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## **Educational Migration and Intergenerational Relations: A Study of Educated Returnee Women in Nepal**

By Laxmi Dhungel<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper explores return negotiation and changed gender roles of highly-skilled women who went abroad for their higher education and then returned to Nepal. Revisiting the concepts of return and migration from gender perspectives, Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* has been considered as a tool for analysis. Based on the fieldwork in the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu, this study was conducted among middle-class women. Through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a cross-section of those women, I found that the prevalent gender structure of Nepalese society is not friendly for the returnee women.

*Keywords:* Gender, Migration, Generational changes, Nepal, Nepali women, gender migration

### **Introduction**

The status and position of Nepali women are affected by a variety of factors, including political changes (Dahal, 2004), access to public spaces (Liechty, 1994) and the opportunity to migrate (Bhadra, 2007). Women have improved their access to education, with female literacy having increased from 35 percent to 57 percent in the last decade. Furthermore, better access to the political domain resulted in a rise in the number of seats held by women in the national parliament from 6 seats in 1990 to nearly 197 of the 601 members in the present constitutional assembly. Local-level elections brought new policies where at least 13,368 women were elected. Moreover, Nepali society has experienced many social and cultural transformations with the development of mass media, internet access, foreign aid and other agencies (Joshi, 2015). Hence, perceptions about appropriate roles for men and women have changed in recent years. This has opened up women's aspirations for social and physical mobility. As a result, women are migrating for work and education: their engagement in foreign employment has increased in the past decade. A status report for Nepal in 2014–15 shows that 161 women had been abroad for work purposes between 1985 and 2001. However, this number skyrocketed to 46,274 in 2013–2014 (IOM 2014). Research has shown that women tend to view out-migration as part of their personal development; it enables them to break out of social conventions and gain more personal development, freedom, economic advantages and social status than men (Piper, 2008; Fleury, 2016). Although they often have access to economic and educational opportunities when they return home, women face continued pressure to conform to traditional, family-defined gender roles. This has created tension for women who crave a sense of personal freedom and independence. They feel continuous pressure to live up to the prevailing gender norms which lead some of them to rethink the wisdom of migrating abroad.

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My work focuses not only on these tensions for returnee women, but also on the evolution of gender thought in Nepal. Studies reflect a trend of discourse regarding Nepali society, including topics that focus on education migration in Nepal, such as migration with the intent to return (Ghimire and Maharjan, 2014), transnational relations in education migration (Sijapati, 2010) and students who stay abroad for education (Valentin, 2012). Some studies have presented stories of women's empowerment at home while their husbands are temporarily overseas (Gartaula, Visser & Niehof, 2012; Chapagain, 2015). When it comes to the issues of women themselves migrating, Sijapati (2015) focuses on the country of destination and the causes of migration. Women's livelihoods in the context of labor migration, of both those who migrate and those who remain in their villages while their husbands migrate, have also been analyzed (Boker, 2005). Researchers have emphasized factors such as poverty and unemployment as the motivations for women to migrate from countries like India, Nepal and Bangladesh to work abroad (Oishi, 2005). A few attempts have been made to integrate generation and gender in the studies of migration and patriarchy (King & Vullnetari, 2009). This study contributes to this development through the cases of highly educated returnees. It is uniquely situated to evaluate tensions related to resettlement and changed gender perceptions following the period of migration.

The objective of this article is to explore how women negotiate to make their migration journey successful. It presents the experiences of married and unmarried young women from the middle-class who come from different castes and ethnic groups. In the current feminist anthropological literature in a Nepalese context, studies mostly focus on rituals performed by high caste women (Bennett, 1983) and low caste women (Cameroon, 1989). Studies regarding gender roles and the return from education migration are less discussed issues (Ghimire & Maharjan, 2014). They tend to disregard the lived experiences of individual urban women regarding their gender roles and education migration. This study addresses this gap using the stories of urban, middle-class women as an entry point to a theoretical analysis of changing gender roles as associated with trajectories of education migration.

## Methodology

This study is based on qualitative data collected from March to November, 2014. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used along with informal conversations before and after the interviews. Moreover, I observed returnees' lives at home, workplaces and social events. Finally, I spoke briefly with parents and relatives of the participants. The length of each interview ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. The women I talked with were selected using purposive sampling. I used an oral history interview format, including a checklist to facilitate conversation, and interviews were recorded on audio tape. The women in this study were aged between 30 and 50 years old at the time of the interviews; they were selected freely to participate and formal verbal consent was taken. There were around 57 interlocutors with whom I discussed regarding their trajectory of education migration and return along with their readjustment in Nepali society.

My research subjects had returned to Nepal from America, Australia, the UK, Norway, the Netherlands, Japan and India. Their educational interests include business, management, humanities, education and engineering. After returning, most of them began professional careers as lecturers, managers, engineers or researchers. They are engaged with government institutions, private companies, NGOs or independent businesses. Some participants were still struggling to find employment in Nepal. The women shared their experiences about their education abroad and the challenges of resettlement in Nepal. Essentially, they were sharing their understanding of

gender roles with a female researcher who had very similar feelings to them. This similarity helped to create an open and honest environment during the interviews.

### **Gender and Migration in Nepal**

Nepali migration processes have predominantly focused on men; women have been nearly invisible (Thieme, 2003; Bhattarai, 2007; Brusle, 2008; Sharma, 2008; Thieme & Muller Booker, 2010). The first mass migration from Nepal began in 1815 when youths were recruited into the British Army. A similar 19<sup>th</sup> century migration pattern led Nepali youths to Lahore, where they served in the army of the Sikh rulers. As a result, Nepali migrants used to be nicknamed ‘Lahure’. This migration trend reflects the patriarchal nature of decision making in Nepal. Throughout history, males have been on the front line of migration discourse (Adhikari, 2009; Piper, 2009). However, the Government of Nepal restricted other forms of migration (except for Gurkhas) until the late 1980s (Thieme & Wyss, 2005). Since then, remittances and savings from working abroad have become a major source of household income in Nepal. For 200 years, many Nepali have left their country, at least for a short time (Adhikari, 2009; Kansakar, 2003).

Nepali women, however, have migrated throughout history. Amshuverma (595–621 AD), a Mahasamanta of the Lichchhavi Dynasty, sent his daughter, Bhrikuti, to Tibet for marriage. Her marriage was associated with the spread of Buddhism. After she married the Tibetan King, Srong-tsan-gampo, she maintained and encouraged Buddhist scholars, religious teachers, craftsmen and painters (Kansakar, nd). In recent migration discourse, women are typically presented as dependent migrants who follow their husbands.

Researchers have also focused on women who have been left behind who are playing active roles in households in Nepal (Gartaula et al., 2012; Capagain, 2015). However, migrant women also contribute to the Nepali economy through their remittances. The population of Nepal in 2011 included 1,917,903 absentee citizens. Of these, 1,663,237 (86.7 percent) were males and 254,666 (13.3 percent) were females (Human Rights Commission, 2012).

A recent migration pattern is also emerging which shows that an increasing number of women migrate on their own initiative rather than as dependents of male migrants. This feminization of migration is associated with migration in order to work and generate economic gains, which typically are returned to Nepal (Oishi & Lim, 1996). However, the migration journeys of educated women, which also include elements of feminization and individual agency, are excluded from this discourse (Kofman, 2012).

There is a common belief that women who migrate from the developing world will be emancipated from patriarchal oppression after they have been exposed to the egalitarian ways of the western world (Lim, 1995). By documenting the journeys of educated migrants from Nepal, as well as their subsequent resettlement back home, this paper provides the opportunities and challenges of education migration in the household. Through individual stories, it will focus on the trajectories of migration of highly skilled women.

When women were brought into the migration discourse, known as the “feminization of migration”, they were presented as dependent migrants (following their spouses). It is associated with the uneducated and unskilled (Cuban, 2010; Piper, 2008). Such a view tends to ignore the equally important experiences of women on the move (Kim, 2011). The trend of migration indicates that women are moving on their own (International Organization for Migration, 2014). Basically, highly-skilled women and their migratory journeys is a recently developed topic for the scholars (Kofman, 2012). Young Nepali girls are given access to higher education with the help

of their parents. This is a growing trend in the present context. There was a cultural preference for sons in Nepali society when women were excluded from higher education. However, the scenario has changed: parents are supporting girls' education in private institutions by investing a huge amount in their education, like for nursing programs (Adhikari, 2012). Moreover, parents are inspiring their daughters to travel abroad for higher education. The motive to send their daughters abroad is associated with social and economic mobility. However, while at home, they are under surveillance from their parents and other members of society. Therefore, women see higher education abroad as an avenue for exercising freedom and independence. This discussion is not only presented by the researchers (Joshi, 2015; Adhikari, 2010), but also is raised in the media. Rajbhandari (2016) mentions that middle-class women of Kathmandu are given access to education, yet are also taught certain traditional rules and expectations, which they need to follow. She explains that they are taught to be strong and bold like men, yet are constantly reminded that they need to follow the certain rituals and practices as a daughter in their families. This has encouraged women to migrate abroad and compelled them to follow the rituals and practices where the hidden rules exist. Therefore, the women's narrative regarding their return and gender roles are discussed throughout this paper.

### **Theoretical Guideline**

Bourdieu's analysis can be a tool to understand more about the gender structure and the actions of urban middle-class women in Nepali society. Women wanted to exercise power through negotiation. Here, negotiation will be analyzed with guidance from Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*. Bourdieu claims that there is interplay between individuals and the social structure. The *habitus* is a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways (Thompson, 1991).

Growing up in Nepal and following the paths of traditional rules, the women's parents sustain certain beliefs and habits regarding gender roles. Life in Nepali society comes with expectations, but the appropriateness of these expectations comes under assault when one travels. Returnees then experience tension between a desire to emulate the cultural milieu they have returned from and a desire once again to fit into the familiar norms and values they had left. This creates a dualism in their decision to migrate and the resettlement in Nepal after the completion of their studies.

### **Dualism in Decision: Settlement Abroad or in Nepal**

Both married and unmarried women are represented in this study. While return negotiation experiences varied among the married participants, most of the unmarried women explained that marriage was the primary cause of their return. Many of my participants mentioned that they would not have been pressured to marry if they had been a son. For example, Romi<sup>2</sup> shares how her parents were engaged in her return decision. Romi did her schooling at a reputed private school in Kathmandu and later went to a private college where she was encouraged to go abroad. Her father was a civil servant and her mother worked as a housewife despite having a degree. Her mother's experience fueled Romi's desire to gain financial freedom and autonomy through economic engagement after her education. She decided to go abroad for her higher education. At that time, her parents pressured her to get married, but she preferred to get an education abroad. Later on, there was a huge debate regarding her return. She said:

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<sup>2</sup> All participants' names in this article are pseudonyms.

*My parents were searching for a guy for my marriage. Marriage was the main reason I returned at that time.*

In Romi's view, her parents' decision obliged her to return. After completing her degree, she had a plan to work abroad, but her desire was overshadowed by her parents' insistence to return. Research suggests that such returns are strongly based on emotional reasons, such as a personal longing for the home country due to cultural or religious reasons (Hautaniemi et al., 2013). Romi showed an attachment and emotional ties to obeying her parents.

As discussed by Bourdieu, *habitus* refers to a set of dispositions created and reformulated through the conjuncture of objective structures and personal history (Awasthi, 2004). Here, Romi's parents' concern is consistent with broader middle-class society in Nepal. Bourdieu claims that this disposition is the result of both social structure and personal history. Most Nepali parents give more importance to the marriage of women after reaching a certain age, and the parents' personal experiences are also consistent with this form of social pressure. It is not considered as "ijjat"<sup>3</sup> if their daughter marries someone from another caste or to someone abroad from another religious group. Therefore, they wish their daughter to marry a Nepali so that they have prestige in their society.

Like Romi, 34-year-old Kangana also discusses issues relating to marriage. Unlike Romi, she was not pressured to marry by her parents. She stated, regarding women's challenges:

*Females face more challenges. The only thing that I thought of when I decided to come back was that I didn't want to get into marriage pressure and social pressure. That was only in my head. Females face challenges after they come to Nepal. While dealing with my friends, they share that they don't want to take the social pressure of marriage*

There was an issue of marriage when she made her return decision. Even though she expected pressure, she was prepared to resist it. Her relatives questioned her regarding marriage. She said that most Nepali women abroad are scared of marriage pressure. Basically, the women who are abroad don't want to get married. Because of the pressure to marry, most of the women do not want to make their decision to return in Nepal.

In Nepalese society, Hindu rituals and practices are predominantly adopted and exercised. According to Michaels, following Bourdieu, "Hinduism as a *habitus* represents culturally acquired lifestyles and value systems, habits and predispositions, as well as conscious, deliberate acts or mythological, theological or philosophical artifacts and mental production" (Michaels, 2004 as cited in Awasthi, 2004). As stated by the Vedic religion, there are four Asrams, or stages in life, viz. Brahmacharya, or the period of studentship; Grihastha, or the stage of householder; Banaprasthan, or the stage of forest-dweller or hermit; and Sannyasi, or the life of renunciation or asceticism. Each stage has its own duties. These stages make up the evolution of man. It is believed that observance of these successive stages (the four Asrams) leads to perfection. It helps to regulate the life from the beginning to the end. The first two Asrams pertain to the path of work and the next two stages – Banaprasthan and Sannyasi – are the stages of withdrawal from the world. They pertain to Nivritti Marga, or the path of renunciation (Sivananda, 1999). By age, Romi lies in the Brahmacharya and it is time for her to enter the Grihastha Asram stage, which is when marriage occurs. In Nepal, marriage between young boys and girls are arranged by the parents. The family

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<sup>3</sup> Ijjat: Prestige given by the society especially related to self and others in Nepali society

hires a lami,<sup>4</sup> who plays a mediating role. Marriage is generally conducted through that mediator. Returning to Romi, instead of following her desire to develop a career abroad, she returned to Nepal to get married and struggled for her career. Kanagana also mentioned marriage as a main motivation to return.

Most of the returnees rebelled against the norms by opting out of Nepalese society. They preferred to remain abroad instead of returning to Nepal. They are also motivated to remain abroad so that they can exercise a level of freedom that does not exist in Nepali society. Dikshya got a scholarship to study in America after graduating from a private boarding school. She mentioned that her perceptions changed during her time abroad. The pedagogical method and the learning environment trained her to be inquisitive. However, when she returned to Nepal, she was reminded not to question authority. She does not prefer the working environment in Nepal and is still trying to settle in America. She is negotiating with an American company so that she can return to America and settle there. Still, she is working in Nepal; she has no plans for marriage and permanent settlement in Nepal even though her mother continually asks her to remain.

Married women who have been abroad make their decisions to return based on various reasons. For example, Dipti mentioned that her husband's decision was predominant while she was making the decision to return. She is working in the government research organization and said that her Australian degree was able to give her a lot of opportunities. Moreover, it gave her many skills regarding research and critical thinking. She is married and has a child. She thought that being abroad was a great experience of freedom and learning. Therefore, she loves to share the experience that she had abroad. She had the desire to settle abroad rather than returning. After completion of her degree, she insisted on staying abroad. Therefore, she negotiated with her husband to apply for lengthening the time of stay abroad. But her husband did not support it because he had his business in Nepal. Therefore, they returned to Nepal, thereby suppressing her desire. Nepali society is based on a patriarchal value belief system. Therefore, she is obliged to accept her husband's decision. The decision-making processes for migration and settlement are often guided by gender roles perspectives. As mentioned by Mahler and Passer (2006), many factors play a role in women's decision to migrate, including psychological and social. Because of the predominance of patriarchy in marriage, Dipti shares that her view is neglected in a way of making the decision.

### **Professional Achievement after Return**

Another tension among the returnees is the unavailability of jobs in Nepal after their return. The difficulty of entering the professional workforce leads some returnees to consider permanent settlement abroad even after they have returned to Nepal. Still, most returnees have expressed their desire to use their skills and knowledge in Nepal. Despite expending considerable effort, many of them are unable to get opportunities to work. Moreover, if they find professional work, they are rarely able to make full use of the skills and knowledge they learned abroad. Therefore, many of these women are contemplating another move outside Nepal.

Most of the returnees have mentioned that the possibility of contributing to Nepali society ranked high among their motivations to return. However, they have been frustrated at their inability to contribute to their society and country. For this reason, they again contemplate moving abroad after staying several years in Nepal. Women who have returned to Nepal said that the country has changed a lot during their stay abroad. The system has been changed and the people who have

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<sup>4</sup> Lami; a mediator who arranges for marriage by playing a role in the meeting of boys and girls and their parents for marriage

been abroad are replaced by other workers. In contrast, people who did their higher education at home have benefitted more because they could develop a network in the job market. At the initial stage, these people worked in lower positions, but rose to good positions with time due to networking and skill enhancement. Hence, an absence of six or eight years can harm the career prospects for those who left to study abroad. You do not know whom to approach, what to do and how to do it. One of my research subjects mentioned:

*Yes, I have seen this kind of situation. I have some friends whose performance was not good enough and they have not even completed a bachelor's, but are getting jobs. This is the working environment. I thought to do something in Nepal's policy sector. The reason behind joining the paper was to build a network. I don't know anyone or anything. I found that the media is a good sector to network because people with high profiles give time to journalists. So, it is a politically and socially good platform to develop a network. Later on, I joined an INGO.*

Women approach various institutions in search of opportunities. However, they face challenges to having a successful professional career. They wish to harness the skills and knowledge that they gained abroad, but it is difficult for them in the absence of opportunities.

### **Making Return Successful: Favorable Working Environment in Nepal**

A group of returnees who want to settle in Nepal have achieved successful careers. Interestingly, the parents of these returnees pressured them to settle abroad. Most of the participants mentioned that it is their own decision to return. Migrants insist that “the grass is greener on the other side.” Moving abroad is increasingly popular among Nepali youths. It has become fashionable for youths to move abroad with the expectation of a better life. Nowadays, most educated people have approached their host country for permanent residence, and they are able to remain abroad due to various provisions for emigrants. Settling abroad is thought to be prestigious. Acharya (2012:402) has stated that there are parents who live in Kathmandu and bask in the glow of prestige that comes from having sons and daughters who live abroad. In 2014–15, Japan, Australia, USA, India and Malaysia were the most popular study destinations. Nepali students comprised the third fastest growing population for Australia in 2014 and the second fastest for Japan in 2013 (ICEF Monitor, 2015). While settlement abroad is prestigious for parents, migrants themselves consider their potential in Nepal when they make the decision to return. Some of them explicitly spell out how they were self-motivated to return. Returnee women mentioned difficulties in convincing their parents that their decision to return made sense. While the women believe that their roles and responsibilities are being changed, the traditional socio-structural patterns remain prevalent. So, there comes a conflict in the negotiation. Maya, one of the participants, reported that there was a conflict with her parents when she decided to return. Regarding her return to Nepal, she expressed that:

*I had always a return mindset. At that time, I thought that I would complete my studies from there and utilize my knowledge here. Therefore, when there was a summer break in the middle of my studies, I used to return to Nepal several times – almost every year. I came to know about the changes taking place here when I had an internship. At that time, I was always concerned about Nepali society. When I*

*made the decision to study abroad, I did not have any plan to settle over there. Other Nepalese proceed for green cards, but I did not have that intention. There are many things behind my return. Both my personal life and professional life led me to return. The next thing is that there were many people in Nepal who had completed their higher education at Cornell University.*

While dealing with return, the propensity of migrants to become agents of change and development at home depends on the extent to which they have prepared for their return. A willingness on the part of migrants is required to achieve a successful return (Cassarino, 2004). Here, this refers to a woman's desire to live and work in Nepal rather than settle in the US. Maya's willingness to engage with her home country has inspired her to return. But Maya's desire and interest was not accepted by her parents and she faced a conflicting situation while negotiating for her return. Later on, she made a plan to return and came home despite her parents' objections. She thought that her professional and personal priorities had motivated her to choose to return to Nepal. She thought a degree gained abroad – in her case, a Master's in Economics from Columbia University, plus some courses in Women's Studies – would be valuable in the Nepali job market. Therefore, she was always motivated to work in Nepal. Her ideas regarding the usage of her knowledge compelled her to make the decision to return. On the other hand, her parents insisted that she could find a job in the US rather than in Nepal.

*My mum and dad didn't like my return. I had completed a master's from a good institution and they wanted me to settle there. They did not want me to come back to Nepal.*

This shows the contradictory interests between Maya and her parents. Maya thinks about the importance of her subject as applicable in the Nepali context, but her parents thought that it would be better to proceed for settlement in the US.

When I talked with Maya's parents, they confirmed that they hoped their daughter would settle in the US. They thought that the opportunities and facilities available there were better than in Nepal and America certainly could offer many opportunities. Her parents' desire for her settlement abroad was because she had a degree from a reputable university. Most of the women present the view that society expects them to play the role of mother and grandmother. However, their own perceptions are appropriate for themselves and have been changed after experiencing life abroad.

### **Expected Gender Roles: Changed Thought and Traditional Belief**

There is a linkage between migration and social change. Scholars have argued that social change following migration proceeds in various phases. During the first stage of migration, women deal with changes in their own status and the status of women in society more generally. During the second stage, women experience economic emancipation, and, during the third stage, the economic situation of women changes (Nare & Akhtar, 2014). This section will focus on women's post-migration phases as related to perceptions of change regarding gender roles. Levitt (1996) deals with social remittances among the migrants. In her original work, she distinguishes between four types of social remittances: norms, practices, identities and social capital. Here, I focus on how migration has helped and changed social practices.

The concept of social remittance is an important lens through which the returnees' changed their thoughts regarding gender roles can be viewed. Social remittance is a behavior and knowledge gained by migrants while being abroad, and they transfer those skills and behaviors after they return to the homeland.

As Bourdeiu explains, change occurs in various forms and can be durable. Regarding the changes in gender roles, women acquire education, employment and social sphere, all of which yield real changes in their lived experiences (Nentwich et al., 2014). Sometimes this change occurs only within the family. Sneha grew up as the only daughter in her family and began her education in India. Later on, she earned her master's degree in India, for which she wrote a thesis that raised issues regarding the changing rules related to menstruation. She questioned the practices prevalent at home in Nepal. At that time, she was not allowed even to prepare a cup of tea. Duwadi notes, "These kinds of expectations have deep roots. According to the Manu Smriti,<sup>5</sup> menstruating women should be avoided" (Duwadi, 2013). A conflict arose when she tried to challenge this practice at her home; neither her mother nor her grandmother supported the new practice that Sneha wanted to implement. She also criticized the "chhaupadi pratha",<sup>6</sup> especially as practiced in the far western region of Nepal, the practice of untouchability at the time of menstruation. She convinced her mother that menstruation is a biological process and nothing more. With this gradual negotiation, her mother eventually allowed her to enter the kitchen. Similarly, Sneha negotiated with her mother-in-law and other family members in a failed attempt to change the rituals surrounding menstruation after her marriage. Her grandparents were never convinced. By the end, Sneha acknowledged that her best choice was to follow the rituals as they existed in that home. She said that change does not occur suddenly; it will take time and is a gradual process.

A challenge to gender roles is insufficient. Emphasis is placed on ensuring female sexual purity, which is considered to be critical to the ideological foundation of the entire caste system. In patriarchal Hindu societies, high-caste males rank over females, because all women are, to some extent, ritually impure (Beck, 1998). Menstruation and childbirth, for example, are considered impure and thereby accord women lower status than men (Awasthi, 2004). Clearly, highly skilled Nepali women are facing challenges to bring changes to traditional rituals and practices.

### Gender and Generational Changes

Gender roles have been described as society's shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified sex (Eisenclas, 2013). Maya brought up ways in which gender roles are evolving from one generation to the next. In her mother's case, there was the issue of dependency in a patriarchy. Besides that, they accept the social norms which have certain restrictions. Her mother also raised her to challenge those restrictions. The other example is the relationship with her in-laws. Her mother used to engage a lot of time in service to her in-laws after marriage and perceived it as an important job. Another issue is the pressure of having children after marriage.

Her mother gave birth to three children. Moreover, there used to be a preference for baby boys. When nearby relatives come and give pressure to have a baby boy, nobody suggests that a baby girl might be better. In her mother's time, they did not have any control mechanisms for family planning, but she has a choice today. They used to accept whatever circumstances arose in

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<sup>5</sup> The Manu Smriti is a Hindu religious text.

<sup>6</sup> Chhaupadi is menstruation-period rituals adopted in the western Nepal.

front of them. But she has started to raise her voice. As a result of these changes, her own personality is emerging.

Along with this, there are issues regarding the relationship with in-laws. When her mother was a young bride, she gave more importance to demands made by her in-laws, but, due to the dynamic nature of the family, she is no longer as concerned about such issues.

Many women want to be free from restrictions and social expectations based on traditional gender roles. They think that their access to migration places them ahead of their mothers. Yet, some participants acknowledged the advances made by the older generation. Ritu observed that her mother and in-laws should be credited for the foresight that led them to send their daughters abroad for higher education. Her mother and mother-in-law had access to education, however, they were excluded from studying abroad and migration. So, Ritu claims that people who encourage their daughters and daughters-in-law to pursue education are themselves at the forefront of a major social change in Nepal.

Another participant, Binita, brought up how she dealt with socially imposed gender expectations while she negotiated her own marriage-related rituals. After observing the rituals adopted for her brother's marriage ceremony, she insisted that her marriage would be different. She said that she would not follow the cultural practice of bowing her head in front of her in-laws. In addition, she objected to Kanyadan rituals, which are common among Hindus throughout South Asia and are believed to comprise the most prestigious form of marriage. In these rituals, the parents and relatives of the bride worship the newly married couple, wash their feet and drink ritually purified water. This is known as the "punya paune kam",<sup>7</sup> that is, to get rid of sin. In kanyadan, marriage is accompanied by a dowry from the bride's family to the bridegroom (Cameron, 1999). Binita objected because the "dan" in "kanyadan" means "gift," that is, the bride is a gift offered to the groom and his family. Binita objected because of "dan", which kanyadan means "gift", that is, the bride is a gift offered to the groom and his family. Women, in Binita's view, should not be regarded as objects and gifts. She says that she is against this contemporary practice of Nepalese society.

While discussing with her mother and mother-in-law, Binita said that people in rural Nepal are two generations behind those who live in Kathmandu. Her own mother is from Kathmandu and is outspoken. Her mother had a love marriage, but she continued the ritual Hindu practice of women coloring their forehead with a red sindur<sup>8</sup> and tika<sup>9</sup> after marriage. Her grandmother was married at the age of 13. Her mother got married at the age of 19 and, in her own case, she got married at the age of 34. Binita claims that most middle-class families in Kathmandu have experienced the same generational pressures for cultural change. Bringing up the case of her friends, she says they are struggling to maintain relationships with their mothers-in-law, and her sister-in-law's story is similar to that of her mother. She had a love marriage, but she prefers not to put on the tika or bangles, which are also ritual symbols of marriage. Her sisters-in-law are balancing home and children and are happy with their status. But Binita herself is outspoken and seems different from others.

Nepali social structure is guided by a belief system that encourages the perpetuation of patriarchal norms and values in one way or another. Besides this, married women are subjected to a specific set of rules. After marriage, a woman's role is transformed from daughter to daughter-in-law, and a new set of rules and regulations become relevant after entering into the husband's

<sup>7</sup> The Nepali proverb "Punya pauni kam" means "sacred deed according to religious belief."

<sup>8</sup> Sindur: Red powder that women put on their forehead which denotes the marriage status of women

<sup>9</sup> Tika: Red pointed circle which is put on the forehead by women as a symbol of marriage

home. Her marital recognition is given by the red color (sindur) that she is expected to put on her forehead. She needs to have bangles on her wrist. Her residence is changed and she has to adjust to the new environment. She is expected to serve her in-laws and engage in household chores. She is expected not to oppose any demand placed on her in the marital home. Therefore, Ramila was stating that her mother, being a second-generation woman, was engaged in serving in-laws and was always busy with household work, but she did not accept the traditional norms and values. She is not engaged exclusively to satisfy the needs of her in-laws. Even though she is not engaged in household activities, she is expected to take her mother-in-law to the temple when she comes to visit Kathmandu. Her husband is not expected to do such work. There are changes in women's household engagements, but they still have many gender-oriented tasks to complete.

Sneha's narrative underscores how Nepali women have been oppressed. Through her mother's story, she reflects on how they adjusted to the particular structure in which they found themselves. In her mother's time, neither migration nor employment were an option. At that time, her mother gave up her dreams and bound herself within the four walls of her home. She continued the traditional culture and practices even though she had to compromise her education and career. Despite having a good education, a job and desire to continue her career, she gave up all of these when she got married. There were restrictions at home and she was not allowed to work outside. They have their family and children instead of their education. These kinds of life experiences, thus, are negotiated between mothers and daughters. With the rising expectations of education, the younger generation of women seeks to find their individuality through education, mobility and work. They are trying to reconstruct their identities differently from their mothers, make best use of their mothers' sacrifices and even seek the feeling of happiness that they expect to come with marriage and family. The socio-economic status of Nepali women had been improved a lot to enable individual agency through employment in the recent past. Nonetheless, daughters are negotiating for individual rights and freedom, even while the society continues to impose the traditional value and belief system that they reject.

Sneha's mother wished to send her daughter to abroad to experience freedom and harness its rewards. When she returned to Nepal, Sneha sought to engage in a negotiation, but her mother replied that home rules and regulations had not evolved as much as Sneha herself had. Therefore, it might make sense for Sneha to lengthen her stay abroad. Her mother had been consistent in her insistence that Sneha would go abroad for her education. She wanted her daughter to gain the advantages, yet also return—for Sneha's mother, this represented the best of both worlds.

Shudha's experience was different. Her mother was always worried about how she could lead her life after her marriage because she was a single, pampered daughter. She never had to do housework. At the initial stage after her marriage, it was very difficult for her to adjust to the changed situation and perform the roles expected of her gender. She exclaimed,

*“I did not even have any experience of preparing a cup of tea. Even today, I do not consider myself a good housewife.”*

Sangita, another participant, also told a story about how she was inspired by her mother. Her mother was the first in her family to gain an education abroad. Seeing the example of her mother, Sangita always intended go abroad. Later on, she completed her studies in Australia and, after returning, she said that she would choose to live with her daughter if they went to settle abroad.

Sarmila's interview also focused on her relationship with her mother, who played an important role in her pursuing a degree abroad. She said that even though she was a daughter, she was raised with all the advantages and opportunities that a son might expect. Her mother insisted that she could apply for education abroad. She did so and earned degrees in the UK and the US. But when she made the decision to return, her mother was not satisfied and suggested that she had to remain in the US. Her mother, comparing Sarmila's experience with that of other family members who appreciated the culture and social system abroad, always insisted that she should remain abroad, but she did not have any plan that would make it a reality. Sarmila herself said that she wanted to be in Nepal with her friends and relatives.

### **Conclusion**

A new form of feminization of migration has emerged where highly educated women need to bear various tensions while making their journeys of return and resettlement in Nepal. The stories of women, their trajectories of migration and their role negotiations with their learned skills have been presented here. The main reason for role negotiation is the notion of self-development, demands and constraints regarding employment, and self-inspiration towards career and education. Women are also trying to negotiate with the cultural practices which they want to implement in their everyday life. Considering the gender roles and the family expectations from a generational aspect, women feel that there are traditional gender roles prevalent in the family. But, at the same time, women are bargaining for change.

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