

# Embodied Experience of Gender and Self in Transnational Migration from Nepal

**Dr. Kapil Babu Dahal**

Lecturer, Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University  
Kirtipur, Kathmandu

Email: [Kapil.dahal@cda.tu.edu.np](mailto:Kapil.dahal@cda.tu.edu.np)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9974-694X>

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## Abstract

*In their efforts to seek employment and income abroad, these days, people leave their place of origin and move to new places through transnational migration. In that sense, transnational migration can be taken as liberating or escaping from the existing context. While looking at certain inherent procedures of transnational migration, it can be questioned whether people can escape from their social and cultural web and conditions through this process. In this sense, transnational migration reinstates and reflects prevailing social norms and values concerning gender, class, and well-being. On top of this, based on ethnographic information, this paper also highlights the process that reflects their embodied experience of border crossing, and thus transnational migration embodies the process of gender and a particular kind of self.*

**Key Words:** Transnational migration, Self, Gender and Embodied experience.

## Introduction

Migration in Nepali society is not a new phenomenon. People have been migrating out to various parts of the country and away from their home country for a long time (Dahal, 2018). Regmi (1978) sheds lights on the migratory history of Nepali hill peasants with the first wave of migration from the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Therefore, emigration to India in different periods can be regarded as the onset of transnational migration of Nepal is in different periods, whether it is during the reign of Sikh monarch Ranjit Singh or during the time of British rule in India (Seddon et al., 2001). Emigration at that time can be largely designated as the common people's efforts to escape the tough socio-economic circumstances at home. Increasing the frequency of onlookers of migration, powerful political forces during the time of Maoist insurgency and natural disasters also expedited the process of emigration compelling people to escape their adversaries at home (Gurung, 2004). Following the Second World War, along with the increment of the national borders and simultaneous upsurge in the number of countries on the world map not only accelerated the security issues and tensions between the states, but it also generated rising movement of people, new working spaces, international trades, and transshipments of goods (Calabrò, 2021).

In their efforts to comprehend such accelerating phenomena, scholars have been making border and border crossing the object of their study. A border is a national boundary that

separates a country from the other. Nevertheless, scholarly engagements have shown that the boundary of a national border is not confined merely to the level of spatial frontier. Thomas Nail has stretched the meaning of boundary beyond a spatial realm as he stated, “We live in a world of borders. Territorial, political, judicial and economic borders of all kinds quite literally define every aspect of social life in the twentieth century” (2016, 1).

In today’s globalized world (Anderson & Hale, 2019) border acts not only as a territorial frontier of adjoining countries in the map, rather as Nail (2016) states, it functions as a continually altering non-spatial realm in its perception, operation, and function. The power of the border is not confined to the perceptual level only, rather, as Malini Sur (2021) argues that it exerts power to regulate and control people and goods across borders. Moreover, Paasi (2012) rightly points out that the border functions as a dynamic space for linking and separating states. The impacts of border go beyond the states and it affects the people in different ways who attempt to cross it. Therefore, along with the increment in transborder mobility, it has rendered people’s identities deterritorialized (Uddin, 2019). The border has also opened up the opportunities for common people to acquire healthcare services (Dahal, 2019) and in case of atrocities even it facilitates in saving the human lives (Uddin, 2023).

Realizing this emerging understanding of border crossing, this paper aims to illuminate the experience of prospective Nepali migrants to cross the Nepal border in their efforts to get employment abroad. It mainly focuses on the experience of some men and women during their recruitment process. Whether and how gender affects their recruitment process, their embodied experience of recruitment, and how they reflect upon such process of construing their identity and self is the main focus of this paper.

### **Research Questions and Objectives**

The main research question that this paper delves into is how can we see the process of recruitment of transnational migrants in the current context of globalization and the mobility of human resources of different kinds? How does it portray the inequality prevalent in the present global context? Can we characterize the cross border migration as a departure from the context or it simply is the part of the continuum?

This paper engages in seeking the following specific objectives navigating through the analysis of generated field data:

1. To examine whether and how this recruitment process construes the self and embodied gender experience of the prospective migrants, and
2. To analyze how do people understand the transnational migration process through the gaze of escaping or liberating from the undesired situation.

The significance of this paper lies in examining the noble aspect of the embodied gender experience of the prospective migrants and the construction of their self in the process of migration. The construction of self, body and identity is deeply rooted in the broader cultural whole and thus experienced through internalized values. Developed engaging with the abundant ethnographic data, the rationale of this paper lies in its typicality in portraying

the embodied experience of the gendered nature of migration in certain process of the transnational migration.

### **Research Methods**

The foundation of this paper lies in the study that began in 2010 to comprehend the knowledge about migrant recruiting firms, which facilitate transnational migration in Nepal. That scoping study inculcated the lasting interest within me to acquire more information about such firms. This paper has been equally enriched by the ethnographic information up to almost a decade thereafter. In its entirety, the study depended mainly on the primary and ethnographic data to understand the intricacies of this field.

The ethnographic study was conducted in various areas in Kathmandu to acquire information about how these employment agencies function. The fieldwork was conducted mainly in Dilli Bazaar, Basundhara, Balaju, and other places. I mainly employed the conversation and observation approach to acquire information. The owners of manpower recruitment agencies (MRAs), their employees, and potential and returnee migrants were the ones mainly approached for the conversations. I travelled to office of many of these MRAs in Kathmandu as part of the ethnographic field research. Meeting and conversations with the prospective migrants in front of or outside of recruitment agencies as well as observations and interactions during their interview dates/events were the main occasions I acquired information about them. During the fieldwork, I also observed the recruitment agency environment, the relationships between agency staff and their customers, and how prospective migrants develop and construct their identities through their interactions with recruiting agencies and with one another.

The primary and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Furthermore, the investigator conducted a content analysis of the information obtained from different secondary sources. For the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity in the process of dissemination, pseudonyms have been used whenever I have referred to these firms or the people in this paper.

### **Results and Discussions**

With the realization that ethnographic data cannot be demarcated between the categories of discussions and results with clear-cut boundaries, both of these analytical stages in this paper have been presented within the same heading. Initially, this part of the paper highlights the embodied gender experience of both men and women labour migrants, and then it portrays the experience of self in the course of the migration recruitment process itself and thereafter.

### **Embodiment of Gender in Transnational Migration**

Transnational migration has left an eternal mark on how people nurture their gender identities. In many ways, it has questioned the customary gender stereotype of migrants, and in a number of other instances, the basic idea of international mobility is based on its very foundation. As demonstrated by Handapangoda's (2014) research, foreign migration gave

female Sri Lankan domestic maids the agency they needed to take part actively in decision-making. They achieved the ability to make decisions within their households through labor migration. Many Nepalese women have begun to go outside to find ways to nourish their families financially, defying their conventional view of the male as the “breadwinner” in the home. As domestic helpers, they have immigrated to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel, and Lebanon.

Even now, on the other hand, women are still given preference for jobs that are traditionally seen as belonging to women. They have become the favoured option for housekeeping and offering care for seniors and newborns. Women are now given greater opportunities to work due to the trend of globalization and commercialization permeating the home and perceiving these jobs as products that can be bought and sold. While the work they are doing elsewhere may be similar to what they did at home, they have been taken out of their homes through the process of globalization (Anderson & Hale, 2019). As in the instance of the Indonesian women migrants from Lombok, women are even receiving monetary assistance for their foreign labour travel costs (Lindquist, 2010), whilst men must take out borrowings to pay for the expenses of their migration.

Amidst such continuum of traditional roles and new trend of migrating out, women are being victimized by agents and employers. Exemplifying the perceived and social prejudice associated with having an illicit relationship while travelling (Shrestha et al., 2020), some Gulf-based housemaid workers who travelled there were coerced into engaging in sexual relations with the home's owner. They had been abused sexually on occasion and had frequently been impregnated without their will. They flee the employer's home and attempt to hide somewhere to protect themselves from the offender. Sadly, after their employment ends, their immigration status is no longer valid, which forbids them from giving birth in a hospital. Instead of the owner of the home where she works as a “housemaid”, the agents who sell her are frequently the ones at fault. The socio-legal system of the destination nation is thus laying the foundation for structural violence (Galtung, 1969), limiting women and their children's access to safe childbirth alongside necessary care during pregnancy and after delivery.

The gendered experience of the foreign labour migration is not confined only to women; rather, men also have their stories and experiences. Their masculine identity is construed based on their body. On a sunny day in December 2016 in Bashundhara at a compound of an MRA, I met a 24-year-old Harka Bahadur Thapa, a prospective migrant. He was there to go to Qatar on a labour visa. He had been staying in Kathmandu for the last four months to be in the queue to get the visa. In those months, he worked in a mobile shop in the New Road area. Staying away from manual jobs for such a long time, his palms became a little softer.

He felt bad about not getting chosen for the job in Qatar mainly due to his prior work at a mobile shop. His soft palm was the reason he was rejected from the construction job. He was not allowed to perform physically demanding tasks. He regretted that his palms were not tough enough—not because he came from a wealthy family or didn't do physical labour—but because he spent a few months working at a mobile shop in Kathmandu. That

day, as I was leaving the agency, I shook hands with a few possible applicants and noticed that, compared to the other selected candidates, his hand was softer.

In the age of deepening globalization, the presence and concerns of foreign employers cross the national boundary, making the border a “zone of limited statehood” (Scott, 2009). Therefore, it is not Nepali rules and regulations that assess prospective migrants’ eligibility but rather that of the destination country or the company. A representative of the employer from the destination country is enforcing the existing idea that a man’s body has to be robust and hard to be fit for physical work. Scrinzi (2010) also found from her ethnographic study about migrant male domestic workers in France and Italy that the recruitment agencies along with the migrants’ training construe and drive the racialized construction of masculinity.

International migration has evolved into a “ritual passage”, or a crucial period in a person's life where they develop their masculinity and mature (Aguilar Jr., 2018). Travelling abroad “completely” transcends a man into manhood. There are many instances of men getting married after getting back from working overseas and then again returning back overseas following their marriage. Their status as foreign migrants enhances their merit to marry into a family belonging to the higher societal echelons. A lot of newspaper wedding advertorials and everyday conversations in Nepal convey strongly that the groom now lives, studies, and/or works in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, or simply abroad to promote him as a suitable bachelor.

The working environment in a foreign country has an impact on the workers' physical appearance, masculinity, and health. Good working conditions are naturally seen as beneficial to health, and as a result, perseverance through labour and income will eventually help to form masculinity; on the other hand, an unhygienic and dangerous workplace is seen as punitive to the development of masculinity. Work at the gas firm will render individuals impotent, a returnee immigrant, Nuwakot’s Dorje Lama, told me while he was trying to find new job at a company in Dubai. He had refused to work for a gas company. He had heard that married workers with children were the only ones employed by gas companies, so that, the company will not have to make compensation to their employees in case of any unwanted situation. He believed that losing one’s ability to conceive was a sign of degrading one’s identity, personhood, and self-image. Dorje’s story also substantiates that foreign labour migration does not necessarily contribute to the growth of masculinity; in fact, it may even work against it.

### **International Migration: Construction of Particular Self**

People make judgments about where to live—inside the nation or abroad—based on the social, political, and economic situation in which they find themselves. They are creating their self by making such a decision. Their decision to migrate to a specific nation also reveals something about their sociocultural, political, and economic standing. Through their destination choice, they render what sort of life and lifestyle they ought to receive in their life and society. By selecting the destination country or at times a specific type of work, as symbolic interactionist (Blumer, 1986) would argue, these migrants are construing their self

and presenting their identities. Throughout this process, people become concerned about how their significant others will see them. However, this is not an indication that identities and the development of the self are episodic; alternatively, they are continual endeavors that result from nuanced negotiations with organizations, society, and the workplace (Bauman, 2006).

For them, the importance of family as a source of identity has gone down while the significance of the destination nation has risen. The migrants understand that, in today's increasingly ambiguous capitalist cultures, identities have grown more precarious (Sennett, 1998). It is known from the conversations that the degree of good governance, which is reflected in the general state of affairs and the daily lives of the common people, also influences their decisions on the destination country. Even in these categories, there is a hierarchy, so when someone travels to the US, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, Japan, or Korea, they are building their social standing as superiors. It might also serve as evidence of his stable financial condition, class affiliation, or extensive network.

The choice of going to the Gulf and Malaysia portrays lower middle status. Significant numbers of would-be migrants confess that had they been able to migrate to the first categories of countries they would not have tried for the ones in the second category. Often, people who have not graduated, that is who have considered themselves to be lagging in studies and thus acquiring white collar jobs, or who are unable to have good income are going into these countries. However, they are also moneyed or at least can arrange for the migration credit in comparison to those who seasonally migrate to India. Moreover, the possibility to earn for many people belonging to these different categories of destinations also varies significantly in terms of money. The decision of choosing the destination country eventually affects the construction of their self in the future. Therefore, there happens a bidirectional relation between the construction of the self of the individual and the process of international migration.

People who aspire to better all or some facets of their economic condition, career, or education typically fall into the first group of nations. The majority of these "welfare magnet" seekers (Pedersen et al., 2008) may choose not to go back home if they are given the "proper opportunity" abroad, while those in the latter group are primarily there to help themselves. After staying and earning for a while, almost all of them plan to go back to their own country. They are using their remittances to make investments in their village and/or the ideal location of a nearby town, where they will someday be able to afford to live and work.

The people in the South are forced by market factors to enter adolescence early rather than mature into adults. Global market forces realize this with the approval of the parents, the state's mechanism, and the household. With the increasing monetization, market forces create a conducive environment through the need for cash in the family (Dahal, 2018, 223-228) even in the rural localities. With all adult members working to the fullest extent possible and producing insufficient revenue, the household is forced to search for alternate sources of income. Amidst asymmetries of global development, by way of such intriguing conditions, the globalized market in neoliberal capitalism forces the production of cheaper sources of labourers in the global south (Delgado Wise, 2013). In the neoliberal political

economic environment of free flow of goods and services to the global South, people of all income levels in the South are inclined to have consumption of goods and services from the global market. These folks must search for options when they become aware that their present source of income is inadequate to suit their needs. Young people from the world's periphery are enticed to relocate anywhere they can as there is a lack of job prospects at home.

### Conclusions

This paper examined the gendered aspects of global migration, taking into account the substantial number of migrants leaving Nepal for different countries. The gendered arrangements through which workers are recruited reinforce the embodied experience of the gendered division of labour prevailing in Nepali society. The gendered division of labour is additionally institutionalized by the prevalent practice of choosing male workers for jobs that are typically seen as physically exhausting and thus masculine, such as driving, construction, and farm work, while women are assigned to domestic chores.

In a similar vein, the decision of which country to migrate to is subject to a variety of instances and therefore acts as a roadmap for the individual seeking to define their ideal identity and self. The nation of destination is always a major factor in forming the identity of the immigrant. Being in the world, they choose whether to go to a certain country or not. As such, the process of hiring and migration continuously shapes the sense of self of the migrants. This essay additionally points out how difficult it is to simply regard international migration as a means of escaping the structural and gender traps that one is subjected to at home or as a victim of such entanglements.

In order to minimize gender stereotypes and the stigma associated with international migration, policymakers will need to have a comprehensive grasp of the recruitment and migration process. It is also crucial for studying further how the employment and working environments in these migrants' destination countries impact their embodied experiences at work and, consequently, their health and well-being. The government of Nepal and other actors should give due consideration to the desire of the migrants for international migration and boost their confidence to lead a dignified life, not make them feel destined to be victims of gender-based and other forms of structural violence.

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