

THE CONJUGAL LIFE OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS' LEFT-BEHIND SPOUSES IN EASTERN NEPAL

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Background and Objectives

- International labour migration is a prominent socio-economic phenomenon in Nepal, which is reshaping the livelihoods of those who remain behind (Thapa et al., 2020).
- The long-term separation of a couple often affects the emotional intimacy, sexual well-being, and reproductive health of left-behind spouses (Compernelle, 2021).
- The left-behind spouses face various challenges, including emotional distress, loneliness, increased workload, and social isolation (Ghimire & Bennette, 2019).
- This is a very common phenomenon, but the sexual and conjugal lives of the left-behind spouses have been less explored in the existing migration literature. Therefore, it focused on assessing the sexual and conjugal lives of the left-behind spouse

Objectives

- To examine how international labour migration affects the sexual and conjugal lives of left-behind spouses in Nepal.

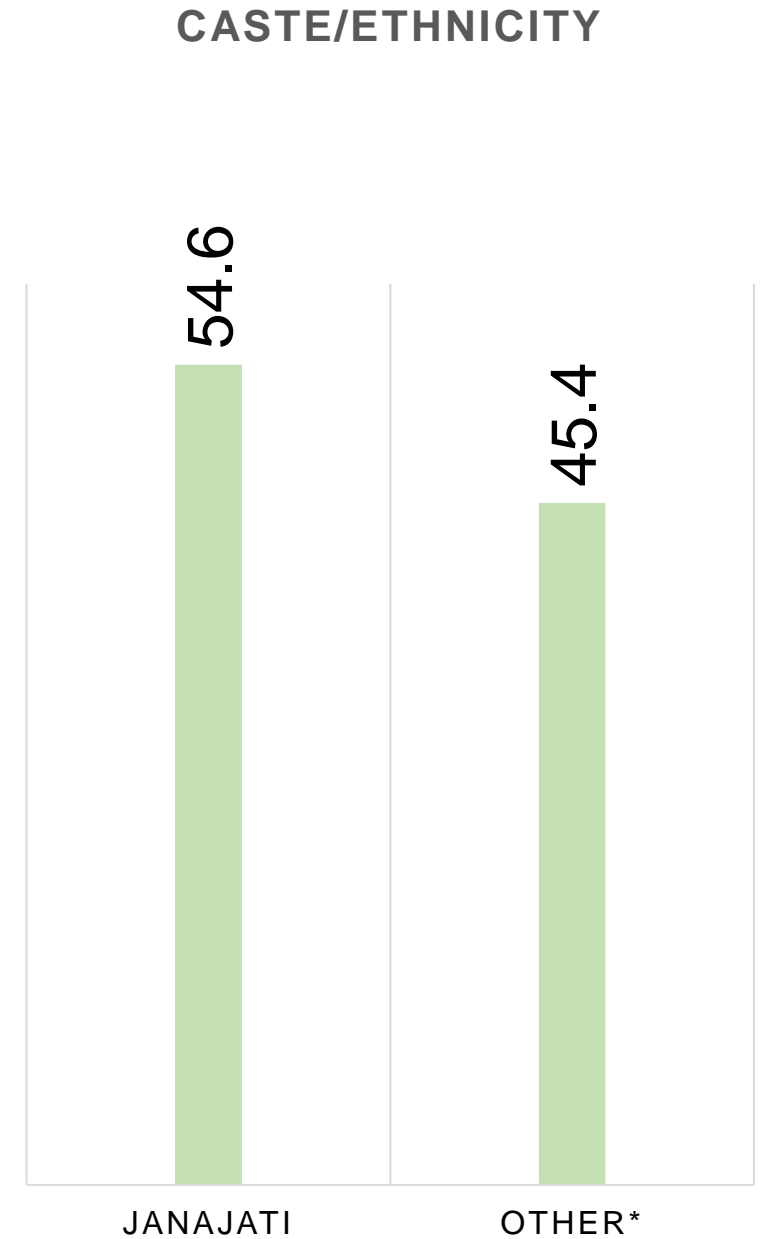
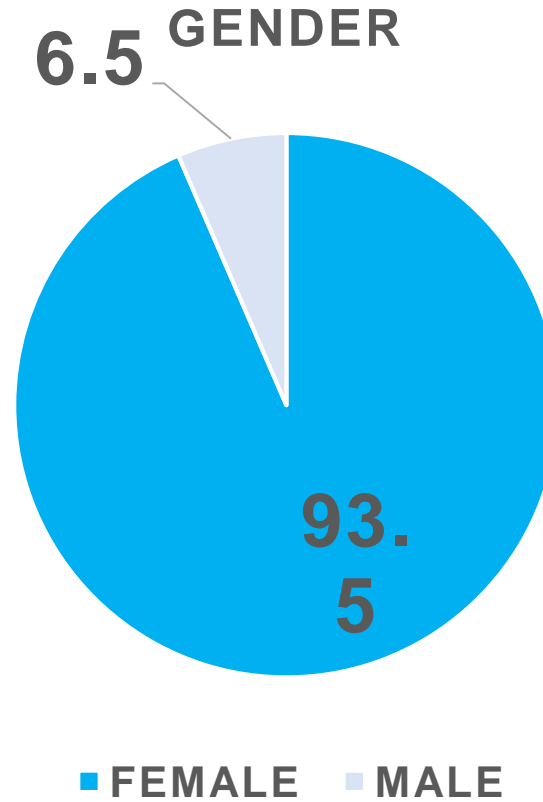
Methodology

Research Philosophy	Post-Positivism
Research Design	Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods (Quantitative complemented by qualitative)
Study Area	Taplejung and Jhapa
Participant	Left- Behind Spouses of aged 20-49
Sampling	Cluster sampling (Qualitative) Purpose (Qualitative)
Sample size	Quantitative 260 and 10 qualitative (1:1 from both districts) $n=D \times (Z/R)^2 \times (1-p)p$ where $D=1.5$ (design effect)

Result

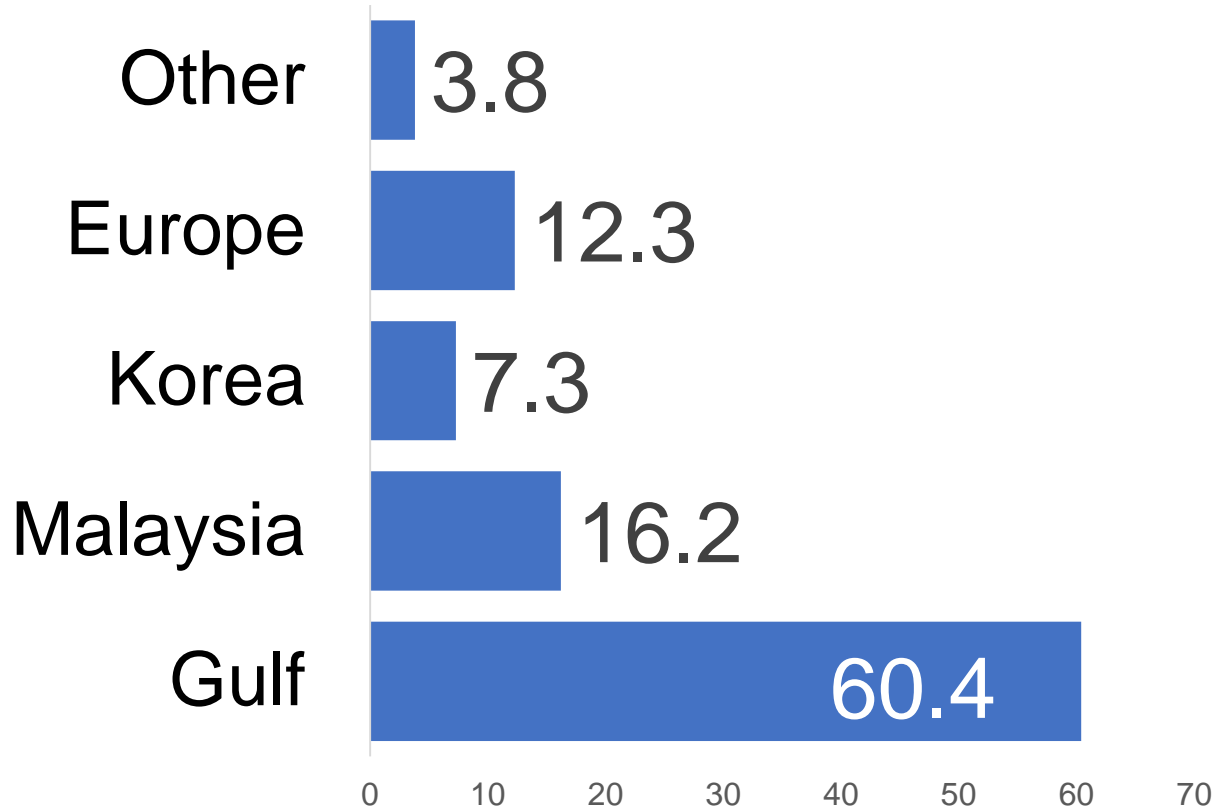
Socio-Demographic Characteristics

	N	%
Age of study participant		
20-24	40	15.4
25-29	80	30.8
30-34	53	20.4
35-39	48	18.5
40-44	22	8.5
45-49	17	6.5
Mean \pmSD	31.57 \pm 6.9	

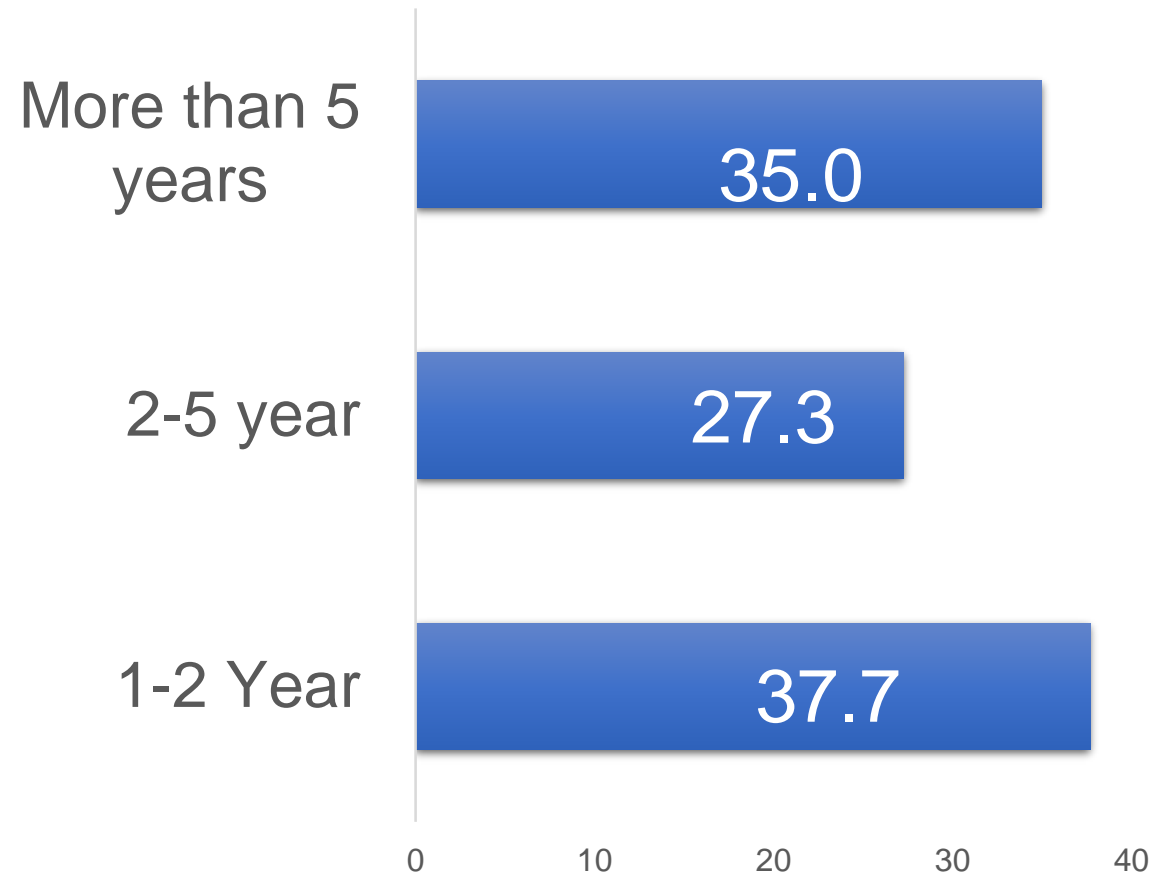


Duration of Migration and Destination

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION



DURATION OF MIGRATION



Experiences (sample-10)

When husbands migrate, family and community members have stricter control over us. They closely monitor our activities, and if we miss a call, our husbands question us, not realizing how much work we're managing at home. Left-behind women endure more mental stress because of this."

Female participant, age 31

"In our society, when a wife goes abroad, people say they are free to have relationships with anyone without facing social stigma."

Male participant, age 25

Social stigma among left-behind spouses escalates most dramatically with low education (19.1% basic vs. 3.8% university) and rural isolation (Taplejung 16.2% vs. Jhapa 8.5%), confirming education and community networks as primary protective factors (Aryal et al., 2020; Sunar, 2019)

	Experiences of social stigma					Chi Square
	Yes		No		Total	
	%	N	%	N	N	
District						Chi Square-3.56 Sig. -0.059
Taplejung	16.2	21	83.8	109	130	
Jhapa	8.5	11	91.5	119	130	
Family Structure						Chi Square-1.764, Sig. -0.184
Nuclear	13.7	28	86.3	176	204	
Extended	7.1	4	92.9	52	56	
Education Attainment						Chi Square-3.814, Sig. -0.149
Basic (1-8)	19.1	9	80.9	38	47	
Secondary (9-12)	11.8	22	88.2	165	187	
University Level	3.8	1	96.2	25	26	
Duration of migration						Chi Square-1.415, Sig. -0.493
1-2 Year	7.1	7	92.9	91	98	
3-5 Year	14.1	10	85.9	61	71	
More Than 5 Years	16.5	15	83.5	76	91	

Experiences

"When husbands migrate, family and community members have stricter control over us. They closely monitor our activities, and if we miss a call, our husbands question us, not realizing how much work we're managing at home. Left-behind women endure more mental stress because of this."

32 years old man participant

"In our society, when a wife goes abroad, people say they are free to have relationships with anyone without facing social stigma."

29 years old woman participant

Impact on the sexual life of left behind spouses

Your odds ratios reveal that Taplejung residents (OR=9.35, p=0.01), businesswomen (OR=17.06, p=0.01), and Janajati women (OR=6.10, p=0.02) face dramatically higher social stigma, directly driving compromised sexual lives through isolation, visibility, and marginalization precisely as Shattuck (2019) documents elevated reproductive morbidity among Nepal's stigmatized migrant wives

Background character	Odds ratio	P>Z	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
District				
Taplejung	9.35	0.01	1.96	44.55
Jhapa	1.00			
Occupation of left-behind spouses				
Farming	1.178	0.89	0.10	14.103
Business	17.06	0.01	1.88	154.70
Salaried employment	0.28	0.41	0.01	5.923
Home maker	1.98	0.68	0.08	51.02
Other	1			
Sex				
Female	1.00			
Male	408.98	0.001	11.58	14454.20
Caste/Ethnicity				
Janajati	6.100	0.02	1.46	25.57
Other	1			

Experiences

“When I return home, I feel like a stranger in my own house. My wife and I have grown apart; we don’t talk much except about household matters. Sometimes, this matter forces me to search for marital relations, and I join in some time.”

32 years old man participant

- *“I am missing my husband, but I also have more sexual needs because he left me after three months of marriage and a test of sexual intercourse. So, I need to fulfil a need that drives me to extramarital relations with my close friends working in the same place, which supports me to maintain mentally and physically, so it is not only about sex, but it is a treatment for me.”*

29-year-old woman participant

Conclusion and Takeaway message

- International labour migration in Nepal is not only economic, but it is also **deeply relational and personal**
- **Prolonged separation** weakens emotional intimacy, reshapes sexual relationships, and strains marital stability
- Conjugal life is shaped by **age, ethnicity, gender norms, and economic dependency**
- Despite awareness, **cultural barriers limit reproductive health choices and autonomy**
- Left-behind spouses face **hidden burdens**: loneliness, emotional distress, and social isolation

Takeaways message

Silence around sexuality and intimacy in migration discourse has left a critical gap in both research and policy.

Introduction

- I am an Assistant Professor of Population Studies at Tribhuvan University with over 18 years of experience in sexual and reproductive health research, training, and program development.
I am currently affiliated with Ramswarup Ramsagar Multiple Campus, Janakpur, where I am engaged in teaching, research, and academic leadership.
My work focuses on migration, SRHR, and marginalized populations, contributing to evidence-based policy and practice in Nepal.

