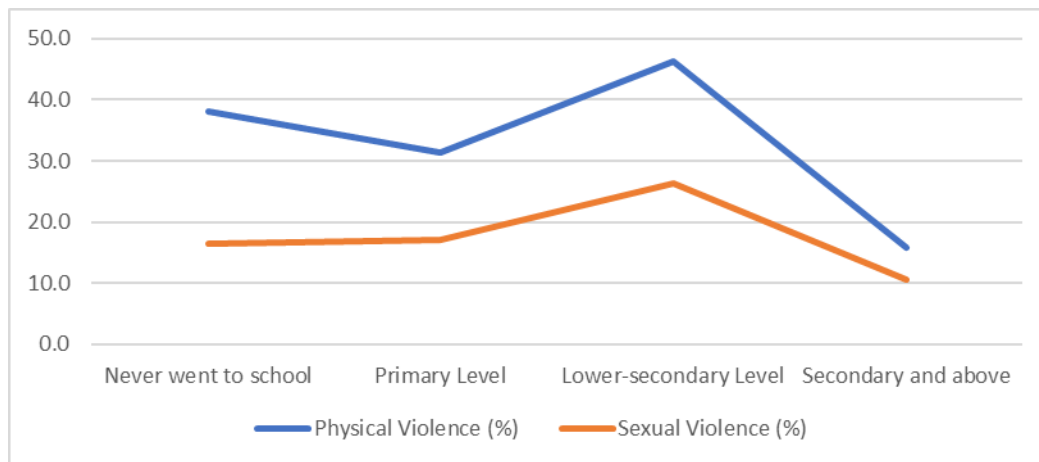
### **Education of Women and Their Husbands can Reduce Violence against Women**

Women's education seems crucial in minimizing violence against them, but only if they have received at least a secondary level of education. The physical and sexual violence rates were lowest among WMWs with secondary-level education or above. The rate of physical violence among women with secondary level education or above was 16 percent –half the rate of violence in

the study population. A similar relationship was also observed between women's education and sexual violence; the rate of sexual violence was lowest (10.5 percent) among women with a higher secondary or higher level of education, and this figure is about 7 percent lower than the average (17.2 percent) in the sample population as shown in Figure 2.

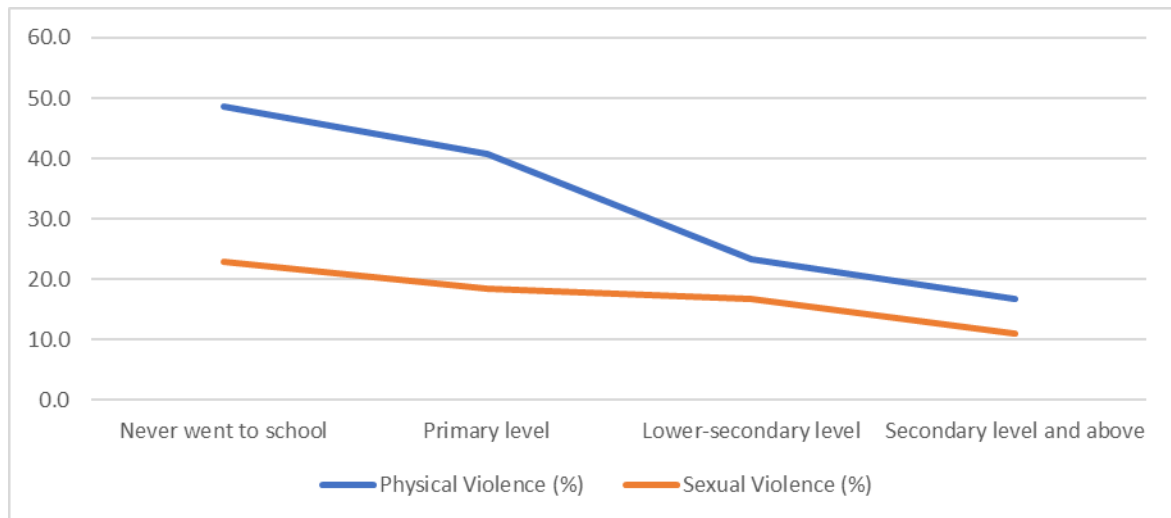
**Figure 2**

*Occurrence of Violence from Husbands by WMWs' Education (N=128)*



The level of husbands' education appears to have an even stronger role in reducing violence against women. The physical and sexual violence rates were lowest – 16.7 percent and 11.1 percent, respectively – among the women whose husbands had secondary or higher levels of education. The physical and sexual violence rates were highest among the WMWs whose husbands were illiterate as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3***Occurrence of Violence from Husbands by Husband's Education (N=128)*

WMWs whose husbands had received some education (formal or informal) did fairly better than the women whose husbands had never been to school or were illiterate. Women with a higher level of schooling are also likely to marry a man with similar levels of education. Bivariate and multivariate analyses showed that among the 19 women who had completed at least a secondary level of education, 14 (about three quarters) had married a man with a similar education level. Only one of them experienced physical violence from her husband. Hence, the education of a husband and wife jointly, rather than in isolation, appears to significantly reduce the probability of violence against women.

#### **Positive Relation is Observed Between the Number of Children and the Likelihood of Violence from Husbands**

A positive relationship is observed between the number of children in the family and the violence from husbands. No case of violence was observed among WMWs without children. Women with a single child also had a lower rate of violence. With an additional child in the family (from one child to two children), the rate of both physical and sexual violence increased dramatically – doubling

the rate of physical violence and almost tripling the rate of sexual violence among women as expressed in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Women's Experience of Violence from Husbands by Number of Children (N=128)*

Number of Children	Physical Violence (%)	Sexual Violence (%)	Number of Respondents (N)
0	-	-	6
1	18.8	9.4	32
2	40.5	26.2	42
3	30.0	10.0	30
4 or above	50.0	27.8	18

Contrary to general assumptions, not giving birth to a son did not increase the likelihood of physical violence against women from their husbands. The rate of violence was much lower for women who only had girls (20 percent) than for women who only had boys (39.3 percent).

### **Relation Between Physical and Sexual Violence**

The WMWs who had experienced sexual violence were also very likely to experience physical violence from their husband. Most of the women (86.3 percent) who had experienced sexual violence from their husbands had also faced physical violence from him. These women reported that their husbands forcing them to have sex on many occasions would lead to physical violence. Shanta, who had been frequently forced into having sex by her husband, explained her difficulty in living with her husband these days:

Just a day ago, my husband tried to force me to have sex with him. I am not so much interested in it. But, he wants it most of the time.

When he gets drunk, it becomes difficult to sleep near him in a shared bed – how can one expect to fulfil somebody's desire every night?

Before we started quarrelling last time, I left the room, went to another room, locked the room, and slept with my sister's daughter.

### **Inter-Caste/Ethnic Marriage and Violence**

Although the rate of violence was not significantly different between women marrying a husband of the same caste/ethnicity versus a husband of a different caste/ethnicity, some women viewed their inter-caste/ethnic marriage to be the main reason for the physical violence from their husband and his family. Meena, a returnee migrant who had married a man from a different social group and initially experienced abuse from her husband's family and later from her husband, explained:

We had an inter-caste marriage. I am Magar and he is Bahun. We married at a very young age. I was something like only 14-15 years of age when we eloped. When he brought me to his house, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law were against our marriage and treated me very badly. They even thrashed me and slapped me. They used very bad words...that I had trapped their son and so on. I was not even allowed to enter the kitchen. I could only eat if they gave me food to eat. Even when my children were hungry, I could not go to kitchen and prepare milk for my children. It was a very bad situation at that time ... it is ironic that when I was in my own country and my own house, I was not allowed to enter the kitchen because I belonged to a different caste.

### **Husbands' Extramarital Affair Contributes to Violence**

A man's engagement in extramarital affairs was also likely to increase violence against women. The rate of both physical and sexual violence was about 50 percent for women who reported that their husband was in a relationship with or was married to another woman. Sajana's narrative describes the scenario of violence in a family when men are engaged in multiple relationships:

Once my husband got married to another woman, he did not come home. Sometimes, unexpectedly, he used to come home and then he used to fight and beat me and take all the money I had. He fought and beat me several times, even before I went abroad for work. Once, during a fight with my husband's second wife, she hit me with an axe from behind. Luckily, my nephew held it and so it touched me with only its tip .... The day before my flight for the second migration my husband beat me again and broke my finger ... when I called my husband from abroad he scolded me with foul words.

Sunita's experience was quite similar:

My husband had relation with another woman and lived with her. One day, he came home drunk from the village. I don't know what he had thought, but he came to where I was sitting and kept saying, 'I won't stop without killing, I won't stop without killing' [implicitly referring to me]. He was carrying a khukuri with him. I managed to get away from him somehow and ran to where his brother was.

### **Association between Women's Participation in Labour Migration and Violence from Husbands**

There seems to be an association, although weak, between women's participation in labor migration and violence from their husbands and family members. For many WMWs, the violence prevailed in both the pre-migration and post-return phases. Some women participated in labor migration due to the violence in the family. For all five WMWs who had experienced physical violence from their in-laws, this was true only for the period prior to their migration. A similar trend is also observed in terms of the relation between women's participation in labor migration and the perpetration of violence by their husbands. Five of the 41 WMWs to have experienced physical violence from their husbands had experienced such abuse only after their return. For the other 36

women, physical violence by the husband was also present in the pre-migration phase.

Still, a larger number of WMWs perceived a connection between their labor migration and violence by husbands and other family members. Twenty-three WMWs believed that the violence perpetrated by their husband or other family members was in some way related to their prior employment in a foreign country. Fourteen WMWs reported that their husband talked unfavorably about their participation in labor migration while inflicting physical violence. As Ritu, a returned migrant worker, narrated:

Someone in the community told my husband that the returnee women are not good in character. They might have slept with someone else, and because of that, my husband beat me once I returned.

The social stigma relating to female labor migration was strongly prevalent, and many WMWs had to deal with it in their everyday lives. Sakuntala, who had returned recently from a non-Gulf country, said:

When I returned from abroad people started talking about me, saying that I might have done some immoral work abroad, and that's why I had lost a lot of weight. And, I went through such humiliation in society because I lost weight, which is directly related to the work and my living conditions [abroad]. I heard people saying, 'What work Mr. X's wife did abroad that she returned so thin?', and some even asked me, 'Did you really do good work abroad?'

The support of family, both in the emigration process and after return, was crucial in contesting the prevalent discourse that questioned women's honor. Karuna, who had returned after working for a couple of years in Saudi Arabia, explained:

When I got married, I was just 17 years old and my husband was working as a driver ... My mother-in-law was working abroad, so

when she came back she asked me to go abroad. She thought it was good for me to go abroad to get exposure and work and see how the outside world was. That's why I went abroad. Even my husband was abroad at that time. But we couldn't meet there. I stayed there for two years but we never met there but only talked on the phone...I don't think people look at me in a negative light, it is maybe because I was sent with the consultation and full support of my family, and people have not been able to say anything to me directly at least.

### **Many Women Still Approve of Violence by Husbands**

Women are likely to consider violence as normal due to their living in a society that approves physical violence such as beating, as a means of disciplining women. The internalization of violence as normal is believed to contribute to the perpetration of violence as well as discourage the victims from reporting it.

In the present study, many respondents approved of different acts of spousal violence, while a substantial percentage of women held neutral views. The proportions of women who could not express their disagreement (i.e., 'agreed' or 'neutral') towards different acts of violence against women fluctuated between 10 to 40 percent (Table 4).

**Table 4**

*WMWs' Perception of Different Acts of Violence (N=138)*

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Okay for a man to sometimes beat/slap his wife	5.8	14.5	79.7
Justifiable for a man to beat his wife if she argues with him	21.0	11.6	67.4
Justifiable for a man to beat/slap his wife if she neglects children	30.4	8.7	60.9
Justifiable for a man to beat/slap his wife if she refuses to have sex with him	2.9	7.2	89.9

Women were most likely to approve of violence by husbands when children are deemed to have been neglected: 30.4 percent of the respondents found the beating by the husband justifiable in this case, while 60.9 percent of women disagreed.

### **Conclusion**

The paper examined the prevalence of spousal violence against women who had participated in foreign labor migration using survey and interview data. The study finds only a weak relationship between women's participation in labor migration and spousal violence. While a small number of women workers had experienced spousal violence only after their participation in foreign labor migration, the spousal violence prevailed in both pre-and post-migration phases for a larger number of women. Many women migrant workers participated in labor migration due to the violence in the family itself, and the violence continued even after their return. Yet, many women migrant workers attributed their experience of violence from their husbands to their participation in foreign labor migration and its social stigma. Many women reported that their husbands cited their travel abroad and associated it with their supposed 'unfaithfulness' while perpetrating violence. Women workers had to deal with the prevalent notion of 'impurity' after their return from abroad, and it is even more challenging for the women who do not have a supportive family.

The study finds that the education of both women and husbands can play an important role in reducing spousal violence. The rates of both physical and sexual violence were lowest among women with a secondary or higher level of education. The husbands' education had an even stronger influence in lowering the incidence of violence against women: a gradual decline in the rate of violence is observed for a gradual increase in husbands' level of education. The programs designed to target and promote women's education are still relevant, but a stronger result could only be attained with men's participation in such programs.

The study suggests that any programs related to lowering the incidence of violence against women should also consider men as an important partner of the initiative. The programs should also focus on challenging the social stigma associated with female labor migration and the prevalent gender norms that justify husbands' perpetration of violence against their wives.



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## Appendix

**Caste and Ethnic Groups**

This study's caste and ethnic groupings are consistent with the caste and ethnicity classification suggested in Pitamber Sharma's book *Some Aspects of Nepal's Social Demography: Census 2011 Update* (Sharma 2014). This categorization was used because it provides an integrated ethnic map of Nepal's diverse caste and ethnic groups by categorizing them into clusters based on shared social, ecological, linguistic and religious attributes.

1. **Hill caste:** bahun, chhetri, sanyasi/dasnami, thakuri
2. **Hill dalit:** badi, damai/dholi, gaine, kami, sarki
3. **Hill janajati:** aathpariya, bahing, bantawa, brahmu/baramo, chamling, chepang/praja, chhantyal/chhantel, dura, ghale, gharti/bhujel, gurung, hayu, hyolmo, jirel, khaling, khawas, kulung, kusunda, lepcha, limbu, loharung, magar, mewahang/bala, nachhiring, newar, pahari, rai, sampang, sunuwar, tamang, thami, thulung, yakkha, yamphu
4. **Inner tarai janajati:** bote, danuwar, darai, kumal, majhi, raji, raute
5. **Mountain janajati:** bhote, byasi/sauka, dolpo, lhomi, lhopa, sherpa, thakali, topkegola, walung
6. **Tarai castes:** badhaee, baraaee, bin, brahmin tarai, dev, dhunia, gaderi/bhedihar, hajam/thakur, haluwai, jain, kahar, kalwar, kamar, kanu, kathabaniyan, kayastha, kewat, koiri/kushwaha, kori, kumhar, kurmi, lodh, lohar, mali, mallaha, marwari, nuniya, nurang, rajbhar, rajdhob, rajput, sonar, sudhi, teli, yadav
7. **Tarai dalit:** bantar/sardar, chamar/harijan ram, chidimar, dhandi, dhankar/dharikar, dhobi, dom, dusadh/paswan/pasi, halkhor, kalar, khatwe, musahar, natuwa, sarbaria, tatma/tatwa
8. **Tarai janajati:** amat, dhanuk, dhimal, gangai, jhangad/dhagar, kisan, koche, meche, munda, pattarkatta/kuswadia, rajbanshi, satar/santhal, tajpuriya, tharu

9. **Other (specify):** bangali, musalman, punjabi/sikh, churaute
10. **Unspecified:** adibasi/janajati, dalit others, tarai others, undefined others, foreigner