

Role of Family Structure and Livelihood Strategies in Shaping Migration Decisions among Kham Magars in Rukum East, Nepal

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Abstract

This article explores the role of family structure and livelihood strategies in shaping decisions for selecting migration types and destinations among rural families. This ethnographic study was conducted among the Kham Magar indigenous community in Rukum East district of western Nepal. Information was obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation and living with the people in their context. The study reveals that family dynamics, such as household size, income levels, and resource availability, influence the decision to select the type and destination of migration. Families that are economically constrained but have a larger size adopt seasonal and labor migration to Indian and Nepali cities, while families with financial resources send members to Malaysia, Gulf countries or even Europe. Smaller and low-income families involve more in the pastoral and seasonal labor migration during the lean agricultural season. Livelihood diversification, driven by economic needs and environmental factors, further shapes family migration patterns. Migration decisions are largely made collectively, often influenced by collaborative discussions among family members. Additionally, community perceptions further shape migration choices, with returning migrants gaining social status depending on the destination and financial success. The findings highlight the complex role of family needs, socioeconomic conditions, and community perceptions in determining migration outcomes, offering a nuanced understanding of migration as both an economic necessity and a social aspiration for rural families.

Keywords: family structure, livelihood strategies, migration decisions, Kham Magars, Nepal.

1. Introduction

Migration decisions are influenced by numerous socio-economic factors, including the family structure and livelihood strategies. Family dynamics and features are central to the migration process and significantly influence migration decisions for selecting the types and their destinations, often driven by the need to support household income conditions and stability (Lauby & Stark, 1988; Black et al., 2022). This indicates that family structures and livelihood requirements play a role as a collective strategy in family migration decisions.

Previous studies have shown that family size, peer pressure, and household characteristics play important roles in shaping migration decisions (Wondimagegnhu & Fantahun, 2023; Tegegne & Penker, 2016). Tao and Shi (2023) mention that the interdependence of family structure and livelihood activities is particularly evident, where household features such

as size and labor force influence both livelihood strategies and migration decisions. Moreover, Black et al. (2022) claim that individuals migrate for family reasons and seek employment opportunities which are linked to family stress and livelihood constraints.

The composition of the family plays a significant role in shaping migration patterns and selection of the destination, as families take into consideration factors such as education for children, benefits for the ageing people, employment opportunities, kinship and social networks to fulfil their economic needs (Jong et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2017). It is invariably recognized that the connection linking the aspects of family structure, livelihood strategies and the decisions to migrate is intricate and multidimensional. According to Ayele and Degefa (2022), the composition of a family undoubtedly affects the different ways of earning a living and most importantly, these ways of earning a living are what influence when and where people migrate. This connection is further stressed and illustrated with the arguments by Tao and Shi (2023), whereby they argued that family structure affects the decision to migrate through socio-economic factors including strategies of livelihood, which play a key role in mitigating risks or improving the household conditions in the context of migration.

Empirical evidence supports these claims, showing that larger family sizes and existing migrant networks positively correlate with the likelihood of migration (Wondimagegnhu & Fantahun, 2023). Generating income for food, clothing, health care and education investment also influences the migration decisions of the family (Rai & Dangal, 2023). Pandey (2018) finds in his study in the far western region of Nepal that family structure, economic standing and newer opportunities to work outside the country play important roles in shaping migration decisions. In rural Ethiopia, ecological degradation and insufficient resources prompt families to seek alternative livelihoods through migration highlighting how environmental factors can intersect with family structure and livelihood strategies to influence migration decisions (Tegegne & Penker, 2016).

Although studies are carried out related to this topic, there remains a gap in knowing how family structures and livelihood strategies impact the migration of the rural Kham Magar community in Rukum East district of Nepal. The specific culture, social and economic settings of this region could reveal different patterns and dynamics in the migration decision-making processes that have not been fully explored. Therefore, this research aims to explore the role of family structure and livelihood strategies in shaping the decision of the family for the types and destinations of migration among Kham Magar people in Rukum East, western Nepal. The study will be helpful to elucidate and contribute towards more understanding of migration patterns in Nepal. The subsequent sections of this article outline the research methods, present the results and discussion and conclude the paper.

2. Research methods

2.1 *Study area*

The field study was conducted in the Gabang, Saipatung, Budhadedda, Khabang, and Janga villages of Bhume Rural Municipality in western Nepal's Rukum East District. These villages are heavily populated by Kham Magar, an indigenous community. The families are heavily involved in seasonal and pastoral migration in the allocated area, as well as labour migration to India and Gulf-countries.

2.2 *Sampling*

The study gathered data from 35 experienced migrants, comprising 19 males (54%) and 16 females (46%). The research was conducted in four distinct stages: April–May 2021,

August–September 2021, March–April 2022, and November–December 2023. During these periods, researchers collected data through in-depth interviews and participant observations. Participants were selected purposively after being informed about the study and providing their consent. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to protect the identities of those involved in the research.

2.3 Research design and tools

This research employed an ethnographic qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, participant observation, and immersion in the community's natural setting to gather information. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse group of migrants, varying in age, education, and socioeconomic status. Interviewees included pastoral migrants, seasonal workers in India, Gulf countries and South Korea, short-term laborers in construction and industrial sectors, as well as family members of migrants. A prepared interview guideline was used, with flexibility for expansion as needed. Observations focused on how families interact and make decisions. A local person who was familiar with the researcher facilitated introductions between researchers and villagers, enabling smooth communication, interviews, and translations with community members.

2.4 Data analysis and interpretation

Mobile audio recording was done to capture in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and discussions, while a notebook was used to document field observations and visits, which was later organized and securely stored. Following the completion of information gathering and field visits, all interviews, observation notes, and memos underwent translation and transcription into the appropriate format. The information was coded to evaluate and establish themes. A theoretical or thematic analysis was performed on the most representative participant narratives based on the collected data. The results were then validated using observation, key informant interviews, and field notes.

3. Result and discussion

3.1 Influence of family structure and status on migration types and choices

The family structure measure includes whether or not the respondent is from a married family, has at least one child, or is a family whose members are ready for the migration but have dependents. This kind of family situation has different motivations and orientations for migration than single migrants. Similarly, Luthra et al. (2018) say that age is also likely to affect the type of migration and integration, with younger migrants more likely to move in a flexible and “footloose” way than older potential immigrants.

Kham Magar families with bigger sizes are more likely to migrate for a living because there is a lack of arable land for cultivation and crops to meet their necessities and they also have more individuals as labourers in the family. Mid-size and middle-class families' main objective of migration is employment. Similarly, rich families decide to send their children to Europe, South Korea, and wealthier countries because they have money or access to loans to invest in migration. In contrast, middle-income families select Gulf countries and Malaysia as the destination of migration. These families also send migrants to Indian, and Nepali cities like Kathmandu, Dang, Butwal, and Baglung and do small businesses. On the other hand, low-income families choose India and cities within Nepal for employment instead of Gulf nations or Malaysia. Low-income families commonly struggle to cover the costs associated with passports, application fees and

travel. Additionally, they need to generate quick remittances to meet household necessities which makes it difficult to wait a prolonged time for the migration process. Poor families often work daily for their subsistence, leaving them with limited resources for their migration opportunities. The families with the above-mentioned features, mostly the elder son and daughter are compelled to pursue labour migration as they have to carry the responsibilities, particularly in the absence or incapacity of the father. The intensity depends on the family income, risk-taking capacity and access to the source of funds to pay for the cost of migration. One participant, Ms Sujata (27 years) explains that:

Based on need and affordability, larger (big-size) families are more involve in migration for employment. I would say that wealthy families send their members to Europe, Korea, and rich countries, while middle-class families send members to the Gulf countries and Malaysia. Lower-income families, on the other hand, send their members to Indian and Nepali cities.

Migration is an increasing trend among middle and low-income Kham Magar families after the newly constructed road linkages because travel duration has decreased. Similarly, those families who are already involved in labour migration move again as they have experience and some income to fund the migration process. Small families migrate for subsistence earnings to sustain their families but families of larger sizes with good incomes want to stand with their status and prestige in society so they seek easy jobs and good earning opportunities in more advanced countries and areas. Likewise, big families move more temporarily maintaining multi-houses in the origin at least by some members of the family and some migrate and build a house in the new destination. Dilman Budha (33 years), intra-village migrant shares that:

I migrated to the Himachal Province of India for seasonal work. Later, we migrated from our hillside village to an emerging road-head town in Saipatung, Kankri but we maintain both houses in the hillside village and in the town.

However, rich families move more permanently as they can afford to buy land and build a house in the cities. Low-income families cannot afford to move permanently by purchasing land and building a house so permanent migration is less among this segment of the family. Nevertheless, all household sizes with varying economic capacities of families migrate seasonally to the designated pastoral land as per the customary governance rules imposed by Gwala Raikar Samiti (village headers committee). Hill and Milewski (2007) mention that the family-life course (changing family structure): marriage, first childbirth when it occurs to marriage formation and second childbirth are connected to migration. This is also true among the Kham Magar families based on their family life course they decide the types and destinations of the migration. When they get married, they also take a loan for the marriage ceremony and they send their son abroad to pay off the loan. Similarly, when the first baby is born, they think of the increasing cost to look after the child and education expenses and they think of earning from outside of their village. The desire to stay in a nice house with a more pleasant environment to raise their children and support the education of children would be a determinant for migration. The growing size of the family and the need to select a school for their children's education are other important factors influencing the migration choices and destinations for the married couple, which are also directly linked to their social status.

3.2 Family dynamics in migration decision-making

There is evidence that the collaborative goals of household members impact migration decisions. Haberfeld et al. (1999) conclude from studies on migration in India that suggest migration-related decisions should be examined not only in terms of utility maximization by individual migrants but also in terms of risk minimization at the household level. The hardship of some members, in particular, will influence the division of labour within a family and thus

migration decisions (Fengbo et al., 2016). Migration decisions are not only made by assessing the cost and benefits, in reality, it is also made often in the context of unique needs, urgency, stress and above all uncertainty and insufficient information about livelihood options (Czaika et al., 2021). Families decide whether to migrate based on cost and benefit, personal unique needs, available information, the gradual formation of aspirations, time for migration, resource accumulation, livelihood opportunities, the success of other migrants, network and seasonal factors, such as the necessity to send family members for labour.

There are five types of family migration decisions among Kham Magars: joint family decisions, decisions made by the family head, individual decisions supported by the family, decisions supported by the parents-in-law, and forced decisions made by the Gwala Raikar Samiti (headers village committee). In a joint family decision, the father, elder sons, or sometimes the mothers are sent to work to earn money based on the household situation, and the family supports the entire process of migration. Family members contribute to the cost of going abroad for labour employment by agreeing to take the risk of migration as well. In this case, family members also force sons to work abroad. In general, families decide who will go to India for seasonal work or transhumance migration in pastoral lands, and who will stay at home to care for their cattle in low lands, including chickens, and pigs, and manage agricultural plantations. Mr. Madan Budha Magar (29 years) says:

Families discuss and decide who will go hillside for cultivation and livestock rearing and also decide who stays on the lowland to look after pigs, and chickens and take care of their crops.

The following interview excerpts are derived from a conversation with Mr. Prakash (35 years) and provide insight into one example of how family decisions are made:

My wife and I decided to move to Saipatung village and built a house on the road headside. We thought that since this location has road access and my other house is on a hillside, we could at least stay here when travelling on a long journey. We also considered potential business opportunities. I've now rented out five rooms and earning money.

Similarly, Ms. Kristi (23 years) explains that:

Regarding migration, my husband and I decided that he would seek employment opportunities abroad. Since we had a loan, I was the one who suggested sending him for the job, and he agreed. I obtained a loan from microfinance to pay for agent fees and travel expenses.

The family makes the migration decisions considering the destination, family network, expected earnings, the logistics of the trip, and the budget for the travel and paperwork. Usually, the older son is chosen for the migration before the younger brothers. Similarly, the father plays a central role in deciding who migrates, with family support. If the father has already migrated then the parents-in-law facilitate the decision-making process in the extended family. Mr Dipak Gharti (30 years) explains:

I decided to migrate to India for work because I wanted to help my parents. My mother quickly arranged a loan after I shared my plan. However, after my return from India, I discussed with my parents about going to Malaysia, and the parents contributed 50%, while my parents-in-law contributed 50% to pay the travel cost and agent fee. My older sister and older brother accompanied me to Kathmandu International Airport to do my farewell.

This shows that two families who are united through marriage, help each other not only in agricultural work but also in sending their adult children to migrate for employment. However, the eldest son and daughter also make the personal decision to migrate for employment,

having witnessed the financial and livelihood struggles of the family. Mr Aakash (18 years), a high school student, explains that:

My third sister migrated with her own decision to work outside of our village but my elder sister and elder brother left home after a family discussion. I remember the discussion was made at home and they shared a plan of where they wanted to go. Since they left the village, all of them are supporting my education while I study here in Saipatung village.

Similarly, Gwala Raikar Samiti (headers village committee) customary rules compel Kham Magar families to adopt seasonal migration to their five designated pastoral highland areas for specific months where they take their cattle backed by the marijuana plantation and minimal other agricultural practices. Thus, households decide on migration based on family needs, family size, economic conditions, labour available in the family, duration of migration and customary rules.

3.3 Effect of livelihood diversification strategy on migration decision

Livelihood diversification is the practice of working in the conventional farming sector while also working in other sectors, such as small entrepreneurship-related activities, to increase the number of income-generating activities in any field (Biswas & Mallick, 2021). Labour migration has become a way of life for many households necessitated not just by economic hardships, but also by cultural beliefs and social reasons (Sunam & Adhikari, 2016). The livelihood opportunities and the level of livelihood diversification of the family based on location, natural resources and socio-ecological context help or hinder migration. Families who want to diversify their livelihood by traditionally being influenced by climate change adopt seasonal migration and transportation and technology have expanded the destination of temporary migration (Biswas & Mallick, 2021). Kham Magar families have been adopting seasonal or temporary migration from a long time ago to different locations which is one of the best strategies to diversify their livelihoods. The road linkages and construction of the Mid-hill region road (*Pahadi Lok Marga*) have expanded migration destination areas and shortened the travel duration.

Similarly, access to the internet through smartphones made easy communication between migrants and prospective migrants, providing required information about livelihood-making opportunities outside their village. Kham Magar people adopt various strategies to enhance and secure their livelihoods, which affects the selection of the types, destinations, and duration of the migration. Thus, migration decisions are closely aligned with each family's livelihood strategies. The choices of the migration type and destination depend on food security, environmental adaptation, cash earning (quick remittance) opportunity, accumulation of assets and supporting the cost of education. Former Ward Chairman, Nar Bahadur Budha (65 years) mentions:

People from our villages decide to migrate to different destinations with the hopes of providing basic needs for families, obtaining food security and education, and saving money for festivals. Many migrate to our region's pastoral hillside areas to raise livestock, engage in small-scale farming, and gather herbs. Families also send members of their households to seek employment in India, Malaysia, the Gulf countries, and Nepali cities during the non-farming season to earn cash income so that they can support families for loan payments, house construction, clothing and education.

Kham Magar families who pursue traditional livelihood through cattle rearing, choose designated pastoral lands for specified months for migration. Meanwhile, families with low-income and small landholdings select Nepali cities and India for employment during lean agriculture season to generate extra income to support their families with food, clothing, and some

cash for social activities. Lean seasons might occur due to agricultural downturns, and temporary migration is an important coping strategy for a significant number of impoverished rural families in developing countries (Shonchoy, 2015). Pastoral livestock management and crop farming are essential for subsistence even if they are not effectively integrated with the official economy in the study region. This is because agricultural goods are critical for the livelihoods of the majority of low-income households (Hauck et al., 2016). This has helped families to maintain their homes and keep family members in the village where their forefathers lived and expect their children to continue living.

Kham Magar families move seasonally in search of jobs they are familiar with, including construction work or jobs involving farming and animal husbandry. Additionally, seasonal migration is employed to adjust to the climate, the growing season, and the efficient utilization of regional resources. Families with multiple livelihood goals such as food security, supporting children's education and loan payments choose various types of migration based on the available persons in the family. For example, a family decide to send some members for pastoral migration that contributes to food security, and some members are sent for the seasonal migration to India which helps families cover school fees and clothing expenses. Additional members may go to the Gulf countries to pay off the loan taken for the family function or to build a house. This is their coping strategy for uncertainty that migrants may take time to search the jobs and send money so they adopt different types of migration to mitigate the risk. Ms Kristi (23 years), intra-village migrant and seasonal migrant explains that:

My small family migrated to Saipatung, near the road from our village and constructed a new house. We migrated here expecting that we would send our son to a good school and also do a small business. I have rented out rooms and run a retail shop. We have a loan taken at a high interest rate from a village money lender to build this house so my husband now works in Kullu, India in the construction field, hoping that we can pay it back soon. I also want to close shop and migrate during the season to India because I want my son to be sent to an English medium boarding school.

In Kristi's story, we see that families migrate to support their children's education, pay off loans and expand livelihoods so they combine different types of migration to increase the overall family income. Similarly, Bhangintha (45 years) experienced in intra-village, seasonal and international migration described:

Our agricultural yields were not enough for our family for a whole year so I went to India and Saudi Arabia. I and my wife lived for four years in India then I migrated to Saudi Arabia for 7 years. I aimed to earn money and support my children with their school fees and better clothing. After I returned from Saudi Arabia, I built this new house and also bought another land with a house in Sahumara village. I supported, my two daughters, to complete their grade twelve level of education and my son is studying in an English medium school. Now, we raise cattle and run a small business and my daughter also works in a Cooperative. Each year, I and my two daughters migrate to India for one or two months to earn quick cash for the family needs and festivities.

Bhangintha's story illustrates that a family's goals and expectations for needs and wealth accumulation influence choosing the types, duration and who would be involved in migration. In short, families make two types of livelihood decisions one is based on economic reasons and the second one is related to environmental adaptation that ultimately helps families select economic and environmental migrations. The economic migrants are the ones who want to reduce poverty, obtain a better future for their children and get employment. Environmental migration is chosen when a family want to cope with the climate and environmental challenges. However, livelihood diversification strategy by seasonal/temporary migration also helps families to block long-term or permanent migration. Abizu, (2018) finds how families adopted migration

as livelihood diversification in his study where 32% of Nigerians mentioned an increase in the living standard, 34% reduced poverty, 8% increased in social status and 16% of families empowered. Thus, the types of livelihood strategies adopted by Kham Magar families influence their selection of migration destinations and types. Kham Magar families are wise and strategic in expanding family income through pastoral migration to designated pastoral land, which is backed by agricultural activities. Among Kham families, if the family wants primarily to respond to the limited resources and basic needs then they adopt seasonal and pastoral migration. Meanwhile, those who wish to accumulate wealth and pay off larger loans for house construction prefer migration to the Gulf and Malaysian countries.

3.4 Community perception in shaping migration decisions of the families

Numerous positive and adverse impacts of migration are realized not just by migrant families, but also by those who have not migrated, including people in the villages, local towns, and across Nepal as a whole (Sunam & Adhikari, 2016). People from the Kham Magar community, who are out-migrated get a kind of respect as migration was their part of living and practices. However, seasonal or pastoral migration, in which all families engage in cattle-raising and marijuana plantation, is viewed as a necessity rather than a marker of social status. This pastoral migration is considered a customary obligation and part of their livelihoods rather than a source of prestige.

Many young people from the Kham Magar community dreamed of serving in the British or Indian forces, but few did so. The perception of the local community is that all young people (men) should leave the area in search of employment and that few consider starting micro-enterprises in their locality. This community mindset, rooted in tradition, both encourages or pressures families to send their members for migration. Comparatively, migrants who worked in India and returned village were afforded less status than the people working in Malaysia, Gulf countries, South Korea etc. However, those who serve in the Indian armed forces are widely respected.

The Kham Magar community assigns various status labels to migrants such as '*Kalapahade*' for those who migrated and worked for a long time in India, '*Arabe Lahure*' for the migrants who work in Gulf Countries or '*Bideshi Lahure*' for all international labour migrants. Mr. Dilman (33 years) says:

I am not sure why people who worked in India are known as Kalipahade. But, it must be that they worked in Himachal in the Kullu area of India. Kalapahad is the blacktop hill that top is seen as black and naked. Those who stayed longer time India for earnings have received their nickname Kaalipahade.

Pahari (1991) explains that the term *Lahuray (Lahure)* refers to the one who goes to or returns from Lahore – was the name assigned to any hill-man who pursued his fortunes in the armies of states to the west of Nepal. In this present time, *Lahure* is a commonly used term to identify the people who worked outside the country and have returned. This phrase (*Lahure*) has evolved in its meaning to encompass all migrant workers and appears in Nepali folk songs and short stories (Ahmadzadeh, 2017). Parents and elders often scold younger family members by comparing them to others who already become *Lahure* (migrants working abroad) which compels young children to seek foreign labour employment as family family-driven decision. The status and respect migrants receive in family and community depend largely on migrants' earnings and visible improvements in homes and families. This raises the question: Why are migrants held in high regard within their families and villages? Mr Gharti (30 years), a returnee migrant explains:

Non-migrants don't understand our struggle but they think we have earned money so they see and respect us. They say that 'Lahure has come back' yet some people

earned well within the country who are not counted as Lahure by the community. This perception encourages the family to make migration decisions.

Those who earned a good amount of money and improved their living standard were respected well in the village. Likewise, Mr Gobardhan (30 years old), an intra-village migrant explains that:

There is one saying "A son needs to see the world." This belief is deeply rooted in the families and society in our village so male members of the family take responsibility for internal/international labour migration under the motivation and often compelled by family expectation.

Migration decisions among Kham Magar families are shaped by the perceptions of their community. Migrations, both pastoral and labor, are culturally embedded and distinct social statuses are ascribed to the destination of the migration and remittances. The perceptions and social attitudes towards migration and the visible benefits of migration influence families to encourage younger generations to seek employment outside the village and perpetuate the cycle of migration.

4. Conclusion

Migration decisions in Kham Magar families are familial, with individual choices supported by immediate or extended family members. Family structure plays a role in migration that affects the selection of types and destinations of migration. The size and class of the family, along with their economic capacity, access to loans, and networking capacity, determine the types, duration, and destination of migration. The purpose of migration varies depending on the size of the family; for example, larger families are more likely to migrate to meet their basic needs and have more laborers available, whereas rich families decide to send their children to a better school or send their members to wealthy nations to accumulate assets as they can invest money or have access to financial services. Moreover, low-income families require seasonal or temporary migration for them to create income opportunities. Similarly, the livelihood diversification strategy of the family also affects migration. Families who want to adopt traditional livelihoods influenced by the climate or weather choose temporary or seasonal migration, whereas families with multi-level goals such as food security, education support, loan payment, and so on combine several types of migration. Families who want to increase their income from overlapping migration can earn money from seasonal migration and use that money to fund international labour migration. The perception of the community also plays a role in the migration decisions because the community tags "*Kalapahade*" for the person who worked in India for many years and "*Lahure*" for those who worked outside Nepal and India, not limiting to soldiers. Those who earned well and returned from Malaysia, the Gulf nations, and other bigger countries are highly respected, encouraging families to consider migration. Additionally, the community has the perception that men have to "see the world and test it," which encourages the families to send their young men outside of their place to earn.

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