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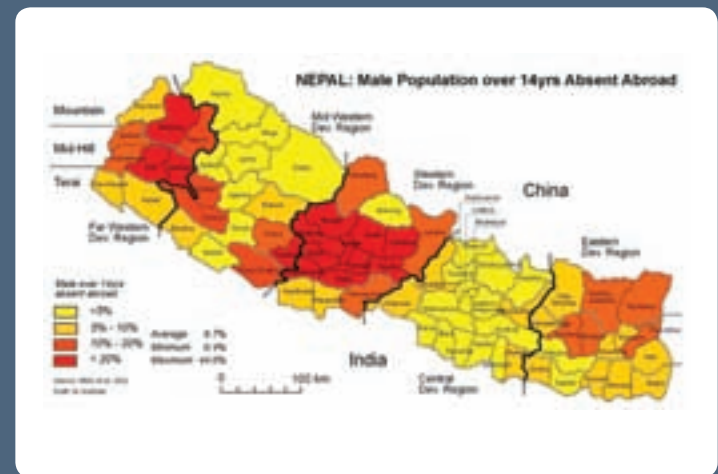
FOR MOUNTAINS AND PEOPLE

# Labour migration in the Hindu Kush- Himalayas – Gender challenges

Labour migration has become a key issue in today's globalised world, and it has become a major factor in the lives of the people in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. Migration is a cross-cutting issue that affects mountain people and the environment in a multifaceted way. Migration can be seen as a challenge, but it also has many potential benefits for livelihood strategies, poverty alleviation, gender equity, disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and natural resource management, and these need to be recognised and harnessed.

Labour migration is a core livelihood strategy of rural households in the mountains of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. Diminishing production from subsistence agriculture, population growth, increased aspirations and chronic under- and unemployment, all drive many mountain people to search for work elsewhere.

Labour migration in the greater Himalayan region has a distinctive characteristic: it has a strong gender bias with mostly men leaving their villages and families and women staying behind. It is particularly important for development, that we understand the effects of this male out-migration on mountain households and discover the needs of migrants' families. We need to consider how best these needs can be addressed so that those left behind benefit more from the positive effects of migration. At the same time, women are gradually starting to migrate independently, which also poses new challenges and opportunities. Critical pieces of the gender, migration, and development relationship have so far largely been ignored.



## Gender biased migration

The share of women in the world's population of international migrants is close to half, that is, almost 100 million of all migrants are women (United Nations 2006). However, in the Himalayan region most of those who migrate are men, leaving women, children and the elderly behind. In Nepal, more than 80 percent of the international migrants are men (HMGN 2001). The gender dimension of migration in the Himalayas is central to the poverty debate, as the migration of men poses both challenges and opportunities for poverty alleviation and development. Two main arguments nourish the debate: the pressing issues for those that stay behind, and the need for better facilitation of migration to make it more successful for both men and women.

## Migrants and those left behind

The families that are left behind face particular hardships if their largely unskilled husbands or sons are caught in unstable and poorly paid employment. In such cases, the remittances that families receive do not compensate for the missing male work force. Women and children have to cope with additional agricultural drudgery, as they cannot afford to employ additional labour or invest in drudgery reducing agricultural technologies from the meagre and unreliable remittances.

The family, especially women, take on greater drudgery to enable their men to migrate. If their efforts and the inflow of remittances cannot compensate for the absent male workforce the already low agricultural output may further decrease.

"Since my husband has gone, I have to work in the field every day. I have no choice, I have to." Gurung women from Nepal (Kaspar 2005)

Unsuccessful migration increases the vulnerability of those left behind. Given the existing food insecurity in many mountain areas, reduced agricultural output due to male out-migration coupled with insufficient remittances poses a real threat to the households of poor migrant workers. In many cases, families cannot sustain themselves anymore in the villages and have to move into more urban labour markets, often under unfavourable conditions.

## Migrant households relying on remittances only, face great anxieties when foreign labour markets shrink.

At the other extreme, there are households with good remittance earnings. Unfortunately, many families are seen to become dependent on these flows; they do less work at home and refrain from productive investments. These people assume that the foreign earnings will continue to arrive, and the children expect to leave for work as well, which exposes them to great insecurity when foreign labour demand is reduced.

## Changing gender roles

Male out-migration poses risks to those that stay behind, but also offers opportunities. In the absence of men, women have the opportunity to take decisions on available resources as they become the de facto heads of household. This is particularly significant in the Himalayan region, where women often have little opportunity to take, or even contribute to, decisions in male-headed households.

The role as household head allows women to discover hidden strengths, skills, and confidence. In rural Pakistan female headship is almost exclusively a result of male economic migration. Given that the average duration of a migration episode is for several years and often

recurrent, women are in charge of the households for a long period of time (Mansuri 2007).

One particularly significant effect of women-headed households is the potential impact on human capital development. If women have a higher income due to their husband's migration, they tend to spend more on education and health for children (Taylor and Martin 2001). A study in Pakistan showed that enrolment rates for girls increased by 54%, thereby reducing gender inequalities in access to schooling (Mansuri 2007).

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### Women are the largest receivers of remittances but they lack a saving and investment framework targeted to their requirements.

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The main receivers of remittances are women who use them for loan payments, savings, investment, and education, as well as to cover their household needs. These women need savings and investment and other microfinance products tailored to their needs, together with a supportive institutional and legal framework, in order to fully harness the potential of the remittances.

### Gender equity in migration

While the traditional profile of male migrants still dominates across the Himalayan region, processes of global change and social liberalisation are beginning to encourage young women to migrate autonomously, rather than as an accompanying spouse. In other Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines, women are already the majority of migrants.

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Although women earn less, they remit a larger share of their income and primarily earmark their remittances for their children's health and education.

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One drawback for aspiring women migrants in the Himalayan mountains is that the majority of them are unskilled. This leads to poor employment opportunities, primarily in the service or manufacturing sector, which are often informal, unregulated, and unprotected. Abusive and exploitative employment practices led several governments in the region to ban or restrict female migration. However, this has only increased illegal

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**"Men in my village can get work anywhere, we women are not so lucky." Dhan Kumari Budha, a Nepalese worker in Kathmandu.**

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migration, which leaves women even more vulnerable, as the demand for female migrants, particularly in the Gulf, remains high. In recent years, however, more supportive policies have emerged to support the labour migration of women, e.g., Bangladesh has proposed welfare schemes for women migrant workers. Governments start to recognise the role women migrants can play for development.



The migration induced responsibility for women to become heads of household offers a potential for exposure, empowerment, and human development.

**"I like to be the household head. I like to take my decisions on my own. When my husband was still in the village, I did not think about that." 29-year old Dalit women from Nepal (Kaspar 2005)**



## ICIMOD's position

Despite the huge phenomenon of in-country and cross-boundary migration in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, this topic has not yet received adequate attention in the development world. In particular, a greater understanding is needed of the gender aspects, as labour migration in the region has a strong gender bias. The issues faced by those that stay behind, their roles and responsibilities, and their access to and control over resources, services, and infrastructure should be considered. More attention also needs to be drawn to the increasing numbers of women migrants in order to respond to their needs.

ICIMOD aims to improve the general understanding and knowledge of labour migration from the mountains of the greater Himalayan region, focusing especially on gathering information and experience on the effects of male out-migration. The implications of the 'feminisation'

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**There is a need to assess the impact of mountain out-migration on gender roles in general and on the feminisation of mountain economies in particular.**

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of mountain economies are little investigated and need to be addressed urgently. ICIMOD's activities will focus on improving the availability of data on migration and gender through qualitative and quantitative studies throughout the region. A particular emphasis lies on reducing women's drudgery in agricultural work, which has increased substantially with the absence of men. One high priority is to identify innovative technologies and alternative livelihood options tailored to the capacity and needs of households of migrants.

Women, as the largest receivers of remittances, have an enormous potential to contribute to the development of their family and community. However, in the mountains there are few efficient channels to receive remittances,

and the investment environment and institutional and legal framework in which mountain women operate, are not always supportive. There is an urgent need to develop access to resources such as savings, credit, and investment packages, as well as to information and knowledge that builds on mountain women's interests and capacity.

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**ICIMOD will look at ways of reducing the drudgery and vulnerability of those left behind and harnessing the development potential of remittances received by women.**

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ICIMOD, based on its regional mandate, will facilitate cooperation among leading regional and international actors to further develop knowledge and gather experiences. By further mainstreaming gender aspects into relevant policies, the positive effects of migration for those that leave and those that stay behind can be enhanced.

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**ICIMOD will create a regional hub for experience and knowledge sharing**

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