

FEMALE LABOR MIGRATION AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF MIGRATION
DISCOURSE: A STUDY OF FEMALE WORKERS FROM CHITWAN, NEPAL

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Nepali women are often barred from going abroad through discriminatory state policies, and the women engaging in foreign employment are generally perceived as “loose” women in Nepalese society. The female migrant workers are also represented as lacking “agency” and “victims” of sex trafficking in the Nepalese media. Despite the unfavorable socio-political contexts, a substantial number of Nepali women have engaged in transnational labor migration in the last two decades, often “illegally” by using the open Nepal-India border to reach the destination countries. The study investigates the impact of women’s migration on the dominant discourse relating to female workers’ sexuality and agency by analyzing the experiences of female workers from Chitwan, Nepal, who have returned after working as housemaids in the Persian Gulf. The study finds that the dominant discourse is both contested and reproduced during the emigration process and after the return of female workers. However, the dominant discourse is overall restructured in the emigrant communities due to women’s participation in foreign employment and return with diverse experiences. As women’s varied migration experiences are hardly reported in the national media, the discursive change in the local communities does not necessarily bring a (similar) change in the national discourse.

While violence prevailed against female workers in the Gulf, most acts of violence were indirect and non-physical. The extreme forms of violence, such as physical and sexual abuses, which are usually reported in the media, were somewhat uncommon. The major complaints of the respondents were low wages, withholding and non-payment of wages, withholding of passport, extremely long hours of work, constant criticism, lack of adequate rest, and the feeling of confinement. The violence against the housemaids was largely facilitated by the sponsorship-based labor recruitment system in the Gulf that bound the migrant workers with their employers.

At the micro level, the living arrangement (having to live with the employers) was also a contributing factor to violence against the female workers. The female workers who were employed in a household with multiple housemaids were less likely to experience violence than those who were the only maid in the employer's house.

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their employers. At the micro level, the living arrangement (having to live with the employers) was also a contributing factor to violence against the female workers. The female workers who were employed in a household with multiple housemaids were less likely to experience violence than those who were the only maid in the employer's house.

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Acronyms

CBS – Central Bureau of Statistics

DOFE – Department of Foreign Employment

FEPB – Foreign Employment Promotion Board

FY – Financial Year

GCC – Gulf Cooperation Council

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

GNI – Gross National Income

ILO – International Labor Organization

KND – Kantipur National Daily

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

NHRC – National Human Rights Commission

NPC – National Planning Commission

NRS – Nepalese Rupees

UAE – United Arab Emirates

UNDP – United Nations Development Program

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Dedication

To Sabina, Anuska, & Atmiyata

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Around mid August of 2012, when I was preparing to return to the USA to continue my study after spending the summer with my family in Nepal, the new rule for Nepalese female migrant workers received national and international coverage. Women under the age of 30 were barred from working in the Gulf¹ over concerns that they were being exploited in the host countries (“Nepal Women,” 2012). This specific event inspired me to delve into the policies of the Nepalese state regarding female outmigration² of labor to understand how these policies affect the prospective as well as returned female migrants.

Nepal is one of the South Asian countries that send thousands of workers every month to different countries in Asia for employment. An overwhelming majority of the Nepalese migrant workers, recruited predominantly in Malaysia and the Gulf, are male. In the last one and a half decades, thousands of Nepalese women have also participated in the international labor market of domestic work, a highly unregulated and informal sector, predominantly in the Gulf. Many Nepalese migrant workers succumb to death or injury, or commit suicide due to the difficult nature of the work, exploitative working conditions, and the resultant depressions. In 2010, nearly 1000 Nepalese migrant workers were reported to have lost their lives: 824 workers died of accidents, illness, or other causes and another 160 workers committed suicide (“Over 800,” 2011). However, female cases usually make national headlines, and the government feels the pressure to act immediately. The usual response of the Nepalese government to address the concerns of Nepalese society over the conditions of female migrant workers abroad has been to

¹ Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is comprised of six oil-rich Arabian countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. The terms “Gulf” and “GCC” refer to these six countries in this study.

² “Migration,” “outmigration,” and “emigration” are interchangeably used in this study. Unless otherwise stated, they all refer to international labor outmigration.

impose travel bans for female workers to specific countries. Between 1997 and 2008, the Nepalese government changed the policies for female migrant workers at least ten times (Gurung, 2010). Most recently, since September 2014, at the time of my fieldwork in Nepal, women of all age groups were barred from working as housemaids in a foreign country (Sedhai, 2014). In other words, at the time of this dissertation writing, Nepali women cannot obtain a labor permit from the government of Nepal to work as a housemaid abroad.

While it is true that some female workers have faced serious problems, such as physical assaults and sexual abuses during the process of migration and while working in the destination countries, the Nepalese state's method of regulating female workers' mobility has worsened their conditions as many women have emigrated through illegal networks, facing greater risks and exploitations. The policy of female migration in Nepal is, to a large extent, shaped by the public perception of female migrant workers in the larger society and the representation of female migration in Nepalese media. Independent female migration is generally discouraged due not only to the possibility of exploitation and abuses abroad, but also out of concern for the sexual "impurity" of female workers travelling to a foreign land. The discourse of sexual "impurity" of female returnees is also perpetuated through the intense coverage of particularly extreme cases of (sexual) abuses of female workers in foreign countries. Female migrant workers are also perceived and represented in the media as "minor," lacking the ability to think and act independently, and the independent female migrants are viewed as the victims of sex trafficking. The portrayal of female migrant workers as "minor" and "victims," rather than as citizens with rights, also justifies the "protective" policies of the state on female migration, which in turn forces female workers to take the help of unauthorized channels for migration, making them even more vulnerable to abuses and exploitations.

Despite the frequent travel bans on female labor migration and the social discourse disfavoring female mobility many Nepali women are participating in foreign employment, often using unauthorized networks. This stream of migration, then, raises some interesting questions, such as: how do women deal with the dominant discourse during the emigration process and upon their return? What factors help women contest the discourse in the emigration process? And, (how) does women's participation in labor migration reshape the discourse? This dissertation aims to explore these questions. Additionally, the dissertation also analyzes the impact of migration policies and the dominant discourse on female migrant workers. The study also discusses how the migrants view their experiences and how their perceptions and experiences compare to the dominant discourse on female migration.

Research Questions

The study investigates the following research questions:

- a) What is the relationship between social perception, media representation, and the policies of female migration in Nepal?
- b) How is the dominant migration discourse contested, reproduced, and restructured in the emigrant communities during women's emigration and upon their return from foreign employment?
- c) What are the contributing factors for female workers' experience of violence in the emigration process and in the Gulf?

Justification for the Research

This study is important for a number of reasons. First, while much study on migration is focused on Europe and the Americas, this study looks at temporary labor migration in Asia. More importantly, in the context of a high concentration of scholarly research on the impact of migration in the destination country this study analyzes gender-biased migration policies of a labor-sending country in South Asia, Nepal. This study also explains the dominant discourse of female migration in Nepalese society and its impact on female migrant workers and their family. This type of study is still rare in migration literature.

The study, to some extent, also engages in a long-standing debate on the relationship between structure and agency – (how) can individuals change the social structure that shapes their perception and experiences? More specifically, the study builds on the concept of discourse, while also exploring the questions and complexities in it – how is dominant discourse (re)produced? Can the local and national discourses be different? Does discourse change? Does a change in local discourse necessitate a change in the national discourse? With an example of the discourse involving Nepali women’s labor migration to the Gulf, the present study contributes to the theoretical discussion on discourse itself.

The study could have a larger impact in Nepal. By retelling female workers’ experiences in different phases of migration, this research helps bring their voices to the national political and social discourse. The research unravels the heterogeneity in female migrants’ experiences, and this might help remove some of the negative stereotypes of female migration. This study, in the line of Katz’s (1997) argument for ethnographic warrant, produces “a more holistic and satisfying summary view of the subject” (p. 416). As the research highlights the impact of the

discriminatory migration policies on female workers, the concerned people might be motivated to reformulate the migration policies of Nepal.

Composition of the Dissertation

The first chapter, which is the present introductory chapter, has provided an overview of the study. I have also stated my research questions, and discussed the importance of the study in this chapter. The second chapter provides the contexts for labor migration of Nepali women to the Gulf in the last two and half decades. In the third chapter, I review the literature on migration and discuss the major theoretical framework utilized in this study. The chapter also discusses the major theories of migration and evaluates the strengths of the theories in explaining the female labor migration from Nepal. In the latter part of the chapter, I explain the conception of discourse as developed by Michel Foucault and highlight the relevance of discourse analysis approach in analyzing the representation of female migrant workers on Nepalese media and the perception of female migration in Nepalese society. Chapter four discusses the research methodologies utilized in this study. I provide a short description of the research sites, explain the rationale for the methods selected for the study, and discuss at length how the data were collected and analyzed. In the next three chapters (chapters five to seven), I present the findings of the research, with a focus on the research questions that are stated in the introductory chapter. In chapter five, I discuss the prevalent discourse on female migration and female migrant workers in Nepalese society. I also explore the relationship between media representation of female migration and change in migration policies in this chapter. Chapter six explores how the dominant discourse is contested, reproduced, and restructured in the emigrant communities in the process of women's emigration and after their return. The chapter also sheds lights on the

contribution of labor migration on the socio-economic conditions of the female workers and their families. Chapter seven discusses the female workers' experience of violence in the emigration process and while working in the Gulf. I also explain the factors contributing to the violence against Nepali female workers abroad. In chapter eight, the final chapter, I summarize the major findings of the research. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the present study and provides guidelines for future research.

Chapter 2 - Contextualizing Labor Migration from Nepal

This chapter explores the socio-economic contexts for labor migration from Nepal. I will first present a macro picture of the socio-economic conditions in Nepal and then a brief history of labor migration from Nepal. After that, I will discuss the status of contemporary migration and remittances in Nepal. This will be followed by a discussion of the legal framework for international migration in Nepal and the demand for migrant workers and their treatment in the Gulf.

Socio-Economic Conditions in Nepal

A country sandwiched between two demographic and economic giants of Asia, China and India, Nepal spreads over an area of 147,181 square kilometers, with a population of just over 26.5 million (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2012)³. Nepal ranks as one of the “least developed” countries in the world, with a gross domestic product of \$19.29 billion and gross national income (GNI) per capita of \$730 (World Bank, 2013a). Nepal’s main trading partner is the neighboring country of India, which also surrounds it on all sides but the north. The total trade deficit of Nepal was about \$6.2 billion in financial year (FY) 2013/2014, while the deficit to India alone accounted for about two-thirds (\$4.13 billion) of the total trade deficit (Nepal Rastra Bank, 2014).⁴

Poverty is highly prevalent in Nepal. At least a quarter of the total population lives in poverty (World Bank, 2013a), with 24.1% of the population earning less than one dollar a day,

³This official figure does not include over 1.9 million people who were outside Nepal at the time of census survey. Most of these people are labor migrants in different countries of Asia.

⁴ This was calculated by the author, using the exchange rate of \$1=NRS100.

and 78% making less than two dollars every day (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2010). Only 78% of the working-age population (aged 10 and above) is employed (CBS, 2011a). The actual unemployment rate is much higher, as more than half (about 54%) of the employed people are “underemployed” – working less than forty hours per week due to the unavailability of work (CBS, 2011a). The main reasons for the high underemployment rate are the struggling agriculture sector, in which an overwhelming majority of people (73.9%) are employed and the lack of alternative employment opportunities. Most of the employed people (about 61%) in Nepal are “self-employed” in the agriculture sector – working for themselves on their own land (CBS, 2011a). However, the poverty rate is very high for the people engaging in agriculture sector. The poverty rate is 2% higher than the national average (of 25.2%) for the households headed by a person self-employed in agriculture, and this rate is much higher (47%) if the heads of household work on a farm for wages (CBS, 2011b). About 3% of people earn wages by working in agriculture sector (CBS, 2011a). Most of the farmers are engaged in subsistence-level farming and own a small plot of land. The landholding size is ever decreasing due to a steady population growth, but a large share of the population is still engaged in agriculture due to the absence of alternative employment opportunities. Cultivable land is both scarce and unequally distributed. Many of these farmers are unable to grow sufficient food for their family. About 80% of agricultural households hold less than one hectare of land, and they jointly own less than half (46.8%) of the agricultural land in the country (CBS, 2011a). Less than one percent of the households own four hectares or more of land, and they jointly hold nearly 9% of the total agricultural land in Nepal (CBS, 2011a).

Nepal has made progress in some socio-economic indicators in the last two decades. The annual population growth rate sharply declined to 1.35% during the period of 2001 to 2011, from

2.25% in the previous decade (CBS, 2014). Infant and maternal deaths have declined while life expectancy at birth has increased. The infant mortality rate per thousand live births stands at 41 now, a sharp decline from 117 in 1981 (Joshi, 2014). On average, Nepalese people now live 17 years longer than three decades ago (Table 2.1).

Table 2-1: Socio-Economic Indicators for Nepal, 2011

Population: 26.5 million					
Annual Population Growth Rate: 1.35%					
Gross Domestic Product (GDP): \$19.29 Billion					
Gross National Income (GNI) Per Capita:\$730					
Infant Mortality Rate (per thousand live births): 40.5					
	Nepal	Male	Female	Urban	Rural
Life Expectancy (in years)*	66.6	65.5	67.9	70.5	66.2
Literacy Rate (for aged 5 years and above)**	65.9 %	75.1%	57.4%	82.2%	62.5%
Human Development Index***	0.49	-	-	0.63	0.52
Gender Development Index***	0.53	-	-	-	-
Human Poverty Index***	31.1	-	-	18.5	34.0

Data Sources: * Pradhan, Acharya, & Das (2014); ** CBS (2012); *** NPC & United Nations Development Program [UNDP] (2014)

However, Nepal still ranks as one of the poorest countries in the world. Nepal is only above Afghanistan in South Asia in terms of human development index, with a value of 0.49 (NPC & UNDP, 2014).⁵ The human development index also greatly varies within the country: rural areas have lower values than the cities, and the disparities also exist in terms of caste, ethnicity, and geographical regions (NPC & UNDP, 2014). Gender inequality has sharply declined in the last decade. However, women still lag behind in terms of education and earnings.

⁵ The human development index was calculated using three indicators – life expectancy at birth, gross national income per capita, and education. The human development values range from 0 to 1, 0 being the lowest and 1 the highest.

On average, women in Nepal earn 57% less than men (NPC & UNDP, 2014). The literacy rate⁶ (for aged 5 and above) is 66% in Nepal. Compared to 75% of males, only 57 % of the female population is literate (Table 2.1).

Although the social norms for Nepali women vary across ethnic and religious groups – ranging “from Hindu high-caste women (including Madhesi women) sequestered in the private sphere, to the Thakali women renowned for their business acumen and skills, to Limbu women who are free to divorce and remarry as widows” (Tamang, 2009, p. 65), the wage gap between men and women and lower literacy rate among women cannot be explained without looking at the prevalent social norms that are unfavorable to women. Men as the “breadwinner” for the family and women as the in-charge-of the domestic sphere is still a dominant social norm, despite the norm being increasingly contested in recent years. Women hold a subordinated position in the households, and are also less likely to involve in decision-making (Paudel, 2007). Many women also experience gender based violence in their everyday life (Paudel, 2007).

The divorce rate is very low in Nepal. Less than 1% of men and women (10 year and older) were divorced in 2011 (Shakya, 2014). The low divorce rate, however, does not always indicate a healthy family life. Many women prefer not to divorce due to the social stigma of a “divorcee.” At least half a million women live with a husband, who is married to multiple women (Shakya, 2014), despite the fact that polygamy is illegal in Nepal. Widows are not only discouraged from remarrying; they are also often abused by their parent-in-laws, with who they usually live after the death of their husband. Acharya (2003) observes that “young widows, particularly in the Indo-Aryan community, are subject to covert and overt violence and face both psychological (as forerunners of misfortune) and physical violence, often for her share of

⁶ “Literate” for this study was defined as a person who could read and write a letter.

property” (p. 223). The divorce and the loss of spouse have a serious consequence for many women, as remarriage of women, particularly in Hindu Brahmin-Chhetri caste group, is still discouraged, if not prohibited, out of the concern for women’s sexual “purity.” Although many women are also remarrying now a days, the rate of remarriage for women is much lower (2.2%) than for men (4.2%) (Shakya, 2014) and remarriage is more commonly found in the geographical regions with concentration of certain ethnic groups, such as Gurung, Magar (Shakya, 2014), which traditionally hold more liberal attitude towards female sexuality.

History of Labor Migration from Nepal

Nepal has a long history of international labor migration. The history of Nepalese youths moving to foreign countries for work and remitting money back home goes back at least 200 years. Some Nepalese men went to join the army of Shikh ruler, Ranjit Sinh, in Lahore (today’s Pakistan), in the early nineteenth century, and the term “Lahure” has since then been used to refer to the returnees from Lahore as well as other migrant workers (Seddon et al., 2001; Thieme & Wyss, 2005). “Lahure” is still a very popular term in Nepal, and it is mostly used to refer to those individuals who have returned after serving in a foreign country’s army. Although Nepalese soldiers were recruited in a foreign army even before the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-1816, their popularity as brave and fierce fighters reached its peak with this war. Although the East India Company, the organization carrying out Britain’s colonial project in India then, was finally able to force the Nepalese state into signing an unfavorable treaty in 1816, which would result in Nepal losing some of its territory, the British Company also sustained significant loss of lives and were highly impressed with the skills and bravery of Nepalese soldiers (Dixit, 2014). With the 1816 treaty, the British were able to recruit Nepalese soldiers (usually identified as

Gorkhas or *Gurkhas*) in their army, often at the displeasure of Nepalese rulers.⁷ The 1947 Nepal-India-Britain treaty at the time of Indian independence divided the Gorkha regiments between Britain and India, while also allowing the latter to recruit Gorkha soldiers. Britain and India still recruit Gorkha soldiers, but the number of recruitments has declined recently, affecting the remittance-receiving communities in Nepal (Thieme, 2006).

Outmigration from Nepal was not limited to foreign armies alone. Many Nepalese went to Bhutan and different parts of India to work for tea plantations, construction works, or for settlements. When the British received Darjeeling hills as a gift from a Sikkim ruler in 1835, and soon developed it as the center of the tea industry, the tea plantations recruited tens of thousands of Nepalese workers from the eastern hills of Nepal (Hutt, 1996). Many of these migrant workers permanently settled in Darjeeling. The British rulers also encouraged Nepalese nationals to settle in Assam and Northern Sikkim (Hutt, 1996; Pradhan, 1991). The main reasons for the emigration of Nepalese nationals in the nineteenth century “were oppressive land and labor policies and indebtedness as a result of compulsory, unpaid labor demands” (Thieme, 2006, pp. 12-13). Many people from the eastern parts of Nepal moved to British India due to the indebtedness resulting from the tax-in-cash approach of the Nepalese state and the seizing of their land by the government officials in the pretext of indebtedness (Hutt, 1996, pp. 400-401). The Nepalese peasants only started settling in the Southern parts of Bhutan only toward the end of the nineteenth century (Hutt, 1996, p. 401). Although the Bhutanese state welcomed the Nepalese peasants to populate its Southern hinterland a century ago, the fear and hostility of the ruling class (from the “Drukpa” ethnic group⁸) against the immigrants grew in the late twentieth

⁷ The British Company and later the British Government always recruited the Nepali soldiers from certain ethnic groups, such as Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu.

⁸ Bhutan has three broad ethno-linguistic groups – Ngalongs, Sharchhops, and Lhotshampas. The first two groups and other communities in the Northern Bhutan practice a state-supported Tibetan style of Buddhism, and they are

century. The animosity against the immigrants culminated in the Bhutanese state's forceful eviction of over 100,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese citizens (about one-sixth of the total population or half of the total Nepali Bhutanese living there) from the country in the 1990s.⁹

The Nepalese workers went to the industrialized Indian cities, such as Delhi and Mumbai only after 1950 (Upreti, 2002). The high volume of migration between Nepal and India was facilitated by the open border shared by these countries. The Indo-Nepal treaty of 1950 includes the provision of unrestricted movement of Nepalese and Indian nationals across the borders, although the border between these two nations was not really closed even when the Nepalese rulers were unhappy with the British recruiting Nepalese youths into their army in nineteenth century (Kansakar, 2001, p. 9). As observed by Kansakar (2001), "It was almost impossible to control and regulate the movement of people along more than 1400 kilometers long border" (p. 7). Moreover, the British always wanted to keep the border open in order to recruit the Nepalese youths into their army and facilitate the outmigration of Nepalese hill people in India (Kansakar, 2001, p. 9). The destination of Nepalese migrants became very diverse only in the last quarter of the twentieth century with the demand for laborers from the South-East Asian countries as well as the Gulf countries (Thieme & Wyss, 2005). The change in political system – from authoritative regime to multiparty democracy – and economic liberalization in the 1990s also helped ease the outmigration of Nepalese laborers. It became easier for people to obtain not only their passports and visas, but also the information regarding employment opportunities abroad (Thieme & Wyss, 2005).

commonly referred as "Drukpas." The Lhotshampas (meaning the people of the South) speak Nepali and practice mostly Hinduism (see Hutt, 1996).

⁹ They took refuge in Nepal for about a decade and a half before being resettled in different industrialized nations of the West.

Contemporary Labor Migration

The rate of labor migration from Nepal has sharply increased in the post-1990 period. Since the migration to India, and via India into a third country, is undocumented, finding the exact number of Nepalese people working outside the country is difficult. The Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) only provides statistics of those workers who leave Nepal with a labor permit from the Nepalese government. The Nepalese workers need to obtain work permits from the government of Nepal to legally migrate to any countries other than India. These workers are temporarily recruited, and they normally work 2-3 years in one entry. Many workers return permanently after they complete their initial contract, while some others renew their contract to stay longer or reenter the same country after spending some time with their family in Nepal. Over half a million Nepali workers legally migrate to foreign countries every year for employment (DOFE, 2014),¹⁰ and nearly two million Nepalese citizens are believed to be working abroad (CBS, 2012).

The Nepalese state is strongly involved in the foreign employment of its citizens in the last two decades. In the contexts of high unemployment, rampant poverty, a frustrating agriculture sector (in which an overwhelming majority of the population is employed), high population growth rate, a significant number of youths entering labor markets each year, trade deficits, and the need for foreign currencies to pay international debts, the Nepalese state views foreign employment as an opportunity to engage a large number of its unemployed working population both for the political stability of the country and for earning foreign currencies to pay international debts and/or invest in developmental projects. During the negotiation between mainstream political parties, the government of Nepal, and the Maoist leadership in 2006, the

¹⁰ This number does not include the Nepali migrant workers in India.

former Maoist fighters were offered employment in foreign countries, instead of recruiting them into the Nepalese army (Acharya, 2008). Actually, many former rebels joined other Nepalese labor migrants in the Middle East eventually (“Second Instalment,” 2012), even without receiving direct support from the government of Nepal. The dependence on international migration for employment is evident in the ever-increasing number of people leaving the country every year. In the financial year (FY) of 2013/2014 alone, about a half million men and 29,000 women left the country with a labor permit from the government (DOFE, 2014). In the last six years, the number of Nepalese citizens obtaining a labor permit for migration has more than doubled, while the number of women migrants has increased by over six times in the same period (see Table 2.2).

Table 2-2: Labor Permits Issued to Nepalese Labor Migrants, 2006/2007 – 2013/2014

Year	Total Labor Migrants	Female Migrants	Female Migrants’ Rate of Increase (%)	Female Migrants as Percentage of Total Migrants (%)
FY 2006/2007	204,533	390	n/a	0.19
FY 2007/2008	249,051	4,685	1101.28	1.88
FY 2008/2009	219,965	8,594	83.44	3.91
FY 2009/2010	294,094	10,056	17.01	3.42
FY 2010/2011	354,716	10,416	3.58	2.94
FY 2011/2012	384,665	22,958	120.41	5.97
FY 2012/2013 ¹¹	453,543	27,713	20.71	6.11
FY 2013/2014	527,814	28,966	4.52	5.49
Total	2,688,381	113,778	n/a	4.23

(Sources: DOFE, 2013; DOFE, 2014)

¹¹ The data for FY 2012/2013 was calculated using the monthly “Progress Report” from the Department of Foreign Employment website.

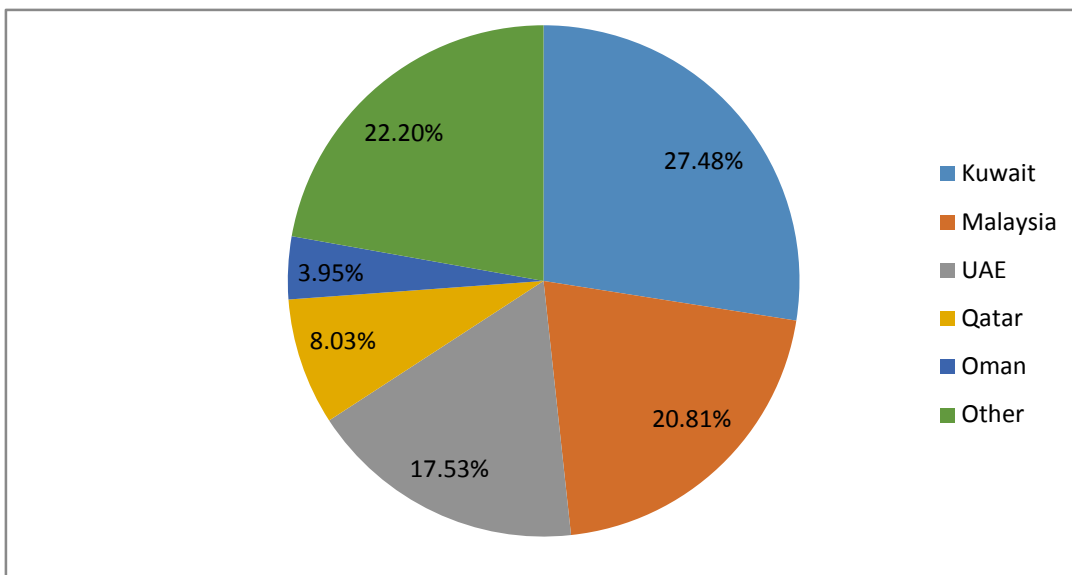
Women, however, still make up a tiny portion of the total labor migrants. In any year, women migrants are less than 7% of the total migrants, despite the surge in their number in the last five years. The mobility of female migrants has been affected by the policies of the Nepalese state prohibiting female labor migration until 2007, and the frequent travel-bans imposed on women migrants even after the promulgation of new Act – the act which was supposed to abolish gender-based discrimination on female migration. We do not have sex-disaggregated data of migrant workers before 2006/2007, and we also do not know the exact number of female workers who have migrated to a foreign country without a labor permit from the Nepalese government. Among the half million workers who obtained work permits for labor migration in 2013/2014, nearly 62,000 had been “re-legalized,” meaning that their previous entry to their destination had been illegal. Over 10% of such “re-legalized” workers were women (DOFE, 2014). Women’s share of “re-legalized” workers is higher than their share of total migrant workers, which also supports the point that a significant number of female workers use the Indo-Nepal open border to get into their destinations, particularly the Gulf countries. Over four-fifths of the “re-legalized” female workers obtained work permits to re-enter the Gulf countries, which they had reached illegally at first, without the approval of the Nepalese government (DOFE, 2014).

Although the Nepales government has authorized 110 countries¹² for labor migration (DOFE, 2015), most of the Nepalese workers are employed in Asian countries like Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. A majority of the workers are employed in the Gulf region. In 2013/2014, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait were the top five destination countries for male workers, while Kuwait,

¹² Among the 110 countries, Iraq and Libya are temporarily banned.

Malaysia, The United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman were the most popular destinations for women. Over 200,000 male workers went to Malaysia in 2013/2014, followed by Qatar (127,000) and Saudi Arabia (27,000). For female workers, Kuwait was the most popular destination with nearly 8,000 workers choosing to go there. Malaysia stood in the second position, hiring 6,000 female workers legally in 2013/2014. Other top destinations for female workers were the Gulf countries (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2-1: Top Five Destination Countries for Female Workers in 2013/2014



(Source: DOFE, 2014)

About two-thirds of the female workers from Nepal were recruited in the Gulf countries in 2013/2014 (DOFE, 2014). A significant number of female workers have also migrated to Lebanon for domestic works in the last seven years. Israel is also emerging as another popular destination for Nepalese female workers due to a high demand for caregivers, better pay, and Nepal’s recent bilateral labor agreement with Israel (“Govt to allow,” 2011).

The figure of Nepalese migrant workers abroad could be even higher as this data does not include the number of migrant workers employed in India, as well as those who have reached other destination countries through informal, and often illegal, networks. Many workers, particularly women, reach foreign countries through informal channels and “illegal” routes.¹³ The number of female migrant workers is not truly represented in the government data. The number of female migrants is estimated to be over 140,000 (National Human Rights Commission [NHRC], 2010). One way of calculating the number of workers in foreign countries is by looking at the absentee population in census data.¹⁴ At the time of 2011 census survey, about 1.9 million people were living outside the country for work, study, or business, and this was an increase from 0.76 million in 2001 (CBS, 2012). An overwhelming majority of the absentees are migrant workers in the Gulf, India, Malaysia, and other Asian countries. The proportion of the absent population to the total population rose to 7.3% in 2011, from 3.2% in 2001 (Khatiwada, 2014). One-fourth (25.42%) of the households in Nepal have at least one member living outside the country (CBS, 2012).

Women make up 12.4% or 237,000 of total “absentees” (CBS, 2012). The size of the female “absent population” has increased by over three times – from 82,000 to 237,000 – in the last ten years, while the number of male absentees doubled during the same period (Khatiwada, 2014, p. 223). An overwhelming majority of the absentees (over 86% of males and 75% of females) are from rural parts of Nepal (CBS, 2012, p. 37). The migration destinations have become increasingly diverse; the absentees are located in different parts of the world. Nearly

¹³ Due to the recurrent banning of female workers’ migration to certain countries by the government of Nepal many female workers use alternative routes to reach these countries, with the help of some (often fraudulent) informal channels. As Nepali citizens do not need a visa to enter India, female workers first travel to India, and from there they make their journey to final destinations.

¹⁴ Absentee population was defined as the people who were living abroad and were absent from their households for more than six months. The absentees are excluded from the official population figure of the country.

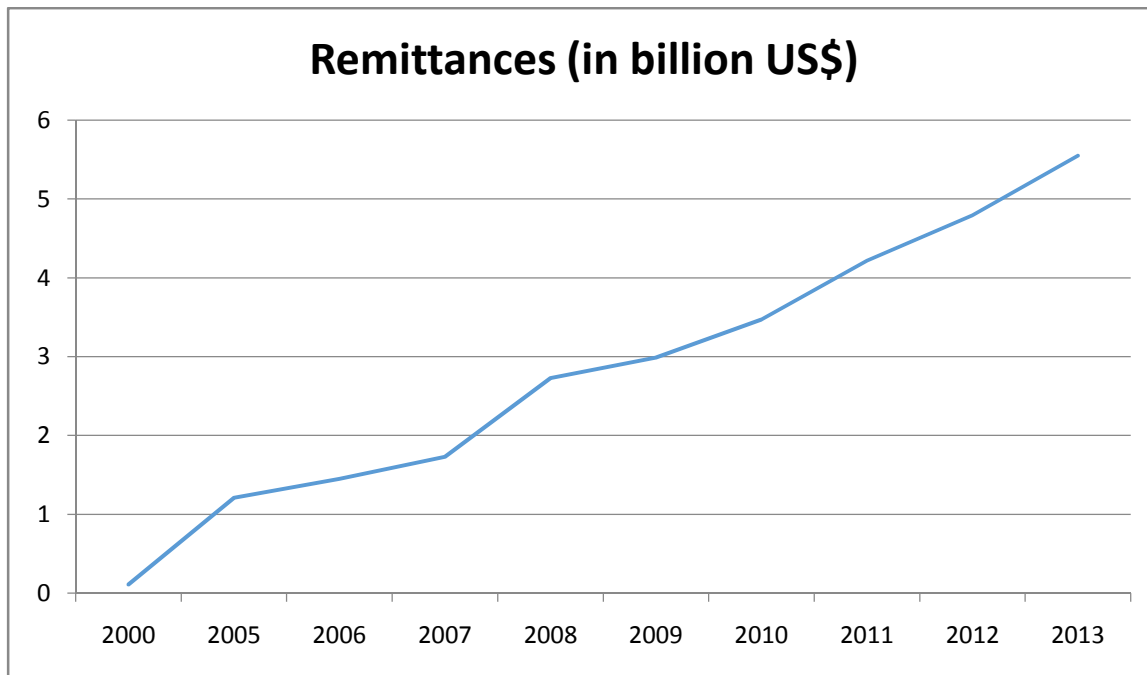
half (49%) of the female absentees and 36% of male absentees were in India. About 21% (or 49,000) female absentees and over 670,000 males were in Middle-Eastern countries (Khatriwada, 2014). The number of female workers in the Middle-East could be higher than this. Some families may not have reported their family members who had reached the destinations illegally, via India, due to the fear of prosecution. This number also did not include the people who were in the foreign land for less than six months.

Contribution of Remittance on Households and National Economy

Over \$400 billion of remittances were sent to developing countries in 2013 (World Bank, 2014). Although households in Nepal receive only \$5.56 billion dollar of remittances from the people residing abroad, compared to \$70 billion received in India and \$60 billion in China, Nepal ranks among the top countries, when the remittances are viewed as a share of the GDP of the country. According to World Bank (2014) estimate, remittances were equivalent to 25% of the GDP of Nepal in 2013, and only two countries – Tajikistan (52%) and Kyrgyz Republic (31%) – ranked above Nepal while measuring remittance as share of their GDP (World Bank, 2014).

As shown below (Figure 2.2), the amount remitted to Nepal increased by over ten times between 2000 and 2005, from just US \$111 million to 1.2 billion, and the total remittances sent to the country have increased by 4.5 times since then.

Figure 2-2: Amount Remitted to Nepal, 2000-2013 (in billion US\$)



(World Bank, 2015a)

The contribution of remittance is significant in the economy of Nepal, at both the national and household level. In the context of declining exports and ever-increasing imports, remittances are the major source of foreign currencies in Nepal. Remittances are equivalent to 190% of exports and cover over 50% of imports in Nepal (World Bank, 2014). The remittances would improve the credit rating and “debt-sustainability” index¹⁵ for Nepal at the global level and enhance the creditworthiness of the recipients at the household level (World Bank, 2015b, p.17). More than half (56%) of the households in Nepal receive remittances, and the average

¹⁵ The Debt Sustainability Framework is developed jointly by World Bank and IMF to evaluate the ability of low-income countries to repay external obligations as well as their ability to borrow from private creditors (see World Bank, 2015b).

income from remittances among the remittance-recipient households is about \$840¹⁶ (CBS, 2011a, p.78). The remittances from foreign countries account for 80% of the total amount of remittances received by the households, and internal sources account for nearly one fifth of total remittance (CBS, 2011a). Although Nepalese expatriates are residing in different parts of the world now, most of the remittances are sent by Nepalese labor migrants in different countries of Asia. Remittances from Gulf countries alone account for just over a quarter (26%) of the total amount of remittances received by the Nepalese households (CBS, 2011a, p. 79).

Remittances have played a crucial role in improving the socio-economic indicators for Nepal in the last two decades. A study finds that the poverty rate would increase by at least 16% if households did not receive remittances (National Planning Commission & United Nations Country Team Nepal, 2013). While most of the remittances are used for “daily consumption” (about 79%) or “repaying loans” (about 7%), the amount of money spent for household property, education, and capital formation is only 11% of the total remittances (CBS, 2011a). More than one-fourth of the remittances received from three major destination countries – Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – are used for paying debt (CBS, 2011a). For various reasons, ranging from corruption to frequent travels to Kathmandu for migration to a number of middlepersons involved in the migration process, the financial cost of migration is usually very high, and the labor migrants end up accruing a large amount of debt, usually borrowed at a high interest rate from local moneylenders. On average, the Nepalese migrant workers in Middle East would require six months’ wages to pay for the expenses of the recruitment process (World Bank, 2013b). In reality, it would take longer than six months for them to repay the debt as the households are likely to save little money from “daily consumption,” but usually have to pay a

¹⁶ At the exchange rate of \$1= NRS 100

high interest rate on their loan. As the sex-disaggregated data on remittances is unavailable, we do not know the amount remitted by female workers and the way their remittances are spent by the households at the national level.

Legal Framework for Labor Migration from Nepal

Having failed to recognize the significance of labor migration for several decades, the Nepalese state now perceives foreign employment of workers as a reliable strategy for reducing poverty and unemployment in the country (Thieme & Wyss, 2005). In the last two decades, migration has emerged as an important, if not the most important, “industry” and remittances have offered some hope of economic development for the policy makers and scholars alike. Three distinct groups are directly involved in the process of labor migration from Nepal – the Nepalese government, recruiting agencies, and the migrants themselves. The Nepalese government is involved in both creating foreign employment opportunities for Nepalese workers and in regulating outmigration from Nepal. The government makes bi-lateral agreements with host countries for the employment of Nepalese workers, and the government also has the authority to open or stop labor migration to specific countries. Although the outmigration of a large number of Nepalese workers started after the democratization of the country in 1990 and the opening of international labor markets to Nepalese youths then, the publication of the first government document on foreign employment, *Foreign Employment Act* of 1985, precedes the 1990 political movement. The first migration Act (1985) can be viewed as the Nepalese state’s efforts at addressing the unemployment problem in the country by creating workers’ access to foreign labor markets, especially in the Gulf region which had high demand for foreign workers in construction. Interest in foreign employment was growing even before 1990, and the Nepalese

state tried to systematize labor migration, especially by having control over recruiting agencies. With this Act, the Nepalese state also recognized recruiting agencies as a stakeholder in the outmigration of workers.

Two government bodies – the Foreign Employment Promotion Board (FEPB) and the Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) – were established under the Ministry of Labor and Employment for foreign-employment-related works. The main objective of FEPB is to “promote the foreign employment business and make this business safe, systematic, and decent, and protect the rights and interests of workers going for foreign employment and the foreign employment entrepreneurs” (*Foreign Employment Act, 2007*, pp. 20-21). Among other things, DOFE authorizes recruiting agencies to advertise available foreign jobs for Nepalese workers, issues labor permits to migrant workers, and investigates complaints against recruiting agents/agencies in Nepal. DOFE also periodically publishes information about foreign employment, including the list of opened countries for migration and the list of fraudulent companies.

The private recruitment agencies have played a crucial role in facilitating the outmigration of a large number of workers in the last three decades. There are over 600 registered recruiting agencies (known as “manpower companies” locally) and a large, but unknown, number of agents participating in the migration business. The Nepalese agencies work with other recruiting agencies (or directly with the companies seeking foreign labor) in the destination countries in the process of sending workers from Nepal. The agencies usually advertise the positions available to Nepalese workers overseas, and the aspirants for migration contact these agencies. Nepalese newspapers are full of advertisements about available employment opportunities in different countries. Middlepersons or agents also facilitate the

contact between these agencies and the workers. The agencies need to work with DOFE to get labor permits for the workers. The Nepalese government has also set a price limit for labor migration to specific countries. However, the agencies usually charge higher than the government limit. The amount of money that the workers have to pay to the agencies increases with the number of middlepersons involved, as the middlepersons receive payment from the recruiting agencies on the basis of the number of workers they get to the agencies. The recruiting agencies are involved in the outmigration of Nepalese workers in all countries but South Korea. The Nepalese government itself sends the workers to South Korea – the most lucrative migration destination for Nepalese workers.

Discriminatory Policies against Female Labor Migrants in Nepal

The first foreign employment act of 1985 was a step towards managing a safe outmigration of Nepalese workers. With this Act, the Nepalese state formally recognized the significance of male labor migration, but forbade the independent migration of women and children for employment overseas. Clause 12 of the Act forbade the foreign employment agencies to “provide foreign employment to children and to women without the consent of her guardian.” Owing to the existence of a very patriarchal and authoritarian regime in the pre-1990 period, it was not surprising that Nepal held discriminatory migration policies against women during this period. However, the discriminatory policies continued even after 1990, and many women during this period went to foreign countries through illegal/informal channels, bearing greater risks. While the government data show zero migration of female workers between 1993 and 2005, thousands of female workers had migrated during this period without the authorization of the government (Gurung, 2010). With the promulgation of *Foreign Employment Act, 2007*

the Nepalese government officially discarded gender discrimination policies in foreign employment. Moreover, through this new Act of foreign employment, the Nepalese state expressed its interest in helping women, indigenous nationalities, oppressed people, and the victims of natural disasters to obtain foreign employment. Viewing remittances as an important source of income for national development, and also for the survival of the country, the Nepalese state openly encouraged the working population of every social stratum to look for employment abroad. The repeal of the discriminatory migration Act of 1985 in fact had a positive impact on the migration of female workers as the number of documented women migrants increased from 390 in 2006/2007 to 29,000 in 2013/2014 (see Table 2.2 above). However, the Nepalese state continued to (often unofficially) discourage female labor migration. Frequent travel bans were imposed on women for international labor migration even after gender equality was maintained in the legal code. As a result, a large number of women continued to go overseas for employment illegally, without having proper documents. A large number of Nepalese women have reached foreign countries through informal channels, and the number of undocumented female workers is believed to be higher than the number of documented.

Treatment of Migrant Workers in the Gulf

The outflow of migrant workers from Nepal is connected to high labor demand in various Asian countries, particularly industrializing Malaysia and the Gulf region, which is heavily investing in development projects. The Gulf region, which comprises six Middle Eastern countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates – began to recruit migrant workers for construction jobs when these countries started investing their petrodollars in development projects during 1970s. Although the migratory movements were always

common between Arab states, the hike in oil price created an unprecedented demand for labor in the Gulf, particularly in the sector of construction (Stalker, 2000). High labor demand and better pay attracted people from the neighboring Arab countries, but workers from other Asian countries, particularly India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, also helped fill the high demand for labor. Using data from national censuses and the study of United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (1994), a United Nations study (2003) estimates that the number of migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) reached 5.2 million in 1990, from just over a million in 1975, with foreign workers accounting for 80% of the total labor force in countries like Kuwait and Qatar. Four GCC countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates – now have more migrant workers than the native population (Table 2.3).

Table 2-3: Immigrants in the Gulf Countries in 2013

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates
Number of Immigrants (in thousands)	729.4	2,028.1	1,112	1,601	9,060.4	7,827
Female Migrants' Share (% of total migrants)	27.8	30	19	20.8	29.0	25.3
Immigrants as percentage of the population (%)	54.7	60.2	30.6	73.8	31.4	83.7

(Source: United Nations, 2013)

Although the above data (Table 2.3) does not denote the exact number of migrant workers (as this is the total number of people born outside the country), it still provides information on the flow of migrant workers into these countries. These countries have very

restrictive citizenship policies. Hence, unlike in European and North American countries, migrant workers are recruited through contracts and prevented from permanently settling there. It is logical to assume that an overwhelming majority of the immigrant population is in fact contract migrant workers.

According to an estimate of the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2013), which used national survey or census data dating a few years back, over 52 million people were working as domestic workers around the world in 2010 and 83% of them were women. At least 2.1 million workers were employed in domestic jobs in the Middle East¹⁷ in 2010 (ILO, 2013). Although a significant number of male domestic workers are hired in the Gulf, particularly for cooking, driving, and gardening, women still make up an overwhelming majority (Table 2.4). On average, about half of female workers (ranging from 39% to 59%) are employed as domestic workers in these countries.

Table 2-4: Domestic workers in the Gulf Countries

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates
Total Domestic Workers	76,500	246,100	94,600	80,300	784,500	236,500
Female Domestic Workers	48,500	151,100	69,300	48,100	507,900	146,100
As percentage of total employment (for female)	42.2%	53.3%	59.3%	38.9%	47.1%	42.4%

(ILO 2013)

¹⁷ The Middle East included following countries: Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (ILO, 2013, p. 109).

The figure of migrant domestic workers reported in another study (Fernandez, 2014) is similar to the ILO (2013) report of domestic workers in the Gulf. Thus, it is logical to assume that the paid domestic workers in the Gulf are in fact the migrant workers. Other Middle Eastern countries, such as Lebanon, also hire a large number of female migrants for domestic works. According an estimate by the Lebanese government, nearly 200,000 female domestic workers were employed in Lebanon in 2012 (ILO, 2015). Most of these workers were from the Philippines, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

The treatment of migrant labor in the Middle East, both in construction and domestic works, has recently drawn heavy criticism. There are several reports of extreme cases of workers' abuses in the Gulf. In 2012 and 2013, 964 workers from Nepal, India, and Bangladesh lost their lives in Qatar alone (Gibson & Patisson, 2014)). Many of these workers died while constructing stadiums for the 2022 soccer World Cup. Female domestic workers particularly experience many types of abuses, including physical and sexual abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2014; International Human Rights Clinic, 2013).

Chapter 3 - Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

I begin this chapter with a review of literature on female labor migration. This is followed by an overview of major migration theories that are relevant to my study. In this process, I also briefly evaluate these theories and discuss their strengths in explaining the emigration of Nepali women to the Gulf countries. While the major migration theories are relevant in explaining the reasons for labor migration of Nepali women, the theories are not very helpful in analyzing the discourse relating to female emigration (which is the focus of this study). Then, I propose Foucault's notion of discourse as a theoretical tool for explaining the issues involving the emigration of female workers from Nepal. I also discuss the concept of structural violence for explaining the workplace violence in the Gulf. I argue that the instances of everyday workplace violence that female workers experience are associated with the larger structural factors that facilitate such violence. The chapter ends with a summary of the theoretical concepts and the analytical framework of the study.

Experiences of Female Migrants in Migration Literature

The mainstream migration literature excluded the experiences of female migrants until recently. Migration was considered a male phenomenon, and female migrants were treated only as dependents and followers of male migrants. Although one of the claims of Ravenstein's (1885) "laws of migration" was that "females are more migratory than males,"¹⁸ women remained largely absent from migration literature for a century, until the 1980s (Lutz, 2010). It was important to study the experiences of female migrant workers separately because, as

¹⁸ Ravenstein makes this point in terms of shorter-distance migration.

Belanger & Rahman (2013) find, the reasons for migration for male and female workers are not always the same (this issue will be further discussed later in the chapter). However, even when scholars talked about female migrants in the earlier part of the twentieth century, women were considered “passive and followers of their male partners” (Lutz, 2010, p. 1648). Since the late twentieth century, many scholars have been attracted to the phenomenon of female migration due to the rise in the number of independent female workers making transnational journeys primarily for economic reasons. Female migrants now account for half of the total migrants (United Nations Population Fund, 2006), and a large number of female migrant workers are located in different countries of Asia. More and more women are migrating for economic opportunities, rather than moving to join their husbands or other family members (Yinger, 2006). The trend of female migration from Nepal is associated with the global pattern of women migration, which is often referred to as the “feminization of migration” – an increasing number of female workers in poor countries are migrating to wealthier nations for employment. Castles and Miller (1993) considered this trend of the “feminization of migration” as a characteristic of the “age of migration.” The number of female migrants has increased due to the demand of female workers for reproductive works and entertainment jobs in the wealthier nations of the North as well as the South (Labadie-Jackson 2008; Yinger, 2006). The international labor markets for women are highly gendered. Most female migrants’ employment is limited to traditional gender roles – informal, reproductive works such as cleaning, cooking, child care, elderly care, etc. or low-paying service-sector jobs like waitressing or entertaining (Yinger, 2006).

Many female workers face violence during different phases of the migration process. The violence they face range from violation of their basic human rights, such as the right to movement, to physical abuses by the employer in host country. The female migrant workers have

to abide by strict immigration laws, they are not allowed to change their employers, and they are not protected by the laws of the host country (Chin, 1997). In her study of Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanon, Moukarbel (2009) observes different types of violence in the everyday lives of the housemaids. While there were also some cases of physical violence (such as beating and sexual abuses) the Lebanese employers mostly utilized symbolic violence (such as threats and belittling) to control the housemaids (Moukarbel, 2009). As most female migrant workers are employed in “domestic,” unregulated sectors they face a greater risk of physical and psychological abuses.

A robust body of research is now focused on female migration. The scholars who are studying the return migrants and sending countries are usually focused on exploring the relationship between migration and women empowerment, investigating the causes of female migration, and/or assessing the impact of female migration in the country of origin. As women make transnational journeys and become breadwinners for their families, they overcome their traditional gender-role. The international migration for work thus challenges traditional gender roles in the labor-exporting countries, and some scholars (such as Pinnawala, 2009) argue that migration of women actually leads to female empowerment and gender equality. Pinnawala (2009) finds women’s position in the household enhanced and involvement in decision-making increased after returning from their temporary migration to the Middle East. In her study of Sri Lankan women who had worked in the Middle East, Gamburd (2000) observes the transformative power of migration: migration has transformed not only migrant women but also their families and communities. The Bangladeshi women who were employed in factories in Malaysia also shared positive migration and work experiences, while also being critical of the social norms of their home country that restrict women’s mobility (Dannecker, 2005).

Most women's migration experience, however, is limited to traditional gender-roles, as care or entertainment workers. Most of the jobs for female migrants are created in the service industries, and they are usually employed in lower-skilled and lower-status jobs. The female workers are mostly employed as "domestic workers, sex workers or entertainers, in unskilled informal and domestic spheres" (Thapan, 2005, p. 39). Female migrant workers' confinement to low-paid reproductive or entertainment jobs "reflect[s] gendered socio-cultural conditions of varying nature in the sending and receiving countries" (Piper, 2003, p.724). The female workers are, thus, likely to experience downward social mobility with their participation in international migration. Piper (2000) argues that the idea that foreign employment really contributes to female empowerment is questionable.

As most care work is still performed by women globally, the transnational migration of female workers affects their family, community, and home country. Hochschild (2000) uses the concept of "global care chain" to illustrate the participation of multiple care workers in a global chain, in which one person's ability to work as a caregiver in a wealthier country is made possible by the hiring of another person for the same job at home, usually from a poorer part of the world. The hiring of migrant caregivers in the wealthier industrialized and industrializing nations has ripple effects – it affects different people and places in the care chain. In her study of Filipina migrant workers' families – the "transnational families" – in the Philippines, Parrenas (2002) observes "a genuine care crisis" in the home country. She observes that "the children of migrant Filipina workers suffer from the extraction of care from the global south to the global north" (p. 53). Although migrant care workers usually managed some "surrogate parenting" – like aunt or some other female relatives – for their kids back home, the "surrogate parents" were often burdened with their own kids, and thus could not take care of these "orphaned" children.

In some cases, the Filipina care workers hired another domestic worker at home so as to supplement the care deficits (Parrenas, 2006). In her study of Romanian villages, Nemenyi (2012) finds the impact of international labor migration on different aspects of family life, including children, spousal relations, and older members of the family. The spousal relationships were badly affected (often ending in divorce) due to separation for a long period of time. The impact on children was also high: the children felt care deficits due to the absence of parent/s. Suicide attempts and poor school performance were prevalent among children with migrant parent/s (Nemenyi, 2012).

Representation of Female Migrants in Home Country

Although substantial research is now focused on female migration, study of the representation of female migrants in home country, and the impact of social discourse of migration on the migrants and their family members is still sparse. Female migrant workers are affected not only by their representation in the host country; they are also equally affected by the way they are perceived in their home country. Women are generally represented as “victims” or considered only dependents in migration discourse (Thapan, 2005, p. 14). In many Asian countries, including the Philippines, which ranks top in terms of female labor export, migration of women is still a contested issue, while male migration is a socially accepted phenomenon (Rodriguez, 2010). In the Philippines, non-government organizations (NGOs), scholars, and activists are critical of “the government’s role in facilitating women’s migration as low-wage workers in gender-typed and gender-segregated jobs that make them especially vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse” (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 93). Not only the general public, but also the state officials, believed, contrary to the state’s policy of portraying female migrants as remittance

producers, that women working abroad would bring “shame to the country” (p. 100). In her study of a migrant-sending community in Indonesia, Silvey (2006) finds the community members putting pressure on female workers not to migrate by neglecting their duty of taking care of children at home. The people in the home country are concerned about women migrants undermining their “duties” back home, while doing the domestic, reproductive work in the foreign countries. In her study, Parrenas (2002) finds the public discourse in the Philippines centered on blaming the migrant mothers for leaving the country at the expense of their family.

Female migrants often experience assaults and abuses abroad, and the NGOs and grass root activists ask for migration reform to address the negative impacts of female migration and the violence and abuse that migrant workers face overseas. “Yet the paternal logics on which demands for migration reform rest have led not to the increased regulation of the state’s migration apparatus, but to the regulation of migrant women themselves” (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 115). The tougher government policies, which also include the banning of female migration to certain countries and for certain types of jobs, do not necessarily help to solve the problem. Banning leads to illegal migration to work as domestic and sex workers, and the vulnerability of female migrants increases even more (Gulati, 2006, p. 69).

The migration of female workers is often conflated with human trafficking, and these independent migrants are prevented from migrating (or “rescued” from being trafficked) by government officials and NGOs (O’Neill, 2007). The social perception of female migrants also plays an important role in shaping state policies. The media’s monolithic representation of female migrants as “helpless” and “victims” affects them (and prospective migrants alike) in different phases of migration, while emigrating as well as during the process of re-settling back into their family and community. It has become essential to analyze how female migration is

perceived in the emigrating society, how it is represented in the media, and how the gendered migration discourse affects the female emigrants.

Theoretical Background

In this section, I discuss the sociological theories and concepts utilized in the analysis and interpretation of the data. The selection of the concepts and theories was based on the nature of the information that was obtained through interviews, field notes, and the review of newspaper articles on female emigration. Interviews with a male and three female returnees are quoted and interpreted below to explain the reasons for the selection of the particular conceptual framework in this study:

Tilak,¹⁹ a male migrant:

It's not good at all to send women to work abroad. Someone must give a guarantee...that these women reach, work, and return safely [without engaging in sexual relationships].

Gita, a female returnee:

It was difficult [to go abroad] in the past. Nepal government would not issue labor permit to women. So, I went to Kuwait via Delhi.

Sunita, a female returnee:

When everyone in the village was leaving I thought I should also go. There's no point in wasting time in this village. There's no work here, but we could earn if we went abroad.

¹⁹ All the interviewees, including the government officials, are given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The only exception are the names from secondary sources (newspaper articles), which are used in Chapter 6. These names are provided as reported in the newspapers.

Asha, a female returnee:

I had to work a lot [in Kuwait]. I used to get up at 4:30 or 5:00 a.m., and would go to bed only after 1 or 2 a.m. Sometimes, it would be even 3:00 a.m. [when I went to bed].... My employer did not beat me, but they often abused me with harsh words. I tolerated all those things as I was in other people's land ... I had heard from other Nepali workers that we should not argue and fight with the employer's family.

The first quotation, a male migrant's observation, resembles the general social perception of female migration in Nepal. This social perception is also connected to the representation of female migration and female migrants in Nepalese media, and Nepal government's policy regarding female migration (which in turn connects with the experience of the female migrant in the second quote). The second quotation illustrates the systemic violence against women emigrants in Nepal. The state-imposed travel bans have attempted to constrain women's mobility in a globalized world. The female workers worked harder and took greater risks to overcome these barriers in the emigration process. In the third quotation, a female returnee explains the reasons for her migration. We see how poverty and unemployment convinced her to look for a job abroad. Her decision was also shaped by the migration information that was available at local level. In the last quotation, a female returnee tells about her work experience as a housemaid in Kuwait. The migrant workers suffered systemic violence in the host countries, although the type and extent of violence varied among the women migrants. Many female migrants accepted violence as a part of a migrant worker's life, and thus were resolved to suppress their sufferings during their stay there.

In the interview samples above, we see important roles of social ties and locally available migration information in the emigration process. Women's migration was also shaped by,

although not limited to, the economic hardship in the home country and the perception of better wages abroad. Thus, the major theories of international migration are still relevant for this study (see chapter 3.4). The Nepalese state's migration policies are largely shaped by the social perception and media representation of female emigration. Foucault's notion of discourse (see chapter 3.5) is utilized to analyze and interpret the data about social perception and media representation of female migration. Finally, I use the concept of structural violence (see chapter 3.6) to explain female workers' experiences of violence in the foreign countries. I argue that the larger structural factors, such as the labor recruitment system, labor laws, state policies regarding migrant workers, social perception of (female) migrant workers, and gender ideologies have facilitated, and even encouraged, the violence against female migrants. While I do not aim to undermine the human agency of both the employers and the women domestic workers, the broader social issues need to be addressed to end the abuses against migrant workers.

Theories of International Migration and Their Relevance in the Study of Female Migration from Nepal

Scholars have tried to explain the phenomenon of migration for over a century now. Ravenstein (1885) is generally considered the earliest scholar to see some patterns and laws in migration, and find this phenomenon explainable. Since his publication of "The Laws of Migration" in the late nineteenth century, an immense body of literature has been produced concerning both internal and international migration. Regarding the determinants of international migration, the theories are generally grouped into two major categories in terms of their focus – initiation of migration and perpetuation of migration, and into three categories – micro, meso, and macro – in terms of their level of analysis (Hagen-Zanker, 2008; Massey et al.,

1998). I do not plan to provide an exhaustive review of literature on international migration (see Hagen-Zanker, 2008; Massey et al., 1998 for review) in this dissertation. As stated at the beginning of the chapter, my plan is to discuss only the major migration theories that are somewhat relevant to my study. For convenience, I also group these theories into two categories – initiation of migration and perpetuation of migration – in the discussion below.

Initiation of Migration

A popular theory in the study of migration is the push-pull framework. The theory assumes that migration decisions are shaped by a combination of various positive factors at the area of origin and negative factors at the destination. Lee (1966) identified four distinct types of factors involving in the migration process – push factors at origin, pull factors at destination, “intervening obstacles,” and some personal factors (p. 52). Lee hypothesized that people migrate to areas with a higher degree of diversity, and the rate of migration rises over time as the destination areas become more and more diverse due to immigrant population. Lee believed that migration decisions are not “completely rational” (p. 51), but he still perceived migration decisions in terms of some calculation between positive factors at the destination and negative factors at the origin, with the most important reason being the economic. While migration decisions involve various push-pull factors in the origin and destination countries, the emigrants do not always make rational decisions. Another major issue with the push-pull framework is that it “is barely a theory, it is more a grouping of factors affecting migration, without considering the exact causal mechanisms” (Hagen-Zanker, 2008, p. 9).

Another major theoretical perspective to dominate the migration scholarship for several decades, along with the push-pull framework, is the neoclassical economic explanations for

migration. The macro neoclassical economic theory views migration in terms of wage differences and the issue of labor supply and demand between geographical regions. The theory assumes that people migrate “from low-wage, labor-surplus regions to high-wage, labor-scarce regions” (Castles et al., 2014, p. 29), and migration thus helps maintain a balance in the larger society. The sending regions will see an increase in wages in the long run due to the eventual labor scarcity resulting from the emigration of workers, while the wages in the destination freeze due to abundance of labor through immigration (Castles et al., 2014). Thus, the theory assumes that the sending and receiving regions will eventually lose wage differences, and people will lose motivation for migration.

The scholars utilizing the neoclassical economic approach at the micro level perceive migrants as “rational actors,” who make migration decisions at personal levels by calculating the costs and benefits of migration (Castles et al., 2014; Massey et al., 1998). These scholars (such as Borjas, 1989; Todaro & Maruszko, 1987) theorize that people migrate to those places where the perceived benefits outweigh the migration costs. Although the costs of migration included non-financial aspects such as severing the present social ties and psychological costs of migration as well, the neo-classic microeconomic framework places too much importance on the financial reward of migration, and also ignores the larger structural factors that shape individual decisions and regulate the cross-border movements of people. Another problem with this theoretical framework is the perception of migration as a “rational choice.” Studies have found that people’s migration decisions are not always based on calculations, and individuals are not solely involved in decision-making. Family, relatives and even communities are involved in the decision-making process. A major contention of the New Economics of Migration, another popular migration theory, is that the emigrants alone do not make the migration decisions;

families and households are collectively involved in migration decisions to maximize their income and minimize the risks of loss from the market failures in the home country (Massey et al., 1998). Economic benefit is an important factor motivating people to migrate, but the economic factor alone does not account for the complex, varied migration patterns in different parts of the world. While families, relatives, and often communities do become involved in migration decisions, the emigration of women from the lowest socio-economic strata, who are barely participating in the mainstream markets, cannot be fully explained by the theory of new economics of migration.

The scholars utilizing the push-and-pull framework of migration tend to focus on the “exclusively economic” factors (Massey et al., 1998, p. 12). Although poverty and unemployment are the two major reasons for migration they do not help explain female migration in Asia (Oishi, 2005). Female migration decisions are also informed by “familial and cultural considerations” (Thapan, 2005, p. 12). Women also migrate to avoid social and cultural constraints and for autonomy and independence (Thapan, 2005). Women’s migration is also affected by the social norms that scorn women’s mobility. The number of female workers migrating from the poorest countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan is still small due to strict social norms that discourage women’s migration; most female migrants are from those countries (such as the Philippines and Thailand) that hold more liberal attitudes towards women (Gulati, 2006; Oishi, 2005). The reasons for female migration are different from those for male migrants as many women migrate for non-economic reasons as well. In their study of Bangladeshi migrant workers, Belanger & Rahman (2013) find many women making transnational journeys not only for their own economic independence; they also looked for foreign employment to support their family members and escape conflicts with their spouse and/or other family members. The

inability of their husbands or other male figures to protect and provide for them and the lower cost of female emigration were also the other factors that motivated women to look for employment overseas (Belanger & Rahman, 2013).

Some scholars (such as Sassen, 2006) have utilized world-systems theoretical perspective in explaining migration. They situate migration within the context of an unequal global economic structure, and argue that migration is the product of disruptions and dislocations in the developing countries through the penetration of a capitalist economy. These scholars believe that “migration follows the dynamics of market creation and structure of the global economy” (Hagan-Zanker, 2008, p. 8). Sassen (2006) ties the emigration of people from the peripheral areas in the global South with economic globalization. A large proportion of women are crossing borders for their own survival, while at the same time helping their country for debt repayment (through remittances). An increase in cross-border migrations of women in the last two decades is also related to economic deterioration in the country of origin, such as growth in unemployment, deindustrialization, the closure of many firms, export-oriented agriculture production, and the burden of government debt (Sassen, 2000). The migration, trafficking and/or smuggling of women has been made possible by “the same infrastructure that facilitates cross-border flows of capital, information, and trade” (p. 190). Sassen contends that the new economies in the global cities profit through the global supply of “low-wage” female workers who work as nannies, maids, sex workers, or nurses. The growth in female migration, both documented and undocumented, indicates the “feminization of survival” – the dependence of households and communities on women –as “it is increasingly on the backs of women that these forms of making a living, earning a profit and securing government revenue are realized” (Sassen, 2000, p. 506). While emphasizing the larger structural factors, this theoretical

framework ignores the “individual motivations” behind migration decisions, and also fails to clearly explain “the exact mechanisms of migration” (Hagan-Zanker, 2008, p. 8).

Perpetuation of Migration

The migration network and cumulative causation theories explain the perpetuation of migration in migrant communities. The basic argument of the migration network theory is that emigrants maintain social ties with their family, friends, relatives, and community back home, and these ties help to facilitate further emigration from the same community (Castles et al., 2014). The latter emigrants are likely to go to those places where the earlier emigrants from their community have settled. Various studies (Boyd, 1989; Choldin, 1973; Tilly & Brown, 1967) have found strong roles of families, extended kinship ties, or personal networks in the migration process. The new emigrants received substantial support of the migrant networks – their kinfolk in the U.S. cities – before, during, and after their migration to the U.S.A. (Choldin, 1973; Tilly & Brown, 1967). Many newcomers were accompanied with their family or extended relatives, and they also received invaluable advice and support in the adjustment process in the U.S.A. (Choldin, 1973, pp. 165-167). As the networks reduce the financial and psychological cost of migration, the new emigrants are attracted to the same destination. Taylor (1984) finds stronger roles of kinship networks in international migration. The prospective emigrants’ contact with the families in the destination areas helps to minimize the migration risk, as they can obtain information about the labor market and the migration process from them (Taylor 1984). This explains why a large number of international migrants from the same place of origin usually move to the same destination areas.

The basic argument of the theory of cumulative causation is that migration perpetuates on its own in the long run (Hagen-Zanker, 2008; Massey et al., 1998). Due to the establishment of different migration organizations and recruiting/trafficking agencies catering to the emigrants and the formation of different networks by the early emigrants, the migration cost declines over time, and thus creates a conducive environment for the emigration of more workers to the same destinations.

While these theories help to explain the migration patterns in various cities in the U.S. and Europe, they may not be equally helpful in explaining the labor migration to the Gulf, which is largely demand-based migration. The workers do not get the opportunities for permanently settling in the Gulf, and their migration decisions are also affected by several factors, including the social perception of female labor migration in the home country and policies of the origin and the destination countries. The family and kinship networks still play an important role for Nepali women in learning about migration opportunities abroad, convincing their family members about their travel, and for gaining confidence about their safety abroad. The various migration organizations, particularly recruiting agencies and local agents, still have crucial roles in the labor migration process.

Discourse, Power, and Truths

To guide my analysis of the discourse involving female emigration from Nepal, I use the concept of discourse as developed by Foucault. Discourse, for the study, is defined, in a Foucauldian term, as a group of statements about a certain topic or body of knowledge (which is female migration in this study). Discourse also includes the rules and structures that make such statements possible (Mills, 2003).

Foucault views discourse as more than language and social interaction; it is “relatively well-bounded areas of social knowledge” (McHoul & Grace, 1993, p. 31). Discourse is an archive of knowledge, on the basis of which we make assumptions and understanding about a subject. It is through the discourse that we comprehend reality. However, the discourse not only enables but also constrains our speaking, writing, or thinking about a particular subject. It is due to discourse that “in any given historical period, we can write, speak, or think about a given social object or practice (madness, for example) only in certain specific ways and not others” (McHoul & Grace, 1993, p. 31). The formation of discourse involves exclusions. In any historical period, certain discourses are allowed while others are excluded from circulation (Foucault, 1972).

Discourse is contextual and historical. Discourse “is not an ideal, timeless form” (Foucault, 1972, p. 117). Discourses do not remain the same; they transform over time. We may not know the future course of the discourse, nor can we guarantee the continuity of the discourse at all. Discourse is rather “historical – a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problems of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of temporality” (Foucault, 1972, p. 117).

As Foucault explains (1980), a strong relationship exists between discourse, power, and truth. Power, for Foucault, is also discursive, and it is through power that “truth” is produced. Truth cannot exist without power: “truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). There is nothing like “universal truth” to be discovered, but only “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true” (p. 132). What determines something as “true” or “false” are the “ensemble of rules” in a society. The “truth” is socially situated, and the defining of something as “true” or

“false” shows the existing power relations in a society. Every society “has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true ...” (p. 131). Truth is never attainable, so what we can know is not “truths” but truth-effects only, generated by discourse. Discourses then have the power to convince people to take some statements as true while marking the other statements as false. The analysis of any discourse, Foucault believes, should be directed towards “how effects of truth are produced within discourses” (Foucault, 1980, p. 118), which inevitably includes a discussion of unequal power relationships. In the present study, I explore how the “truth” about female migrant workers is produced in the larger Nepalese society and how that “truth” affects the female workers and their family.

Discourse affects the subject about whom certain claims are made. In the context of female migration in Nepal, the prevalent discourse affects the female migrants as “discourse around female migration in Nepal is laden with powerful assumptions about female sexuality” (O’Neill, p. 2001). The prevalent migration discourse makes claims about female migrants and their sexuality, which in turn have (un)intended effects on the migrants and their families. This study analyses how the dominant discourse particularly affects female migrants, and how the narratives of female returnees compare with the discourse of female migration.

Regarding the relationship between discourse and individuals, the approach of critical discourse analysts (such as Fairclough, 1989) is more helpful. These scholars argue that individuals are “both discursive products and producers in the reproduction and transformation of discourses and thereby in social and cultural change” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 17). This is to say that the discourses are changeable and human beings also have the capacity to contest and transform the dominant discourse. Although female migrants’ actions are affected by the

dominant discourse on female migration they have also challenged the dominant discourse by engaging in the transnational journey against all the odds. Thus, in this dissertation, I explain how the dominant migration discourse is contested, reproduced, and transformed in the female workers' emigration process and after their return from foreign employment.

Structural Violence and Female Migrant Workers in the Gulf

Many female workers indeed experience violence while working as housemaids in foreign countries. The concept of structural violence is helpful in drawing a connection between everyday violence and the larger structural factors that allow and facilitate such violence (Gardner, 2010, p. 6). The everyday violence, such as extremely long hours of work, physical assaults, sexual assaults, and/or inadequate food at work, that many Nepali female workers experience abroad is connected with the broader social structures – the labor recruitment system, state policies (both at origin and destination), gender norms, perception of migrant workers in the destination – that have facilitated, and even promoted, such violence.

Several scholars (such as Gardner, 2010) have utilized structural violence as a theoretical concept to explain the impact of broad factors such as global economic structure in people's life. According to Galtung (1969), unlike individual violence, structural violence is “built into structure” and “exercised even if there are no concrete actors” (p. 171). Galtung considers social inequality and poverty as structural violence because they offer “unequal life chances” to different groups of people in a society (p. 171). Although defined as separate entities, personal violence and structural violence are interconnected. Galtung, as a peace researcher, further states that peace is the absence of both personal violence (individual acts of violence) and structural violence (social injustice).

While outlining the conceptual framework for his study of Indian migrant workers in Lebanon, Gardner (2010) rightly makes a case for Eric Wolf's conception of structural power in the discussion of structural violence. Explaining structural power, Wolf (1999) writes: "By this I mean the power manifest in relationships that not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the direction and distribution of energy flows" (p. 5). According to Wolf, the structural power differs from other types of power as it "organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves." In Gardner's (2010) view, "Wolf's notion of the orchestration at work ... also provides an opportunity to the everyday, interpersonal violence and suffering many of the foreign workers in the Gulf states endure with structural arrangements that so intricately construct, limit, and govern their existence in the Gulf" (p. 7). Thus, following this line of thought, I explain how broad social factors at the origin and more importantly at the destination create a social setting for abusive relations of the employers with the housemaids in the Gulf.

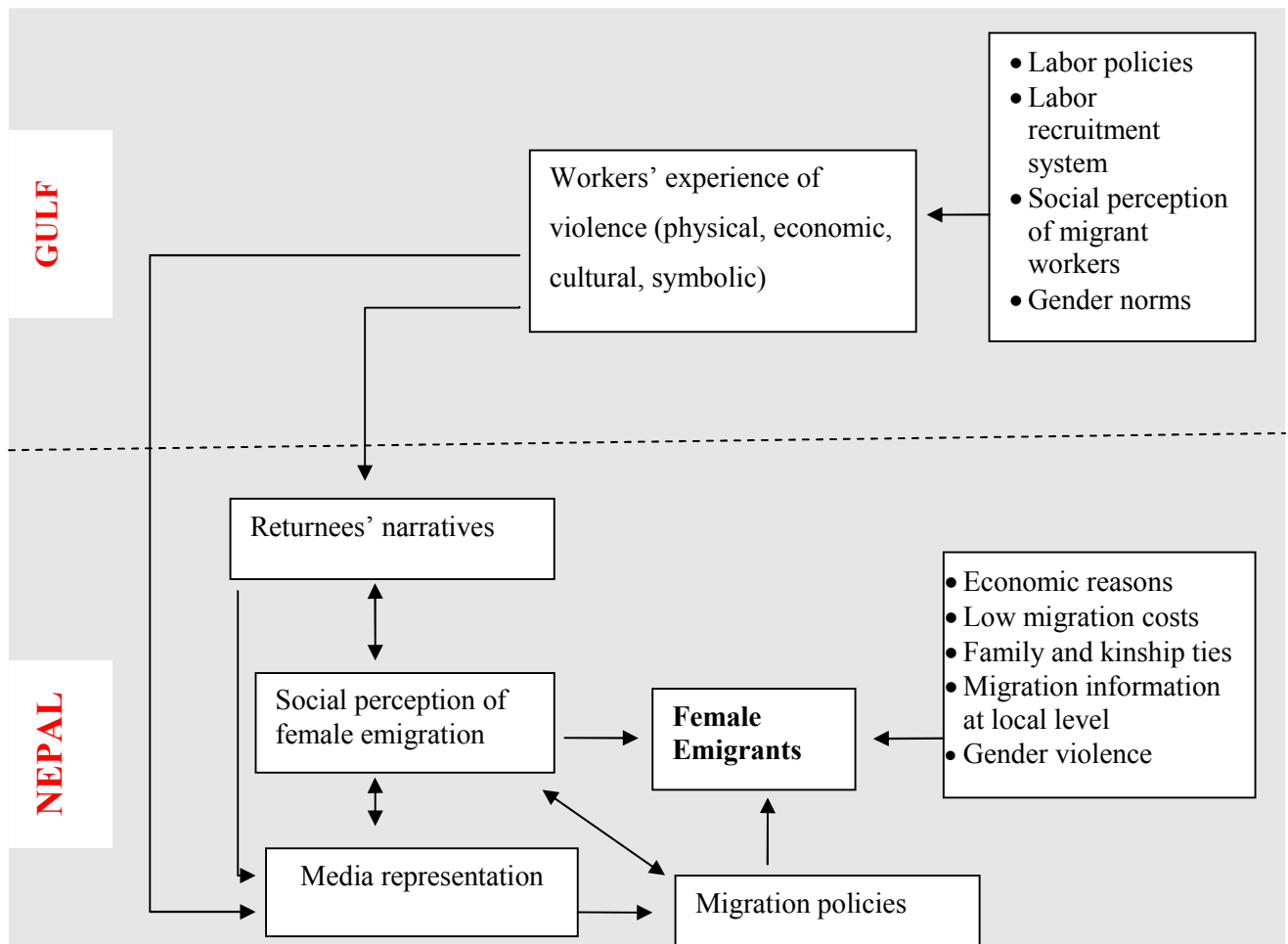
Analytical Framework

In this section, I summarize the major concepts and analytical framework (Figure 3.1) utilized in this study of female migration from Nepal for domestic works in the Gulf. I mostly draw on the concepts of discourse and structural violence for the interpretation and analysis of the empirical and archival data of the study. The analysis is also informed by the migration theories discussed above.

The discourse of female emigration and female migrant workers is reproduced and reinforced through their representation in the media. Although the media representation itself feeds on the social perception of women's independent movement and their sexuality, the

monolithic (negative) representation reinforces the prevalent discourse regarding female migration and female migrant workers. The social discourse in general, and particularly the media’s representation of female migration, helps shape the Nepalese state’s migration policies – frequent travel bans on female workers.

Figure 3-1: Analytical Framework of the Study



(Note: The arrows in the figure indicate the impact)

The state policies also have a two-way relationship with the social discourse of female migration, reinforcing each other. However, despite bans and negative social perception, female workers engage in foreign employment for various reasons, including economic (Figure 3.1). Family and kinship ties also have important roles in the emigration process. The emigration process involves overcoming various barriers, which may be physical, social, and psychological. Female emigrants also need to overcome or negotiate with the social discourse of female emigration. This process generally involves convincing family members, relatives, or even their community that they will return “pure” from abroad.

Although the work experience of housemaids varies, many women experience some form of violence. Their experience of everyday violence (long hours of work, physical assaults, threats of violence, etc.) is connected with broad social factors in the host country, such as labor recruitment system, perception of migrant workers, and labor policies. The female workers’ experience abroad is also affected by the sending country’s migration policies – the travel-bans that force female workers to use the unauthorized channels for travel. The stories of female workers in foreign countries (always the worst cases of abuse), reported by the Nepalese media, reinforce the dominant discourse on female migration as well as put pressure on the Nepalese state to make more restrictive policies. The returnees’ own narratives can also be influenced by the dominant migration discourse in the society. While the returnees’ narratives of negative experiences help reinforce the dominant discourse, their positive experiences do the opposite – they rupture the discourse. After their return, female workers tell explicitly about their “positive” experiences to their families, relatives, and even community. The returnees also implicitly retell their “positive” migration experiences through changes in their lifestyle, remodeling/ building their house, acquiring some land or gadgets, etc. It is this type of narrative,

or the subordinate discourse, that helps to rupture the dominant discourse, especially at the local level. The new emigrants are likely to draw on the narratives of early emigrants, rather than on the national discourse that always discourages their emigration, while making their migration decision.

Chapter 4 - Research Methods

In this chapter, I explain the methods utilized in the collection and analysis of data. At first, I explain the rationale for the selection of the specific methods for the study. Then, I provide a brief description of the research sites and the sampling method utilized in the study. Next, I explain the strategies used in interviewing and data analysis. The chapter ends with my reflections on the fieldwork experiences.

Selection of Methods

In this study, I wanted to address the following questions: how is female migration perceived in the Nepalese society? How is female migration represented in the Nepalese media? How is the migration discourse contested, reproduced, and restructured in the process of emigration and after the return of female workers from foreign employment? And, what are female workers' experiences in different phases of labor migration? To explore these questions, I used qualitative methods of data collection – personal in-depth interviews, field notes, and secondary sources (archival data, published government documents, news articles, and published research works). Personal interviews, which make up the major portion of the data, were utilized mainly to understand the respondents' perceptions and experiences. Interview, as Berg (1998) writes, is helpful for “understanding the perceptions of participants or learning how participants come to attach certain meanings to phenomena for events” (p. 62). The returned female migrant workers were interviewed to understand their experiences in the process of migration, while working abroad, in the process of returning home, and in resettling within their families and community. The interviews were also utilized to understand the workers' perception of their

migration experience, their view on the social perception of female migration, and also to uncover the socio-economic impact of migration on the lives of female workers and their families. The female returnees' families and community members were interviewed to understand their views on female migration. The interviews with the family members were also useful in understanding their support, or lack of it, of the female workers in the process of emigration and after their return.

I also interviewed some government officials (of Foreign Employment Promotion Board and Department of Foreign Employment), social activists, and the officials of migration related organizations to understand the issues facing the female migrant workers. The interview data were also utilized to understand the dominant discourse on female migration in the larger Nepalese society. Interviews with the returned and re-emigrating male migrant workers and a newspaper archive were utilized in exploring the dominant migration discourse in the larger Nepalese society. I reviewed the female migration related publications in *Kantipur National Daily (KND)* from 1997 through 2014. *KND* was selected for review due to its significance in shaping public policies in post-1990 Nepal. I chose this time-frame because policies on female migration frequently changed during this period, and I wanted to study the prevalent migration discourse in the media during this time to analyze the influence of public discourse in shaping Nepal's migration policies. The travel ban on female migration was imposed in 1997, after the death of Kani Sherpa in Kuwait, and the policies on female migration have oscillated between imposing bans and lifting bans since then. The publications from 1997 until 2009 were skimmed, and the relevant articles were photographed for further analysis. As the publications from 2010 onwards were accessible online, some key words (Nepali words for housemaids, domestic, female workers, women, rescue, and trafficking) were used to find the relevant articles. The

news articles, editorials, and op-ed pieces on female migration were analyzed to see the relationship between migration discourse and the change in government policies.

The data from the field notes were also used in the study. I always took note of my observations and experiences in the field. Field notes specifically included the description of female returnees' interaction with me, including their reactions when I first approached them for an interview. The field notes describing the female workers' housing and surroundings were helpful in understanding their socio-economic conditions. Field notes about the interactions between female returnees, family members, neighbors, and other community members were helpful to understand, among other things, the power relations between the actors in the household and community. I also took elaborate notes on respondents' pauses, silences, and facial expressions during the interviews. In sum, field notes provided some valuable information that was missing from the interviews.

Fieldwork

I spent four and a half months in Nepal collecting data in two major locations – Chitwan district and Kathmandu city. Chitwan served as the primary research site as the female workers, their families, and the community members interviewed and observed for the study lived in four different communities in the district. The interviews with the male migrant workers, government officials, and the officials of different migration-related organizations were mostly conducted in Kathmandu (Table 4.1).

Table 4-1: Number of Interviews According to Respondents' Categories and Location

Respondent Categories		Number
Chitwan	Female returnees	56
	Female returnees' family (parents and husbands)	19
	Community members	15
Kathmandu	Male migrant workers (including two workers interviewed on flight to Kathmandu)	14
	Government officials	3
	Officials of migration-related non-government organizations	5
	Social activists	2
Total Interviews		114

Fieldwork in Kathmandu

My field-work in Nepal started in Kathmandu, the capital city, where the major government offices and the headquarters of most non-governmental organizations are located. An overwhelming majority of recruiting agencies' offices as well as the only international airport in the country are also located in the capital city. I used web searches as well as my personal contacts in Kathmandu to identify the non-governmental organizations working for/with female migrant workers. After the organizations were identified and the initial contacts were established, I scheduled interviews with an official and/or a board member. Altogether, I interviewed six people (board members and/or officials) affiliated with three different non-governmental organizations working in the sector of migration. The interviews were conducted in the office buildings of the organizations. I also interviewed a registered recruiting agency's owner, who was also an executive member of the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies, in his office in Kathmandu. Additionally, I interviewed two female social activists at their residences.

The interviews with these key informants spanned between 55 to 80 minutes. Most male migrant workers were interviewed at the recruiting agencies' office in Kathmandu. While two male returnees were interviewed on the flight to Kathmandu from Abu Dhabi, a couple of male workers were asked for an interview when I met them at the Foreign Employment Promotion Board of Nepal (FEPB). The interviews with male workers lasted for about 30 minutes.

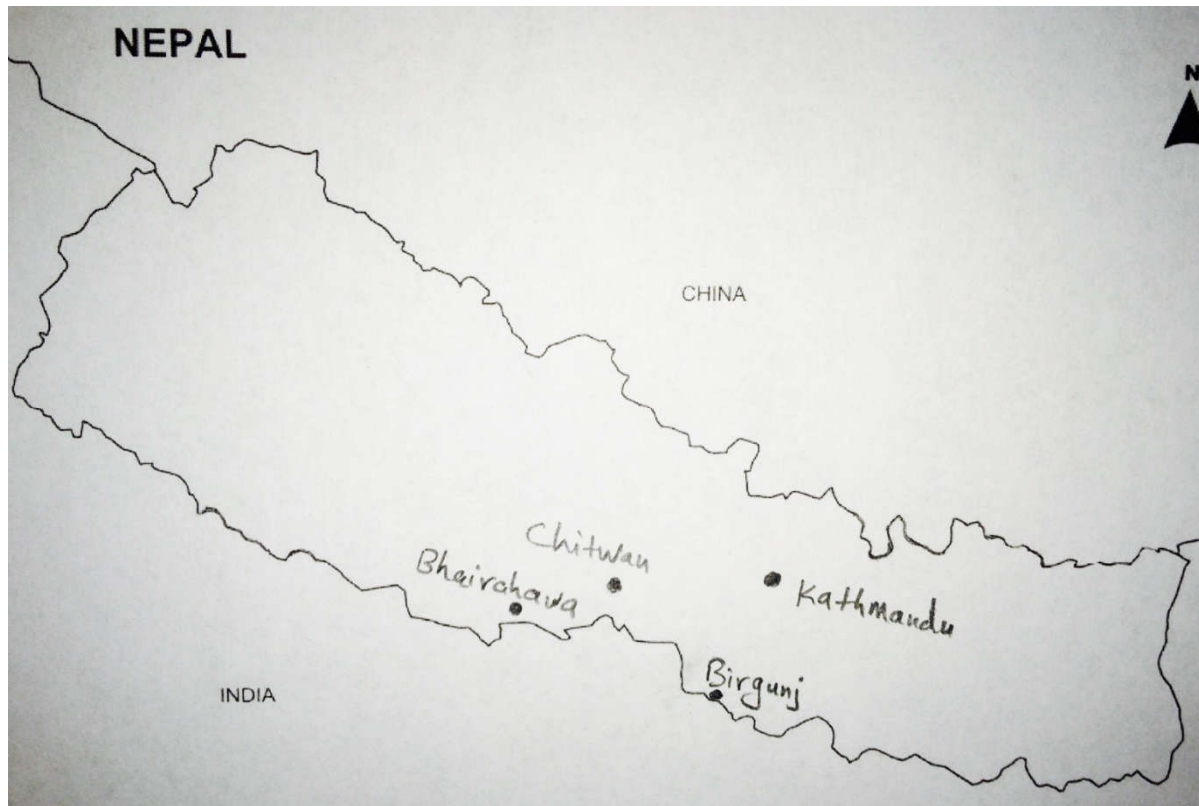
In Kathmandu, I also spent several days in an FEPB library scanning migration related resources and collecting the archival data from the FEPB office. I was also able to interview three government officials there. While some archival data were gathered from the Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE), most of the data were obtained from its website. The newspaper archival data used in the study were collected from the library of Kantipur Publications in Kathmandu.

Fieldwork in Chitwan

Chitwan lies in the southern part of the Central Development region of Nepal. Chitwan is also considered the geographic mid-point of Nepal as it is located roughly in the middle of East West Highway connecting the east and west of brick-shaped Nepal. Chitwan has grown to be an ethnically diverse district due to internal migration of people from different parts of the country for settlement. Chitwan, often dubbed as the “second capital” (after Kathmandu), is also one of the most prosperous districts in the country. Travelling to other major cities in Nepal is also very convenient from Chitwan. It takes only about three hours on a public bus to reach Birgunj and Bhairahawa – two cities bordering India most commonly used by the female interviewees travelling to India for their trip to the Gulf. The distance to Kathmandu from the emigrant

communities was a bit longer; on a public bus, it would take them about four to five hours to reach Kathmandu.

Figure 4-1: Map of Nepal Locating Research Sites



The female returnees living in four different communities in Chitwan were interviewed and observed for the study. The study was expanded to four communities mainly due to the lack of the required number of respondents (which was initially set at 50) in one community, not for the purpose of comparison. The interviews with the female workers continued until a saturation point was reached, and no new information was obtained from the new interviews. Altogether 56 female workers were interviewed. All four communities were located within the five-mile radius of the East West Highway passing through the district. While these communities were generally identified as “rural,” they still exhibited various urban characteristics and were much more

sophisticated than most villages in the country. All of them had electricity, telephones (usually cell phones), a drinking water supply (usually community-operated), and were connected by at least gravel roads. Non-farm employment was, nevertheless, very rare in all of these communities.

The decision to select the emigrant communities in Chitwan was primarily based on their accessibility to the researcher. My initial contact with two emigrant communities was established with the help of a Kathmandu-based non-governmental organization, which was working in Chitwan at the time of my fieldwork. The organization offered me an opportunity to participate in a training program offered to the “resource persons” from different communities in Chitwan. Two resource persons that I came in contact with at the training program helped me reach two communities with the presence of a substantial number (10 to 15) of female returnees. One of them arranged my meeting with a local female activist with knowledge of female returnees in the village, while the other person took me to an emigrant community and arranged my meeting with a female returnee. Three other persons – friends and relatives – helped me reach the female returnees in the next two communities. They personally knew many of the interviewees, which also helped build a rapport with the interviewees.

Snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used in the selection of the study population. While the initial interviewees were identified with the help of some key informants in each community, the subsequent research participants were usually referred by the earlier respondents. The referral chains had broken at times, and a new chain was started with the help of key informants. The only criterion that was applied in the selection of the female interviewees was their work experience as a housemaid in a Gulf country. All the available female returnees in each community were interviewed.

Table 4-2: Demographic Profile of Female Returnees

Education	Frequency
Illiterate	33
Literate Only (can read and write)	5
1 -5 th grade	9
6-10 th grade	9
Age (at First Emigration)	
Under 20	6
20 -24	6
25-29	29
30-34	10
35 and Above	5
Caste/Ethnicity	
Hill-Janajati	27
Hill Brahmin/Chhetri	9
Hill Dalit	12
Others (Indigenous/Madhesi)	8
Marital Status at the Time of Emigration	
Married	38
Never Married	8
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	10
First Travel to the Gulf (in Year)	
1998-2006	14
2007-08	13
2009-10	15
2011-12	14
Route to the Gulf	
Via India (Delhi/Mumbai airport)	33
Via Nepal (Kathmandu airport)	23
Frequency of Labor Migration	
Single Time	41
Multiple Times	15

Nearly all the female workers who were approached for an interview agreed to it. Most of them offered to sit for an interview during our very first meeting despite my offer to come on a

day and time that was more convenient to them. In some cases, I waited for an hour or two for the former housemaids to finish their work at home or on a farm before starting the interview. The husbands of all the married female workers were also asked for an interview, if they were available. Altogether twelve husbands and seven parents of the female returnees were interviewed for the study. While interviews with the family members were completed in less than half an hour, conversations with the female workers averaged about an hour. Below is the demographic profile of the female returnees.

Fieldwork Issue: Researcher as an Insider/Outsider

Scholars have argued that a researcher's social locations are likely to affect their research (Bozzoli, 1998; Burton, 1998; Emerson, 2001). The researcher's age, sex, and class are likely to affect his/her relations with the actors (respondents) and the information gathered through participant observation and interviews. Fieldwork relations, notes Emerson (2001), are "mutually collaboratively produced exchanges between fieldworker and those studied," and are affected by the fieldworker's physical and social characteristics (p. 116). However, it is difficult to tell what kinds of physical/social characteristics will help in attaining valuable information in the field: while being an insider – sharing ethnic and social identities – might help an ethnographer to easily become a part of the group, s/he may also fail to see or gather some useful information from the "subjects" as they might suppose that s/he already knows that information (Emerson, 2001). Thus, the ethnographer's age, gender, race, and class are likely to affect the field relationships in either direction – positive or negative. What is important in the field is that "the fieldworker's response must involve sustained, self-conscious analysis of his 'social position' and its influence on relations with those studied" (Emerson, 2001, p. 119). The

insider/outsider dichotomy actually does not hold true, as a researcher is both an insider and an outsider. What is very important for ethnographers is to understand the social locations of themselves and their informants, and the negotiations that take place between them (Emerson, 2001).

I interviewed all the male and female respondents myself. I had a back-up plan of hiring a female research assistant to conduct interviews with the female workers if they were reluctant to speak with me. However, I did not have to face such a situation. All the female workers I approached and asked for an interview were interested to talk with me. The most challenging thing was finding a separate, quiet space for interviews. Most interviews were conducted in an open space, at the porch of the respondent's house, not in a closed room. Many times, the family members and the neighbors also tried to join our conversation, and I had to ask them, politely and usually indirectly, to leave and let us talk without interference. As a male researcher and a student at a U.S. university, I was perceived somewhat as an "outsider" in the community of migrant workers. However, I was not perceived as a complete stranger or an "alien" either. I always introduced myself with an explanation of what I wanted to study (i.e. female workers' experiences) and why (i.e. for my Ph.D. study), followed by my identity as a person living in Chitwan until some years ago (I lived there until recently; many of my relatives still live there). As suggested by Goffman (1989), I exposed myself to the subjects as much as possible, and this helped build rapport with the study population. I provided them with all of my relevant personal information. I always told them that my wife and daughters were in Kathmandu, while I was there for field-work. I also told them that I used to work as a lecturer at a college in Nepal before I went to the U.S. for further study. All this information was very helpful in gaining the trust of female interviewees, their families, and the community. Many of them exclaimed, "Oh, you're

also from Chitwan!” or “Oh, you are also from *our place!*” They said that they were happy to talk with me. Nevertheless, I was always aware of how people perceived me and how my presence, particularly as a male researcher, affected people’s interactions between themselves as well as with me. I always took detailed notes of the things happening in the field. While interviewing, I always took note not only of what they said (which was recorded with a voice-recording device), but also of how they said, what they could not say, and what they were hesitant or uninterested in talking about. While interviewing the women living with family, I also first talked with their husband, parents, or parent-in-laws to build trust with the family and gain their approval, which was very important in a country like Nepal, where men make most decisions. I also interacted and discussed various issues in the community with other family members at the beginning to develop a rapport with the family and the interviewees.

Interviewing male workers was less challenging. With a couple of exceptions, the male workers were outspoken. They were extremely interested in talking about their experiences, although some of them were hesitant at first to talk about their experiences with female workers abroad. Nevertheless, all the male workers shared with me their perception of female migration, and the challenges of both male and female migrant workers abroad. Most male workers were interviewed in recruiting agencies’ office in Kathmandu. They were in the office for their re-emigration to the Gulf and other Asian countries.

Interviewing Strategies

Terkel (1998) states that “there aren’t any rules” in interviewing; an interviewer experiments and learns on his/her own. The most important thing in interviewing is having the curiosity to learn about people’s lives (Terkel 1998). I started the interviews with a curiosity to

learn about the respondents' work, views, and life (particularly in the case of female workers). I used a semi-structured interview format because, as Berg (1998) writes, in this interview style, while interviewers begin with a set of questions to start the conversation, "the interviewers are allowed freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers are permitted (in fact expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardized questions" (p. 61). Although I started the conversation with some questions, I did not focus on the questions as the conversation proceeded. I let the conversation flow with as little interruption as possible. The interviews proceeded, as Terkel (1998) notes, as an exploration, not an inquisition, moving along the experiences of the interviewees and exploring the unanticipated territory. The interview schedule was checked before ending the interview to ensure that all the required information was obtained.

While interviewing, especially female respondents, I paid attention not only to what the interviewees said but also what they could not say, particularly when they talked about their experiences of violence in the Gulf. I paid attention to pauses and silences, as well as body language and other expressions, such as smiles (Terkel, 1998). As Anderson & Jack (1998) warn, it is problematic to take the comments of the interviewees at face value. It is important to understand the underlying meaning/s of respondent's comments and expressions. In many occasions, I asked the female interviewee to provide her "own interpretation of her experience, or her own perspective on her life and activity" (Anderson & Jack, 1998, p. 136). A researcher needs to see things through the actors' viewpoint and this strategy helps "to understand their actions, reasons, and motives" (Becker, 1993, p. 60). I tried to utilize insider's perspective while interpreting certain activities and events of interviewee's life. I asked the interviewees to explain the concepts they introduced during our conversations, and also confirmed with them while

interpreting those concepts. It is important for researchers to honor the privacy and integrity of the interviewees (Anderson & Jack, 1998), and I have maintained the anonymity and confidentiality of my interviewees. All interviewees are referred to by a pseudonym throughout the dissertation, and the communities are unnamed in order to protect the identity of the interviewees. All of the recorded interviews were deleted after transcribing. All interviewees' participation in the study was voluntary. The informed consent, which is provided in the appendix, was read to the interviewees, and verbal consents were secured before starting the interview.

Data Analysis Strategies

Analysis of qualitative data involves organizing data, immersing oneself in the data, interpreting data, coding, generating themes/categories or identifying patterns in the data, and presenting the analysis to an audience (Emerson et al., 2011; Esterberg, 2002). The strategies that are used in organizing the data are: (1) separating different types of data (keeping each interview and related fieldnotes and other documents in one folder), (2) keeping data in chronological (or alphabetical) order, (3) organizing data according to topic or document type, and, (4) preparing a logbook (Esterberg, 2002). Fieldnotes, interviews, and any relevant documents were read several times, from beginning to end, in order to become familiar with the data and to make sense of it. The data were coded in two phases, first with open coding and then focused coding. Open coding was helpful in identifying new, unexpected themes and categories in the data. As Esterberg (2002) notes, instead of using pre-established codes, we need to focus on what is in the data and try to understand the themes and categories we see. After completing open coding, recurring themes or categories were identified and focused coding of the data was carried out.

According to Esterberg (2002), “When you begin seeing the same codes over and over and don’t seem to be seeing quite as many new themes or creating many new codes, this should suggest potential themes” (p. 159). In the process of developing an analysis, I looked for patterns (as we do while coding), compared cases, or built typologies (categorizing types of things).

While analyzing data, I also looked for negative cases (or disconfirming evidence) to test rival hypotheses. Esterberg’s (2002) “null hypothesis strategy” – beginning our analysis with an assumption “that there is not pattern or relationship in the data” (p. 175) – was utilized to gather evidence for establishing the pattern/relationship in the data. Data triangulation was also used while analyzing data.

In the process of analyzing the data from the newspaper archive, the migration articles were also coded following the methods of open and closed coding as discussed above (for data collected through interviews and field notes). The newspaper articles were also read and analyzed together with the interviews of male migrant workers and some government officials to find recurring themes.

Reflections

Nothing could be as exciting as doing dissertation fieldwork in your home country, the place you miss so much while living away. The fieldwork also provided an opportunity to be with my family in Kathmandu, at least for some time. It was also somewhat convenient to collect data in Kathmandu and Chitwan as I was familiar with these places and the people, although my personal networks barely existed in both places due to my internal migration to Kathmandu from Chitwan about two decades ago and (temporary) international migration to the U.S. over half a decade ago for my graduate study. Nevertheless, visiting both of these places for fieldwork was a

very joyful experience for me. The joy in visiting parts of Chitwan, which I had never seen before, on a motorcycle taking mostly gravel roads (public transportation was unreliable and also did not reach most female workers' houses), and spending hours in "tea shops" talking with various people in the community is unexplainable. Equally enjoyable was hearing about people's experiences as well as their very plain and simple view of life.

The fieldwork, however, was also emotionally challenging, if not draining, at times. I was disheartened when some female returnees broke down while explaining their experiences of physical abuses in the Gulf. I had difficulty holding back my tears when a female respondent got very emotional while explaining her indebted situation due to unsuccessful migration to a country in the Middle-East for the second time (she had returned from the Gulf due to illness the first time). I felt sad that I did not have a fund to help her out of the indebted situation. Occasions like this also made me question the contribution of my dissertation in the lives of the female returnees – how does my dissertation help them? In the course of fieldwork and dissertation writing, I questioned several times whether my study would really help the prospective and returned female workers. However, I always found its relevance (although minimal at times) to these people, and it was this feeling that motivated me to continue the fieldwork, and, later, dissertation writing.

An overwhelming majority of the female returnees and their families were very welcoming. The family and the community members also often asked me about my study, work, and my plans after graduation. I also developed closeness with the families of many female migrant workers due to my frequent visits to the community and their seeing me as an "inhabitant" of Chitwan. Many of them offered me tea and food after the interview, and it was hard not to accept the offers on some occasions (so as not to offend them). The perception of me

as an “insider” helped me gain the trust of female returnees, their families, and the community, and this trust was very helpful while interviewing them.

In the chapters that follow, I present the analysis of the data collected through the fieldwork in Nepal. The findings are presented according to the research questions stated in Chapter 1.

Chapter 5 - Social Perception, Media Representation, and the Policies of Female Migration in Nepal

Nepal has a Kathmandu-centric political and economic system. Kathmandu, the capital city, houses the major government offices as well the headquarters of prominent non-governmental organizations in the country. It is also here that bureaucrats and political leaders, who are predominantly male (especially in the decision-making positions), formulate policies relating to female migration. The Nepalese society generally frowns upon women going out alone, and it is this perception regarding female mobility that provides the basis for the gendered migration policies in the nation. The national migration discourse may not always be as strong in the emigrant households and communities as it is in the larger Nepalese society, and yet it is the national discourse that has shaped the migration policies in Nepal. In the post-1990 period, Nepalese media, particularly the national newspapers like *Kantipur National Daily (KND)*, also played an important role, intentionally or unintentionally, in (re)producing the discourse relating to female migration. Although most people at the local level are unaware of what is reported in the national media, the media have played an important role in shaping the migration policies of Nepal. Thus, in this chapter, I first describe the prevalent social discourse of female migration in Nepalese society using the newspaper archive and the interviews with government officials, returned and re-emigrating male migrant workers, social activists, and officials of non-governmental organizations working in the sector of migration. All but one interview were conducted in Kathmandu. I have reviewed the news articles, editorials, and op-ed articles relating to female migration published between 1997 and 2014 in *KND*, arguably the most influential newspaper in post-1990 Nepal. While *KND* still ranks top among the national dailies in Nepal,

its position was even more dominant in the past. It was the only independent (non-governmental and not leaning to any specific political parties) top-ranked newspaper in the country until a few years back. In the last section of the chapter, I explain the relationship between media coverage of specific cases of female migrant workers in the Gulf and the change in the policies on female migration.

Prevalent Discourse on Female Migration

In this section, I explore, using the interviews, news articles, archival data, and published scholarly works, the prevalent discourse of female migration in the larger Nepalese society. The media, male migrant workers, and the officials of governmental/non-governmental organizations are also involved, often unintentionally, in the (re)production of the dominant migration discourse, which eventually affects the female migrant workers and their families. Three major patterns/concepts relating to female migration were observed across the data. Each of them is discussed below.

***Cheli* and the National “Dishonor”**

The female migrant workers are frequently referred as *cheli* or *chelibeti* in the news articles, op-ed articles, everyday conversations, and also by male migrant workers and the (male) officials of government as well as non-governmental organizations. While *cheli*, according to *Nepali Brihat Sabdakosh*, a comprehensive Nepali dictionary, means daughters, sisters, or female pupils, the term carries the first two meanings when used to refer to the Nepali female

workers abroad.²⁰ Nepalese women are perceived as “kin” first, and possibly also as citizens with rights later. Joshi (2004) argues that as a nation still in the process of conceptualizing “a theory of citizenship,” Nepalese women are generally perceived “as kin: as mothers, daughters, sisters, and in-laws,” not “as a citizen ... imbued with ‘rights’ that give them access to certain privileges” (p. 243). The *cheli* trope is often used to evoke a kinship tie with Nepali women. During the interviews, some (particularly male) officials of governmental and non-governmental organizations and many returned and re-emigrating male migrant workers also used the term “*cheli*” to refer to the Nepali female workers abroad. The general conception is that Nepali women are “*our cheli*” – like our daughters and sisters – and we need to “protect” them. Unfortunately, the usual method of “protection” has been to limit women’s mobility rights. While talking about female workers’ condition in Kuwait, a high-ranked government official stated in a recent interview:

We found *our cheli* working in a miserable condition ... *our cheli* are sold like animals... [and] in the present situation, the ban on the housemaids will not be relaxed. We have seen the suffering of *our cheli* ... our ministry won’t let the injustice prevail against *our cheli*” (Shiwakoti 2014).

While it is praiseworthy that the government is adamant about protecting female workers from abuses in foreign countries, perceiving women as kin, not as citizens with rights, and devaluing their agency has only exacerbated the problem. The cases of abuses are real, and some extreme abuses have indeed taken place against female workers. However, the policy of imposing travel bans has only increased the vulnerability of female workers as they use a longer, riskier Nepal-Delhi/Mumbai-Gulf route for labor migration and many reach the destination countries without proper documentation and a support network (see Chapter 7). The workplace abuses against

²⁰Although the term is also used to refer to Nepali women in other contexts, my analysis is limited to the word’s use in reference to the female (prospective, current, or returned) migrant workers.

Nepalese male workers are also staggering. The death rate for male workers is much higher than for the female workers. However, there are no such travel bans against the male workers to “protect” them.

The women-as-kin trope also implies women as “minor,” in need of protection from a “guardian,” such as a father, husband, or brother. The Nepalese state legitimized this infantile view of female workers for a long time through their differential treatment in the legal codes. The first labor migration act, *Foreign Employment Act, 1985*, forbade the independent movement of female workers. A woman, irrespective of her age, was required to obtain “the consent of her guardian” for employment in a foreign country (*Foreign Employment Act, 1985*, Clause 12). Although the 1990 Constitution promised the equal treatment of male and female citizens, the first amendment of the Act in 1992 still did not remove the discriminatory provision. The amendment only specified who could function as a “guardian” of the prospective female migrant workers. For an unmarried woman, a father or mother was considered a guardian. In case of their unavailability, an elder or a *younger brother* at least 21 years of age could still be her guardian. For a married woman, her husband was the first choice, but in case of his unavailability the husband’s parents could also be her guardians. Many women, who were visiting a foreign country for a reason other than the employment, were also stopped at the Kathmandu airport for not furnishing the guardian’s “consent” for the travel.²¹

The conception of “*cheli*” as the daughters and sisters of the nation associates women with national pride and prestige, or reversely national shame and dishonor. The female workers engaging in (both consensual and forced) sexual relationships are supposed to bring “dishonors”

²¹ Joshi (2004) describes her personal experience of being prevented from flying via Kathmandu airport. There was also a report of a woman en route to Egypt returned from the Kathmandu airport for not having “husband’s approval.” She was reported to be going to meet her husband in Egypt (“Patiko Swikriti,” 2001).

and “insults” to the nation. The society is concerned about the female emigrants’ possible indulgence in sexual relationships, with or without consent, in a foreign land, and thus, no longer remaining “chaste” and “pure” – a characteristic considered essential for Nepali women (the notion of “purity” will be further discussed in the section to follow). The female migrants are thus presumed to bring only “insults” and “dishonors” to the county, not pride and fortune. Some male migrant workers expressed their concern about the “image” of Nepal in the international arena due to female workers’ migration to the Gulf and other Asian countries for domestic works, and their indulgence in sexual activities. As Sanjaya, a male migrant worker, observes:

I used to meet Nepali female workers [in Saudi Arabia], who were employed as housemaidsSome women also worked as cleaners. We often passed by them during weekends. They would come to visit some places in the city, carrying kids with them. They look like Arabians, but we could only recognize them when they spoke. They do not normally want to talk. They rarely speak as they are afraid of their boss even to have conversations with us. Their boss would not allow them to speak with others. These Arab men are allowed to do whatever they want, but Nepali men don’t do anything like that [sexual relationships]. It’s difficult for women there. We should not send Nepalese women abroad at all, I think. The Arabs suppress Nepalese women and their voices, even if they try to resist. Their law is like that. The law allows these men to do any bad things they want with these female workers. I think the main thing is that Nepalese women should not go abroad to work as a housemaid. It’s very dangerous. It’s not good. Other men also think the same. They should not go...some women still go, but they return miserably. These women do not tell the truth after they return. After a woman goes abroad, they are certainly going to be ...doomed. These women only bring “insults” and “dishonors” to the nation.

While analyzing the news articles published in *KND* from 1997 to 2014, one thing that stood out was the frequency of the word “*cheli*” in the news headlines and the presentation of female workers as lacking agency. “*cheli*” appears dozens of times in the headlines, and the word’s occurrence has even increased in post-2007, with an increase in the coverage of female migrant workers in this period. Some of the headlines are:

1. Over Hundred *Cheli* Rescued in Fourteen Months (“Chaudha Mahinama,” 1999, p. 4)
2. Six *Cheli* Rescued (“Chha *Cheliko*,” 2001, p. 3)
3. Ten *Cheli* Rescued (“Das *Cheliko*,” 2003, p. 3)
4. Twenty Five *Cheli* Sold (“Pachchis *Cheli*,” 2009, p. 5)
5. A Nepali *Cheli* Commits Suicide in Oman (“Omanma Ek,” 2011)

The female workers are generally believed to be duped into going abroad. They are presumed to be never knowingly travelling to a foreign country, particularly via India. The Nepalese society cannot accept the fact that female emigration is also based on a household decision in many cases, and women are not always tricked into going abroad, just like their male counterparts. This is why the independent female workers are often “rescued” from the border and returned to their “guardians” for their "protection" as they are presumed to have no knowledge of what they are doing.

The society is sympathetic to the plight of “*cheli*” as long as they maintain their “child-like innocence.” The women cease to be “*our cheli*” if they transgress the social norms, such as while seeking an alternative route for foreign employment. They can still be “*our cheli*” and the society can be sympathetic to them if the women were cheated or forced into doing something against the established social norms. The society is angry about the transgression, and the transgressors are reprimanded. The transgressing women are “arrested” at the border or at the airports in India, held in “custody,” and handed over to their “guardian.” It is no surprise that the “transgressing” women are hardly referred as “*cheli*” in the migration discourse. (For example, you rarely read “*cheli* arrested” in newspapers if a woman is arrested because of her crime, and the society is unsympathetic to her). The society has a tendency to “disown” the transgressing

“daughters” and “sisters.” The conception of independent female migration as a transgression of the social norms ignores the socio-economic and political contexts of why women had to migrate (via India) in the first place. It also overlooks the impact of government policies on female migrant workers.

“No Woman Returns ‘Chokho’”: Assumptions about Female Workers’ Sexuality

The Hindu notion of “*chokho*,” which literally means pure, unadulterated, or uncontaminated, holds a special place in the Nepalese society, which has moral codes structured around the Hindu scriptures. The society emphasizes the notion of “*chokho*” in everyday life, such as “*chokho khana*” (unadulterated food), “*chokho luga*” (uncontaminated clothes), and even “*chokho maya*” (pure love). Only “*chokho*” things are offered to the gods and goddesses. One of the requirements for a woman is to remain “*chokho*” in her life, which she can maintain by restraining herself from remarriages and pre-marital and extra-marital sex. In other words, women are expected to control their sexual drives to maintain their “purity.” There are no such requirements for men, except that men are supposed to marry only “*chokho*” women. The national discourse about female migration also revolves around the notion of “*chokho*” or “purity” in the Nepalese society. While “purity” still remains a dominant social norm for women, many ethnic groups (who are often grouped as Hill-Janajati in the government data), many of whom are Buddhism or Kiranti practitioners, hold more liberal views towards female sexuality. Some ethnic groups are also more accepting of pre-marital sex and remarriages. While many female labor migrants (about half of the female returnees in this study) are also from Hill-Janajati group, the national migration discourse is based on the Hindu, middle class, Brahmin-

Chettri's concern for female sexual "purity." The dominant discourse is also used to make a judgment about all female workers' sexuality, regardless of their ethnic background.

The media and the returned male workers also frequently make an assumption about female workers' sexuality. The male migrant workers play an important role in perpetuating the discourse about female workers' sexuality through their narratives upon their return, or having their account/assumption of female workers' sexuality published in the newspapers. The Nepali newspapers frequently cite male migrant workers while making certain claims about the female workers. In my review of the news articles and the interviews with returned and re-emigrating male migrant workers, the claim that "nearly all female workers are engaged in sexual relationships abroad and such an act (even the consensual relationship) is bad" was very evident. Tilak, a 31-year-old man from the eastern part of Nepal, has been working in the United Arab Emirates for several years now. As his seat was next to mine on our flight from Abu Dhabi to Kathmandu, he shared with me his views and experiences regarding female emigrants. Tilak does not approve the emigration of female workers due to the possibility of women engaging in sexual activities, with or without their consent. He views female migration as a national disgrace. Tilak says:

It's not good at all to send women to work in the Gulf countries. Someone must give a guarantee...that these women reach, work, and return safely [without engaging in sexual relationships]. But, they don't return safely. You should understand it, brother! No women will return pure after they go abroad. Nowadays, they use Facebook, and they meet with different men, and after they meet... you know, it's a human heart...and the loneliness...then they realize all these things when their family learns about it. They get scolded by their family when they return to Nepal. Most of them are married and have their family in Nepal, but they have relationships with other people during their stay abroad. The Arabians also do not like women workers engaging in friendship and other relationships with other men as they know that these women are married and have a husband in Nepal. That also often results in sexual exploitation by the owner. But in general, unmarried women are at a higher risk than married women. The owners don't leave even the married women, then you can imagine what they do

with the unmarried women, and also what kind of lifestyle the unmarried women live abroad. No woman returns *chokho* from abroad.

As female workers are perceived as the daughters and sisters of the nation it is considered the nation's responsibility to preserve their "purity." The society presumes women to be "innocent" and they can remain so as long as they do not engage in unauthorized sexual relationships. All sexual acts of female workers are presumed to be either "forceful" (hence, women are "innocent") or they are labeled "loose" for engaging in sexual relationships in foreign countries. The society cannot accept that women workers can also engage in sexual relationships by choice, sometimes even in the foreign countries.

It would be unfair to argue that the male migrant workers and the Nepalese society are only concerned about female sexuality, not the well-being of the female workers. Many male migrant workers indeed expressed their concerns about the abuses and exploitation of female workers in foreign countries, and a couple of them had also helped the female workers, who had run away from the abusive employers in the Gulf. Some of them had also met the female returnees with experiences of abuses and/or read about their stories in newspapers. The negative social perception is connected with the cases of unsatisfactory migration experiences of female workers. However, there is still some concern about female workers' sexuality in most male migrant workers' narratives, as we see in Kamal's account below. Kamal, who had returned from working in Saudi Arabia for several years and is in the process of re-emigrating to a different country, describes:

Most of the cases of female migration that I have heard are unsatisfactory and unsuccessful. I once met a woman, who had been to Kuwait, and returned to Nepal in three and a half months. She told me about the difficulty she had there – too much of work and abuses. She had to work all the time, but the owner would never be happy with her work. They were always unappreciative of her work. She said that she felt like living under Rana Sasan [a draconian regime]. She had

also bad health, and thus returned home. There was also another girl who had returned after 15 months in Iraq, who also said that her stay abroad was unsatisfactory. She has gone to Israel now ... many women are forced to have sex. You know these Arabians are different. I don't think any woman returns *chokho* from abroad.

The lack of public support for female labor migration is connected with cases of abuses and exploitations of female workers overseas. However, there are also concerns about women's "impurity" – the notion that women might become "impure" once they cross the boundary of home or home country. The discourse such as "no woman returns pure" is based not only on the cases of abuses and exploitation of female workers abroad; it is also the result of the emphasis on women's "purity" in the Nepalese society.

The assumptions/claims about female sexuality are also often found in news articles. When Kani Sherpa's suicide at a Kuwaiti hospital was reported in 1998, the *KND* news report makes an assumption, citing an interview with a male worker in Saudi Arabia, that "the Nepali female workers in the Gulf undergo various physical and mental tortures as *most male employers try to sexually exploit them*" (Mishra, 1998a, p. 1, emphasis added). Another report contains a claim of an official of an anti-human trafficking organization that "over 90% of housemaids are sexually exploited in the Gulf" (Ghimire, 1999, p. 1). While evidence of sexual abuses against the housemaids in the Gulf exists, the tendency to overly exaggerate the figure only helps portray all female migrant workers as the victims of sexual abuses.²² This type of discourse affects the female migrant workers and their families.

²² While the official data on sexual abuses against Nepali housemaids is unavailable, the figure was very low in the present study (see Chapter 7). In Eelens's (1995) study of former housemaids in Sri Lanka, 2.2% of the returnees reported that they were raped. Shah and Menon's (1997) analyses of sexual abuses against the domestic workers in Kuwait also find the figure less than five percent (p. 17). In Moukarbel's (2009) study of Sri Lankan housemaids in Lebanon, 11% of women complained about the sexual harassment. Even accounting for the fact that some female workers may not report sexual abuses due to the fear of social stigma, the cases of sexual abuses must be much lower than what is reported in the media.

Female Migrants as “Victims”: Conflating Labor Migration with Human Trafficking

Independent female labor migration is often conflated with human trafficking. Due to the travel bans in Nepal, many female workers have used the Nepal-Delhi/Mumbai-Gulf route to reach destination countries. The women who travel without a “guardian” are often stopped at the Indo-Nepal border under suspicion of being trafficked. The women, who are stopped, returned, or arrested at the Nepal-India border by the security personnel and anti-human trafficking organizations, are claimed to have been “rescued” from being “sold” to India or the Gulf countries. Joshi (2004) argues that the anti-trafficking organizations in Nepal perpetuate the “women-as-victims” discourse, which undermines women’s agency and their identity as a citizen with rights. By conflating human trafficking with labor migration, the same discourse of “women-as-victim” is reproduced by the media and anti-trafficking organizations. This discourse emphasizes women’s transnational migration only as a law-enforcement issue (stopping women and arresting the human smugglers) while completely undermining the socio-economic contexts of female labor migration. The anti-trafficking discourse for female labor migration also asks for tightening of border/airport security for female emigrants, which not only strips women of their rights, but also makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuses as they depend on unauthorized sources for their outmigration.

While reviewing the news articles in *KND* from 1997 through 2014, I found several examples of female migrant workers being presented as the “victims” of human trafficking. Many times, no evidence corroborated the claim that those women were really being trafficked. An analysis of few selected news articles is presented below.

Example 1: Eighteen Women Planned to be Taken Abroad Are in Police Protection

(Mishra, 1998b, p. 4)

The police took the women in its protection from Chabhil, Kathmandu, as they were “being taken” to India for Kuwait on a charter bus. The women were “taken into police protection” with the help of Anuradha Koirala, the chairperson of Maiti Nepal, an anti-human trafficking organization.²³ One of the women supposedly said that “we did not know we were going to *get rotten*. But we are [saved] from *being rotten*” (emphasis added). And the report asserts that “she is happy even though she could not go abroad.”

Example 2: Five Women Saved from Being Sold in Brothels (“Pach Yubati,” 1999, p. 3)

These five women were “arrested” by a police officer at the Nepal-India border while they were trying to get to Bombay to fly to a foreign country. These women were suspected of being trafficked (as they were travelling without a “guardian”). The women were later handed over to Maiti Nepal.

Example 3: Thirty *Cheli* Rescued from Thori (“Thori Bata,” 2014)

Thirty women were “rescued” from the Nepal-India border on the south in the last six months. They were being taken via India “to be traded” to other countries.

While the female migrant workers are consistently represented as being “smuggled” to India and other countries, such news stories have more frequently appeared during periods of travel bans in

²³ Maiti Nepal is an internationally recognized and probably the most renowned anti-human trafficking organization in Nepal.

Nepal, when women used India as a transit point to get to the Gulf. The conflation of female labor migration with (sex) trafficking and the representation of female labor migrants as women duped by some “evil” men does not truly explain the reality of female migration. This type of discourse undermines the agency of Nepali female workers, while reinforcing the perception of women as “commodities” to be “traded” in the markets. There are several instances of female (as well as male workers) being cheated by the recruiting agencies and unregistered agents. However, the claim that dozens, and sometimes even hundreds, of women held at the Nepal-India border were trying to get to India or other countries without their knowledge is not plausible. This type of discourse ignores the socio-economic factors of female emigration. The perception of female emigration to selected destination countries only as a law-enforcement problem does not address why women are travelling via India to work as housemaids in a foreign country. The tendency to blame the open borders with India for female labor migration to the Gulf also does not address the issue of extreme poverty and high unemployment rate particularly in the rural communities of Nepal – the prime location of female emigrants.

Cases of Extreme Abuses and the Policies of Female Migration

There is a tendency to generalize the experiences of some female workers to the larger population. The cases of extreme violence against female workers – physical and sexual abuses, suicide, imprisonment, etc. – are intensely covered in the media. The coverage of only the extreme cases, particularly of sexual abuses, often with some assumption about sexuality, helps perpetuate the discourse of “all housemaids as victims of sexual abuses” in the larger Nepalese society. In the analysis of nearly two decades of newspaper articles relating to female migration, hardly any talked about the positive experiences of female workers. I am not attempting to

disprove the cases of abuses against Nepali housemaids in the foreign countries. Some female workers have indeed suffered abuses from employers in the Gulf, and this is also a finding of the research (see Chapter 7). However, the overemphasis (if not the only emphasis) on the cases of extreme abuses, particularly the news relating to female migrants' sexuality, has helped perpetuate a national discourse regarding the "impurity" of women returning from foreign employment, and this type of discourse has affected the female migrant workers and their families. There is also a strong connection between the media coverage of some specific incidents (suicide, death penalty, or extreme abuses) involving female workers and a shift in national policies on female migration. With intensive coverage of some specific incidents, the media helps create public outrage about the state's inability to save the "daughters and sisters" of the nation from the "evil" foreign elements. The government until now has responded with restrictive policies against female labor migration to specific countries and for specific jobs, with/without knowing that such policies backfire. The frequent travel bans have made female workers more vulnerable to abuses, and thereby helped reinforce the same dominant discourse.

The media coverage of migration in general, and particularly of female migration, was very sparse until 2000. The first major coverage to appear in *KND* in the late 1990s was the death of Kani Sherpa, a Nepali female worker in Kuwait. *KND* published Kani's story, with her photograph, on the front page on November 27, 1998 (Mishra, 1998a). She was allegedly abused by her employer, and badly injured when her employer's son pushed her down from the third floor of the house. Kani had committed suicide in a hospital in Kuwait. She had reached Kuwait about a year earlier via Kathmandu. The dead body of Kani arrived in Kathmandu airport eleven days later, on December 8. The *KND* provided special coverage of Kani on the next day. A big photo of Kani's family and relatives holding a placard with Kani's picture, with "Killed in

Kuwait: Kani Sherpa” written at the bottom. Among Kani’s four children, the oldest child, an eight-year old daughter, was also at the airport waiting to see her mother's body. The report (“Kuwaitma Atmahatya,” 1998) claimed that Kani was frequently raped by the employer's son and committed suicide after learning in the hospital that she had to “either return to the employer’s house or go to the jail (p. 12).”²⁴

Table 5-1: List of the Major Government Decisions Relating to Female Migration

Major Decisions	Date
The requirement of a guardian’s approval for women to leave the country for work in the first foreign employment act (<i>The Foreign Employment Act, 1985</i>)	1985
Ban on female migration, following the death of Kani Sherpa in Kuwait	1998
Ban completely lifted and approval of a guardian no longer required, with the implementation of <i>Foreign Employment Act, 2007</i>	September, 2007
Ban on female migration to the Gulf and Malaysia, following the news of the death penalty for Dolma Sherpa	September, 2008
Ban on Gulf labor migration lifted	December, 2010
Women under the age of 30 banned from working in the Arab states	August 2010
Ban on all age groups for low-skill works	2014

As expected, the case of Kani Sherpa caused a public outrage. Consequently, the government of Nepal completely banned female labor outmigration. Although the exact date of the decision is unknown, there is a general consensus (including Gurung 2010) that Nepali

²⁴ The news report does not explain why Kani would be sent to the jail. The domestic workers in Kuwait and other GCC countries are recruited through the sponsorship of employers. The sponsorship visa binds the domestic workers with their employers. Kani’s status would possibly have been “illegal” (hence, she would be sent to the jail) if she left her employer. The Gulf sponsorship visa system and its impacts on domestic workers are further discussed in Chapter 7.

women were banned from participating in foreign employment in any country in 1998, following the death of Kani Sherpa in Kuwait. The government had decided to ban women's migration in order to “protect” them from the abuses, but the travel ban only forced female labor migrants to seek unauthorized, alternative routes to reach the destination countries. What was ignored in the dominant discourse, and also overlooked in the government decision-making process, were the socio-economic factors of female emigration, or asserted simply but truthfully by Kani’s mother: “The poverty of Nepal killed my daughter” (“Kuwaitma Atmahatya,” 1998, p. 12).

The ban on female migration was completely lifted in September 2007, with the implementation of a new foreign employment act – *Foreign Employment Act, 2007*. The change in policy of female migration (such as lifting the ban partially, allowing emigration with certain conditions, imposing new conditions for labor permit, etc.) had occurred at least half a dozen times between the travel ban of 1998 and the complete removal of ban in 2007 (Gurung 2010, p. 3). Although women could go for foreign employment at some times during the period between 1998 and 2007, the independent labor outmigration from Nepal was very tough for the first-time travelers.²⁵ According to DOFE, only 390 women left the country for employment in the financial year 2006/2007 (see Table 2.2. in Chapter 2). The available evidence suggests that first-time emigrants to the Gulf rarely used the Kathmandu airport in this period. All the female interviewees for the present research, who had travelled to the Gulf between 1998 and 2007, had flown from an Indian city, Delhi or Mumbai, and without a labor permit from the Nepal government.

The 2007 Act also formally ended the gender-based discrimination on labor migration. Women no longer needed a guardian’s consent for their travel. However, the removal of travel

²⁵ The female migrants were issued a labor permit for entry after meeting certain conditions, if they were going to work for the same employer (irrespective of how they went first time).

ban on female labor migrants did not last long. The government decided to ban female migration to Malaysia and the Gulf exactly a year later, in September 2008. This ban was the consequence of another “high profile” case – Dolma Sherpa receiving the death penalty in Kuwait. Dolma’s news was extremely shocking to the Nepalese society: a Nepali “*cheli*,” from a country that opposes the death penalty, had been sentenced to death in the Gulf, where nearly all women workers are presumed to be the victims of sexual abuses. The society was sympathetic about the plight of their “*cheli*” abroad. This case also questioned the Nepalese state’s capability of saving “our daughters and sisters.” The government had to act immediately to appease the concerns of the general public, and it did so by imposing travel bans against female emigrants to the Gulf and Malaysia. Dolma Sherpa’s case was extensively covered in *KND*. *KND* published over a dozen news reports about Dolma Sherpa’s life abroad, her family in Nepal, and also helped promote the “Save Dolma Campaign.” Dolma was convicted of stabbing a Filipina co-worker to death (it was initially reported that she was accused of killing her employer’s son). The campaign collected thousands of dollars from Nepali living in and outside the country to “save Dolma” and gave some “blood money” to the victim’s family (who accepted the money in exchange for Dolma’s life). Dolma’s punishment was eventually reduced to three years in prison.

The government decided to ban female labor migration to the Gulf after the case of Dolma Sherpa. However, the fact that Dolma as well as other female workers (usually with experiences of abuses) reported in the *KND* had travelled via India, at a time when female labor outmigration was still illegal, was completely undermined. The government decision to impose a travel ban also ignored the fact that Dolma’s migration to Kuwait was a household decision. Dolma’s husband, who worked in an American military camp in Iraq at the time of Dolma’s conviction, was reported to have said: “We could not feed ourselves even six months from our

farm. So, I had first gone to Malaysia for work, but had to return in eight months due to illness ... then Dolma talked about going [abroad] to earn. I had not wanted to send her, but she had to go due to the difficulty” at home (Sherpa, 2008, p. 1). The reality that many women are participating in foreign employment for the survival of themselves and their family is usually ignored in the mainstream migration discourse.

In addition to Dolma’s case, there were also other news articles relating to women workers abroad. As the number of women reaching the Gulf countries increased – especially by getting there illegally – the cases of female workers experiencing difficulty abroad also increasingly appeared in the national media. All the coverage of female migration in *KND* in 2008 were the unsuccessful stories – women stranded in the Gulf, women taking refuge in the embassies, women rescued from the Gulf, women in the jail, women returning home (some of them in half-conscious condition). While this trend continued in 2009, another issue – women returning pregnant or with a baby born in the Gulf – also started to appear in the national discourse. *KND* published a story of a woman “Returned with Son” on the front page on October 10, 2009 (Bhattarai 2009). The child was born from a man she married and lived with in Kuwait, but she spent one and a half years in prison for living (and possibly giving birth to a child) in Kuwait illegally. She was also married in Nepal prior to her emigration. Another story of a woman, Sita Sapkota, engaging in a legal battle for ten years in Kuwait “to get her husband” (or give the child her father’s identity) was published about two months later (Karki, 2009, p. 3). The child was conceived when her employer forced her to have sex with him. It was also mentioned in the news report that there were several Nepali women in Kuwait, and some in prison, with children born out of wedlock. Most women were reported to have conceived with other male migrant workers, who they lived with after leaving their employers due to difficult

working conditions. The magnitude of the issue of “women returning with kids” from foreign employment was amplified due to discrimination against women in citizenship rights in the home country: a mother’s citizenship alone would not guarantee citizenship to the children.

Although people were increasingly aware of women going to the Gulf via India (such as “Bharatko Bato,” 2008) the public opinion was still for tightening border security. *KND*’s editorial (“Khadima Bichalli,” 2009) on the aftermath of the returning of “15 *Cheli*” from the Gulf also asked, among other things, for the government to take a stronger role in controlling the outmigration of Nepali female workers for domestic work in the Gulf. The government was asked to take the help of Indian government to prevent the women from using Indian airports to fly to the Gulf. The same editorial also asked for a deemphasizing of the agenda of “gender equality and rights” while talking about women’s emigration to the Gulf for housemaids (p. 6).

The ban on female migration was lifted in 2010 due to pressure from national and international organizations. The concerns about female workers’ rights and their increasing vulnerability had come to the national political discourse. Migration scholars and officials of migration organizations had for some time criticized the government for not having a solid migration policy and its discriminatory treatment of female workers.²⁶ Even with the relaxing of the travel ban in 2010, the government still lacked a solid, clear policy on female migration. Women under the age of 30 were barred from labor migration to the Arab states in August 2012 by a cabinet decision. This decision was influenced by the report of under-age female labor migration to the Gulf. Although the minimum age for women to migrate was set at 21 (in contrast with 18 years of age for men), there were reports of many girls age 14-16 obtaining passports with falsified documents and going to the Gulf for domestic work. In the late of July of

²⁶ Such as Gurung (2007) and “Khadima Gharelu” (2009)

2012, 25 girls were returned from the TIA airport, with the help of Maiti Nepal, for trying to go to Kuwait under-age (Ghimire 2012). The girls were reported to have been between 14-15 years of age and obtained passports with an older age by providing false documents. The government had decided to increase the age requirement to 30 years to help the government officials in identifying and stopping the under-age girls from obtaining passports and/or labor permits and flying abroad. This decision would, however, force more women to cross the Nepal-India border for outmigration to the Gulf and other Asian countries. While the government had faced criticism from national and international migration organizations regarding the ban as a violation of women's rights, it was supplemented in 2014 by an even tougher ban – a ban against female migration for low-skill jobs to all destination countries. Even between 2010 and 2014, the unofficial ban (or the perception of ban) against female migration existed. Hence only few women migrated legally in this period.

Conclusion

Female workers are generally perceived as “*cheli*” – daughters and sisters – in the Nepalese society. They are frequently referred to as “*cheli*” in the media and also by male migrant workers and the officials of governmental and non-governmental organizations. The “*cheli*” trope implies an infantile perception of female workers and undermines their agency, and this perception has remained a major component of the dominant discourse on female migration. Female migrant workers are perceived as “minor,” lacking the ability to make decisions about their lives. The infantile treatment of women was also scripted in the legal codes of Nepal: women were not allowed to participate in foreign employment without the “consent of a guardian” until 2007. This infantile view of women, along with the urge for “purity,” has helped

to perpetuate the discourse of “victim” – the conception of female migrant workers as the victims of (sex) trafficking. The “victim” discourse is (re)produced by the media and the anti-human trafficking organizations like Maiti Nepal through their indiscriminate association of female migration with human trafficking. The notion of “female migrant workers as victims” only resulted in an emphasis on stricter border control (Nepal-India open borders) and airport security to “stop women from being sold” in India and abroad, while ignoring the socio-economic contexts of female labor migration. The discourse also helped make labor outmigration more difficult. Hence, many women used unauthorized routes and networks to get to the destination countries, at a greater risk of exploitation and abuses (see Chapter 7).

The prevalent discourse on female migration centers on female workers’ sexuality. The general conception is that the women engaging in foreign employment do not return “pure,” a characteristic still considered important for women in the larger Nepalese society. As women are considered the “daughters” of the nation, their sexual engagement abroad is also associated with national “dishonor.” Many returned and re-emigrating male migrant workers also expressed their concern as well as assumptions about female workers’ sexuality. The overrepresentation of the cases of extreme (sexual) abuses against female workers in the media, such as the *KND* newspaper, has also perpetuated the discourse that “no woman returns safe and pure” from abroad. How the dominant discourse on female migration is contested, as well reproduced and restructured, in the emigrant communities will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 - Female Migration and the Restructuring of Migration

Discourse

As explained in the previous chapter, the dominant discourse relating to female migration (such as “women should not go abroad,” “no woman returns safe and pure,” and “female workers bring dishonor to the nation”) is laden with references to female sexuality. The dominant migration discourse feeds into the general concerns of the Nepalese society about female sexuality, and the discourse is reinforced through the state policies and the national and local media, which monolithically represent female workers as the “victims” of (sex) trafficking and physical and sexual abuses. However, the dominant discourse weakens at least in the local communities as women constantly participate in foreign employment and return with more diverse experiences. The discourse is restructured as the counter discourses are produced and emphasized by the female migrants, their families, and some community members. The discursive change in the emigrant communities, however, does not necessarily transfer to the national level. As female workers’ diverse experiences are rarely reported in the national and local media the national migration discourse is less likely to follow the discursive change taking place in the emigrant communities.

The restructuring of the migration discourse involves female workers contesting it in the emigration process and after their return from foreign employment. The female workers’ positive migration experiences and the resultant positive change in the socio-economic conditions also help challenge the dominant migration discourse. The dominant discourse, however, is also reproduced and reinforced in the pre-departure and post-return phases. The female workers’ experiences of abuses and exploitation in the foreign countries also help reinforce the dominant

discourse. Thus, in this chapter, I explain how the gendered migration discourse is contested, reproduced, and restructured in the emigrant communities in the Chitwan district of Nepal at the two major points of labor migration – pre-departure and post-return, using the interviews with the female returnees, their families, and the members of local communities. I also discuss the factors that helped the female workers contest and overcome the dominant discourse for participating in the labor migration. The chapter also sheds lights on the impact of the migration discourse on the life of the returnees.

Migration Discourse: Context of Pre-Departure

An overwhelming majority of the respondents stated that they were unaware of the media representation of female migration prior to the departure as all forms of media – newspapers, television, and radio – were generally inaccessible to them. While the national dailies were published in Kathmandu and were very influential in shaping the national migration policies, the newspapers hardly made it to the emigrant households. With the high illiteracy rate among the migrant households and the cost of the newspapers, it was not very surprising that the emigrants did not have access to the print media. Nearly all the emigrants also could not afford to own a television. Although a handful of women did have a radio in their house most of them would hardly have any free time to listen to it. They would be busy with household and agricultural work. The emigrants, thus, lacked the first-hand experience of the media representation of female migration at the time of their departure. But still, an overwhelming majority of the female workers were aware of the prevalent discourse on female migration at the time of the departure. While all the emigrant communities shared the dominant migration discourse in some ways, the discourse more strongly prevailed in the communities with few or no instances of female

migration. Many women were advised by family, relatives, and/or neighbors to not participate in foreign employment. Many villagers, and some emigrants alike, believed that the foreign lands were only for men, not for women, despite the fact that the rates of abuses, injuries, and deaths were also very high for male workers. According to the Foreign Employment Promotion Board of Nepal, 880 male and 24 female workers (who had emigrated with a labor permit from the Nepalese government) died in foreign countries in the financial year 2013/2014.²⁷ Although the number of female workers emigrating with a labor permit was very small – women made up only 5.5% of the total migrants in 2013/2014 (DOFE 2014) – the death rate for male workers was two times higher than for the female workers. Many households were also reluctant to approve women workers' emigration due not only to the possibility of abuses, but also to the concern for their sexuality – that “no woman returns pure” from abroad.

However, various factors motivated female workers to consider labor migration, while also convincing, in most cases, their family members to approve their travel. The economic hardships in the home country, stories of better earnings abroad, the recruiting agents' frequent visits to the villages, the migration information at the local level, and the lower migration-cost for female workers not only boosted the emigrants' confidence and motivated them to seek employment abroad; these factors also helped the emigrants contest the prevalent discourse and convince their family and relatives to agree to the travel. Many women were motivated to go abroad as they did not have a dependable man in their household to engage in foreign employment. Each major factor influencing the female workers' migration decision, as well the contesting and reproducing of the migration discourse in the emigration process, is discussed below.

²⁷ The data was obtained from Foreign Employment Promotion Board during my visit to the office.

Economic Hardship in the Home Country and Stories of Better Pay Abroad

An overwhelming majority of the female workers had decided to participate in the international labor migration due to economic hardship in Nepal. Most of the workers and their families had experienced the vicious cycle of extreme poverty throughout their life. They were born in a poor family with extreme economic hardships, and their economic condition did not improve as they grew up. The economic hardships in the family motivated the female workers to take the risk of foreign employment, while the same factor also encouraged the family members to approve the travel. The emigrants hoped that the foreign employment would provide them an opportunity for upward mobility, which multiple generations of their family had failed to attain. Mamata, an unmarried woman of 35, who had participated in the foreign employment for nearly two decades, explains:

When I was small, the economic condition of our family was extremely weak. We could afford meals only once a day. We even did not have our own house to live in. We lived in a small hut that was built in other people's land. I could see my parents paying the rent of that land annually. Then, since I was a child I had in my mind that I will earn money and build a house of our own.

Mamata's parents did not own any land. They worked on- and off-farm for wages whenever the work was available. Poverty also caused Mamata to spend more time on other things, such as seasonal farm work, than her education. She ended up dropping out of high school because of poor grades. While the employment prospect was bleak even for those with a college degree, job opportunities were much more limited for a person like Mamata who had dropped out of high school. Even travelling to a big city like Kathmandu would not help her find a (decent paying) job. She further explains:

I did several jobs before going abroad. At first, I found a job at a photo studio in Kathmandu with the help of [Pramod] sir. Then I received the beautician (beauty

parlor) training, but I did not work as a beautician as I did not have money to start a business. I did not find a regular job. I often went to my relatives and acquaintances, stayed with them for some time and also helped them in their work. I also worked for some time in a sweater factory in Lazimpat [in Kathmandu]. They exported sweaters to foreign countries They would pay me 700 rupees a month ...but that money was barely enough to survive in Katmandu.

While the unemployment rate was very high even in the big cities like Kathmandu, it was much worse in the rural areas, where the major (in most places, the only) sector for employment is agriculture. While an overwhelming majority of the Nepalese labor force (73.9%) is employed in agriculture (CBS 2011a), the poverty rate is 2% higher than the national average (27.2 %) for the households headed by a person self-employed in agriculture, and this rate is even much higher (47%) if the heads of the household work on a farm for wages (CBS 2011b). Most of the available jobs for the female emigrants were on-farm seasonal work. The workers barely earned enough for their everyday needs. There was no way they could save for their children's education or to build a house. When asked about the reasons for her emigration, Laxmi, who was in her late 30s at the time of her emigration to Kuwait in 2008, reflects:

Why would I go, dear? I am a poor woman, can't fill my hungry stomach here. The wages I earned by working on the field would be finished on the same day, and the next day would not be any different. Then I thought, 'okay, I will also go abroad and earn.' I did not have to pay the agent. He even made my passport. He paid all my travel expenses, including the bus fare to India and plane ticket to Saudi from there.

Even the regular non-farm employment, which is generally hard to find in the villages, would not provide enough wages to sustain the family, let alone buying some land or building a house of their own. Pabitra, who was 34 at the time of her first labor migration in 2006, reflects:

We did not have any land, nor did we have a house of our own. I used to pull a rickshaw. I pulled the rickshaw for a local dairy for eight years. But, I felt that I was aging. I was at the final years of my active life, but there were no sources of income and place for better employment. Rickshaw pulling would not pay for children's education, and I realized if I did not do anything the life would end in the same condition. With this realization, I decided to go abroad for work.

If Pabitra owned some land where she could grow food for her family, she would have been able to cover most of her expenses by pulling a rickshaw. Unfortunately, Pabitra did not have land as an additional source of income. Her difficulties were compounded by her negligent, unsupportive, alcoholic husband. The economic prospects were dire for those engaged in agriculture without owning even a small plot of land. Januka, who went abroad at the age of 28 leaving her two kids with her husband, explains how the economic hardship influenced her migration decision:

After I married him [my husband], we lived with his family. We had a small house, but there were about 15 people living together – parent-in-laws, husband’s brother and his family, and our family. There was hardly any space in the house. I always wished I had a small house of our own – a house with some rooms and a kitchen, with a table, a wardrobe, and a gas stove. We raised some goats and a cow, and we also worked on farm for wages. But we could hardly save any money. The money we earned would be sufficient only for food. Then, I heard in the village that women could go abroad to earn money. I talked to my husband, and he was okay with that. Then I went with other women from a neighboring village.

The female workers hoped that they could save some money from working abroad, and they could invest that money in buying a small piece of land and/or building a small house for their family. With two or more years of work in the Gulf, many women workers were in fact able to achieve that dream (this will be further discussed in the “post-return” section). Although some female workers, and also their family and relatives, were concerned about the dominant social perception of female migration, the extreme poverty spurred them to challenge the discourse and venture into the fairly unknown territory of international migration. Most of these women had barely left their village before.

Low Cost of Female Migration

The low migration-cost for female workers played an important role in the outmigration of Nepali women. The nominal migration cost not only drew the female workers towards foreign employment; the difference in the migration cost for male and female workers was also crucial in gaining the support, and, often, rare encouragement, of family members, particularly the husbands. When the information about migration was available at local level, free emigration opportunities gave many women from the low (usually the lowest) socio-economic strata hope that they could actually change their socio-economic condition by working abroad, which required some courage and determination, family support, and extra hard work. While the cost of migration for a male worker ranged between 100,000 to 200,000 Nepalese rupees, most female workers went for free (Table 6.1).

Table 6-1: The Number of Female Respondents according to the Migration Cost

Cost of Migration	Number of Female Respondents
Free	29
0 – 10,000 Rupees	5
10,001 – 20,000 Rupees	7
20,001 – 30, 000 Rupees	10
30, 001 – 40, 000 Rupees	4
Above 40, 000 Rupees	1

Even when the recruiting agents made the women workers pay for their travel, they were allowed to pay them back later from their earnings. Thus, an overwhelming majority of the workers either went for free or paid the agents later from the money remitted to their family. The local agents also helped the female workers obtain passports (by filling out the application,

accompanying them to government offices, or providing them with the required information), if they did not have one, and also paid the passport fees of 10,000 Nepalese rupees of most workers. Many women preferred to go to the Gulf because of low migration cost, compared to “better” destinations such as Malaysia for factory work, which would cost them about 100,000 rupees. The nominal cost for female migration thus played a crucial role in encouraging women workers to seek jobs as housemaids in the Gulf.

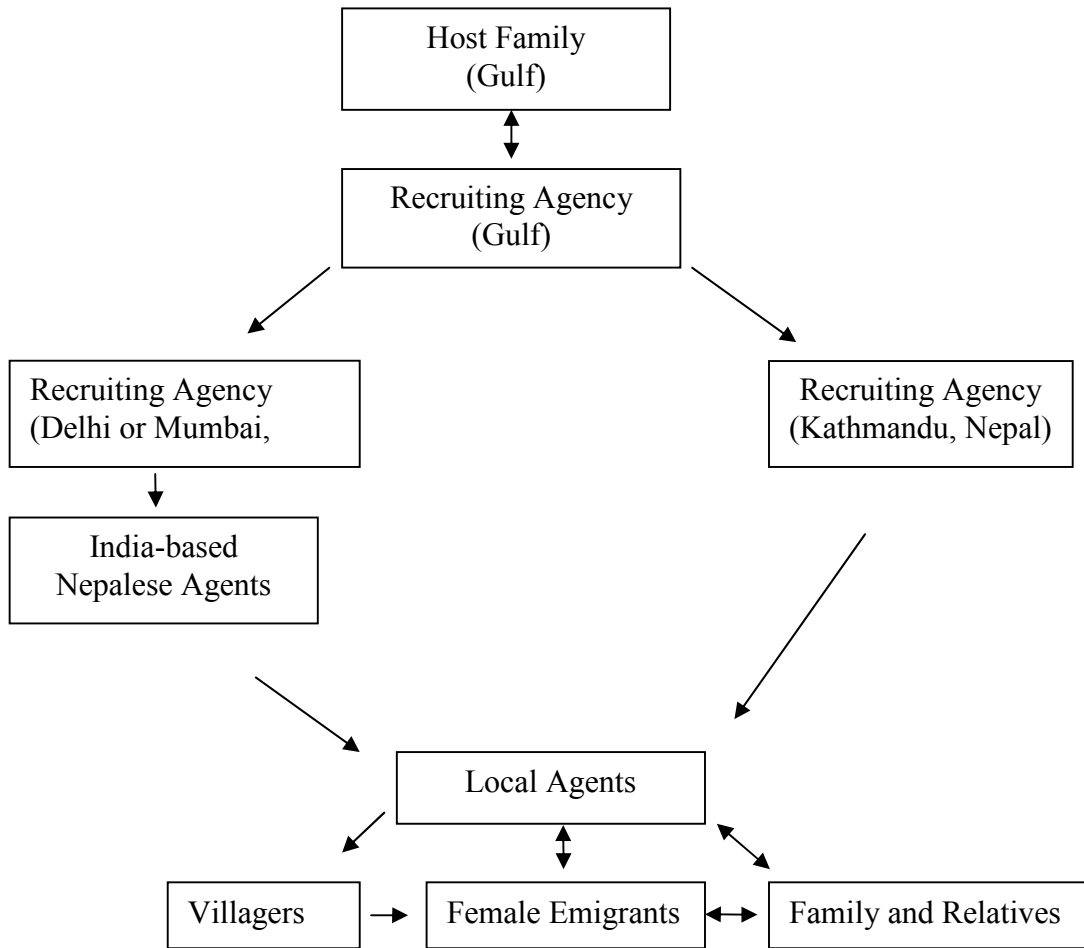
Some female emigrants and their families still believed that the labor migration was a male phenomenon. However, the impossibility for male labor migration due to high cost also motivated the men to send their wives for work abroad. The migration of some female workers was indeed based on a household decision: the female workers went abroad as it was cheaper than the male migration. But still, in nearly all cases, it was the female workers themselves who had first shown an interest in going abroad for work and the husbands had often reluctantly agreed. Anju, a married woman with a child, went to work in Saudi Arabia after her husband’s unsuccessful labor migration to Malaysia incurred a huge debt. Although her husband had initially told her not to go, the economic reality of their household helped convince him to allow her to go. Her husband explains:

I was not happy when my wife talked about going abroad. But, I had just returned from Malaysia. I had returned in two months after the company went down. I had a debt of 120,000 rupees, which I had borrowed for going to Malaysia. Nobody would give me another loan without clearing the first one. Then, there was no possibility that I could pay for another labor migration. My wife went abroad as it was free for her. The agent paid for everything, including the passport.

***“Everyone in the Village Was Going”*: Migration Information at the Local Level**

An important factor facilitating the outmigration of female workers from Chitwan for domestic work in the Gulf was the dissemination of migration information in the local communities. In the post-2000 period, when all but one respondent had made their first transnational journey, the information regarding female labor migration for domestic work was widely spread. Although the official data is unavailable, some Nepalese women had travelled to the Gulf countries for domestic works by late 1990s. Since female labor migration was illegal in Nepal, the early emigrants had travelled without the authorization of the Nepalese government. Many interviewees learned about the job opportunities in the Gulf from those who had returned from foreign employment. All but three female workers had learned about foreign employment in their hometown, and many of them had also talked with the former housemaids or their relatives before travelling abroad. Three female respondents were living in Kathmandu, the capital city, when they heard about the jobs for women in the Gulf. In most cases, the recruiting agents had also visited the villages and towns looking for potential emigrants to work as housemaids in the Gulf. They were usually the local sub-agents, who worked with a recruiting agency in Nepal or India, and were paid by the agency for finding the potential emigrants. The family that hired the workers (host family) would bear the total expenses of the labor recruitment. There were several organizations and individuals involved in the recruitment process (Figure 6.1). Many female workers stated that their employer had spent about \$3,000 to recruit each of them.

Figure 6-1: The Process of Recruiting Female Workers from Chitwan, Nepal



(Note: The arrows indicate the direction of interaction between the actors)

The host family would normally contact a local recruiting agency in the Gulf to get them a domestic worker, which in turn would contact a recruiting agency in Nepal or India. While female emigration was legal, a Kathmandu-based Nepalese recruiting agency would send female workers to the Gulf in coordination with the Gulf-based agency and a Nepali agent was also usually present in the Gulf office. However, at the time of the travel ban on female emigrants,

Indian cities such as Delhi and Mumbai would function as the hub of labor recruitment. Many Nepali agents participated individually (without being directly affiliated with an organization) in the recruitment of Nepali female workers. Everyone involved in the recruitment chain would receive a certain amount of “commissions” (allowances). Some local agents also managed to obtain extra money from the female emigrants. While the local agents usually visited the villages for recruitment, the emigrants and/or their family members also contacted the agents, after hearing about the foreign employment from other people in the community. Only two female workers had not taken the help of a recruiting agent in the emigration process. They found an employer and reached the destination with the help of a relative, who was already working in the Gulf as a housemaid.

At the time of her labor migration to Saudi Arabia in 2010, Shanti, a 45-year old unmarried woman, was living with her mother and brother’s family. Although she was not, in her traditional gender roles, obligated to earn for the family, Shanti wanted to uplift the economic condition of her extended family by earning abroad. Had she not heard about the migration opportunity locally and had the recruiting agents not visited her village, she would not have possibly ever gone abroad. She explains: “Every [woman] in the village was going [for foreign employment] ... our female neighbors also used to go abroad, return, and go again after some time. They still do that. Agents also used to come to this village. Then, I thought I would also go.” Gaining her family’s consent was easy for Shanti as she was single and middle-aged. Shanti only had to convince her elderly mother that she would work, earn, and return safely.

The prospective female emigrants and their family members generally approached the local agents, after they learned about the opportunity of labor migration. When the competing discourses about migration prevailed in the local communities, the emigrants relied on the

narratives of the returned female workers and their relatives. Gita, 25, was working in a carpet factory in Kathmandu, and living with her husband and three children, when she heard about the employment opportunity for female workers in the Gulf. She has now worked for about nine years in the Gulf. While reflecting on the decision-making process in her first emigration, she explains:

I heard about migration while working in a carpet factory in Kathmandu. I heard that women go abroad for work. After I gained more information about [female migration], I also felt like going There was a woman in the neighborhood who had returned from working abroad. I went to her to learn more about it. She said that her brother in-law [sister's husband] sent women abroad. Then I went to meet him with other women. 'My *Sali* [wife's sister] has returned after working abroad, and she says everything was fine there. If you have an interest, you should go and earn,' he said. After he said that, I thought if that woman, who was also a mother of two children, could come back successfully after working abroad I could also do the same. I gained that confidence, and I went.

The local recruiting agents were usually from the same or a nearby village. The local agents were often an acquaintance of the migrant, or a relative of a villager. The feeling of "knowing" the agents (even without actually *knowing* them in some cases) gave confidence to the female workers in leaving home and as well helped convince their family members to approve the travel. Kriti was 28 and recently married, when she went to Saudi Arabia in 2011. While describing her migration decision, Kriti explains:

I had heard about migration in the village. And, in the mean time, I found some friends considering going abroad for work. Two other girls were also going from our village. Then, I also thought about going The agent was our relative, actually a close relative – my brother in-law. He had sent many women abroad. Then, I said [to my husband] that I will also go, and then I went.

Finding a trustworthy agent was even more important for the women migrants, who were travelling to the Gulf via India. As the journey involved several hours of bus and/or train ride as well as crossing of Indo-Nepal border, the women migrants needed to find someone trustworthy to travel to the Indian transit cities – Mumbai or Delhi. The confidence in the recruiting agents

was also essential for the migrants to be assured that the agents would in fact send them abroad, and not sell them in Indian brothels making them suffer the fate of many fellow Nepali girls and women. Mamata was barely 20 when she went to Saudi Arabia, via India, in 1998 – at a time when the number of women migrating to a foreign country was still minimal. She met an agent while she was working in Kathmandu. She checked with multiple sources, including a political leader from her district, to be sure that her agent was reliable and would honestly send her to a foreign country.

Going with a familiar agent, however, did not always guarantee a quick travel to the destination, a good employer, completely free travel (as it had to be), or an efficient rescue in the case of difficulty abroad. The agents usually disappeared after they recruited the workers from the village, and would only come into contact with the sending family to ask for more money if they heard the female worker had a good employer and was remitting regularly. The agents would normally sever all methods of contact (especially if they had sent the workers via India, without the authorization of the Nepal government) – including the change of their phone number – if the sending family needed the agent’s help in rescuing the female workers from abroad (the issue of violence against female workers is further discussed in Chapter 7).

The women who had their female relatives or acquaintances working in the Gulf were quickly convinced to consider foreign employment. Sunita, who had returned in 2011 after two years in Saudi Arabia, was married with two children at the time of her emigration. She thought about going abroad for employment as other women from the village were also migrating, including her sister from a neighboring village. She recounts:

All women started going abroad. Some women from our village were also going. My sister, who lives with her family in a nearby village, had returned after working for two years in Saudi Arabia. My *Fupu* [father’s sister] had been to Kuwait, but returned within few months after being unable to work there. They

had sent her back as she fell sick due to long hours of work. We went only after that. When everyone in the village was leaving, I thought, 'I should also go. There's no point in wasting time in this village. There's no work here, but we can earn if we go abroad.' Then, after other friends and relatives went to work abroad, we also went.

Sunita decided to go abroad despite her relatives' mixed experience of international labor migration. The prospect of better earnings abroad and the lack of employment opportunities in the home country motivated many women to seek foreign employment, once they heard about it from their family, friends, relatives, or villagers. Anjali, who had been to Kuwait at the age of 27, also describes her migration decision in a similar tone:

I heard [about foreign employment] from the agents in our village. They said that it would be fine there. I was told that we might have some difficulty at the beginning, until we learnt the local language. They told me that it would be easier after I learnt the language. The female returnees also said positive things about working abroad. And, we also did not have to pay the agent. So, I also thought that it would be okay to work abroad, and then I went.

A couple of female emigrants were fortunate to have their relatives working as housemaids abroad, who also processed their migration. Maya went to Dubai through her sister who was working as a housemaid in the same city for several years. The recruiting family, which was an Indian immigrant family, approached her sister in Dubai to get them a housemaid, and it was through her sister that Maya was able to go to Dubai. Maya explains:

My sister was in Dubai. She was a housemaid. I learnt about [going abroad] from her. When I asked her how the work was there, she said, "It's good here. Everything depends on you!" I went through the visa my sister sent me. My sister and I returned to Nepal at the same time, after working for several years there.

Maya, and also her husband, did not have to worry much about the foreign land as her sister was working as a housemaid in Dubai, in the same neighborhood where Maya was going to work upon her arrival. But still, the discourse regarding female sexuality came into the discussion during the emigration process. Maya, and many other returned female workers, used the phrase

“Everything depends on you!” in an effort to negotiate the discourse that “the women do not return pure and untainted from abroad.” By associating the experiences of sexual violence with personal responsibility, the returnees tried to differentiate themselves from the “bad” and unfortunate women whose experiences were usually covered in the media, and around whose experiences Nepalese society generally developed the conception of female migration and female migrants. The returnees produced the discourse of personal responsibility to create a safe space abroad, amid the narratives of the dangers of international female migration.

Thus, women from Chitwan district went to work in the Gulf as the information about labor migration was widespread in the village, and the women from lower, usually the lowest, socio-economic strata wanted to utilize it as an opportunity to uplift their economic condition. They were engaged in labor migration only after establishing some “trust” with the agents and generally with the approval of their family. In many cases, a male family member also accompanied the female emigrants until the transit cities of Kathmandu or Delhi/Mumbai. The husbands of all the married women accompanied them to the transit cities, if they were migrating with the approval of their husbands and the husbands were at home at the time of their departure. The husbands of many migrant women returned home from the transit cities only after their wives departed for the Gulf. Single and the separated women were more likely to travel with only the agent and other female migrant workers.

Unavailability of Men for Labor Migration

Most female respondents still viewed migration as a male phenomenon, and international labor migration was usually their last choice. Many female workers went to foreign countries because they did not have a reliable man to engage in foreign employment. The female returnees

stated that they would prefer that their husbands or brothers go abroad and earn for the family. The economic burden fell on women due to unsupportive husbands, lack of male siblings, and/or the high cost of male labor migration. Rita grew up with seven sisters and a brother. Her parents kept bearing children in the hope of having more than one son. When her only brother was in India, and he did not earn enough for the family, Rita took the responsibility of earning for the family. Rita explains:

I decided to go abroad myself. We were seven sisters. I also had an elder brother, who was not home at that time. We always had financial problem at home. The agent said, 'go abroad for domestic work; it will be fine to work as a domestic helper', and then I went. My family helped in the emigration process, but you know parents do not encourage going abroad. Dad did not say anything; mom approved my travel. I had an obligation to think for the family – I have younger sisters, and everyone has difficulty. I went because we cannot find work in Nepal. My elder sister was also in Kathmandu, and she also told me to go due to the financial problem at home.

Rita took the responsibility of feeding the family of her own volition. But there were other women who did not have any other choice but to go abroad themselves due to negligent, alcoholic husbands. As Leela, another returnee, from the same community narrates:

One day I and my husband had an argument/fight, and after that my husband left for India. I was living with my three children and parent-in-laws. He would not even talk to me on phone, although he often talked with his parents. He would not send any money for the family, so it was getting very difficult to raise kids and send them to school. I talked with other people in the village about my misery. They told me that I should not give up even if my husband was irresponsible and did not care about the children. Then, I went abroad as it was my responsibility to take care of children, fulfill their needs, and also pay for their education. I left my kids with my parents and left for Kuwait. The agent processed everything at no cost ... I had to pay him 30 thousand rupees later [from my earnings].

A combination of various factors – economic hardships, unsupportive husbands, low (or even free) migration cost, and family and community supporting their outmigration – motivated many women to go abroad for work. In the case of Leela, her economic hardship went from bad to worse as her husband left for India, abandoning her without any other support.

As the migration information was widespread in the village and the agents were literally knocking on the door of every prospective candidate, many female workers wanted to seize this opportunity to enhance their economic condition. As many men and women were migrating from their village and many households were receiving remittances, the non-migrating households also perceived migration as a panacea to their economic hardships. They felt someone from their family also should go for foreign employment, like their neighbors. When their husbands were unwilling to take the risk of international migration, or were alcoholic and unsupportive, women took up the responsibility. Babita was a mother of a seven-year-old boy. When her husband was unwilling to go abroad for work, she decided to go to Saudi Arabia herself. She took the help of her parents and a brother in this process.

Our economic condition was weak. I asked my husband to go, but he did not want to go. He would only drink and ramble in the village, but was not willing to go abroad for work. I had a seven-year old son to take care of. Then, I decided to go myself, as I also found some female friends planning to go. I met [an agent], who said he would send me abroad. He used to do that type of work. He asked me for ten thousand rupees, which I paid immediately...and I made the passport myself.

Having a negligent husband was not uncommon in the migrant communities. While divorce is still very rare in Nepal, the lower divorce rate does not truly reflect the quality of marriage in Nepalese society. Many women prefer to live with their husbands even if their husbands do not support them or engage in extramarital affair. Due to the social stigma of divorce, difficulty in remarrying, and the financial burden of raising kids, many Nepalese women are legally un-separated from their husbands despite all their evils. So, those women whose husbands were not providing for the family decided to go abroad in order to create a better living condition for their children. Pabitra, who spent several years in Saudi Arabia, leaving her children in Nepal, tells a similar story when she describes her migration decision:

I had planned to send [my husband] abroad, but my cousin's body arrived from Malaysia during that time. Then, after seeing the dead body, my husband changed his mind and decided not to go abroad. Then I told him, 'I will go myself. All [migrant workers] have not died, but have returned with good money.' I tried to convince him saying that people die when their days come...but he would not even listen to me. He instead told me to do whatever I liked. He was also alcoholic, always fought with me, and would not provide for the family. Then, I went to earn for my family.

Her husband squandered the earnings from her first two years in Saudi Arabia, and he had left home before she returned from her first visit. He never came back. They were still legally married, although they last met over ten years ago.

Single women had the sole responsibility of feeding and educating their children. In the case of Rita, it was the untimely demise of her husband that compelled her to go abroad for the sake of her daughter. Rita wanted to earn for her daughter's education – the thing she could not attain due to poverty, lack of schools in the village, and parents' undermining of girls' education (as was/is the case in Nepal) – as she did not want her daughter to end up like her. Rita explains her migration decision in this way: "I was living with financial difficulty for some time. My husband had passed away when our daughter was only three months. I am illiterate, but I should send my daughter to school. Then, I did not have any other option, but to go abroad. I went to Kuwait leaving my 17-month-old daughter with my mom."

Some women also wanted to use emigration as an escape from their stressful conditions. They also wanted to show others, and also wanted to prove themselves, that they can also earn and become self-dependent. It was the changing scenario after divorce that gave these women strength and courage to venture into the unknown territory of international migration. Sikshya was recently divorced after several years of married life. She experienced a lot of stresses from the divorce and lived with the consequent social stigma of a divorcee. She wanted to engage in international migration to earn for her family as well as to escape from the society:

I had to go abroad because of my situation at that time. It was the economic hardship of that time, but I was also very frustrated with my overall situation. My husband left me and started living with another woman. Then I came to my parents' house and started living with them. My kids were small. I needed money for their education. I was thinking that if I would go abroad, I could also do something in my life. Then I went to meet with the agent, who was from a neighboring village, and told him about my interest.... I had heard the successful stories of Nepalese housemaids, but I was still not sure whether I would even return alive from abroad. I had not expected to return healthy and alive. I had wanted to go at any cost. I was very unhappy with my situation at that time.

With a divorce or separation from husband, women had to become the primary breadwinner for their family. With a low level of formal education and only on-farm seasonal jobs, they could earn barely enough for the everyday consumption and their children's education. In the excerpt below, Bhawana, who had returned to Nepal a couple of years ago after working for two years in Kuwait, explains the divorced or separated women's motivation to work as housemaids in the Gulf. Her explanation also best summarizes female migrants' general conception of foreign employment:

I did not have a good relationship with my husband, and you know people go away when their heart is broken. My husband would not care for me; he did not value me. Then I thought, instead of staying here I should earn myself ... why would anyone have to go abroad if they had a caring husband? Only those women whose husbands are unsupportive, alcoholic or engaging in extramarital affair go abroad. They have to earn for the family.

Migration Discourse: the Context of Post-return

Female migrant workers also had to deal with the gendered migration discourse upon their return from the Gulf. Compared to pre-departure, more women (about half of the interviewees) were aware of the media representation of female migration in the post-return phase. The increase in the awareness was also related to the women returnees' increased access to radio and television in the post-return phase. Many women owned those items at the time of

the interview. None of the returnees, however, reported hearing a positive news story about female migrant workers in the media. As Sudha states:

I often hear news about female workers on the radio...I hadn't heard anything at the time of my emigration ... I generally hear bad news: women raped by male employers, workers suffering abuses by employers, etc. Some male returnees also tell about the female workers they helped abroad. I have met many other women who have worked and successfully returned, but I haven't heard about that on the radio. It's always the bad things happened to the women that we hear. I don't know why it is like that.

The constant representation of female workers as the victims of sexual abuses helped reinforce the dominant migration discourse that “the foreign employment is not good for women” or “no woman returns safe and untainted from abroad.” Many returnees had to constantly contest the discourse in the community, while some of them also had to challenge the discourse within their households. In the sections that follow, I discuss how the discourse is contested, as well as reproduced and restructured, at the household and community levels with the return of the female workers from abroad.

“What Others Say Actually Depends on How Your Family Treats You”: Contesting the Discourse in the Household

The role of the family was significant in the process of resettling in the society and overcoming the stigma of a “migrant woman.” An overwhelming majority of the female workers received the support of family members upon their return. The family members also supported the returned women in challenging the discourse in the community and the larger society. Only four female returnees (all of whom were married) experienced difficulty in re-adjusting in the family, and three of these women divorced within a year of their return. One of these women had returned early and empty-handed due to the physical abuses by her employer. The conflict in the

family of the returned migrant workers was associated with the influence of the dominant migration discourse in the local communities. While the wives were abroad, the husbands generally had to deal with the discourse every day. Contesting the discourse was even more challenging in the communities with few instances of female migration. Many husbands had to hear in the community that “the women are not safe abroad,” “the male employer abuses the housemaids,” and/or “the female workers return infected with the HIV/AIDS” with an assumption that all female workers engaged in sexual relationships (voluntarily or forcibly) abroad. Sumi’s husband asked her to get her blood tested for sexually transmitted diseases, and it took some time and effort for her to convince her husband that nothing had happened in the foreign land. Her husband was later convinced, and she again went to another country in the Gulf. While many husbands were able to challenge and overcome this type of discourse, some of them failed to do so. These men used the same dominant discourse to insult and abuse their wives. No sooner had Kumari returned after 20 months in Kuwait than she found her relationship with her husband and his family estranged. Her husband insulted and abused her using the same dominant discourse that he had dealt with in her absence. Kumari explains:

It was really hard after my return. I learned that the people in our community talked bad things about me when I was abroad. They had said, “Women emigrants engage in sexual relationships with various men abroad. Women have to welcome and offer themselves to all the guests [that visit the employer’s house].” All these allegations are wrong. It was not like that at all. ... I suffered a lot after I returned. I often thought about committing suicide – drinking some poison or jumping into a river. But I thought about my daughter ... It was my husband who had said all the bad things about me to his parents and siblings, and they told all the stuffs to other people. My husband lived with me for a week after I returned. I later learnt that my husband had told his family, “I did sleep with her in the same bed for seven days, but I didn’t even touch her. Who knows about her health? She has returned from abroad. She could have contracted AIDS. Who knows how many men she slept with?”

Kumari lived with the husband's family, and all the family members started treating her as an "untouchable" after hearing from her husband about her alleged promiscuity abroad. It resulted in a very big fight and a divorce. Some husbands likely engaged in extramarital affairs in their wives' absence, so they later used the discourse of female workers' "impurity" to rationalize their engaging in a relationship with another woman. Kumari deals with the discourse of "impurity" in her everyday life, even though several years have passed since her return.

Six female workers who had returned due to physical abuses by their employers did not have any difficulty in resettling in the family and community. They all received their husbands' support, which also helped them to contest the discourse in the community. While the husbands of half of these women had previously worked as a migrant worker in a foreign country, all of them were living in the communities with a high rate of female emigration. Bina, who had returned after enduring physical violence in the Gulf, explains her experience with her family after her return from Kuwait:

My family never held a negative view of me. My husband would have married another woman and settled in the 11 months I was away, if he had a negative thought about me. He never perceived me that way. My mother-in-law also did not say anything; she was a nice woman. My children were dying to see me; how could they say anything against me? I would also not have returned home, if I was walking down the wrong path. And, the other people did not get a chance to say bad things about me as I received the full support of my family. You know what others say actually depends on how your family treats you.

Bina's husband, Shiva, had worked for over five years in a Gulf country. Shiva emphasized personal choice in being a "good" or a "bad" person while in a foreign country. He also viewed labor migration as a more complex phenomenon, the success of which depended on the employer and the workplace, along with the employee. Shiva explains:

I was in India when [my wife] left for the Gulf. We had not agreed about her emigration. I learnt about it only after she had left home and was in Delhi to get to Kuwait. Foreign employment is good for those who go and work well, but bad for

those who are bad themselves and do bad there as well. Many good people have gone abroad, so have bad people. Foreign land is like that – everything depends on you. It also depends on the place. Things will go well if you get a good employer and workplace, but, you will have miseries if you get to a bad place.

The husbands of other returnees also emphasized the worker's personal choice and personal characteristic in determining their (sexual) experience abroad in order to shield themselves/their wives from the generalization that “no woman returns safe and untainted from abroad.”

Although most husbands provided support to their wives while re-adjusting in the society and contesting the stigma of a “migrant woman,” many of them expressed embarrassment and a sense of “guilt” about sending women for foreign employment. At the time of interview, many husbands who had agreed to their wife's emigration tried to disown their role in the wife's emigration claiming that “she insisted on going, so I let her go,” “I had told her not to go,” or “I had not fully agreed.” This held true even in the case of successful female migrants – the female workers who did not experience any physical abuses and earned a substantive amount of money from foreign employment. Leela is a 40-year old married woman who had gone to Kuwait with the approval of her family. She returned after completing her two-year contract and lived with her husband and children at the time of the interview. Leela's husband, Shyam, was alcoholic and unsupportive. Leela's then-estranged husband was in India at the time of her emigration. The excerpt of the conversation that took place between Leela and her husband shows his resentment about Leela's migration, as well Leela's defense of her migration decision:

Shyam: I would not let her go abroad, if I was here in Nepal. I would tell her, “You stay in Nepal, and I will take care of you and our family by any means.”

Leela: But he did not say anything like that. He did not say a word. Maybe, he would not let me go, if he was here. It was his mistake not to call me from India. He also did not care me at all. That was the main reason why I went. But I haven't done anything bad.

The husbands were affected by the dominant discourse that devalued and disparaged the female migrant workers like their wives.

The people with higher socio-economic status were more likely to feel embarrassed about female migration than the people from the lower socio-economic group. In terms of wealth and income, the female migrant workers stood at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They had low education level (an overwhelming majority of them were illiterate), and an overwhelming majority of them came from the so-called “lower-caste” groups – Hill Janajati, Tharu, and Dalits. Only a handful of female returnees were from the so-called “high-caste” groups of Hill Brahmin and Chhetri. The tensions between the relatives were much more apparent if they came from different socio-economic positions. Pabitra was a 42-year-old woman, separated from her husband and living with her grown-up children. She worked for seven years in Saudi Arabia as a housemaid before she decided to discontinue her periodic outmigration a few years ago. During Pabitra’s migration process, her husband clearly did not approve of her travel. She also did not tell her parents and siblings, who lived less than half a mile away, about her decision to work abroad as she knew that her travel would not be approved by her parents and brothers, who held higher socio-economic status and a “good reputation” in the society. While I was interviewing Pabitra on the porch of her house, her younger brother, Shankar, who was in his late thirties, was also present. Here is an excerpt of the conversation that unfolded between Pabitra and her brother while I was interviewing her.

Arjun: Did you talk with anyone regarding your plan to go abroad?

Pabitra: I talked with my husband. But, he did not give a clear decision – some time, he would say, “Okay, go.” But some other time he would say, “Don’t go.” Then, the final decision was my own. I told the kids about my travel. I told the

older kids to look after twin boys who were only six – take them to school, feed well, etc. My oldest child was a daughter, who was 15 at that time.

Arjun: Did you also talk with your parents about your travel?

Pabitra: I did not discuss with anyone from my Maiti [my parents' home], so my brothers are still mad at me.

(Now, her brother, Shankar, comes.)

Shankar: Can you take the interview inside? You know, other people might see or hear your conversations.

Pabitra: Why? What happens?

Shankar: Because it's outside. I felt a bit uncomfortable.

Pabitra: Why should you feel uncomfortable about it?

Arjun: I am okay with interviewing anywhere – inside the house or the porch. But there's no one around us, and we are speaking at a low voice.

(We go inside, and sit on the floor.)

Shankar: Women's problem is different. We men are different from women. I thought talking with my sister outside would be uncomfortable.

Pabitra: Yes, you son of a wealthy father will feel uncomfortable, but we poor [she and her family] are not ashamed.

(Both laugh)

Shankar: I had not wanted my sister [Dil Maya] to go abroad for employment. She went due to her own interest and household needs. She discussed with her family. But, I cannot even think of letting my sister go abroad. Foreign land is not our home; there is a lot of difficulty abroad. You might face many problems...and if my sister asks for help, I cannot get in there. I can help her here, but going there would be impossible for me. There are too many things to take care of – visa, plane ticket, time.

Pabitra: I did not ask my parents and brothers for their approval because they would not approve my travel. While they would not let me travel, my problems at home would not be solved. The problems would remain in the same state.

Shankar: My sister went due to her problems. I also have my own problems. But, I never wanted my sister to go abroad to earn money.

Pabitra: What shall I do? Even if you are living in a misery, brothers only watch from their house! They wouldn't help you even if you are living miserably; they would only care about their prestige or reputation, but not me!

The family members and relatives were concerned about the difficulties for the housemaids abroad. But, they were also concerned about how other people in the society would perceive them after the female members engaged in foreign employment. The female outmigration jeopardized the “prestige” and “pride” of the immediate family members, as well as of close and distant relatives. The people with higher socio-economic status were more concerned about the social perception than the poor people, who were more concerned about their everyday needs.

None of the single or the separated women had any problem in their family after the return. These women lived with the parents and/or siblings, who did not care much how the society perceived the female returnees. The single and the separated women were also less likely to care about the discourse. However, some of these women got married upon their return and the husbands did not allow them to go abroad again, although the husbands were themselves working in the foreign countries. Most of these women said that they would go abroad again if their husbands allowed them to work in the foreign countries.

***“They Think Bad Stuff about the Returnees”*: Contesting the Discourse in Community and Larger Nepalese Society**

An overwhelming majority of the returned female workers believed that society generally held negative views towards female returnees. Many respondents believed that their neighbors, acquaintances, and even relatives perceived them as “loose women” for going to the foreign countries all by themselves. The female returnees often had to deal with the discourse in their

everyday lives, such as while having a cup of tea at a local tea shop, walking on the street, working in the field, or going to the jungle to get fodder for the cattle. Kalpana, a 30-year old woman living with her husband and three children, had returned about a year ago from Kuwait after working for two years as a housemaid. Although her husband and other family members were very supportive after her return, she had to often deal with the dominant migration discourse in her everyday life. As the female returnees usually interacted with other women in the community, they were more likely to hear about the social perception of female migrant workers from the women themselves. The non-migrating women were critical of the female migrant workers. Kalpana explains:

Some people, usually women, say to me sometimes ... that the women who go abroad are not good. But, they themselves have not gone abroad. If they had been to a foreign country, they would know. But those who have not gone abroad say, "How can we trust you!" When I hear [such a comment] I tell them, "We have also worked abroad. We have returned after earning some money, but we did not live a carefree and negligent life." But these days, many women are emigrating, so only few people make such claims about women migrant workers.

The observation that the society perceived the female returnees in a negative light resonated among the female workers of all emigrant communities and all caste-ethnic groups. The women returnees had to attempt to convince people that they were different from the other women the people might have heard about. Maya, who had recently returned after working for three years in the United Arab Emirates, also deals with the society's negative view of female returnees in her everyday life. Maya explains:

The female emigration is perceived negatively in this village. Many people say bad things about the female returnees. They say that the women return home after doing bad things abroad. They don't say to me in person, but many women say that type of things ... that the men in the foreign countries do different things to the female workers. Some women also ask me how it was like going abroad for female workers. I tell them, "Such things do not happen there. It all depends on you; if you are good, they cannot do anything" But, many people in the village do not believe what I say.

Some women were aware that the social perception of migrant workers was gendered: the society had different rules for female versus male workers. They were also frustrated with the gender-based discrimination involving independent female mobility. Babita, whose first labor migration dated to 2001, is frustrated about the society's differential treatment of men and women. Given the period of her migration, when female outmigration was still rare and constitutionally illegal, it was not very surprising that Babita had to deal with the gendered migration discourse to a greater extent than the later emigrants. Babita expresses her frustration this way:

I wonder whether the social perception about women ever changes. Why is it that the women should not go abroad? ... There is no problem at all when men go to any places, but there will be a lot of gossips if a woman leaves her home. This is really strange! Where haven't I gone? I went to Madras and Bangalore of India. I also went to Mumbai twice, but nothing bad happened to me. But people still gossip. They speak against us behind our back.

The female returnees stated that the prospective emigrants and their families were more likely to trust their narratives than the people who did not have a female relative abroad or planning to go there soon. The people who did not have a female relative abroad would usually select the few cases of abuses against female workers and generalize that to the larger migrant population.

About one-fourth of the interviewees had gone to work abroad multiple times, and the multiple travels had a positive impact in terms of contesting the dominant discourse. During the interviews, many people in the communities associated the women's multiple travels to the foreign countries with their positive work experience abroad. Some female returnees, who had frequently travelled to the Gulf countries for work, also believed that the society perceived them somewhat more favorably than the one-time traveler. Pabitra, who had frequently travelled to the Gulf for work, explains, "People assume that the one-time traveler may have had a bad

experience and did not go again. But, they might think the women like me, who have gone abroad 2-3 times, must be going frequently because of a positive work experience.”

Female Returnees’ Views on Female Migration

The female emigrants’ views on female migration also help reshape the migration discourse at the local and national level. As expected, the female returnees’ views were largely correlated with their experiences, particularly with financial success abroad. An overwhelming majority (over three-fourths) of the interviewees held positive views towards women’s participation in foreign employment. These women also considered their migration decision and the overall migration experience as “positive,” although many of them had worked extremely long hours in the Gulf (see Chapter 7 for a full discussion on workplace violence). It was the income from working abroad and the positive change in the economic condition of the family that influenced the returnees’ perception of the migration experience. An overwhelming majority of the women were able to save some money from their earnings abroad. About one-sixth of the female workers did not earn at all, while a handful of women could not save much as all the remittances were spent on children or wasted by their husbands.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents believed that their income from foreign employment had brought some noticeable change in the family, and most of them stated that their economic condition would not have improved if they had not worked abroad. A majority of the women spent their savings in improving the existing house or building a new one, while some women also used the funds to pay for the education of their children and siblings. Some women helped repay the family’s debt, while others paid for the labor migration of other family members and close relatives. Some women had also loaned to the villagers. As Hema, who had

worked for three years in Kuwait, reflects, “We did not have a house to live in before. Now, we have built a house, although it’s fairly small. We could not have built the house if I had not gone abroad. I have also given money to my sisters’ husbands for their labor migration.”

The returnees who had experienced extreme violence in the Gulf were less likely to support the female emigration due to the possibility of abuses and exploitation against the female workers. Most of these women had also returned early without earning at all. However, the female workers who had experienced some physical assaults but returned with some money from abroad still approved the female migration. The excerpts below from the interviewees, who had experienced extreme physical abuses, illustrate their mostly negative view of female migration.

Anjali: I would not advise female workers to go abroad now. It’s bad for women.

Kriti: I tell [the prospective female emigrants] not to go abroad. I have informed many women. But some of them do not trust me and go. ... I do not think positively of the women who have gone to work in the foreign countries later than me. I do not consider them as good women.

Manju: After I returned, my husband said to me, “You should not go abroad again. It’s so bad over there [as you have already experienced]. We will work hard and live here. You don’t need to go again.” He doesn’t say anything to me now, but he had scolded me at the beginning. What to do? I had gone to Kuwait disobeying him. He had told me not to go. But, I suffered and returned. What to do? ... It’s much better in Nepal than there. I shouldn’t have gone. I will never go again. I have promised to myself that even if I would starve here I would rather drink just water, but never go abroad. I also tell other women not to go.

The female workers who had returned due to extreme abuses and without any earnings disapproved of women’s emigration particularly for domestic work. While most of them did not agree with the social perception of female migrant workers as “not good” women, their disapproving of female emigration likely reinforced the same dominant discourse about female migration. After the unsuccessful migration, family members, particularly husbands, were usually very critical of female workers’ migration decision if the emigration decision was

influenced by the female workers' insistence. The female returnees were also remorseful about their migration decision. Many of them stated that they should have listened to their husband or other people who had advised them to not emigrate.

Many female returnees' accounts of their migration experiences were also influenced by the social perception of female emigrants. When asked about their experiences, many successful returnees (those who had returned with good earnings and viewed female migration positively) stated, "What happens to you in the foreign countries actually depends on you." However, none of the returnees with the experience of abuses used that type of statement. The female returnees reemphasized the notion of a "good woman" in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the "loose women" – the women who were (forcibly or by consent) engaged in sexual relationships abroad – who had also participated in the foreign employment. Sudha, who had recently returned after three years of work in the U.A.E., uses a similar type of discourse while explaining her experience of contesting the migration discourse in the local community:

People do not view the women returning from abroad positively. They say that these women are not good ... they think bad stuff about the returnees. I assume they also think the same about me. But, I respond to anyone if they say anything against me. I tell them, "It all depends on you. If a person is like that [a "loose woman"] she will do bad stuff. It's also the same here. Who is untainted in Nepal? Many have rotten in Nepal too." However, people do not normally say anything face-to-face.

Conclusion: Female Migration and the Restructuring of Discourse

As discussed above, the female migrant workers had to deal with the dominant gendered migration discourse in the process of emigration as well as after their return. The female migrants challenged and overcame the dominant discourse while leaving home for foreign employment, and a combination of various socio-economic factors helped women in this regard.

When the information about foreign employment was available in the local communities many women from the lowest socio-economic strata wanted to participate in it hoping that it would help them overcome the extreme poverty. The emigrants and their family were assured about the safety of female workers abroad due to the early female migrant workers from the same or nearby villages who had returned after working and earning in the Gulf. The husbands and other family members of many female workers also agreed to their travel due to the low cost (usually no cost) of female migration, although many of them still believed that the labor migration is a male phenomenon. The travel of other female workers from the same or a nearby village along with them also enhanced the female emigrants' confidence, as well as helped them contest the dominant discourse that "no woman returns safe and pure" from abroad. Some women were motivated to go abroad for work as they did not have a (reliable or interested) male figure in their households.

The female workers also had to deal with this discourse primarily in their households and communities after their return from foreign employment. Many women drew on their personal experiences to counter the discourse that the female migrant returnees are "loose" and "tainted." The returnees' positive experiences and their narratives would help change the discourse of female migration in the local communities. The prospective emigrants usually relied on the narratives of the former returnees while making their own migration decision.

The dominant discourse was also reproduced during the process of female migration. Many men, usually husbands, accompanied the female members to the transit cities, and many of them also stayed there until the female workers departed for the Gulf. This emphasizes the dominant discourse that "the outside world is unsafe for women." The returning of the female workers without financial success, and the cases of abuses and exploitation, reinforced the claim

that the foreign land is unsafe for women. While an overwhelming majority of the female workers received the support of family members upon their return, some of them were abused by their husband and his family. The husbands reproduced the dominant migration discourse when they abused and insulted their wives, using the same discourse that “no woman returns untainted” from foreign employment. In short, the emigrant communities were the battlefield, where the competing discourses were constantly produced and reinforced. Nevertheless, the dominant discourse would undergo some transformation as the counter-discourses were produced and emphasized by many female returnees with the positive experiences of work abroad. The discourse would be restructured. What would gradually come to people’s understanding was the heterogeneity of the experiences of female migrant workers (just like their male counterparts). Some female returnees and few community members also emphasized the changes in the social perception of female emigrants over the years. Hema was barely nineteen when she went to Kuwait in 2010. She is now married and lives with her husband and his family in a village different from the one she was living in with her parents. Hema has noticed a change in the social perception of female migrant workers in her community as a result of the high rate of female emigration. She explains:

I did not have any difficulty in the society after my return. Many women from our village were participating in foreign employment. So, it was easy for me in the community Until the time of my emigration, the society used to perceive the female emigrants very negatively. But now, there are many women going, working, and returning. So, female migrant workers are not perceived as ‘bad women.’ Now, I hear people encouraging others to go abroad and earn. It has changed now. Women are encouraged to go for company works than for domestic works.

The social perception has somewhat changed in the communities with the high rate of female outmigration. The husbands of some female returnees also made similar points. They believed that the society does not use the same label – the label of “dishonorable women” –

against all the female returnees. Hari, husband of Anjali, who had returned from Kuwait due to difficult working conditions, also thinks that there has been change in the social perception of the female workers participating in international labor migration. In Hari's words:

Some people may backbite ...but, nowadays, I don't think people assume all women return only after doing "bad" things [engaging in sexual relationships] abroad. It has changed now. But, to have difficulty while working is a different thing. Those who can, they will stay and work; those who can't, they will return. It's like that. Many women have worked, earned, and returned fine.

The frequent travels of female workers to different countries for work and the change in the socio-economic conditions of their families have helped restructure the dominant discourse. Although there are still many people in the migrant communities, who refer the female migrant workers as "dishonorable women," there has also been an increase in the number of people who perceive them positively. Jagat, who had worked for several years in Malaysia and Thailand years before starting a tea and snacks shop in one of the emigrant communities, explains the changes in social perception of female workers in the last few years. Jagat's observation below best captures the restructuring of the migration discourse in the local communities with high female migration for foreign employment.

[The way the society perceives the female migrant workers now] is very different from what it used to be. It's not like before. It has changed a lot. In the past, even if some women went abroad for work, they would not walk in the village with their head straight after the return [due to the feeling of shame]. They would be anxious about what people might say about them. The society would think negatively even if the women had returned without any bad experience abroad. But it's different now. Many women returnees share with us their work experiences in the foreign countries It has changed a lot Here in Nepal, the people generally questioned women's sexuality even if she went to the market alone. But it has changed now. Young men and women do not think it that way. Many men and women are going abroad now. The people in the village also encourage young women to go abroad for work, just like the young men.

The change in the migration discourse in local communities does not guarantee a (same level of) change in the national migration discourse. As discussed in Chapter 5, the diverse experiences of

female workers are rarely reported in the major national media. The female workers are usually presented as the “victims” of (sex) trafficking and the discourse of “female workers as the victims of sexual abuses” is reproduced through the intense coverage of some extreme cases of (sexual) abuses. The dominant discourse is less likely to change without channeling the diverse experiences of female workers and the impact of the state’s discriminatory policies on female migrant workers to the national political and social discourse. This dissertation also makes an effort to bring the problems (including the ones caused by the state’s policies), concerns, perceptions, and diverse experiences of female migrant workers to the national discourse.

Chapter 7 - Female Workers' Experiences of Violence in the Migration Process and in the Gulf

Female migrant workers experienced different types of violence in the emigration process and in the Gulf. For some women, the experiences of violence even extended from pre-departure to post-return. While most women had participated in international labor migration to overcome the violence of poverty and unemployment, some women had also left Nepal due to violence in the family, usually perpetrated by their husbands engaging in alcoholism and extra-marital affairs. A handful of respondents also experienced violence from their family members upon their return from foreign employment. These factors were discussed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, my focus will be on explaining the violence against female workers in the emigration process and in the Gulf. At first, I will discuss the Nepalese government's policy of imposing travel bans on female emigrants as an act of violence. I will explain how the Nepalese state's policy has also contributed to other instances of violence against female workers both in the process of emigration and at the destination. Although all instances of violence against the female workers cannot be attributed to the travel bans, the women became even more susceptible to abuses and exploitative conditions due to the travel bans in Nepal. Next, I will explain different types of violence experienced by Nepali housemaids in the Gulf. Finally, I provide a short summary of the chapter.

It would be spurious to claim that the female migrant workers were passive victims, without any capacity to act, of different individuals and larger structural factors. The Nepali women indeed resisted violence on several occasions, although within the limitation of the social

context. This chapter also illuminates how some women successfully resisted abuses and what factors enhanced (or lowered) their capacity to engage in resistance.

Travel Ban as Violence against Female Workers

For the most part of post-1990 period – the period of high labor outmigration from Nepal to countries beyond India – independent female outmigration was still illegal in Nepal. Women needed an approval from a “guardian” to leave the country legally. This was a common experience of the female interviewees who had engaged in labor migration prior to 2007. As specified in the 1992 Amendment of the first foreign employment act, *Foreign Employment Act, 1985*, the “guardian” for the prospective female migrant workers differed according to their marital status. For an unmarried woman, a father or mother was considered a guardian. In the case of their unavailability, an elder or a younger brother of at least 21 years of age could still be her guardian. For a married woman, her husband was the first choice, but in the case of his unavailability, the husband’s father or mother could also be her guardian. Women also needed the guardian’s consent to get a passport. Most of the married women had received their passport and emigrated with the approval and assistance of their husbands, while parents usually helped single and divorced women. Some married women received the help of their parents or elder siblings when their husbands did not approve their travel. When her husband was reluctant to help her get a passport, Babita, who was 29 at the time of her emigration, asked her elder brother for help. In the process, she faked her marital status as “unmarried” and her brother signed the documents as her “guardian.”

The second foreign employment act – *Foreign Employment Act, 2007* – formally ended the gender-based discrimination in labor outmigration. However, the travel bans against female

workers continued in some ways – age ban, total ban, or ban to specific countries (see Chapter 5 for details). The main objective of the travel bans was to protect the prospective emigrants from possible abuses against them in the foreign countries. However, the policy did not deter the Nepali women from seeking employment abroad. Many women travelled to the Gulf and other Asian countries via India, by crossing the open Indo-Nepal border and without obtaining travel authorization from the Nepalese government. The restrictive migration policy made the emigration process more difficult, and also increased the vulnerability of female workers in the emigration process as well as in the Gulf. It was particularly difficult to rescue female workers travelling without a labor permit from the Nepalese government, if they experienced abuses in the workplace. They were also less prepared to deal with situations in the workplace.

A majority of the respondents (33 out of 56) had travelled to the Gulf “illegally,” without obtaining a labor permit from the Nepalese government. While they received their passport in Nepal, all other travel documents, such as the visa and job contract, were prepared by the recruiting agencies in India. In most cases, a male family member and/or a local recruiting agent accompanied the female emigrants to the Indian transit cities – Delhi and Mumbai. However, this was not a preferred route for the female workers. They all preferred to travel via Kathmandu, the Nepalese capital city with the only international airport in the country, due to convenience as well as safety. Indeed, there was no incentive to travel via India as the wages and the migration cost did not differ in terms of how they travelled or where their documents were processed. The female workers seemed to have travelled via India only when there was a ban or difficulty (due to the various conditions imposed) in labor migration from Nepal. Flying through India was a burdensome and risky route for the female emigrants. Not only were the Indian transit cities like Delhi and Mumbai much farther than Kathmandu from their hometown; they were also “scary”

foreign places, where many Nepalese women and girls have been sold in brothels. According to a National Human Rights Commission report, hundreds of Nepalese girls and women are trafficked to India every year (NHRC, 2014).²⁸ The female emigrants were also likely to be stopped by Nepali security personnel and Nepali anti-human trafficking non-governmental organizations, particularly Maiti Nepal, at the Indo-Nepal border with the suspicion that they were being trafficked to Indian brothels.

In their travel to the Indian cities, married women were usually accompanied by their husband, if the husbands were at home and had agreed to their wife's migration, to make sure that the female workers would pass through the border, reach India safely, and fly to the destination country on time. While none of the women travelling with their husbands had difficulty in crossing the border a handful of female workers, who were travelling alone or with an agent, were stopped or held at the border.²⁹ The single women (not accompanied by the family members) usually told some made-up stories (like going to India to see their brothers or other male relatives who lived and worked there) when they were stopped and asked about the purpose of their visit to India. While most women were allowed to go after being interrogated for some time, a couple of them had bribed the security personnel on either side of the border. Rita was barely 17 when she travelled to Kuwait in 2006. As it was still illegal for women to go abroad for employment, she travelled to the Gulf country via India facing various obstacles on the way. Rita explains:

I went to Kuwait through India. We seven women were travelling with the agent. We reached safely. My brother was in India since he was small. The agent had taught us to tell lies – the lies that we were going to meet our brother in India – if we were stopped at the border. While crossing the border, we were stopped [by

²⁸ As the reports on human and sex trafficking also include the Nepali men and women trying to get to the Gulf and other countries for employment, finding the exact number of Nepali women trafficked for sex is difficult.

²⁹ The rate of women getting stopped or held at the border could be much higher among the prospective female emigrants. My sampling only included the women who were successful in crossing the border to get to the Gulf.

people belonging to an anti-trafficking NGO and security personnel] in the Indian side of the border. But, you know, money is the most powerful thing! If you give them some Indian currencies, they will let you cross the border ... we gave them some money – one thousand five hundred each. They were Indian nationals. When they asked us where we were going, we told them that we were visiting our brother in India.

Although Rita paid some money to the security personnel on the border this practice looked more like an exception than the rule.

As explained in Chapter 5, the female workers are occasionally stopped, held, and returned home by anti-human trafficking non-governmental organizations, preventing them from participating in foreign employment. While a majority of the female interviewees travelling via India were stopped and interrogated on their way to India only two respondents were held at the border for some time.³⁰ When asked if she was ever stopped at the Indo-Nepal border, Mamata explains her experience on her second trip to the Gulf this way:

I was once stopped by Maiti Nepal [an anti-human trafficking NGO] at Sunauli, while crossing the border to get to Bombay for our travel to Oman. We were four women. An employee of Maiti Nepal suspected us as the victim of sex trafficking. I had crossed the border, but the other women were stopped and were asked why they were going. They pointed towards me, so I returned to the Nepal side of the border and talked to them. They took me and others to Maiti Nepal office in Bhairahawa, and questioned us. I told them that we were going for work, and I lived in Kathmandu. They could ask anyone about me and if found involving in illegal activities they could punish me. I told them that I was going abroad because of poverty. I provided them my home address, and told them that I was not selling these fellow women in India. If I wanted to sell women I could do that from my hometown, which also borders India. I was coming to this place as Mumbai was closer from here. I told them that I was also in contact with the leaders of political parties. I also gave them number of PCO [public call office] in my hometown. They called, and the person in the PCO told them about me – that I was a good person and had been to Saudi before. I also had train tickets. They were concerned about us getting sold in India. They asked me why I would want to go to India or a foreign country at this young age, and I told them that I would not go if they would provide me a job there and pay me enough to support myself

³⁰ Since the women who were held at the border were usually returned to their guardian, preventing them from labor migration, it is no surprise that the sample contained only few women who were held at the border but allowed to leave later.

and my family. I also told them that I had passed 10th grade, but failed in the S.L.C. exam. Then, they gave us lunch and took us to Sunauli border by a bus.

Mamata managed to convince the NGO officials about her travel to the Gulf for employment. Her previous work experience in the Gulf and education were helpful in this process. Many interviewees recounted how some of their co-travelers were returned home from the border, or even before reaching there, as they were travelling independently – without a male “guardian.” While the reason behind stopping the women emigrants was to protect them from being trafficked to India, the practice also prevented some women from improving their economic conditions by participating in international labor migration.

The Nepal-Delhi/Mumbai-Gulf route involved a lot of difficulties even for the frequent travelers. Gita was engaged in international labor migration for several years. She worked about nine years in two different Gulf countries in her three visits – Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait again. Explaining the difficulty involved in the emigration process, she says:

It was difficult [to go abroad] in the past. Nepal government would not issue labor permit to women. So I went to Kuwait via Delhi. I stayed in Kuwait for three and a half years. After a year in Nepal, I went to Saudi Arabia via Bombay [Mumbai]. It is a bit difficult for women like us to go to Delhi/Bombay. Going alone is difficult, and going with a man [such as husband] is unfeasible due to the lack of free time. When I arrived at Kathmandu airport from Saudi Arabia, I asked a man at the airport, “Can’t we go abroad from here?” He said that I had to make a document to fly from there. Then, I told my friend’s brother about it. I think he got the help of another person, who was our relative as well. I don’t know what they actually did, but they got the document ready. And, after that, I flew from Nepal. I flew [to Kuwait] twice from Nepal after that.

The female workers who had been to the Gulf illegally were allowed to return home via Kathmandu airport. They were also issued a labor permit (or “re-legalized”) by the Nepal government, if they would return to work for the same employer. Over six thousand female migrant workers were “re-legalized” in the year 2013/2014 (DOFE, 2014), meaning that these

workers' previous outmigration had been "illegal." The differences between flying from Nepal versus India were distinct for Gita:

It's very convenient to fly from Kathmandu. We can just take a single bus from Chitwan, and stay at our relative's place in Kathmandu, if needed. But while travelling via Delhi/Mumbai, we had to change several buses. Travelling to India itself was difficult. And, we also had to stay in Delhi/Mumbai for some days. I stayed in Mumbai for three days. They paid for food and lodge. But nobody wants to get stuck in India. There were some Nepali women who were in India for several weeks and still waiting for their visa and flight to the Gulf.

The difficulty was not limited to getting into India. The female emigrants were generally stressed about the amount of time – from a few days to a couple of months – they had to spend in India.

While most women spent about a couple of weeks in India, the women who were thin and skinny stayed there longer as they had difficulty in being recruited. As a respondent reflected, "the values of the migrant workers lay in their physique." Babita, who had been to Saudi Arabia at the age of 29, in 2001, describes her experience in India this way:

I stayed in Mumbai for 22 days. I was skinny then. They [the agents from Saudi Arabia, who had come to India for recruitment] did not select me assuming that I would not be able to work because of my "weak" body. They would only look at me and leave. It was like buying and selling cattle there in India. They would take only those women who looked muscular and strong for medical test. The thin and skinny women were left out, and could only hope that an agent would be interested in them. There were several women like that. Then, one day they took one of my friends [who had travelled to India with me] for medical, but she failed. Only after that, they took me for medical. My medical report was good. Then, my ticket got confirmed, and I flew from Mumbai.

The India-based recruiting agencies usually provided free food and bed to the female workers and their accompanying family members during their stay in India. These agencies in turn were paid by the families that hired those housemaids. But, only a handful of female returnees were accompanied by their family members to India and had waited together. Mamata was barely 20

when she left for Saudi Arabia in 1998.³¹ She went to Delhi with a female agent, in a bus from Kathmandu to Sunauli (border town) and on a train to Delhi thereafter. Describing the situation that unfolded as she reached Delhi, she explains

I did not get a visa [to the destination country] for a long time due to not meeting the age requirement. I stayed in Delhi for two months, doing nothing. They said that I had to be 25 or 30 years old, but I was much younger. I felt ashamed to return to Nepal from Delhi because I had told everyone that I was going abroad for work. I had said good-bye to everyone. People would say different things if I returned from India, without going to Saudi Arabia...they would say that I went to India for a different purpose ... that I was a “loose” woman It had been two months, and the agent advised me to return to Nepal saying that the visa was declined. But I insisted her on sending me anyway. I asked her to take me to the recruiting agency’s office. We went there. The boss was an Indian guy. He said, “How can I send you? We don’t get your visa. You are too small.” He asked me to work at his place for some years, but I did not agree to work in India, after leaving Nepal for foreign employment. I would rather return to Nepal. I told him, “you can send me for any salary, but I want to go.’ Then he sent me to Saudi Arabia for SAR 200 (3000 Nepalese rupees of that time) a month.³² We signed an agreement in a piece of paper, and then I flew to Saudi.

A long stay in the Indian transit city was a very stressful experience for the emigrants. While it was often uncertain how long the emigrants had to wait in India, they felt humiliated to return home without reaching their destination. It would not only be a waste of time and money; their unfortunate return from India would also get them a label – a label of a “loose” woman – in the Nepalese society. Getting to the Gulf via India, which involved travelling a long distance on a bus and/or train, crossing the border, and spending up to two months in India, would make female workers vulnerable to sexual and physical exploitation. Although no women respondents had experienced physical and sexual abuses in India, one respondent recounted the abuses experienced by a fellow traveler in India. Rojee, a 32-year old woman with two children at the time of her emigration, explains:

³¹ She was the only respondent to engage in international labor migration prior to 2000. Female outmigration was still rare during this period.

³² US\$1= 100 Nepalese Rupees

While going abroad, I was very scared in [Mumbai]. As I did not have a relative accompanying me, I did not feel safe. I thought we should not go abroad via Mumbai. Actually, it's not only my thought; I saw with my own eyes. There was a young woman, like my younger sister, who was also going to Saudi Arabia with us. She said that [the agent] made her do the things she did not want to; he forced her to ... [have sex with him]. The agent was a distant relative of mine, like my Mama (maternal uncle). What could I say to Mama? And, I had my flight scheduled for the evening. I had to go. She begged me not to go leaving her there. She cried holding my legs. It was very hard for me to leave her and go. I saw her at a clinic in Saudi Arabia. She was also with her Saudi boss, like me. We both were there to undergo a routine medical examination [required for migrant workers], but we could not talk. We were not allowed to talk to anybody in Saudi. I don't know what happened to her after that.

The female migrants were heavily reliant on recruiting agents. The emigrants also lacked the ability to file a complaint against the abusers in a foreign city because of the language barrier, information gap, and the lack of trust in Indian police. The female migrants who flew from Kathmandu airport did not experience or witness such abuses, at least while in Nepal. They also did not feel unsafe in Kathmandu, unlike their compatriots who flew through the Indian cities. Due to frequent travel bans of Nepal government, Nepali female migrants went to different Asian countries, particularly the Gulf countries, illegally, bearing a greater risk of abuses and exploitation on their way. While returning home, they could fly to Nepal directly. None of the respondents faced any problems at the Immigration Desk in Kathmandu airport even if they had left the country illegally.

The mode of emigration – with or without a labor permit – also had an effect on the support network available to the female migrants. The women who had flown legally from Nepal were better informed about what they needed to do if they had problems in the workplace. It would also be easier for the emigrants and their family members to contact the recruiting agencies for rescue, if the workers faced problems in the workplace or wanted to return Nepal for other reasons. The Nepalese government also provided financial support to injured workers and

the family of the deceased. However, the migrant workers and their family would not receive any support if they had left the country without a labor permit. The migrant workers leaving the country legally are required to obtain life insurance, and also contribute one thousand Nepalese rupees to Migrant Workers' Welfare Fund managed by the Foreign Employment Board. In case of accidents or deaths of the migrant workers abroad, the workers or their family would be paid by the insurance companies as well as up to 500,000 Nepalese rupees from the Fund. The families of 24 female workers who had died abroad (all but three were employed in the Gulf countries) were paid from the Fund in 2013/2014.³³ Since the workers who left without a labor permit did not contribute to the fund and also did not obtain life-insurance coverage, they would not receive the financial supports that were provided to other migrant workers and their families.

Violence in the Gulf

The female migrant workers were subjected to different types of violence in the Gulf. All instances of violence occurred in two specific places – the employer's house (the workplace) and the recruiting agency's office. The violence against the housemaids in the Gulf countries is structured in the sponsorship-based labor recruitment system in the Gulf, which creates a very unequal and highly dependent relation of migrant workers with their employers. The transnational migrant workers in the Gulf countries are recruited and regulated through a sponsorship system commonly known as *Kafala* (Dito, 2015; Gardner, 2010). Under the *Kafala* system, the migrant workers can enter and be employed in the Gulf countries only through the sponsorship of a citizen (Dito, 2015). The *Kafala* system binds the migrant workers with their employers, allowing the latter to have control over the former. As the work permits are issued

³³ The data was obtained from Foreign Employment Promotion Board during my visit to the office.

through the employers, the workers' visa bears the employer's name and the workers can stay in the country only as long as the employer wants them. As Dito (2015) writes, "Because residency and mobility rights of the workers are connected to the permit, employers come to wield significant power over labor market conditions" (p. 79). The migrant workers are bound to tolerate the abuses of the employer as they cannot change the employer or exit the country without the visa sponsor's approval. If the workers run away from their employers, they become undocumented (or "illegal" as identified in the host countries). Gardner (2010) observes that "by binding foreign workers to individual citizens, the *Kafala* system is the keystone in the systemic and structural violence levied against foreign workers in the Gulf" (p. 27). The violence against the housemaids is facilitated by the foreign labor recruitment system in the Gulf states, which delegates the authority of labor control to the individuals. What follows now is the description of different types of abuses experienced by the housemaids in their workplace and at the recruiting agency's office in the Gulf. I also attempt to explain, whenever applicable, how the labor recruitment system makes the housemaids vulnerable to abuses and exploitation in the Gulf countries.

Violence in the Workplace

An overwhelming majority of abuse cases took place in the employer's house, where the housemaids provided live-in services. Although violence highly prevailed among Nepali housemaids, the extreme forms of direct, physical violence, such as physical and sexual abuses, were not very common (at least not as common as represented on Nepalese media). Most often, the housemaids experienced indirect and non-physical violence. The major complaints of the respondents were low wages, withholding and non-payment of wages, withholding of passport,

extremely long hours of work, constant criticism, lack of adequate rest, and the feeling of confinement, rather than the physical and sexual abuses. This is, however, not to say that there was no connection between the direct and indirect forms of violence; often times, the indirect violence contributed to direct, physical violence against the housemaids. In contrast to the widespread perception, most acts of violence were committed by the female employers, not by men. All cases of sexual abuses were committed by a male employer or a male relative of the employer. Each major type of violence is discussed below.

Work Hours

The housemaids were responsible for domestic works, such as cleaning, cooking, washing, ironing clothes, and looking after kids and the elderly. An overwhelming majority of the interviewees had worked extremely long hours, about 18-20 hours a day, seven days a week. The housemaids did not get adequate rest and sleep. Indeed, this was the major grievance of most respondents. With a couple of exceptions, the former housemaids, regardless of the destination country, stated that they could get only about four hours of sleep a day. They worked from around 5-6 a.m. until 1-2 a.m., as recounted by Asha, who had worked in Kuwait: “I worked a lot there. At least 15-16 hours a day. I used to get up at 4:30 or 5:00 a.m., and would go to bed only after 1 or 2 a.m. Sometimes, it would be even 3:00 a.m., but usually 1 a.m. We could barely get four-hours of sleep.”

All female interviewees had lived with the employer’s family (at least until they ran away), and this living arrangement also created an exploitative condition, forcing the housemaids to provide 24-hour services to the employer. The services would range from washing dishes and ironing clothes to cooking dinner for unexpected guests at midnight. The amount of time for

sleep and rest would even further decline during the festivals. Shanti, who had been to Saudi Arabia at the age of 45 in 2010, explains:

There was no fixed schedule of work. During the festivals I had to work the entire night, until 4 a.m. During regular days, I could sleep around 10 p.m., but had to get up at 5 a.m. I did washing, cleaning, cooking and childcare. It was very difficult during the festival: we did not get a chance to sleep at all. Several guests would be invited, who stayed until late with the family. They ate, laughed, and enjoyed, while we collected and cleaned the dishes.

The work experience of the female workers who were employed in a house with multiple housemaids was found to be somewhat more positive than the workers who were the only helper in the house. Although both groups of housemaids worked for about same number of hours, the work was more extensive, the workplace environment lonely (due to the lack of colleagues), and the probability of abuses higher for the second group of women. In her two different travels to Kuwait, Rita had worked for two different families that employed about half a dozen housemaids from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Nepal. In such families with multiple housemaids, there was a good division of labor; each woman was assigned some specific job. Reflecting on her work experience, Rita says:

My work was okay. There were several female workers in the family. In the first house, there were Filipino and Indonesian women, and we worked together. In the second house, there were other Nepali women as well. There were six Nepali women and altogether eight housemaids. It was a big house, with a large extended family – brothers, their wives, and a lot of kids. There were 7-8 kids in the family and much of the time would be spent looking after the kids. I used to get up at 6 a.m., but there was no certainty of what time we would go to bed. I worked the entire day – clothes-washing, house cleaning, and child care. They [the boss and his family] would go out in the afternoon, and I would get busy taking care of children. I also had to iron clothes and bathe the babies. Normally, my job was to look after kids during the day. The work in the house was divided among workers: some women only cooked while others cleaned the house or took care of the kids. At night, the house owners would go to bed first. The housemaids would go to bed only after the kids fell asleep. We would normally go to bed around 2 to 3 a.m. ... In our place, no one experienced [abuses]. After we finished our work, all the housemaids would gather together every night. We would eat together, talk, and have a lot of fun.

One factor that had a significant impact on the housemaids' working conditions was the living arrangement. The women who did not live with their employers had a somewhat fixed schedule and were paid on an hourly rate. While living independently, the female workers still had control over their labor and they could also make decisions regarding their employers. It could not be verified whether the opportunities to work independently (but as undocumented) were available in all Gulf countries, as both the respondents in the present study had worked as run-away maids in Kuwait. The news stories about the run-away female workers working illegally in the Gulf, particularly in Kuwait, are occasionally reported in the Nepalese newspapers.³⁴ In her study of Sri Lankan housemaids in Lebanon, Moukarbel (2009) finds the cases of physical and sexual abuses non-existent among the freelancers (non-live-in housemaids). The narratives of two female workers, who had run away from their first employers and worked as freelancers, also corroborate the point that the risks of abuses and exploitations were much lower for the freelancers than for live-in housemaids.³⁵ Having escaped from her abusive employer in Kuwait, Bina worked as a freelancer for a couple of months until her arrest. While working as a freelancer, she was paid much higher, had a fixed work schedule, and also did not have any experience of violence.

I worked for three months after escaping from my employer. I used to work in two places, at a school and a house. I used to work at the school from 5 a.m. to 1 p.m. and in a private house after 2 p.m. I lived with two other women who were from Indonesia and Sri Lanka. They had also run away from their employers. I used to earn 90 Kuwaiti Riyal in total...and that was more than twice of what I was paid by my first employer. It was really rewarding to work as a part-timer (freelancer). I had enjoyed working like that. Unfortunately, the police raided our area one night and arrested all of us.

³⁴ Such as "Illegal workers granted 'amnesty' in Kuwait after paying fines," retrieved March 18, 2016 from <http://kantipur.ekantipur.com/news/2016-01-11/20160111145957.html>

³⁵ This, however, does not mean that the freelancers did not face any abuses and exploitation. Mourkel (2009) sheds lights on the problems facing the freelancers in Lebanon (I could not find a similar study on housemaids in the Gulf).

Bina was arrested as she had lost her legal status in the country after running away from her employer. Under the *Kafala* system of labor recruitment, the workers lose their legal status once they leave their employer, the sponsor of the visa. The workers can neither change their employer nor leave the country without the consent of the sponsor of the visa (Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012). The run-away housemaids usually spend several weeks in a jail as a punishment, or simply wait for the exit visa from the employer. Before returning to Nepal, Bina had spent over six weeks in jail in Kuwait. She flew home only after her employer returned her passport, which was seized upon her arrival in Kuwait, and let her exit the country.

While most of the housemaids had to work continuously for over 18 hours a day, many of them did not express the difficulty to their employers as they believed that the workers should obey their employers and make them happy. Although the situations abroad would not allow them to strongly protest on most occasions, some women could not even express their discontentment. The work was nearly unbearable for some housemaids, as we see in Hema's case. Hema had returned in 2014 after three years in Kuwait. She explains the working conditions in her employer's house this way:

It was a family of 10. There was also a Filipino woman at the beginning, but she left within few months. Then, I was the only housemaid in the house. I was told by the agent that I could change the house within 3-4 months. But, since there was also another worker, I thought it would be a bit easier to work for this family. But after the Filipino woman left, I had to do all the works: cleaning the house and dishes, cooking, washing ... the work was too much...I still remember the tiredness at night. I would get so tired after ironing the clothes that I would fall asleep within seconds of resting my head on a pillow. I washed and ironed all the long, large clothes that the Arabians wear. My hands would get so tired and would ache so much from ironing that I could hardly move my hand. But, I would still keep on working as I was at other's place, not my own house. It's like that in other's place. The workload increased in the weekends as we had visitors, usually married sisters/daughters. But, I liked weekends as a Nepali Didi (sister) would also come with the guests. She was a housemaid of my employer's daughter. We

talked the entire night. I would feel like meeting with my family, like my own sister.

Some housemaids' bodies could not sustain the extremely long hours of work. Five women respondents returned home before completing their contract due to illness. Two of them believed the illness had resulted from long work hours. Jyoti, who had worked as a housemaid for about one and a half years, explains the working conditions and her illness this way:

It was really tough. You have to work very hard in another country. It's not like Nepal. Some housemaids take rest as they do not obey their Sahu/Sahuni,³⁶ but I always worked and never took rest. I think it was due to my respect to Sahu/Sahuni. I never felt like taking rest, so I worked all the time. But I got sick due to too much of work. It had been only one and a half years. I became ill. I had extreme gastritis. I felt pain in my heart. I shivered, had weakness, and had a feeling of fear. Later I was not even able to stay alone in the apartment. Then, I returned home.

The female workers were generally taken to hospitals if they became ill. As the workers did not have a health insurance their treatment largely depended on the good will of the employers.

While employers generally paid the expenses, some female workers also shared the cost (as it was deducted from their wages).

Wages

Another major concern of the female migrants was regarding wages. Almost all the female returnees were dissatisfied with the wages they received. With a handful of exceptions, the Nepali housemaids earned about 10,000 to 12,000 Nepalese rupees (about \$100 to \$120) per month.³⁷ Considering the work hours and the cost of living in Nepal, the pay was very low. Only six female workers were paid above 15,000 rupees per month, and all of them had flown via

³⁶ The employers were usually referred as "Sahu/Sahuni" by the female returnees. "Sahu" means a male employer and "Sahuni" a female employer.

³⁷ Calculations are based on the exchange rates at the time of the interview

Kathmandu in the post-2007 period, when emigration for domestic works was legalized. As some interviewees stated, the Nepalese female workers ranked toward the bottom in the “hierarchy” of domestic workers in the Gulf, and were paid much less than their coworkers from Indonesia and the Philippines. This claim is consistent with the findings of some reports that the Nepali and Sri Lankan maids receive much lower wages than the Filipino maids (Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2007).³⁸ Moukarbel (2009) also found a similar pattern – the Filipinas received much higher wages than the Sri Lankan and Ethiopian housemaids – in her study of Sri Lankan maids in Lebanon. The female workers from the Philippines were perceived “superior” because of their education and proficiency in English. The Filipinas were also considered to “be cleaner, more efficient and more trustworthy” than the housemaids from the countries like Sri Lanka and Ethiopia (Moukarbel, 2009, p. 32). Some Nepali male returned workers also echoed this perception when they claimed that unlike Nepali women the Filipina workers were “very smart” and came well-trained for the jobs. The female workers in the present study were from rural areas, and had little or no formal education. They also lacked the knowledge of English or Arabic prior to their travel, and this had created difficulty in communication until Nepali women learned the local Arabic language. It took them about 2-3 months to learn the local language and be able to communicate with the employers without much difficulty. With few exceptions, most workers had received no training from the recruiting agencies about the work anticipated in the Gulf. These factors could also have contributed to Nepali women receiving lower wages than the workers from the countries like the Philippines.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch Report (2007) mentions that the Muslim workers were paid higher than the workers of other faiths in various Gulf countries. The Indonesian housemaids could have the advantage of being a woman of Islamic faith, among other “superior” traits.

The workers generally received a raise in their salary when/if they renewed their contract. The contract renewal was also favorable to the employers, as this saved them from paying the recruiting agencies to hire a new housemaid. The employers generally offered a free two-way ticket, a month's unpaid holiday, and some increase in wages (which depended on the negotiation) if the housemaids agreed to renew their contract. Bina, who went to Saudi Arabia via India for 10,000 rupees a month in 2006, worked for seven and a half years for the same employer. During this period, she visited Nepal twice through the Kathmandu airport (after going through the re-legalization process, which is offered to the workers who first emigrated illegally, without a labor permit, but are now returning to work for the same employers). When she left her job for a final return to Nepal, her salary was about 25,000 rupees a month – more than double her first salary. However, only a handful of respondents had renewed their contract to work for the same employer. Only nine women had renewed their contract or extended their stay by a year or so, although about one-fourth of the respondents (15 women) had travelled to the Gulf more than once. Most women did not want to work for the same employer as they did not get a (substantial) raise in their salary or were not satisfied with the working environment (usually too much work). Those who had extended their contract for only a year or less did not receive a raise; they worked for the same salary.

While the wages for the housemaids were very low, about one-third of the female workers were not even paid the wages assured by the recruiting agents. They were paid about 10% to 20% less than the assured wages. The mode of emigration – with or without a labor permit from Nepal – had little impact on the gap in the actual and assured wages. A similar proportion of female workers from each group (travelling via Kathmandu with a labor permit versus flying via India without obtaining a labor permit from Nepal government) received lower

than the assured wages. In other words, even travelling from Kathmandu and having the labor migration processed through a Kathmandu-based recruiting agency would not guarantee the promised wages to the female emigrants. The discrepancies between the assured and actual wages for the migrant workers existed across all Gulf countries. One factor that correlated with the workers receiving the assured wages was the number of maids employed in the house: all six women who had worked in a household with multiple housemaids did in fact receive the salary as stated by the agents.

It could not be verified whether it was only the employer's exploitation, or also the agent's false promise, that was responsible for the underpayment of the workers. The discrepancies in the assured and actual wages are also the major issues of Nepali male migrant workers. The Nepali recruiting agents also often dupe the male migrant workers by sending them to lower wage and more labor-intensive works than promised. It is also very likely that the recruiting agencies assured the female workers higher than the actual wages in order to motivate them to migrate. As Rashmi, a former housemaid who had migrated to Kuwait via India, stated, "The agents do not provide detailed information. They are only concerned about sending workers abroad by any means."

A factor contributing to the gap in the assured and actual wages of the housemaids was the absence of a contract signed between the employer and the employee, as well as the workers' lack of awareness of the terms and conditions in the contract even when one existed. Almost all the interviewees were unaware whether they had signed a contract that stated their wages as well as other terms and conditions. The women emigrants generally relied on the debriefing of the agent; hence, they lacked any legal basis to make a claim about the assured wages. For the workers who fly legally via Kathmandu, the recruiting agencies are required by law (*Foreign*

Employment Act, 2007) to submit the copies of the labor contract to the Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE). The agencies receive labor permits for the workers only after submitting copies of the contract to the DOFE. However, the agencies are also engaged in the malpractice of contract substitution, where the copies of the contract furnished in the home countries are different from the ones drawn in the destination countries (Vesuvala, 2011 as quoted in Bajracharya & Sijapati, 2012). Thus, it is also possible that the copies of the contract submitted to the DOFE bear the terms and conditions different from the ones offered in the copies of contract provided to the emigrants and their employers. For the workers who fly without a labor permit, the regulating mechanism is obviously non-existent in the sending country. Even if a genuine contract existed, the workers were unlikely to engage in a legal battle, as the legal services were out of their reach. If the workers were aware of the wages in the contract they could at least negotiate with the employers. Given the high illiteracy rate among the female emigrants and the scale of frauds in the foreign employment sector, the female workers were less likely to be fully informed about the terms and conditions in the contract paper.

While one in every three female workers received lower-than-the-expected wages, a couple of respondents were able to get their salary increased through some negotiation. Mamata had been to Saudi Arabia in the pre-2000 period via India. As she had spent several weeks in India waiting for a potential employer, she had agreed to work for a really low wage. However, through some negotiation with the employer she got her salary increased from the very first month. As Mamata's explains:

After completing a month's work, when they gave me SAR 200 as a salary, I did not accept it. I told them, "You have a very big family [a family of 35]. I can't work here. I will go home." Then Sahu said, "You have signed a contract for a salary of 200. We have also paid the government to get you here. We can't bring a worker on our own. We have invested some money to bring you here." Then I told him I had also spent money to come here. Actually, I hadn't paid the agent,

but I just told him that. They asked me, “How much did you pay?” I told, “I don’t remember right now, but I have. I haven’t paid in cash at this moment, but have agreed and signed a paper to pay some amount later.” They said, “You don’t have to pay there, we have already paid.” He asked, “What was the amount for which you signed the contract?” “600 Riyal” I replied. That just came out of my mouth. They were surprised and asked me to show any evidence/paper. Then I told him, “I don’t have the paper right now. It got lost, but I can’t work for 200 Riyal only.” Then he increased my salary by 100 Riyal, but I did not agree. He kept on increasing by 100 until it reached 500 Riyal. When I did not agree to the salary of 500 Riyal, they said that they would not pay me higher than that. They would rather send me home in few days than giving me more than 500 Riyal a month. Then, I also thought about the hardships I had undergone to reach there, the financial difficulty back home, and I had come there to earn some money for my family...then I received 500 Riyal as the first month salary. They were always honest in terms of their payment. Sahu would pay me on the 27th of every month. He would also ask for my signature on two pieces of paper to acknowledge the receipt of salary. He would give one paper to me and keep the other with him. He would even ask me to remit money, whenever I had some money. He would advise me not to keep money with me as it might be lost or children might take the money as there were several kids in the family.

Mamata’s education (she had passed the 10th grade), job experience in Nepal (she had worked in several places before emigration), and her exposure to the outside world (she was living independently in the capital city, Kathmandu, at the time of her emigration) gave her confidence and the ability to negotiate her salary with the employer. She was also lucky to get an employer who increased her wages, paid her in full, and also helped her remit to her family. It must also be noted that Mamata’s employer had several domestic workers, both male and female, and in the study sample, all the female workers who had worked in a household with multiple housemaids were generally treated better than the women who were the only domestic worker in the household.

The withholding of and the non-payment of salary also prevailed among the housemaids. About one-fourth of the interviewees had their payment withheld for several months or were not paid in full. The withholding of the salary was one of the employers’ strategies to have control

over workers and their mobility. With the wages being withheld, the workers were less likely to runaway or proceed to return home before completing their contract, as by doing so they would risk losing the earned wages. The delay in payment created suspicion on the housemaids regarding the honesty of the employer. Many interviewees expressed concern that they were highly stressed when their wages were withheld for several months and they could not remit home to fulfill the basic needs of the family members. When the housemaids failed to remit on a regular basis, their family members would also be more concerned about their well-being in the foreign country, suspecting that they might be having some difficulty at the workplace. Most workers eventually received the full payment. About one-sixth of the respondents were not paid in full, and many of these were women whose payment was withheld for several months. Five women received hardly any wages for several months of work. All but one of them had worked for less than six months before returning to Nepal. Anjali was an extremely exploited worker, receiving only four-month's wages after 17 months of work. All these women, who were not paid in full, had also experienced direct physical violence in their workplace. Some housemaids were not paid some months' wages to compensate for their medical bills or as a penalty for workplace error. Asha was not paid three-month's salary to compensate for her medical bills. She had been hospitalized for about a month due to respiratory problems. Three other women's wages were deducted from their salary as a penalty for their "carelessness" in the workplace, such as "not taking care of the child properly," burning foods while cooking, or burning clothes while ironing. Kamala lost a month's salary as a toddler she was taking care of fell (while trying to walk) and cried, while Jeena was penalized for "not ironing the clothes properly."

Food

A majority of the respondents stated that “the food was okay.” However, many of them had satisfied themselves only with the leftovers, and they also could not decide when and what to eat. Some women were not happy with the available (or the lack of) food choice. About one-tenth of the respondents complained that the food was inadequate and unsatisfactory. They also had to wait for the employer’s family to finish eating and had to keep working and waiting even if they were hungry. Most of the women who did not get adequate food were also the ones who had suffered physical abuses from their employers. Manju, who had returned home before completing her two-year contract due to the physical abuses by her employer, reflects:

I had to get up at 6 in the morning, and then I would not rest at all the entire day. I would eat lunch around 3-4 p.m. There was no breakfast. I would not get anything to eat until late afternoon. I could eat only if Sahuni gave; otherwise, I had to remain hungry. There would not be any food to eat, so I lived on water. I would drink water to appease my hunger. The food would not be that good either. They used to put all the food items in a refrigerator, hiding from me. They used to give me few chapattis and tea for dinner. How could that fill my stomach?

Although food was not a major concern for an overwhelming majority of the respondents, some workers like Manju had difficulty carrying out their duties in the absence of adequate food available in a timely manner.

Limited Contact with the Outside World

The housemaids’ contact with the outside world was very limited and highly supervised. As the housemaids provided live-in services, they would rarely get a chance to step outside the employer’s house. Hence, the likelihood of meeting with other people, including their compatriots, was very low. Even when such opportunities were available (such as while accompanying the employers and their children to the parks or their relatives, or while attending

the mosques with their employers, or when there was a Nepali housemaid in a neighbor's house), the female workers were prevented from talking to other people without the employer's permission. Some women explained that although they would often come across other Nepali housemaids in the parks they were forbidden to talk to each other, especially in their native language. Even when the female workers were allowed to talk in a face-to-face meeting (in their native language), they were strictly prohibited from maintaining a regular contact and forming a network. Such networking would have been very helpful during times when the workers experienced abuses from the employers. The employers severed the workers' connection with the outside world or only offered highly supervised contact with other people in order to prevent them from running away or returning to Nepal before completing their contract. The employers who abused their workers feared that the women would runaway or share their stories of suffering with other people. Thus, the female workers experiencing physical abuses were usually prevented from talking to anyone in person or on phone.

An overwhelming majority of female workers were forbidden from carrying a cell phone or calling anyone without the employer's permission. Most women were allowed to use the employer's phone to call their family once a month. Most employers had also allowed the housemaids to receive calls from their family in Nepal. However, such opportunities were mostly unavailable to female workers who were experiencing physical abuses. The excerpts below explain the situation involving the cell phone.

Tara (Kuwait): I called home after I received my first month's salary. I told Sahuni that I needed to make a call home. Then, she let me call. They would not allow us to make a call before one month. I had to buy a calling card to make a call.

Bina (who had experienced abuses): I called my husband as soon as I reached the agency's office in Kuwait after flying from India ... but, once I reached the employer's house I was not allowed to make a call. I could not contact home

when I had difficulty. I had the [Nepalese] embassy's phone number, but how to make a call? I did not have a phone. I was not in a position to make a call.

Sarala (Saudi Arabia): I was allowed to carry a cell phone in the beginning. But after one and a half years, I was loaned to my employer's sister to help her during her pregnancy. They would not allow me to carry a cell phone. It was very boring as I lived alone in the apartment the entire day and I could not even make a call when I wanted. Then, I returned few months before completing my two-year contract.

Kriti (Saudi Arabia): I was not allowed to make a call. I could receive the call, but my husband was given a different number – the number of the employer's son, whose name was on my visa. But he did not live in that house. So, I could not talk to my family for two months. I called home only after two months. One of the employer's daughters was nice to me, and I asked her to call my home. Then, she gave a ring to my husband's cell phone, and my husband called back. We talked next time after one and a half month. You can imagine how I was feeling when I was unable to talk with my family for two months. I was very stressed and sad.

As the female workers were prevented from carrying a cell phone, they were unable to contact the police, the recruiting agency's office, their compatriots, or even their family during times of difficulty in the workplace. Even if they managed to secretly call and tell the recruiting agency's office or their family in Nepal about their difficulties, the consequences could be even worse when the employers learned about the call. Such was the experience of Kumari, who had worked for a year and a half in Saudi Arabia prior to her early return due to abuses by her employer. Kumari was not allowed to carry a cell phone, nor was she allowed to make a call. One day, she managed to call the recruiting agency's office and informed them about the abuses (a lot of work as well as beatings) by her employer. When her employer learned about the call from the agency, she beat Kumari again. Kumari explains:

It had been several months of abuses in Saudi. One day I found a phone number on a copy of my visa. I assumed it was the agency's number. Then, I asked my employer's permission to make a call, but she wouldn't let me. One day, I managed to call that number, and yes, it was the agency's office. The guy spoke in Hindi ... I told him, "I have difficulty at the workplace. I have to work day and night, at my Sahuni's clinic as well as her house. She also beats me almost every

day. I want to go back to Nepal. I don't want to stay here." Then, he said, "You don't have to work there. I will transfer to a different place – a house or an office." But the agency did not rescue me from there. The agent only talked to my employer about my complaints. She was mad after her conversation with the agent. She closed the door of the room and beat me again saying, "Why did you complain against me?"

Kumari also could not inform her family in Nepal and ask for their help as she always had difficulty in making a call. She finally ran away with the help of a housemaid and her boss of Indian origin, who were sympathetic to Kumari's miserable condition. If the housemaids could carry a working cell phone, they did not have to suffer the extreme forms of violence for an extended period of time.

Withholding of Passport

All housemaids' passports were held by their employers upon their arrival in the Gulf, and were returned to them only at the time of their departure. The workers did not have their passport with them during their entire stay in the Gulf. The labor recruitment system gave employers authority to control their workers, legalizing the guardianship of the employers over their workers. The workers' visa embodied the employer's name and the workers could not change their employer or exit the country without the employers' approval. The labor system also reinforced the perception of the migrant workers as the property of the visa sponsor. The employers also perceived the migrant workers as their "owned items" and seized their passports as they had also funded the worker's travel and paid the agencies for their hiring. The withholding of the passport increased the vulnerability of female workers, diminishing their ability to resist or run away from the exploitative and violent working conditions. Even with the passport, running away would have been difficult; but, by withholding the passport, the housemaids were even further discouraged from leaving the house. The workers who managed to

run away from their employers spent several months in jail waiting for their passport and exit visa. The Nepalese embassies in the Gulf countries provided the travel documents for the workers whose employers never returned their passports. The workers could return home with travel documents, but it was a lengthy process which required the runaway-workers to spend a substantial amount of time – from few weeks to several months – in jail.

Shouting, Criticism, and Threats of Assaults

Many female workers were subjected to shouting, constant criticism and threats of assaults. The employers often used abusive language if the housemaids failed to work to their satisfaction. Satisfying the employers was, however, a very difficult task for the housemaids employed alone. “We worked like a machine. Actually, we worked harder than a machine” was the common expression of many housemaids. Even working like a machine would not satisfy some employers as they expected the workers to perform all the jobs, and there was no limitation on time or the amount of work.

The housemaids with the primary responsibility of childcare generally worked longer hours and considered their job very challenging. These housemaids were also more likely to face constant criticism and shouting due to the challenge involved in taking care of children. Specifically, taking care of multiple children was a very stressful experience for the housemaids. The children would run, fall, and cry, and the housemaids would often fail to prevent those things from happening, especially when they had to take care of multiple children at a time. Asha, who worked for about two years in Kuwait, had the primary responsibility of childcare. She shares her experience this way:

I never experienced a really bad incident at my work. But once when a child fell on the floor while walking, they deducted one month wages as a penalty. I did not

argue with them as I had heard from others that we should not argue and fight with the host family in a foreign land. I had heard from another Nepali worker in Kuwait that the owner often verbally and physically abused her. My owner did not beat me, but they often scolded me with harsh words. I tolerated all those things as I was in other people's land, not my own. I felt that people would say whatever they liked once you worked for them. The child fell down while walking, but how can a child grow without wobbling or falling down? But they don't think that way! ... I had to take care of three kids, oh how mischievous were they! Compared to these kids, kids in Nepal are like saints. The kids were aged 11, 5, and 3 years. It was the 5-year old who had fallen.

The female workers also did not challenge the employer due to the fear of even more violence. Many of them also accepted the indirect and non-physical violence, such as shouting and criticism, as "normal" in a foreign land.

Attending Mosque and Wearing a Burqa (Veil)

The housemaids were forced to attend the mosque and wear a burqa despite the fact that they did neither of those things in their home country. About 15% of the respondents spoke about their experiences of wearing burqa and about the same percentage of women were coerced into attending the mosque with their employer every week. As followers of a different faith – Hinduism or Buddhism, the Nepali housemaids were uncomfortable participating in the religious activities in the mosque. Some employers also used the faith difference to designate the Nepali housemaids as inferior and "untouchables." Reema, a former housemaid, stated that her employer considered her an "equal" human being only after going through some ceremonies/rituals in a mosque, and attending the mosque regularly thereafter. The forced religious conversion, although temporarily, was a stressful experience for the housemaids.

Wearing a burqa felt like being in a prison for the Nepali housemaids. As a woman living all her life in a completely different socio-cultural environment, which was less gender-segregated and less restrictive to women than the country she went to work, Anita was very

shocked in the first few months in Kuwait. She was tired of living a life isolated from the outside world. As Anita explains:

We were like prisoners there; it was like living in a jail. They would not let us go anywhere, and we were confined within the house once we reached there. We could get out of the house only after finishing our two-year contract. We would not even see men's face. We had to wear Burqa like our Sahuni and we had to do what she did. We stayed inside and did the house works. We would also go wherever our Sahuni would go, but wearing the Burqa. Even, while at home, we were strictly forbidden from looking at men. We were not even allowed to look at or communicate with grown-up boys – teenagers and adolescents.

Wearing a burqa was not a pleasant experience for Shanti as well. Shanti, a single woman, had travelled to Saudi Arabia in 2010 at the age of 45. She had returned to Nepal after working for two years, without experiencing other difficulties, such as direct physical abuses. However, wearing a burqa felt like a confinement for her. She explains:

It was not interesting there. When we went out, nobody could see our face. We had to cover our face. We could see the people in the street, but they would not see our face. Here in Nepal, we have the habit of walking openly and how could we enjoy there? (She laughs.) Here, we walk, smile and talk to people...it's not like that there [Saudi]! We could speak with other women in Saudi, but not with men.

While many women shared their feeling of confinement in the restrictive socio-cultural environment of the Gulf countries, some women (ironically) drew on the same practice of urka-wearing to assert their “purity” after the return. A handful of female workers stated that their husbands were assured about their “purity” because of their travel to the countries that were even more restrictive and repressive to women.³⁹ When Sarala went to Saudi Arabia in 2007, she was just separated from her husband. After she returned, she went to Malaysia, where she worked in a glove factory. In Malaysia, she stayed in a company dormitory with other female workers, but worked with both male and female workers. She also met her current husband while working in

³⁹ This perception, however, was not very common in the emigrant households and the community. The preferred jobs and the destination were the factory work in the more liberal countries like Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea.

the factory. They married after returning from Malaysia. While her husband went to Malaysia again, she stayed with her family in Nepal, as per the recommendation of her husband. In our conversation, she stated that there was difference in how men perceived women migrants who had been to a more repressive state such as Saudi Arabia versus those who had worked in a more liberal country like Malaysia:

In Malaysia, there were several Nepali men working in the factory. They don't perceive the women migrants positively. Women and men work together in Malaysia, and the Nepali men used to say that only tainted women would come to a foreign country. In Saudi, we would hardly see any men. Men do not see women as they wear the veil. Only women can recognize other fellow Nepali men [from women's veil]. We can't even talk to any men. My present husband knew I had been to Saudi, but he did not say anything. He knew that Saudi was a different type of country.

In the context of Nepal, her second husband's attitudes were still very liberal. It is still very hard for women to remarry. It is even rare to see men like her husband, who were never married before, marry a divorcee. However, his trust in her "purity" abroad was also enhanced by the fact that she had worked in a restrictive country like Saudi Arabia, not in the country like Malaysia where women were likely to meet other men.

This was also the experience of Kalpana, who was only 19 at the time of her emigration to Saudi Arabia in 2008. Kalpana married after returning from Saudi Arabia, where she worked for about four and a half years for the same employer. She came in contact with her husband, although only by phone, while both of them were working in Saudi Arabia. They met and married after returning to Nepal. Describing her experience of wearing the veil and her husband's perception of her emigration to Saudi Arabia, Kapana says:

We had to wear Burqa while going out. We could see others but they would not see us. I did not like it. It felt like being suffocated. You know, we don't wear [Burqa] in Nepal.... My husband did not say anything like that [migrant women are "bad"]. He, however, had said, "I would not have trusted you if you had been

to a different country. I trust you because you came to Saudi.” Saudi is different. In Saudi, men cannot look at women, and we are also not allowed to see men.

Physical and Sexual Abuses

Unlike the media representation, extreme forms of violence, such as physical and sexual abuses were not very common among the female respondents. The abuses against the female workers indeed prevailed; however, an overwhelming majority (three-fourths) of the workers did not experience physical and sexual abuses in their workplace in the Gulf.⁴⁰ Nearly all the female returnees were aware of the general social perception of the female emigrants as the victims of sexual abuses. Many of them told me, when I approached them for an interview, that they “are not the type of people [I was] looking for.” Those who did not have the experience of physical and sexual violence stated at the very beginning of our meeting, even without being asked, that they “did not experience anything like that” abroad. Most of the interviewees did not even articulate what “that” meant unless I asked them. They assumed I was aware of the general (mis)understanding in the society that all female emigrants have suffered physical and sexual violence.

One question that emerged while analyzing the data was: why fewer women had experienced physical and sexual violence, compared to what is generally believed and also read in Nepalese newspapers? I at first thought that the interviewees might not have told me about their experience of violence over concerns that other people in the society might learn about it. However, even when I cross-checked this information with other pieces of information, such as

⁴⁰Although the sample size (56) and the non-probability sampling method do not allow for generalizations in the larger population, and which is also not an objective of the dissertation, the present analysis still explains the patterns of Nepali housemaids’ experiences in the Gulf.

how long they worked, how the earning was, what they invested their earnings in, why they returned, and how they returned, the information on violence was consistent. The women who had experienced physical or sexual violence had returned home without completing their initial contract, and their earnings were also very little or none. Twelve respondents had returned home before their contract was over and two respondents had changed their employer with the help of the recruiting agencies. These numbers are consistent with the number of female returnees (14) reporting physical or sexual abuses at their workplace in the Gulf. While twelve of them had experienced some physical violence – usually beating – by their employers (who were also women), two women had experienced sexual assaults by a male relative of the employer.

Physical Abuses

An overwhelming majority of the housemaids experiencing physical abuses had emigrated via India. Compared to three women (out of 23) who had reached the Gulf via Kathmandu, nine women (out of 33) travelling via India were physically abused by their employers. The female workers were usually beaten when the employers were not satisfied with their work. The difficulty was compounded by the fact that the female emigrants who had travelled to the Gulf for the first time lacked the knowledge of local language, the understanding of the socio-cultural contexts, and the skills in operating some of the household gadgets. Many workers travelling via Kathmandu had received at least some information about the destination country before their departure, while such opportunity was rarely offered to the workers emigrating via India. During times of difficulty, the workers flying via Kathmandu were more quickly rescued than those flying via India. Two factors were crucial in this regard. First, it was easier for the family to contact the recruiting agency in Nepal to process the worker's return, although the agencies would not usually cooperate at the first attempt. Next, many Nepalese

recruiting agencies also had a Nepalese agent in the Gulf while the female emigration for domestic work was legal in Nepal. The Gulf-based Nepalese agents were found to be somewhat more helpful and supportive to the Nepali housemaids than their counterparts from India and the Gulf countries.

The female workers who faced extreme forms of violence managed to leave their employer before completing their contract. While some housemaids terminated their contract with the consent of the employer, many of them had to devise other strategies to change their employer or simply return to Nepal. The housemaids received the support of different individuals and organizations in this process: the recruiting agencies, neighbors and fellow housemaids, family in Nepal, the local police, and the Nepalese embassies in different Gulf countries. When Anjali felt that her body could no longer withstand the excessive work and frequent beatings, she decided to return home. She had gone to Kuwait via Kathmandu in 2011, when female labor migration to Kuwait was legal. As the Nepal-based recruiting agencies also had a Nepalese agent in the Gulf, Nepalese workers were asked to contact the agent when difficulties arose especially in the first three months (although contacting the agent was not easy for the housemaids as they were not allowed to carry a cell phone). Anjali explains:

It was my fifth month in Kuwait, and I could not work. The work was too much, and they would not even give me food to eat. They would beat me. Even small children would come to beat me. There was no way I could live and work there. And, I stopped working. Then the Kuwaitis (the employer's family) called the agency's office complaining against me. Then, a Nepali Dai (brother) came and took me to the office. The other people in the office said, "It costs 200,000 Nepalese Rupees for you to return. How can you go? There's no way you can go to Nepal." Then, I told them if they did not send me home I would commit suicide. I also called my mom, who called my husband. Then, my travel was arranged.

As per the accounts of some female workers and their family, if a housemaid left her job early, the recruiting agencies were obligated to return a certain portion of the amount received from the

employer or send another worker to fill the position. Losing a worker, thus, meant losing some commissions for the agencies. Hence, they would not easily allow the workers to return. They would ask the workers to compensate the loss and pay for the return ticket as well. Anjali's husband also contacted the Nepal-based recruiting agency (as she had gone via Kathmandu) to process her return. While Anjali's husband's initial request was declined, the agency was willing to help her return after he threatened to report the situation to the police. He also had to pay about 20,000 Nepalese rupees to the agency for the ticket.⁴¹

Kumari was one of the two women who faced the most extreme violence (a lot of beating) by their employers. Her employer, who was a lab technician, made Kumari work for eight hours a day in her clinic, and another 12-14 hours at her home. Kumari could hardly rest or sleep for two hours a day. Due to the lack of sleep, her eyes would always be extremely red and sometimes bleeding. Her employer also beat her. She managed to run away with the help of an Indian doctor in the adjacent clinic, who gave her some money to escape from the extremely miserable conditions. While her employer had remitted only four months' salary for her 16 months of work, Kumari was not allowed to keep any cash with her to prevent her from running away. With some money in her hand, she took a cab and asked the driver to take her to the Nepalese embassy. After spending about three months in the shelter, where she also got her passport from her employer, she was able to return to Nepal.

Sexual Abuses

Two respondents had experienced at least one incident of sexual abuse by the employer's male relative. Both of the women, Kriti and Babita, were employed as single housemaid for their

⁴¹It seemed from the conversation that Anjali's husband actually paid a third party – a distant relative of Anjali, and the amount never reached the agency in Kathmandu which had prepared the documents for her emigration. This indicates the level of fraud in the labor-migration industry in Nepal.

employers. Kriti had gone to Saudi Arabia via India in 2011. Although she had difficulty making a call to her family, other things were going fairly well for the first four months, until her employer's son visited the house while Kriti's employer (an elderly woman) and her daughters were out one Friday afternoon. Kriti explains:

The work was okay. It was housework and I can't complain about that. I had to work from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. But they would not allow me to make a call. There was an elderly woman with three daughters in the family. The woman's two sons lived on their own. The older son had picked me up at the airport and left me at his mother's house. The woman and her daughters used to go to the mosque every Friday. One day, the youngest son came to the house when the other people had been to the mosque. Then, he came close to me (pause) and started saying something ... then, I stopped working.

Babita experienced sexual assaults in her second trip to the Gulf, to a different country – Qatar, and a different employer. She had gone to Qatar after working for two and a half years in Saudi Arabia. When asked if she had experienced any difficulty at the workplace, Babita said:

[My employer] was insane ... (pause). He would often shout at me. But I did not face any problems like that of other women. I could speak with them with confidence. I would fight with them if they tried to do anything. I would strongly tell them I was not that type of person. Maybe, they would [sexually] abuse me if I had not spoken strongly. In Qatar, my employer's brothers could do or say something like that. One time, one man [the employer's guest] pointed at something in my body and held me. Then I shouted at him. I strongly told him, "I will inform the police and get you arrested!" Then, he said that he would not do or say anything like that ever again... I did not have this type of experience in Saudi as there were other workers too.

It was Babita's previous work experience in the Gulf and knowledge of Arabian language that enhanced her ability to fight with the employer, at least against the extreme violence of sexual abuse. Kriti was in Saudi Arabia only for four months. She did not fully understand the new language, nor did she have the courage and strength to openly fight against the offender in a

house with no other members present. She still resisted against her employer, utilizing a different method of resistance – hunger strike and refusal to work. As Kriti further says:

[After the assault], I stopped eating and working from the next day. I also returned the two-month wage that I had received and asked them to send me back. Sahuni threatened me, “We have spent ten thousands Riyal to get you here. You can return only after you hand in 200,000 Nepalese rupees to me.”... Then, Sahu (who was the older son) called me, and I told him that my husband had passed away in Nepal. Then, the Delhi-based agent called me saying that it was not my husband but my sister that had died. But, I asked him how a person living in Bombay would know about my family in Nepal. Even after that, they had wanted me to stay and work there. But I resisted. I told them if they did not allow me to return, I could do anything. Then, Sahuni handed me the passport and Sahu took me to a police station [to process my return]. They also took me to a court, where I was asked if I received all my wages. As I told them that I had returned my wages, the employer was asked to pay me 1,200 Riyal. They used 1000 Riyal from that amount to buy a ticket to Nepal for me.

Abuses by the Recruiting Agencies

The abuses against the female migrant workers were not limited to the employers and their families. The recruiting agencies in the Gulf countries also physically abused the female workers, although instances of such violence were very few. Only two respondents (out of 56) were either a witness to such violence or a victim of it. Most of the female workers did not have to meet with a representative of the agency after they arrived in the Gulf countries, unless they faced some problems. The female workers or their employers contacted the agency only if there was a misunderstanding, conflict, or any other problems between them. Six respondents were taken to the agency’s office in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia after they declined to work. They refused to work and wanted to return after they experienced difficulty in the workplace. The agency would not want them to return to Nepal without completing their two-year contract, and generally arranged a different employer for the workers having problems with their current employer. The agencies were usually reluctant to help the workers (particularly those who had

been in the host country for few months) return due to the consequent loss of commissions from the employer losing the worker. As per the accounts of some female workers and their families, the Gulf-based agencies would not receive full payment from the employer if the workers left without completing the contract. After extremely long hours of works, constant criticism of her employer, and the withholding of wages for two months, Sima ran away from her Omani employer to get to the agency's office. However, the agency officials tried to beat her, rather than help, for running away from her employer. Sima stayed in the office for several weeks until she found a new employer.

The employers were generally fixed before the workers' departure from the transit city, such as Delhi, Mumbai, or Kathmandu, and the employers would pick them up at the airport in the Gulf. However, about one-tenth of the respondents had flown before their employer was fixed. These women were picked up by the agency and stayed at the agency's office (or a boarding house) until they found an employer. Their visa status would be changed after the employer was found. Lisa stayed in the agency's office in Kuwait for about three weeks, hoping that someone would be interested in hiring her. During her stay at the agency's office, Lisa witnessed and experienced physical abuses – kicking, beating, and shoving – by a female agent, who was from India. While the agent beat her frequently for not being “attractive to the [prospective] employer,” other workers from Nepal and India were severely beaten for leaving their employer, or “not working.”

Summary and Conclusion

The former housemaids from Nepal experienced different types of violence in the process of emigration, as well as in the destination countries. The policy of the Nepalese state to impose

travel bans on female migrant workers to protect them from abuses in foreign countries, particularly the Gulf, actually made the emigrants even more vulnerable to abuses and exploitation. The female workers migrated through a longer and riskier route of Nepal-India-Gulf for employment, often accompanied by a male family member. Many of them were also stopped at the Indo-Nepal border under suspicion of sex trafficking. Some independent female migrants were returned from the border and prevented from participating in foreign employment, which could help them improve their economic conditions. The workers migrating via India, without a labor permit from the Nepalese government, were more likely to experience abuses in the transit cities than those flying via Kathmandu. These workers were also less prepared for their work and less able to deal with situations that arose in the Gulf. The workers migrating without a labor permit did not receive the insurance coverage and other financial benefits offered to the legally emigrating workers in the home country.

The violence against the female workers occurred in two specific places in the Gulf – the employer’s home and the recruiting agency’s office. Although the direct, physical violence prevailed among the housemaids, such violence was somewhat uncommon. Two respondents had experienced sexual assaults by a male relative of the employer, while about one-fourth of the workers had experienced at least one incident of physical violence. The indirect forms of violence, such as extremely long work hours, constant criticism, withholding and non-payment of wages, discrepancy in the assured and actual wages, withholding of passport, and preventing contact with the outside world were highly prevalent. The workers who were employed as a single housemaid in the family were more likely to experience all instances of violence than their compatriots who worked in households with multiple maids. The housemaids’ living arrangement – having to live with the employer – strongly affected their working conditions in

the Gulf. As live-in housemaids, they were required to provide 24-hour service to their employer. The workers' lack of knowledge of local language and socio-cultural contexts also diminished their ability to resist violence. This could also help explain why the workers were more likely to experience abuses and less likely to effectively resist during their first trip abroad. Female workers could more effectively resist violence in their subsequent travels to the Gulf.

The violence against the migrant workers was largely facilitated by the labor recruitment system in the Gulf known as *Kafala*. As the migrant workers enter the Gulf countries through the sponsorship of their employer, they are bound to their employer for legal status in the country. They cannot change their employer, nor can they exit the country, without the approval of the employer. This system has helped to perpetuate, if not encourage, the violence against the domestic workers in the Gulf countries.

Chapter 8 - Conclusion

In the present study, I have explained Nepali female workers' experience in the entire cycle of labor migration, spanning from pre-departure to post-return. Using the data collected through in-depth interviews, field notes, and secondary sources, the study has specifically explored three research questions: (1) what is the relationship between social perception, media representation, and the policies of female migration in Nepal? (2) How is the dominant migration discourse contested, reproduced, and restructured in the emigrant communities during women's emigration process and after the return? And, (3) what are the contributing factors for female workers' experience of violence in the emigration process and in the Gulf? In the sections to follow, I summarize the major findings of the study in relation to each of these research questions. The chapter ends with a brief discussion on the limitations of the present study and future research.

Social Perception, Media Representation, and Migration Policies

In Nepal, female migrant workers are generally perceived as *cheli* – daughters and sisters, rather than as citizens with rights, and this perception has remained influential in shaping the policies of female labor outmigration. The discourse of female workers as “our *cheli*” is also reproduced by male migrant workers, officials of governmental and non-governmental organizations, and the Nepalese media. The *cheli* trope is problematic as it also suggests female workers are “minor,” lacking the ability to make decisions for themselves. The female workers were indeed treated as “minor” in the legal codes until recently. Women were required to obtain an authorization of a “guardian” – parents, male siblings, husband, or husband's parents – for

their participation in international labor migration until 2007. The perception of women as minor helps justify the method of “protecting” female workers through the discriminatory policies that deny them the right to mobility.

Discourse, as explained by Foucault (1980), generates truth-effects. The discourse convinces people to take some statements as true, while marking the other statements as false. The dominant migration discourse in Nepal produces certain “truths” about female workers’ sexuality, which affect the female workers and their families. The discourse is based on the notion of sexual “purity” – abstinence from pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships – in the Nepalese society. The society generally questions the “purity” of Nepali women engaging in foreign employment. All female workers are considered to have been engaged in sexual relationships abroad, with or without their consent, and are generally labeled as “loose” women. During interviews, many male returnees claimed that “no woman returns pure” from foreign countries. They also expressed their concern about the national “shame” and “dishonor” due to women’s sexual indulgence in the foreign countries.

The perception and treatment of female migrant workers as “minor,” along with the emphasis on women’s sexual “purity,” have contributed to perpetuate the “victim” discourse in the larger Nepalese society: the independent female migrant workers are assumed to be the “victim” of (sex) trafficking and/or sexual abuses. The commonality in the discourses such as “no woman returns pure” and all female workers are “victims” of sex trafficking and/or sexual abuses is that they both make assumptions about female workers’ sexuality. The discourse is perpetuated by the media, returned male workers, and governmental policies. The female labor migrants aspiring to go abroad via India due to travel bans in Nepal are indiscriminately referred to as the “victims” of sex trafficking by the anti-human trafficking organizations and the

Nepalese media. The Nepalese media has helped perpetuate the victim discourse (such as female workers are the “victims” of sex trafficking and all female workers are the victims of sexual abuses) through their intense coverage of selected cases of extreme sexual abuses against female workers abroad. The Nepalese government has imposed travel bans on several occasions in response to the media coverage of specific cases of violence against female workers abroad. The dominant discourse of female migration only emphasizes stricter regulation to “stop women from being sold” in India and other foreign countries, while completely undermining the socio-economic contexts of female labor migration. What is ignored in the dominant discourse is that female labor migration is also largely based on household decisions, and women have participated in foreign employment, often using a riskier route and unauthorized channels, due to extreme poverty, unemployment, and the social norms and legal codes that are discriminatory to them.

Female Migration and Change in Dominant Discourse

The dominant discourse on female migration also prevailed, although with a varying degree, in the emigrant communities in Chitwan at the time of female workers’ participation in labor migration. The various socio-economic factors helped the female workers overcome the barrier of the dominant discourse in the emigration process. Extreme poverty, un-/under-employment, low migration cost, migration information at the local level, and the lack of a dependable male figure in the household encouraged women to engage in foreign employment to improve their socio-economic conditions. Consistent with Belanger & Rahman’s (2013) study on Bangladeshi women, some women from Chitwan had also travelled to the Gulf for non-economic reasons. A handful of respondents stated that they had gone abroad as an escape from

the strenuous relationship with their husband or the social stigma of a divorce. However, an overwhelming majority of female workers, including a larger share of the divorced and separated women, had participated in the international labor migration for economic reasons. Most divorced and separated women went abroad due to the economic burden associated with their new role as the sole breadwinner for the family. They wanted to earn for their children's education and everyday needs. The finding of the study supports the mainstream migration theory that the economic incentive is the driving force of international migration.

The present study introduces a new intervening variable – the discourse of migration in the home country – in the traditional push-pull framework, which usually takes into account the positive factors in the destination and negative factors in the origin in migration decisions. The migration decisions are affected by the migration discourse, as well as the policies in the home and host countries.

The migration decision of the female workers from Chitwan was not a complete “rational choice” of the individuals. Migration was facilitated by various factors, and several actors were involved in the migration process. The labor migration was a household decision for most workers. With a couple of exceptions, all female workers had received family members' help and support in the migration process. The husbands had accompanied most of the married female workers to the transit cities – Kathmandu or Delhi/Mumbai. The institutions, such as the recruiting agencies in the destination, source, and transit countries, and (usually familiar) local agents played important roles in facilitating the outmigration of Nepali women, most of who had never travelled to a big city prior to their outmigration. The lower migration cost offered an unprecedented opportunity for the female workers, who were from the bottom of social hierarchy, to enhance their economic condition. Some women also received rare encouragement

from their husbands and other family members to go abroad for work due to the low migration cost.

The dominant discourse was also reproduced in the emigration process as most women still viewed labor migration as a male phenomenon, and they would not participate in it if they had a dependable man, or if they could afford to send their husbands for labor migration. The discourse that the outside world is not safe for women was reinforced when the husband or other family member accompanied the female workers to the transit cities. The dominant discourse was also reinforced when some women, particularly those who were travelling without a male family member, were held at the border by security personnel and anti-human trafficking organizations who suspected them of being the victims of sex trafficking.

The female workers had to deal with the “effects of truth” (Foucault, 1980, p. 118) upon their return. They had to contest the dominant assumptions about their sexuality, such as “no woman returns pure,” in their households and communities. They were also affected by the negative social perception against female returnees in their communities. An overwhelming majority of female workers believed that the society generally held a negative view of them, although many of them were less likely to care what the other people said about them. Many respondents believed that their neighbors, acquaintances, and even relatives perceived them as “loose women” for working in a foreign country. While a majority of the returnees received the support of their family in contesting the discourse, a few married women had difficulty in the family. The husbands of married women had to generally deal with the discourse relating to female workers’ sexuality while the women were abroad. Husbands from the communities with very few instances of female migration, in particular, had difficulty dealing with the discourses that questioned the sexual purity of their wives. Some husbands used the same discourse (that the

female workers engaged in sexual relationships with the employers and other men abroad) to insult and abuse the female workers upon their return. Such instances of conflict in the family and the use of the dominant discourse to abuse the female returnees would nevertheless help reinforce the dominant discourse. None of the single or separated women had any difficulty in their family after the return. These women lived with their parents and/or siblings, who did not care much how the society perceived the female returnees. The single and the separated women were also less likely to care about the discourse than the married women.

The female returnees' views on female migration largely correlated with their experiences, particularly the financial success, abroad. An overwhelming majority (over three-fourths) of the interviewees held positive views towards women's participation in foreign employment. An overwhelming majority of the respondents believed that their income from foreign employment had brought noticeable change to the family, and most of them stated that their economic condition would not have improved had they not worked abroad. A majority of the women spent their savings in improving the existing house or building a new one, while some women also used the funds to pay for the education of their children and siblings. Some also paid for the labor migration of their husbands or siblings with their earnings.

The returnees who had experienced extreme violence in the Gulf were less likely to support the female emigration due to the possibility of abuses and exploitation against the female workers. Most of these women had also returned early without earning at all. While most of them did not agree with the social perception of female migrant workers as "not good" women, their disapproving of female emigration was likely to reinforce the dominant migration discourse. The female workers who had experienced some physical assaults but returned with some earnings still approved of female migration.

In sum, the emigrant communities were the frontline, where the competing discourses were constantly produced and reinforced. The dominant discourse somewhat weakens in the emigrant communities, as the counter-discourses are produced and emphasized by many female workers returning with positive experiences. The discourse affects the individuals about whom the claims are made. However, the individuals can also challenge and contribute to changing the discourse. The individuals are “both discursive products and producers in the reproduction and transformation of discourses and thereby in social and cultural change” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 17). The discourse relating to female migration has been somewhat restructured in the emigrant communities with women’s participation in international labor migration. During the interviews, many community and family members showed an awareness of the diverse experiences of female workers abroad, just as with the male workers. Some female returnees, family members, and the community members also emphasized the changes in the social perception of female emigrants in their community due to the participation of a substantial number of female workers in foreign employment.

Foucault (1972) believes that discourse transforms over time. The findings from the present study suggest that while the dominant discourse changes in the local communities with the production of competing discourses, the local-level discursive change may not guarantee the transformation in the national level discourse as female workers’ varied experiences are hardly reported in the national media. The selective coverage of extreme cases of abuses against female workers in the media, the use of anti-trafficking discourse to describe the independent (but usually unauthorized) female migration, and the frequent bans on female labor migration only reinforce the dominant discourse of the female workers as “minor,” “victim,” and “loose.” Instead of a singular discourse, different sets of discourses are, thus, likely to exist in different

migrant-sending communities and the larger society. It is also very likely that the discourses vary across the communities in terms of the rate of female outmigration and the religious and caste/ethnic composition of the communities.

Foucault (1972) contends that the discourse not only facilitates but also constrains our understanding of the social phenomenon as it is through the available discourse that we comprehend the social reality. The formation of discourse is exclusionary as certain discourses are excluded from circulation in any historical period. The discourse of female migration in Nepal corroborates this claim as the alternative discourses on female migration are largely marginalized and inhibited. Women's diverse experiences are excluded from circulation to produce a homogenized, singular discourse of all female workers as "victims" of trafficking and sexual abuses. The main challenge in changing the discourse concerns channeling female workers' experience to the national discourse. While some social activists, migration scholars, and non-governmental organizations are also working in this regard, this dissertation can also help bring the voices of female workers to the national discourse.

Female Workers' Experience of Violence

The female workers experienced violence in different phases of migration. Some women had participated in labor migration itself due to violence in the family, specifically the violence of poverty, husbands engaging in alcoholism and extra-marital affairs, and the social stigma of a divorce. The female workers also experienced violence in the labor migration process and in the Gulf. While the travel ban against female workers was in itself an act of violence, the female workers were susceptible to even more abuses, exploitations, and difficult situations due to the discriminatory migration policy. Due to the travel bans in Nepal, many women accepted help

from unauthorized channels to travel to the Gulf, usually via India. A majority of the respondents had reached the Gulf via India, and some of them, who were travelling alone or only with an agent, were stopped on either side of the border by security personnel and anti-human trafficking organizations. They usually told some made-up stories, such as going to India to meet with their brother or other male relative, when they were stopped at the border. While none of the interviewees had experienced violence at the recruiting agency's office in India, a few of them shared stories of witnessing abuses against a female traveler in India. All female workers stated that they would not travel via India, if they were allowed to go abroad via Kathmandu. None of the workers flying via Kathmandu had to witness or experience such violence. The workers travelling via India were also less prepared for their work and less able to deal with the difficult situations in the Gulf. The workers migrating without a labor permit did not receive the insurance coverage and other financial benefits offered to the legally emigrating workers in Nepal.

Most acts of violence against female workers in the Gulf took place at employer's home. Only a few workers experienced abuses at the recruiting agency's office in the Gulf. Although violence against Nepali housemaids was prevalent, extreme forms of violence, such as physical and sexual abuses were not very common. Two respondents had experienced sexual assaults by a male relative of the employer, while about one-fourth of the workers had experienced at least one incident of physical violence. In contrast to the widespread perception, most acts of violence were committed by the female employers, not by men. The findings suggest that protecting female workers from one type of violence (sexual violence in this case) by arranging them to work for female employers, instead of male employers, might only open-up the possibility of another type of violence – the physical violence from the female employers.

The most common type of violence that the female workers experienced was indirect and non-physical. The respondents' major complaints concerned low wages, withholding and non-payment of wages, withholding of passport, extremely long work hours, constant criticism, lack of adequate rest, and the feeling of confinement, rather than physical or sexual abuses. Because the maids lived with their employers, they were required to provide 24-hour service. The former housemaids stated that they normally worked 18-20 hours a day. The female workers providing elder care and employed in a household with multiple housemaids had a more satisfactory experience than those who were the only maid or employed primarily for child care. The workers' lack of knowledge of local language and socio-cultural contexts also diminished their ability to resist violence. Due to their understanding of the local language and the socio-cultural contexts, female workers who had previous work experience in the Gulf were more likely to strongly and effectively resist violence.

The labor recruitment system based on employer's sponsorship – known as *Kafala* – has helped facilitate violence against the migrant workers in the Gulf. As the migrant workers enter the Gulf countries through the sponsorship of their employer, they are bound with their employer as long as they remain in the country. The *Kafala* system of labor recruitment has helped perpetuate, if not encourage, the violence against the domestic workers in the Gulf countries.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

The present study explains the experiences of female returnees from Nepal's Chitwan district who were once employed as housemaids in the Gulf. While the study explores the major issues facing the female migrant workers from Nepal, it does not claim to represent the experiences of all female workers from Nepal, let alone the experiences of female workers from

other South Asian countries with a similar socio-economic structure. The experiences of Nepali female workers, who have worked in the non-Gulf countries, particularly the “better” destinations such as Hong Kong and Israel, are likely to be different from the experiences of female workers from Chitwan.

The study is also limited to the analysis of articles related to female migration published in one specific newspaper – Kantipur National Daily, and does not include other newspapers and media sources in the analysis. It is possible that we would find more variations in the national migration discourses if multiple media sources were included in the study. It would also be interesting to analyze how female migrant workers’ issues are covered in the local media, and how the discourses relating to female migration compare in the national versus local media.

The present study describes the violence against female workers only from the victims’ perspective. The perpetrators are not included in the study due to the difficulty involved in accessing the study population (as well as a different emphasis in the present research). In order to understand the violence against female workers more holistically, it would be useful to include the employers in the study as well. Interviews with the employers can be utilized to understand why they perpetrate violence against the housemaids. Inclusion of the female employers in the study would also help understand how the gender dynamics change in the household with the recruitment of housemaids and whether the change in the gender dynamics is related to the female employers’ abuse of the housemaids. Such a holistic study can be carried out in the future.

The present study only discusses the local-level migration discourse in the emigrant communities in Chitwan district. The migration discourse in the communities with a different rate of female outmigration and a different caste/ethnic or religious make-up could be different

from the local-level discourse in Chitwan. A future study in a different location could be useful for a comparison.

While collecting and analyzing the data for the present study, I found an interesting discourse emerging in the Nepalese media, as well as in the conversations of ordinary people. The news media is lately focusing on the stories (such as, extramarital affairs, divorce, and property fraud) involving the women, whose husbands are employed abroad. It is my future plan to investigate the validity of such claims, as well as their impact on long-distant spousal relationships, including the mental health of Nepali male migrant workers abroad. The study might be relevant especially in the context of the high suicide rate among male migrant workers abroad.

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Appendix A - Interview Schedule

For Female Returnees

1. Which country did you go for foreign employment?
2. How did you go? Could you describe the emigration process?
3. How do you describe the family support in this process?
4. How long did you work?
5. What was your typical working day like? Please provide as much details as possible.
6. Do you have any memorable moments from your time abroad? What were they? Could you elaborate?
7. What was your salary? Did you receive all your wages?
8. When did you return? What were the reasons for your return?
9. How did you return?
10. How did you feel when you arrived in Nepal?
11. Could you tell me about the day you reunited with your family? How did you feel? What did you do?
12. What was the response of your family about your return? About your migration?
13. Did anything change (in you or family perception of you) after you returned? What things have changed in your life and family?
14. What do you do now?
15. Did you face any difficulties/challenges in re-adjusting in your family and community? What are they?
16. How do you perceive your migration experience?

17. How do you view your employment in a foreign country?
18. What do you think of female migration?
19. How do you perceive yourself as a returned migrant worker?
20. How do you think female migration is perceived in our society?
21. Do you read/hear news about female migrant workers on radio, television, or newspapers? What types of news stories are usually covered? Had you heard/read news about female migration prior to your first travel to the Gulf?
22. What is your future plan?

For Male Migrant Workers

1. Which country did you go for foreign employment?
2. How was your work experience there?
3. What have you heard about female migration?
4. Did you meet or hear about Nepali female workers when you were abroad?
5. What do Nepali male workers think of female workers abroad?
6. What do you think of female migration? What do you think of male migration?

For Organizations Working with/for Migrant Workers

1. What are the major problems and challenges of Nepalese workers employed abroad?
2. What are female migrant workers' problems/issues?
3. What challenges/problems do women migrants face during the process of migration?
While working abroad? While returning?
4. What kinds of support are available to female migrants?

5. What does your organization do in general? How do you support female migrants?

What do you think of female migration?