The Impact of Foreign Migration on Nepali Family Structures

Focusing on: Gender Roles, Intergenerational Relationships, and Family Decision-Making  
Through the Lens of Capability

Central Question  
How does foreign migration impact gender roles, intergenerational relationships, and family decision-making within Nepali family structures, in terms of the level of capability of women, children, and the elderly?

Justification of the Question  
In recent decades, Nepal has witnessed a dramatic rise in foreign labor migration, particularly among young men seeking employment in Gulf countries, Malaysia, and India. This phenomenon has profoundly altered family dynamics, with women, children, and the elderly bearing the brunt of these changes. By exploring how migration affects their “capability”—defined by Amartya Sen (1999) as the real freedom to lead the life one values—this research offers insights into how traditional Nepali family structures are being reshaped. This question is significant because it intersects with development, gender studies, and intergenerational care, while also informing policy on family wellbeing and social protection.

Literature Review  
A growing body of literature addresses the socio-economic and emotional consequences of labor migration on households left behind in South Asia. Kaspar (2005) and Adhikari and Hobley (2015) highlight the dual burden borne by women who become de facto heads of households in the absence of their husbands. Sen’s (1999) capability approach and Nussbaum’s (2000) list of central human capabilities provide a theoretical lens to assess whether new responsibilities translate into real freedom for family members.

Maharjan, Bauer, and Knerr (2012) reveal that while remittances boost household income and educational access, they do not necessarily enhance emotional wellbeing or autonomy. For the elderly, migration often leads to a feeling of abandonment, while children may experience behavioral issues due to a lack of parental supervision (Sharma & Gurung, 2009). These shifts raise critical questions about empowerment, autonomy, and emotional resilience within migrant households.

Methodology

Framework  
The analysis employs Sen’s capability approach, which focuses on the actual opportunities available to individuals. This framework allows the essay to assess how foreign migration affects the real freedoms of women, children, and the elderly—beyond surface-level economic gains.

Methods  
This research is qualitative in nature and draws on ethnographic case studies, NGO reports, and national-level surveys such as the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS, 2022). Data interpretation centers on how changes in roles and decision-making authority affect individual well-being and autonomy.

Sources  
Primary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and organizational reports. Government data and local case studies are used to illustrate trends within Nepali communities heavily affected by migration.

Preliminary Research

Gender Roles  
In migrant households, women frequently take over roles traditionally held by men, such as managing finances, supervising farming activities, and making everyday decisions. However, this shift does not automatically equate to empowerment. Adhikari and Hobley (2015) found that while some women gain self-confidence and mobility, many remain constrained by patriarchal norms. Decisions may still be deferred to absent husbands via mobile communication, reducing the woman’s agency to symbolic leadership.

Using the capability approach, we see a discrepancy between instrumental agency—taking action out of necessity—and substantive agency, which includes freedom of choice and voice in shaping one’s life (Sen, 1999). In some cases, support from NGOs and local women's groups has expanded women’s capability sets, but these gains are uneven and often temporary.

Intergenerational Relationships  
Migration often undermines traditional intergenerational dynamics. Elderly parents who once held decision-making authority in joint families may find themselves emotionally isolated and physically overburdened. Their capability for social connection and health security is diminished in the absence of daily interaction and care from adult children (Sharma & Gurung, 2009).

For children, the absence of a father figure may result in increased material support but emotional and psychological challenges. Some studies suggest declining discipline, identity confusion, and poor academic performance among children in migrant households (Maharjan et al., 2012). The capability for emotional development and social participation is hindered, even when economic conditions improve.

Family Decision-Making  
The departure of a male household head often leads to new power dynamics in family decision-making. In some cases, women assert greater control over budgeting and child-rearing decisions. Yet, major decisions—such as land sales or children's education—are frequently postponed or made via distant communication, which lacks immediacy and context (Kaspar, 2005).

Children and the elderly rarely participate in these decisions, perpetuating hierarchical norms and reducing their capability to influence their own lives. Decision-making becomes fragmented, with physical distance amplifying emotional and communicative gaps between family members.

Potential Policy Recommendation  
To improve the capability of left-behind family members, a multi-level approach is required:

1. Women's Empowerment Programs: Training in financial literacy, legal rights, and leadership should be prioritized by local governments and NGOs. These programs should aim to convert responsibility into real agency.  
2. Child Mental Health and Support Services: Schools and community centers should offer counseling and after-school programs to address emotional gaps left by absent parents.  
3. Elderly Support Networks: Community day-care centers and social workers should be established in high-migration areas to combat isolation and neglect among the elderly.  
4. Smart Family Communication Initiatives: Government and telecom providers can collaborate to subsidize mobile services and train families in using digital platforms for more meaningful interaction and joint decision-making.

By supporting the agency and wellbeing of all household members, such policies can mitigate the negative effects of labor migration while enhancing the long-term resilience of Nepali families.

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