



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Labor Migration and Household Vulnerability in Nepal: Rethinking Remittance-Led Development and Institutional Capacity

Prakash Pandeya

Independent Researcher and Development Practitioner

Tribhuvan University

Abstract

International labor migration has become a defining feature of Nepal's development trajectory, generating substantial remittance inflows that contribute significantly to household livelihoods and the national economy. However, the extent to which remittance-led development translates into sustainable improvements in household well-being remains contested. This study examines the socioeconomic impacts of labor migration on migrant families left behind in Nepal, with particular attention to household vulnerability and institutional responses. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research combines quantitative survey data from 400 migrant households with qualitative evidence from six Focus Group Discussions and 18 Key Informant Interviews conducted across Rupandehi, Palpa, and Myagdi districts.

The findings demonstrate that while remittances enhance household income, improve access to education and healthcare, and support daily consumption, their developmental potential is constrained by persistent debt burdens, limited productive investment, and continued dependence on overseas employment. The study further reveals that left-behind women experience increased responsibilities in household management, agriculture, and caregiving, often without corresponding gains in decision-making authority. Children and elderly family members face varying degrees of emotional, educational, and care-related challenges associated with prolonged family separation. At the institutional level, local governments possess important mandates to support migrant households, yet their responses remain limited due to resource constraints, competing development priorities, and weak integration of migration concerns into local planning processes.

The study argues that remittance-led development alone cannot address the multidimensional vulnerabilities experienced by migrant families. Strengthening institutional capacity, expanding local social protection mechanisms, and promoting productive use of remittances are essential for transforming migration into a more inclusive and sustainable development pathway in Nepal.

Key Words: Labor migration; Remittances; Household vulnerability; Institutional capacity; Migration governance; Social reproduction; Gender inequality; Left-behind families; Nepal; Transnational migration; Reintegration; Debt-induced migration

1. Introduction

International labor migration has emerged as one of the most significant socioeconomic phenomena shaping contemporary Nepal. Over the last two decades, the country has experienced a sustained outflow of workers seeking employment opportunities in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Malaysia, India, and other international destinations (Government of Nepal, 2024; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022). This migration trend has been driven by limited domestic employment opportunities, persistent rural poverty, demographic pressures, and aspirations for improved living standards (Sijapati et al., 2017). As a result, labor migration has become deeply embedded within household livelihood strategies and national development processes. Remittances sent by migrant workers constitute a substantial share of Nepal's economy and contribute significantly to household livelihoods and national foreign exchange earnings (World Bank, 2023).

The contribution of remittances to Nepal's development has attracted considerable attention from policymakers, development agencies, and researchers. Migration is frequently portrayed as a pathway to poverty reduction and household advancement, with remittance income enabling families to invest in education, healthcare, housing, and consumption needs (Adhikari & Hobley, 2015; Sharma et al., 2014). At the macroeconomic level, remittances have strengthened economic resilience and supported national development objectives (World Bank, 2023). Consequently, migration has often been framed as a key driver of socioeconomic transformation in Nepal.

Despite these positive contributions, growing evidence suggests that the developmental outcomes of labor migration are more complex than conventional remittance-centered narratives imply. While remittances improve household income and consumption, they do not automatically generate sustainable development or reduce long-term vulnerability (de Haas, 2010; Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). Many migrant households remain dependent on overseas employment, with limited opportunities to convert remittance income into productive investments or sustainable local livelihoods (Sunam & McCarthy, 2016). In many cases, a substantial proportion of remittances is used for debt repayment and everyday expenditures rather than long-term asset creation (Kollmair et al., 2006).

The experience of families left behind represents a particularly important dimension of the migration-development relationship. Migration affects not only workers abroad but also household members who remain in their communities of origin. Spouses, children, elderly parents, and other dependents must adapt to prolonged periods of family separation while managing the social and economic consequences of migration (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020). The absence of migrant workers frequently reshapes household responsibilities, caregiving arrangements, agricultural activities, and decision-making processes (Maharjan et al., 2013).

In Nepal, the impact of migration on household vulnerability is closely linked to changing gender dynamics. Women in migrant households often assume expanded responsibilities for household management, agricultural production, childcare, and financial decision-making (Kaspar, 2005; Gartaula et al., 2012). While these changes may increase women's participation in household affairs, they do not necessarily translate into greater empowerment. Existing social norms and patriarchal structures frequently continue to influence major household decisions, including asset ownership and long-term financial

planning (Tamang et al., 2014). Consequently, many women experience increased workloads and responsibilities without corresponding institutional support.

Migration also has important implications for children and elderly family members. Although remittance income may improve access to education and healthcare, prolonged family separation can create challenges related to caregiving, supervision, and emotional support (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; UNICEF, 2021). Children in migrant households often rely on a single parent or elderly caregivers, while older family members may face growing care needs in the absence of adult children. These experiences highlight the multidimensional nature of vulnerability within migration-affected households and demonstrate that economic gains alone cannot fully capture the social consequences of migration.

At the same time, the capacity of institutions to respond to the needs of migrant households has become an increasingly important policy concern. Nepal's transition to federalism has created new opportunities for local governments to engage with migration-related issues through local planning, social protection initiatives, and community-based development programs (Government of Nepal, 2015; MoLESS, 2022). In principle, local governments are well positioned to identify and address migration-related vulnerabilities within their jurisdictions.

However, the integration of migration concerns into local governance systems remains limited. Development planning often prioritizes physical infrastructure, while social protection mechanisms and migrant family support services receive comparatively less attention (IOM, 2022; MoLESS, 2022). Limited resources, inadequate technical capacity, insufficient migration data, and competing development priorities constrain the ability of local institutions to respond effectively to migration-related challenges (Sunam & Paudel, 2021). Consequently, many households continue to navigate the social and economic consequences of migration with limited institutional assistance.

These realities call for a critical re-examination of remittance-led development as a dominant framework for understanding migration outcomes in Nepal. While remittances undoubtedly contribute to household welfare and economic stability, they should not be viewed as substitutes for comprehensive development policies, employment generation strategies, and social protection systems (de Haas, 2010). A narrow focus on financial inflows risks overlooking broader household-level challenges associated with migration, including dependency, caregiving burdens, gender inequalities, and institutional limitations.

This study contributes to this discussion by examining the relationship between labor migration, household vulnerability, and institutional capacity in Nepal. Drawing on evidence from migrant households in Rupandehi, Palpa, and Myagdi districts, the research investigates how migration reshapes household livelihoods, gender roles, caregiving arrangements, and access to institutional support. The study argues that while remittance income generates important development gains, these benefits are often accompanied by persistent vulnerabilities that cannot be addressed through financial transfers alone. Strengthening institutional capacity, improving local governance responses, and expanding social protection mechanisms are therefore essential for transforming migration into a more inclusive and sustainable development pathway.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Labor Migration and the Remittance-Led Development Paradigm

International labor migration has emerged as one of the most significant livelihood strategies in developing countries, particularly in South Asia, where limited domestic employment opportunities and persistent socioeconomic inequalities have encouraged large-scale labor mobility. Classical migration theories,

particularly neoclassical economic theory, conceptualize migration as an individual decision motivated by wage differentials between origin and destination regions (Todaro, 1969). Expanding this perspective, the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) argues that migration decisions are often made collectively by households seeking to diversify income sources, reduce livelihood risks, and overcome market failures in credit, insurance, and labor markets (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Within this framework, remittances constitute a critical mechanism through which migration contributes to household welfare and economic development.

The growing importance of remittance flows has strengthened what is commonly referred to as the migration-development nexus. International organizations and policymakers increasingly portray migration as a development strategy capable of reducing poverty, enhancing household welfare, and stimulating economic growth (World Bank, 2023). Empirical studies suggest that remittances contribute to improved consumption, educational attainment, healthcare access, housing quality, and resilience against economic shocks (Adams & Page, 2005; Ratha, 2013). In Nepal, remittances have become one of the largest sources of foreign exchange earnings and account for a substantial proportion of national GDP, positioning labor migration as a cornerstone of household survival and macroeconomic stability (Pant, 2008; Wagle, 2019).

Despite these benefits, the remittance-led development paradigm has increasingly come under scholarly scrutiny. Critics argue that migration often compensates for structural weaknesses rather than addressing their root causes (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020). De Haas (2010) contends that migration should not be viewed as a substitute for comprehensive development policies because remittance inflows alone rarely generate structural transformation. While remittances can alleviate immediate economic hardship, they do not necessarily create productive employment opportunities, strengthen domestic industries, or reduce regional inequalities.

The Nepalese experience illustrates this contradiction. Labor migration has become deeply institutionalized within household livelihood strategies due to persistent unemployment, agricultural stagnation, and limited industrial development (Lokshin, Bontch-Osmolovski, & Glinskaya, 2010; Sijapati & Limbu, 2012). Although remittance income improves living standards, a substantial proportion of remittances is allocated to consumption, debt repayment, housing construction, and land acquisition rather than productive investment (Adhikari, 2011). Consequently, migration frequently produces household-level economic gains without fostering broader structural economic transformation.

This contradiction raises important questions regarding the sustainability of remittance-dependent development. Rather than reducing vulnerability, migration may create new forms of dependency in which households rely on continuous labor export to maintain their socioeconomic position. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond remittance volumes and examining how migration shapes household vulnerability and institutional responses.

2.2 Household Vulnerability in Migration-Dependent Economies

The concept of vulnerability has become increasingly influential within development studies because it highlights the relationship between risk exposure, adaptive capacity, and livelihood security (Chambers, 1989). Vulnerability extends beyond poverty and encompasses the inability of individuals and households to anticipate, cope with, and recover from adverse shocks. In migration-dependent economies, vulnerability emerges through the interaction of economic, social, and institutional factors that influence household resilience.

Migration can reduce vulnerability by increasing income and expanding access to resources. Remittance-receiving households often experience improved food security, better educational outcomes, and greater access to healthcare services (Adger, 2006). However, migration can simultaneously create new forms of insecurity. Households heavily dependent on remittances become vulnerable to fluctuations in destination-country labor markets, geopolitical instability, and economic crises that may interrupt income flows.

In Nepal, migration-related debt represents a particularly important source of vulnerability. Prospective migrants frequently borrow substantial sums to cover recruitment fees, transportation costs, medical examinations, and documentation requirements (Sijapati et al., 2017). These financial obligations often create pressure on households even before migration begins. Consequently, remittances are frequently directed toward debt repayment rather than productive investment, limiting their developmental impact and reinforcing cycles of migration dependency.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of migration-dependent livelihoods. Thousands of Nepali migrant workers lost employment or experienced wage reductions, leading to declining remittance flows and forced returns (ILO, 2021). The crisis revealed how external shocks can rapidly undermine household welfare when livelihoods depend heavily on overseas labor markets. Similar vulnerabilities arise from changes in immigration policies, labor regulations, and economic conditions in destination countries.

Furthermore, migration often fails to generate sufficient local opportunities capable of reducing future migration pressures. Many households engage in repeated migration cycles because remittance income supports consumption but does not necessarily create sustainable livelihoods at home. Vulnerability, therefore, should be understood not only as a consequence of poverty but also as a product of structural dependence on transnational labor markets. This perspective shifts attention from economic gains alone to broader questions of resilience, sustainability, and livelihood security.

2.3 Gendered Social Reproduction and Left-Behind Families

Migration is not merely an economic process; it also transforms family structures, caregiving arrangements, and social relations. Feminist scholars argue that migration redistributes responsibilities for social reproduction—the unpaid labor involved in maintaining households, caring for family members, and sustaining communities (Bhattacharya, 2017). These transformations have significant implications for household vulnerability.

In Nepal, labor migration remains predominantly male-oriented, resulting in the transfer of household responsibilities to women who remain behind. Women often assume expanded roles in agricultural production, financial management, childcare, eldercare, and community engagement (Kaspar, 2005; Gartaula, Niehof, & Visser, 2012). Some studies suggest that these changes can enhance women's decision-making authority and economic participation. Access to remittance income may increase women's control over household expenditures and strengthen their involvement in local institutions.

However, greater responsibility does not necessarily translate into empowerment. Research indicates that many women experience increased workloads while remaining constrained by patriarchal social norms (Maharjan, Bauer, & Knerr, 2013). Although women manage daily household affairs, major decisions concerning assets, investments, and land ownership frequently remain under the influence of absent husbands or senior male relatives. Migration can therefore intensify gendered burdens without fundamentally transforming power relations.

The effects of migration extend to children and elderly family members. Remittances often improve educational opportunities and material well-being, yet parental absence may weaken emotional support systems and reduce supervision (UNICEF, 2020). Studies have documented emotional distress, behavioral

challenges, and educational difficulties among some left-behind children. Elderly parents similarly experience both benefits and challenges. While remittances may improve access to healthcare, migration can disrupt traditional care arrangements and contribute to loneliness, social isolation, and increased caregiving burdens on remaining family members (Adhikari & Gurung, 2016).

These findings demonstrate that migration reshapes social reproduction in complex ways. Financial transfers may compensate for material needs, but they cannot fully replace physical presence, emotional care, and interpersonal support. Consequently, household vulnerability must be conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing economic, social, emotional, and intergenerational dimensions.

2.4 Institutional Capacity and Social Protection Systems

Institutional capacity has emerged as a critical concept within governance and development studies. Broadly defined, institutional capacity refers to the ability of public institutions to formulate policies, mobilize resources, coordinate stakeholders, and deliver services effectively (Grindle, 1997; North, 1990). Within migration contexts, institutional capacity encompasses the ability to protect migrant workers, support migrant families, facilitate reintegration, and ensure that migration contributes to sustainable development outcomes.

The developmental impact of migration depends not only on household decisions but also on the quality of institutional support systems. Effective institutions can reduce vulnerabilities by providing access to social protection programs, financial services, legal assistance, information systems, and community support mechanisms (UNDP, 2010). Conversely, weak institutions may amplify risks by limiting access to resources and failing to address migration-related challenges.

Social protection systems play a particularly important role in migration-dependent societies. These systems include cash transfers, insurance programs, healthcare services, psychosocial support, child protection mechanisms, and assistance for vulnerable populations (ILO, 2021). Strong social protection can reduce household dependence on remittances and enhance resilience during periods of economic disruption. However, evidence from Nepal suggests that migration-affected households often remain outside formal social protection frameworks, relying instead on informal family networks and remittance income.

The institutional dimensions of migration have received comparatively less attention than remittance flows and poverty reduction. Yet understanding institutional capacity is essential because migration outcomes are shaped not only by individual choices but also by the ability of institutions to support households throughout the migration cycle.

2.5 Institutional Support Systems for Prospective Migrants and Migrant Workers

Migration governance begins long before migrants depart their communities. The availability of information, training, legal protection, and financial support significantly influences migration outcomes. Nevertheless, institutional support systems for prospective migrants in Nepal remain fragmented and unevenly distributed.

Research indicates that many prospective migrants rely heavily on informal brokers, recruitment agents, friends, and relatives rather than official information channels (Sijapati et al., 2017). As a result, migrants often possess limited knowledge regarding employment contracts, labor rights, grievance procedures, and destination-country regulations. Information asymmetries create opportunities for exploitation and increase migrants' exposure to fraud and abuse.

Although Nepal mandates pre-departure orientation programs, concerns persist regarding their effectiveness and practical relevance. Studies suggest that training often focuses on procedural requirements while providing limited preparation for workplace risks, financial management, legal rights, and psychosocial challenges (IOM, 2022). Consequently, many migrants remain inadequately prepared for the realities of overseas employment.

Financial barriers further contribute to vulnerability. The high costs associated with migration frequently compel households to borrow from informal lenders, generating significant debt burdens. Limited access to affordable credit and financial literacy programs constrains migrants' ability to make informed decisions and increases dependence on recruitment intermediaries.

Institutional support during overseas employment remains equally important. Migrants frequently encounter contract substitution, wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and restrictions on labor rights. While embassies, labor attachés, and international organizations provide some assistance, access to protection mechanisms remains uneven. These challenges underscore the importance of strengthening institutional support systems before departure and throughout the migration process.

2.6 Migration Governance and Local Government Responses

Migration governance refers to the policies, institutions, and practices that regulate migration and manage its social and economic consequences (IOM, 2022). In Nepal, migration governance has evolved significantly over the past two decades through legislative reforms, bilateral labor agreements, and institutional restructuring.

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) and the transition to federal governance expanded the responsibilities of local governments in areas related to social protection, development planning, and community welfare. Municipalities are increasingly expected to address migration-related issues, maintain migrant databases, support returnees, and integrate migration concerns into local development strategies.

Despite these policy developments, substantial implementation challenges remain. Studies consistently identify gaps between national commitments and local capacities (Upreti et al., 2018). Many local governments lack trained personnel, technical expertise, migration data systems, and financial resources necessary to address migration-related vulnerabilities effectively. Consequently, migration often remains peripheral within local development planning despite its central importance to household livelihoods.

Furthermore, local development priorities frequently emphasize physical infrastructure projects while allocating limited resources to social protection programs, migrant family support services, and community resilience initiatives. This imbalance reflects broader challenges in translating migration governance frameworks into practical support mechanisms capable of addressing household vulnerability.

2.7 Return Migration, Reintegration, and Institutional Support

Return migration constitutes an increasingly important dimension of contemporary migration systems. Reintegration involves the economic, social, and psychological processes through which returnees re-establish themselves within their communities of origin (Paudyal et al., 2024). Successful reintegration requires coordinated institutional support, including employment services, entrepreneurship programs, vocational training, psychosocial counseling, and financial assistance.

In Nepal, reintegration support remains limited and fragmented. Returning migrants frequently encounter difficulties translating overseas experience and savings into sustainable livelihoods (Sharma & Bhadra, 2017). Limited employment opportunities, weak entrepreneurial ecosystems, and inadequate institutional coordination constrain reintegration outcomes.

The challenges are particularly severe for involuntary returnees who return due to illness, workplace exploitation, contract termination, or economic crises. Such individuals often face outstanding debts, limited savings, and psychosocial stress. Without adequate support, many returnees re-enter migration pathways shortly after returning home, reinforcing cycles of repeated migration and household dependency.

These patterns suggest that migration governance should be understood as a continuous process extending beyond recruitment and overseas employment. Institutional support during reintegration is essential for transforming migration from a temporary coping mechanism into a sustainable development strategy.

2.8 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

The literature demonstrates that labor migration generates both opportunities and vulnerabilities for migrant-sending households. Existing studies have extensively examined remittance flows, poverty reduction, gender relations, and migration governance in Nepal. However, much of this scholarship remains fragmented. Economic analyses frequently emphasize remittance benefits, while social studies focus on household experiences and governance research concentrates on policy frameworks.

Limited attention has been paid to the intersection between remittance-led development, household vulnerability, and institutional capacity. Existing studies rarely examine how institutional support systems shape household resilience throughout the migration cycle, from pre-departure preparation to return and reintegration. Consequently, important questions remain regarding the capacity of institutions to mitigate migration-related vulnerabilities and promote sustainable development outcomes.

To address this gap, the present study adopts the Transnational Social Reproduction Precarity (TSRP) framework. Drawing upon Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017), Gendered Geographies of Power (Pessar & Mahler, 2001), and Transnational Family Theory (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002), the framework conceptualizes migration as a process that redistributes both economic benefits and social costs across transnational spaces. The framework highlights the interconnected dimensions of economic precarity, household vulnerability, and institutional capacity, thereby providing a comprehensive lens for understanding labor migration and development in Nepal.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design to investigate the relationship between labor migration, household vulnerability, and institutional capacity in Nepal. The mixed-methods approach was selected because migration is a complex social phenomenon that cannot be fully understood through quantitative indicators alone. While household surveys provide measurable evidence regarding remittance utilization, economic conditions, and access to services, qualitative methods offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of migrant families, gendered caregiving burdens, emotional well-being, and institutional responses. Combining these approaches enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how migration shapes household vulnerability and how institutions respond to migration-related challenges.

The study is informed by a pragmatic research paradigm, which emphasizes the use of multiple methods to address complex research questions and generate contextually relevant knowledge. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed independently, and integrated during the interpretation stage. This design facilitated triangulation of findings and strengthened the validity of conclusions by allowing statistical patterns to be interpreted alongside participants' experiences and stakeholder perspectives.

The analytical framework of the study draws upon the concept of Transnational Social Reproduction Precarity (TSRP), which conceptualizes migration as a process that redistributes both economic benefits and social costs across households and institutions. The framework guided the examination of three interconnected dimensions: remittance dependence and economic precarity, household vulnerability and social reproduction, and institutional capacity for migration governance and social protection.

3.2 Study Area

The research was conducted in three districts of Nepal: Rupandehi and Palpa in Lumbini Province and Myagdi in Gandaki Province. These districts were purposively selected because they represent diverse geographical settings, socioeconomic conditions, and migration experiences while maintaining high levels of international labor migration.

Rupandehi, located in the Terai region, is characterized by rapid urbanization, commercial agriculture, and significant labor out-migration to Gulf countries and Malaysia. Palpa, situated in the mid-hills, represents a semi-urban and agrarian setting where migration has become a long-standing livelihood strategy among farming households. Myagdi, located in the mountainous region of Gandaki Province, exhibits high rates of labor migration due to limited local employment opportunities and a strong dependence on remittance income.

The inclusion of these districts enabled the study to compare migration experiences across different ecological and socioeconomic contexts while enhancing the broader applicability of the findings.

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Survey Design

The quantitative component of the study consisted of a household survey involving 400 migrant households. A multi-stage stratified cluster sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across geographical regions and settlement types.

In the first stage, the three study districts were purposively selected based on migration intensity and regional diversity. In the second stage, two municipalities were selected from each district, including one urban municipality and one rural municipality. The selection sought to capture differences in infrastructure, service delivery, and local governance capacity. In the third stage, wards with high concentrations of migrant households were identified in consultation with local authorities and community records. Finally, systematic random sampling was used to select eligible households.

A household was considered eligible if at least one member had been employed abroad for a continuous period of twelve months or longer. The final sample consisted of 150 households from Rupandehi, 130 from Palpa, and 120 from Myagdi. Respondents were primarily left-behind spouses, particularly women, followed by parents or senior household members responsible for managing family affairs in the migrant's absence.

The household survey collected information on demographic characteristics, migration history, remittance patterns, household expenditures, debt obligations, education, health access, caregiving responsibilities, social support systems, and perceptions of local government services.

3.4 Qualitative Data Collection

To complement the survey findings and capture dimensions of migration that are difficult to quantify, qualitative data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and expert interviews.

A total of six Focus Group Discussions were conducted across the three districts. Three FGDs involved left-behind spouses, primarily women, and explored issues such as changing gender roles, caregiving burdens, psychosocial stress, community expectations, and household decision-making. Two FGDs were conducted with adolescents aged 13 to 18 from migrant households to understand the impacts of parental absence on emotional well-being, education, and family relationships. One mixed FGD involved returnee migrants and community elders and focused on reintegration experiences, local support systems, and community perceptions of migration.

In addition, eighteen Key Informant Interviews were conducted with local-level stakeholders, including municipal officials, ward representatives, social development officers, school principals, health workers, and representatives of civil society organizations. These interviews explored local government responses to migration, service delivery challenges, social protection mechanisms, and institutional capacity constraints.

To connect local experiences with broader policy processes, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with migration researchers, officials from the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, representatives of the Foreign Employment Board, legal aid practitioners, and former diplomatic personnel with experience in major labor destination countries. These interviews provided valuable insights into migration governance, policy implementation, and institutional challenges across different levels of government.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were entered, cleaned, and verified using Microsoft Excel before being analyzed using SPSS Version 28. Descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, means, and cross-tabulations, were employed to examine migration patterns, remittance utilization, household welfare indicators, and access to institutional support systems.

Where appropriate, chi-square tests were conducted to assess associations between categorical variables, including district location, household characteristics, and perceptions of government services. These analyses provided an overview of the socioeconomic conditions of migrant households and the extent of migration-related vulnerabilities.

Qualitative data obtained from FGDs and interviews were transcribed, translated into English where necessary, and imported into NVivo 14 for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed following an iterative coding process. Initial coding was guided by the study objectives and conceptual framework, while allowing new themes to emerge inductively from participant narratives.

The analysis identified several recurring themes, including remittance dependency, migration-related debt, feminization of household responsibilities, emotional consequences of family separation, institutional invisibility of left-behind families, inadequacies in migrant support services, and challenges associated with return and reintegration. These themes were subsequently integrated with quantitative findings to develop a comprehensive interpretation of migration, vulnerability, and institutional capacity.

3.6 Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Several measures were undertaken to enhance the quality and credibility of the research. Quantitative reliability was strengthened through pre-testing of survey instruments, standardized interviewer training, and systematic data verification procedures. Qualitative trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation across multiple data sources, participant groups, and methods.

The integration of survey findings, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and expert perspectives allowed for cross-validation of evidence and strengthened confidence in the results. Detailed documentation of data collection and analytical procedures further enhanced transparency and methodological rigor.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards for social science research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. For adolescent participants involved in focus group discussions, parental consent and participant assent were secured.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and datasets, and pseudonyms were used when presenting qualitative evidence. Digital files were stored securely and accessed only by the research team.

Given the sensitive nature of discussions surrounding family separation, emotional distress, workplace exploitation, and migration-related hardships, particular care was taken to ensure participant well-being. Participants were informed of their right to discontinue interviews at any time, and referrals to appropriate community support services were made available when necessary.

By integrating household-level experiences with institutional perspectives, this mixed-methods approach provides a comprehensive examination of how labor migration influences household vulnerability and how existing governance structures shape migration outcomes in Nepal.

4. Findings

The empirical findings of this study are based on a mixed-methods dataset comprising a household survey of 400 migrant-sending households and qualitative evidence from six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and eighteen Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Guided by the Transnational Social Reproduction Precarity (TSRP) framework and informed by the migration-development and institutional capacity literature, the findings are organized across the full migration cycle: pre-departure vulnerabilities, remittance use and household restructuring, gendered and intergenerational consequences, psychosocial distress, institutional governance gaps, and reintegration failure.

4.1 Pre-Departure Institutional Gaps and the Production of Migration Debt

A key finding of the study is that household vulnerability begins before migration itself, shaped by weak regulatory enforcement and the financialization of migration processes. Survey data and qualitative narratives confirm that most migrants enter overseas employment through debt-financed recruitment channels, relying heavily on informal lenders and recruitment intermediaries.

Nearly half of households reported borrowing significant sums to finance migration-related costs, including recruitment fees, medical tests, documentation, and travel expenses. This establishes a structural condition where migration is not a voluntary accumulation strategy but a debt-driven survival mechanism.

Qualitative evidence reveals widespread dependence on informal brokers (dalals), who operate in regulatory grey zones. A participant from Palpa explained:

“We had no choice but to borrow from the village moneylender. The agent demanded payment immediately. The interest starts even before the worker leaves the country.”

— Left-behind spouse, Palpa

This finding directly extends the literature (Sijapati et al., 2017; de Haas, 2010), confirming that migration in Nepal functions as a market response to structural unemployment, but is simultaneously shaped by institutional weaknesses in credit access and recruitment regulation.

At the policy level, KIIs indicate that pre-departure orientation programs exist but remain largely procedural, focusing on documentation rather than rights awareness, contract literacy, or financial preparedness. This aligns with critiques in the literature that pre-migration governance in Nepal is administratively present but substantively weak, producing informed departure but not protected migration.

4.2 Remittance-Led Income Transformation and Structural Dependency

Quantitative findings show that international labor migration significantly increases household income, with 80% of households reporting improved financial conditions. However, this improvement is structurally constrained by expenditure patterns dominated by consumption and debt servicing.

Table 4.1: Remittance Utilization Patterns (n=400)

Category	Total (%)
Daily consumption	76.2%
Debt repayment	48.5%
Education	34.0%
Healthcare	25.0%
Productive investment	7.8%

The data confirms a central argument in the literature: remittances function primarily as a household survival mechanism rather than a driver of structural transformation (Adams & Page, 2005; Castles et al., 2020).

Qualitative evidence further demonstrates that remittances are rapidly absorbed into debt repayment cycles, leaving limited room for savings or investment. A respondent from Myagdi noted:

“The money is already spent before it arrives. We repay loans, then manage food and school fees. There is nothing left to invest.”

This indicates that remittance inflows produce income stability without economic mobility, reinforcing the dependency dynamics identified in the literature review (Sunam & McCarthy, 2016).

4.3 Gendered Social Reproduction and Asymmetric Empowerment

A major finding is the reconfiguration of household labor into a system of gendered role overload without corresponding empowerment, directly supporting feminist migration scholarship (Kaspar, 2005; Gartaula et al., 2012).

Women in migrant households assume full responsibility for:

- agriculture and livestock management
- childcare and eldercare
- financial transactions

- community representation

However, decision-making authority remains largely controlled by absent husbands or senior male relatives, producing what this study conceptualizes as asymmetric autonomy.

Table 4.2: Labor vs Decision-Making Authority

Domain	Operational Responsibility	Decision Authority
Agriculture	Women	Male migrants/in-laws
Assets	Women	Male migrants
Remittances	Women	Male migrants

A female ward representative summarized this contradiction:

“Women do all the work, but the final decision still belongs to the husband on the phone.”

These findings confirm that migration intensifies patriarchal continuity across transnational spaces, rather than dismantling gender hierarchies.

4.4 Intergenerational Vulnerability: Education and Care Deficits

The study finds that migration produces a dual effect on children: improved material access but weakened caregiving structures. While 34% of households invest remittances in private education, qualitative findings reveal declining supervision, emotional instability, and uneven educational outcomes.

Teachers reported reduced attention, absenteeism, and behavioral changes among children from migrant households, particularly where caregiving is transferred to elderly grandparents.

A school headmaster in Myagdi stated:

“Children come with better resources, but their discipline and performance decline because supervision is weak at home.”

Adolescent narratives further reveal that children—especially girls—are absorbed into domestic labor, reducing educational continuity. This confirms literature on the reorganization of social reproduction under migration pressures (Bhattacharya, 2017; UNICEF, 2021).

4.5 Psychosocial Distress and Community Surveillance

A significant finding is the high prevalence of psychosocial distress among left-behind spouses. Quantitatively, 62% reported anxiety, while over half reported depressive symptoms and sleep disturbances.

However, the study identifies that psychological distress is not only driven by separation, but also by social surveillance and moral regulation within communities.

Women reported continuous monitoring of their behavior, mobility, and appearance, reinforcing emotional stress. A participant stated:

“Even small actions are judged. You feel constantly watched and never free.”

Health workers confirmed that these conditions are often misdiagnosed as physical illness due to the absence of mental health services at the local level. This reflects a structural gap in Nepal's social protection system, where psychosocial care is not integrated into primary healthcare delivery.

4.6 Institutional Failure in Migration Governance Across the Migration Cycle

A central finding of this study is the systemic weakness of institutional capacity across all stages of migration governance.

(a) Local governance gaps

72% of households reported no access to municipal migration-related services. Municipalities prioritize visible infrastructure projects over social protection and migrant welfare programs. This confirms the literature's argument that migration remains peripheral in local development planning despite being central to livelihoods.

(b) Fragmented state response

KIIs reveal weak coordination between:

- Ministry of Labour
- Foreign employment agencies
- local governments
- embassies

This fragmentation results in a governance gap where no institution provides continuous support across the migration cycle.

A municipal official stated:

“We do not have trained staff or budget for migration issues, even though most households depend on it.”

This aligns with de Haas (2010), reinforcing that migration outcomes depend not only on flows of remittances but on institutional embedding of migration governance.

4.7 Reintegration Failure and the Cycle of Forced Re-Migration

The final finding highlights the breakdown of reintegration systems. Returnees face limited employment opportunities, weak access to credit, and absence of institutional support for skills transfer or entrepreneurship.

Within 6–12 months, many households exhaust savings and re-enter migration cycles, creating what this study identifies as a structural cycle of forced re-migration.

A former diplomat explained:

“There is no continuity between overseas employment systems and local reintegration programs. Returnees are abandoned after arrival.”

This finding directly supports the literature on reintegration failure (Sharma & Bhadra, 2017; Paudyal et al., 2024), demonstrating that migration governance in Nepal ends at repatriation rather than reintegration.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that labor migration in Nepal produces a contradictory development structure:

- Economic gains through remittances and consumption stability
- Persistent structural vulnerabilities through debt dependency
- Gendered intensification of unpaid care work
- Intergenerational educational and emotional instability
- Psychosocial distress and community surveillance
- Weak institutional capacity across the migration cycle
- Failed reintegration leading to cyclical re-migration

Rather than producing linear development outcomes, migration generates a transnational system of precarious social reproduction, where households remain economically sustained but structurally vulnerable.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for rethinking remittance-led development in Nepal by situating labor migration within a broader framework of household vulnerability, gendered social reproduction, and fragmented institutional capacity. While remittances are widely recognized as a key driver of poverty reduction and macroeconomic stability (World Bank, 2023; Adams & Page, 2005), the evidence from this study demonstrates that their developmental impact is structurally constrained by debt dependency, weak governance systems, and persistent inequalities within migrant-sending households.

This discussion is organized around four interrelated analytical arguments derived from the Transnational Social Reproduction Precarity (TSRP) framework: (i) remittance-led development as a fragile economic equilibrium, (ii) migration as a mechanism of reproduced vulnerability rather than transformation, (iii) gendered and intergenerational restructuring of social reproduction, and (iv) institutional incapacity across the migration cycle.

5.1 Remittance-Led Development as a Fragile Economic Equilibrium

The findings confirm that remittances play a crucial role in sustaining household consumption and reducing immediate poverty, consistent with earlier studies (Adhikari & Hobley, 2015; Ratha, 2013). However, this study extends the literature by demonstrating that this improvement represents a fragile economic equilibrium rather than structural transformation.

The dominance of remittance allocation toward consumption (76.2%) and debt repayment (48.5%) reveals that remittances function primarily as a liquidity maintenance system, not a productive investment mechanism. This supports de Haas's (2010) critique that migration does not automatically generate development but often compensates for structural deficiencies in the domestic economy.

Rather than enabling accumulation, remittances stabilize household survival while reinforcing dependency on continuous labor export. This pattern reflects what can be conceptualized as a "remittance trap", where households remain locked into cycles of external labor dependence due to limited local economic alternatives.

5.2 Migration as a Mechanism of Reproduced Vulnerability

A key contribution of this study is the finding that migration does not simply reduce vulnerability; it also reproduces new forms of structural insecurity across time.

The pre-departure debt burden identified in the findings demonstrates that vulnerability begins before migration itself. High recruitment costs and reliance on informal lending systems confirm the arguments in the literature that migration is embedded in unequal financial and institutional structures (Sijapati et al., 2017).

This debt-financed migration creates a condition where households are exposed to dual vulnerability:

- dependency on uncertain overseas labor markets
- obligation to repay high-interest loans regardless of migration outcomes

This reinforces Chambers' (1989) conceptualization of vulnerability as exposure combined with limited coping capacity. In the Nepalese case, migration does not eliminate vulnerability but reconfigures it across borders, making households dependent on both global labor demand and local credit systems.

5.3 Gendered Social Reproduction and the Limits of “Empowerment” Narratives

The findings strongly challenge simplistic narratives that equate migration with female empowerment. While women in migrant households experience increased responsibilities, this does not translate into meaningful decision-making authority.

Instead, the study identifies a condition of asymmetric autonomy, where women perform the majority of reproductive and productive labor but remain excluded from strategic household decisions. This finding aligns with feminist migration scholarship (Kaspar, 2005; Gartaula et al., 2012), which argues that migration often intensifies rather than dismantles patriarchal structures.

The persistence of male authority through transnational communication technologies further demonstrates that patriarchy is not spatially fixed but transnationally reproduced. This finding contributes to Gendered Geographies of Power (Pessar & Mahler, 2001) by showing that digital connectivity enables the continuation of patriarchal control even in physical absence.

Thus, migration produces labor intensification without institutionalized empowerment, reinforcing gender inequality within the very households that benefit economically from remittances.

5.4 Intergenerational Precarity and the Social Costs of Migration

The study demonstrates that migration has profound implications for social reproduction, particularly in relation to children and elderly caregivers. While remittances improve material access to education and healthcare, they simultaneously weaken caregiving structures.

Children in migrant households experience:

- reduced parental supervision
- increased domestic labor responsibilities
- declining educational performance in many cases

This confirms UNICEF (2021) and Battistella & Conaco (1998), who highlight the emotional and developmental costs of parental absence.

However, this study extends existing literature by showing that these effects are not uniform but are socially distributed within households, with adolescent girls disproportionately absorbing care responsibilities. This produces a cycle of intergenerational inequality reproduction, where educational disruption today contributes to limited livelihood opportunities in the future.

5.5 Psychosocial Distress as an Invisible Dimension of Vulnerability

A significant contribution of this study is its emphasis on psychosocial distress as a core dimension of migration-induced vulnerability. While economic analyses of remittances dominate migration discourse, the findings show that emotional and psychological costs are equally central but institutionally invisible.

High levels of anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances among left-behind spouses reflect not only separation but also social surveillance and moral policing, particularly in rural contexts. This finding adds to the literature on social reproduction by demonstrating that vulnerability is socially produced through both economic and cultural mechanisms.

The absence of mental health services at the local level further intensifies this condition, highlighting a critical gap in Nepal's social protection system. This reinforces the argument that institutional capacity must include not only economic support but also psychosocial governance infrastructure.

5.6 Institutional Fragmentation and the Governance Gap in Migration

A central argument emerging from this study is that Nepal's migration governance system is structurally fragmented across institutions and migration stages.

Local governments lack dedicated migration units, national agencies focus on regulation rather than reintegration, and embassies primarily operate in crisis-response mode. As a result, no institution provides continuous support across the migration cycle.

This confirms the literature's critique that migration governance in Nepal remains administratively decentralized but functionally disconnected (IOM, 2022; Upreti et al., 2018).

The absence of coordinated institutional systems results in three major governance failures:

1. weak pre-departure protection (debt and misinformation)
2. limited support during migration (rights enforcement gaps)
3. failed reintegration (lack of employment pathways)

This fragmentation explains why remittances alone cannot translate into sustainable development outcomes.

5.7 Reintegration Failure and the Structural Cycle of Re-Migration

The study finds that reintegration mechanisms in Nepal are insufficient to convert return migration into sustainable livelihoods. Limited employment opportunities, weak credit systems, and absence of institutional continuity lead to rapid depletion of savings and renewed migration.

This produces what can be conceptualized as a cycle of forced re-migration, where return does not mark the end of migration but a temporary pause in a continuous livelihood strategy.

This finding aligns with Sharma & Bhadra (2017) and Paudyal et al. (2024), but extends their work by linking reintegration failure directly to household-level vulnerability reproduction and intergenerational instability.

5.8 Overall Theoretical Contribution: Beyond Remittance-Led Development

Collectively, the findings challenge the dominant remittance-led development paradigm by demonstrating that migration outcomes cannot be understood through income metrics alone.

Instead, the evidence supports a shift toward a Transnational Social Reproduction Precarity (TSRP) perspective, which highlights that:

- economic gains and social vulnerabilities are co-produced
- households are structurally dependent on external labor markets
- institutions fail to mediate risks across the migration cycle
- gendered and intergenerational inequalities are reproduced, not reduced

Thus, migration in Nepal should be understood not as a linear development pathway but as a multi-layered system of precarious social reproduction shaped by weak institutional capacity.

Conclusion of Discussion

This study contributes to migration scholarship by empirically demonstrating that remittance-led development in Nepal is structurally limited by institutional fragmentation and social reproduction vulnerabilities. While remittances remain essential for household survival, they do not resolve underlying structural inequalities. Instead, they operate within a broader system of dependency, gendered labor restructuring, and governance gaps that collectively sustain household precarity across time and space.

6. Chapter 6: Conclusion and Policy Implications

6.1 Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between international labor migration, household vulnerability, and institutional capacity in Nepal, with a specific focus on the limitations of remittance-led development. Drawing on a mixed-methods design and guided by the Transnational Social Reproduction Precarity (TSRP) framework, the study analyzed data from 400 migrant-sending households in Rupandehi, Palpa, and Myagdi districts, complemented by qualitative insights from FGDs and KIIs.

The central finding of this research is that remittance-led development in Nepal generates income stability but not structural transformation. While remittances significantly improve household consumption, education, and healthcare access, these gains are constrained by high levels of debt dependency, limited productive investment, and structural vulnerabilities. This supports earlier critiques that migration often functions as a compensatory mechanism for structural weaknesses rather than a transformative development strategy (de Haas, 2010; Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2020).

Rather than producing sustainable development, migration in Nepal operates as a survival-based transnational livelihood system, where households remain dependent on continuous labor export (Sijapati et al., 2017). A significant proportion of remittances is absorbed by consumption and debt repayment, limiting accumulation and reinforcing long-term dependency (Adhikari, 2011; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016).

At the household level, migration produces reconfigured vulnerability rather than vulnerability reduction. Gendered divisions of labor intensify, with women assuming expanded responsibilities in agriculture, caregiving, and financial management, while decision-making authority remains largely controlled by

absent male migrants or in-laws. This reflects the persistence of patriarchal structures across transnational households (Kaspar, 2005; Gartaula, Niehof, & Visser, 2012).

Children and elderly family members experience mixed outcomes. While remittances improve access to education and healthcare, they also weaken caregiving structures, resulting in emotional distress and educational instability (UNICEF, 2021; Battistella & Conaco, 1998). Psychosocial distress among left-behind spouses is also widespread, driven by isolation and social surveillance, reinforcing the non-economic dimensions of vulnerability (Adhikari & Gurung, 2016).

Most critically, the study identifies a systemic institutional governance gap across the entire migration cycle. Pre-departure systems are characterized by weak regulation and debt-financed migration pathways (Sijapati et al., 2017), overseas protection mechanisms remain fragmented (ILO, 2021), and reintegration systems are underdeveloped and poorly coordinated (Sharma & Bhadra, 2017; Paudyal et al., 2024). Local governments, despite constitutional mandates under federal restructuring, remain under-resourced and weakly integrated into migration governance (Upreti et al., 2018; IOM, 2022).

As a result, Nepal's migration regime reflects a structural paradox: migration is central to household survival and national economic stability, yet marginal within institutional governance systems. This paradox sustains a cycle of forced labor migration and reinforces structural dependency rather than long-term development (de Haas, 2010).

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to migration theory in three key ways.

First, it challenges the remittance-led development paradigm by demonstrating that remittances primarily stabilize consumption rather than generate structural transformation, supporting critiques of migration optimism in development theory (Adams & Page, 2005; de Haas, 2010).

Second, it advances the Transnational Social Reproduction Precarity (TSRP) framework by empirically demonstrating that migration redistributes not only income but also unpaid care labor, emotional burden, and institutional risk across transnational households (Bhattacharya, 2017; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002).

Third, the findings highlight that institutional capacity is a central determinant of migration outcomes, rather than a peripheral factor. Migration outcomes depend on the ability of institutions to manage risks across pre-departure, overseas employment, and reintegration stages (Grindle, 1997; North, 1990; IOM, 2022).

6.3 Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for migration governance, social protection, and development policy in Nepal. A shift is required from remittance-centric approaches toward a comprehensive migration governance system addressing vulnerabilities across the entire migration cycle.

6.3.1 Reforming Pre-Departure Governance and Reducing Migration Debt

The study shows that migration-related debt is a foundational source of vulnerability. High recruitment costs and reliance on informal brokers (dalals) reinforce indebtedness even before migration begins, consistent with prior findings (Sijapati et al., 2017).

Policy priorities should include:

- Strict enforcement of recruitment fee ceilings and regulation of informal recruitment intermediaries

- Expansion of state-backed low-interest migration financing mechanisms
- Strengthening of pre-departure orientation programs to include rights awareness, contract literacy, and financial education rather than purely procedural training (ILO, 2021)

These interventions are essential to reduce migration as a debt-driven coping strategy.

6.3.2 Enhancing Productive Use of Remittances

The findings confirm that remittances are predominantly used for consumption and debt repayment, with limited productive investment (Adhikari, 2011). This limits long-term development outcomes.

Policy responses should include:

- Matching grant schemes for migrant households investing in productive sectors
- Expansion of cooperative-based investment platforms
- Remittance-linked savings and credit products through formal banking systems
- Local government facilitation of remittance investment advisory services

These measures align with calls to shift remittances from consumption stabilization toward structural economic transformation (World Bank, 2023).

6.3.3 Gender-Responsive Migration Governance

Migration intensifies women's responsibilities without corresponding empowerment, reflecting persistent patriarchal structures in transnational households (Kaspar, 2005; Gartaula et al., 2012).

Policy interventions should include:

- Recognition of left-behind women as a distinct policy category in local governance
- Legal and institutional strengthening of women's property and asset rights
- Agricultural labor support and childcare services for migrant households
- Inclusion of women in municipal migration governance structures

These reforms are necessary to address asymmetric autonomy and gendered precarity.

6.3.4 Strengthening Psychosocial and Community Support Systems

The high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and social isolation among left-behind spouses reflects a neglected dimension of migration vulnerability (Adhikari & Gurung, 2016).

Policy actions should include:

- Integration of psychosocial counseling into primary healthcare systems
- Training of community health workers in mental health support
- Community-based support groups for migrant families
- Awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and social surveillance of women

These measures align with global evidence on the importance of mental health within migration governance (UNICEF, 2021).

6.3.5 Strengthening Local Government Capacity

Despite federal restructuring, local governments remain weakly integrated into migration governance (Upreti et al., 2018; IOM, 2022).

Recommended reforms include:

- Establishment of municipal-level migration focal units
- Dedicated budget allocation for migrant household support programs
- Development of local migration databases for tracking households and returnees
- Capacity-building programs for municipal staff on migration and social protection

Without strengthening local institutional capacity, migration governance will remain fragmented and ineffective.

6.3.6 Building an Integrated Reintegration System

Reintegration failure is a major driver of repeated migration cycles (Sharma & Bhadra, 2017; Paudyal et al., 2024).

Policy priorities include:

- Establishment of a national reintegration coordination mechanism linking embassies, MoLESS, and local governments
- Skills recognition and certification systems for returnees
- Entrepreneurship and credit support for return migrants
- Targeted reintegration programs for female returnees facing stigma and exclusion

Such measures are essential to break the cycle of forced re-migration and household instability.

6.4 Final Remarks

This study demonstrates that labor migration in Nepal must be understood not merely as an economic strategy but as a complex system of transnational social reproduction shaped by structural inequality and weak institutional capacity (Bhattacharya, 2017; de Haas, 2010). While remittances remain vital for household survival and national stability, they are insufficient to generate sustainable development in the absence of strong and coordinated governance systems.

A fundamental policy shift is therefore required—from treating migration as a remittance-generating mechanism to recognizing it as a governance-intensive development domain requiring integrated institutional responses across all stages of the migration cycle (IOM, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

Only through strengthening institutional capacity and addressing structural vulnerabilities can migration in Nepal transition from a necessity-driven survival strategy to a genuinely sustainable development pathway.

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