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Stigma and empowerment: A qualitative study on Nepalese women and labour migration

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Introduction

Labour migration is a global phenomenon, with an estimated 150 million migrant workers worldwide (ILO, 2015). The number of people migrating for work is increasingly driven by changing labour markets and economic globalization (Benach et al., 2011; Piper, 2004). Globally, women make up nearly 45 per cent of migrant workers with many increasingly migrating independently for work (ILO, 2015; United Nations, 2005). This feminization of labour migration is largely due to women contributing to the gendered low-skilled sectors such as domestic work, manufacturing and as caregivers (Piper, 2003; Timothy and Sasikumar, 2012; United Nations, 2005). This trend has been most prominent in Asia (Lim and Oishi, 1996), with more women migrating than men in some countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia where approximately 60 per cent and 65 per cent of the migrant workers are women, respectively (Piper, 2003).

There has been a significant increase in the number of Nepalese women migrating for work in recent years. Official figures show that between 1985 and 2001, only 161 women migrated and by 2014–2015, the figure shot up to 21,421. However, these numbers do not include cross-border migration to India and those migrating through informal channels (Government of Nepal, 2014; Gioli et al., 2017). Nepal has the highest feminized migrant stock of 70 per cent in Southern Asia, with India and Saudi Arabia the main countries of destination (United Nations, 2019). The main reasons Nepalese women migrate are due to poverty, unemployment/lack of opportunities and higher remuneration in destination countries (Timothy and Sasikumar, 2012). The majority of Nepalese women are employed in the low-skilled service sectors, typically domestic work due to the increasing life expectancy and declining fertility in destination countries (Timothy and Sasikumar 2012; Bhadra 2007).

The empowerment women may have gained through labour migration can challenge gender norms and traditional roles at home, which in turn, leads to social sanctions and stigma. This process of stigmatization at home can begin to challenge the sense of power and independence women have gained through migration and work (Fleury, 2016; Bélanger and Rahman, 2013). This paper explores the contradictions between empowerment and stigmatization experienced by Nepalese women labour migrants. Through the analysis of their experiences, we aim to add to the migration literature to better understand and help formulate policies and interventions that address the broader social and cultural factors.

Stigma and empowerment

Stigmatization is developed in a social context and persists due to structural factors. Its purpose is to exploit and dominate, to maintain inequalities and enforce social norms, and to encourage people to conform (Bos et al., 2013). As Bos et al. (2013:2) state: “stigmatisation occurs on societal, interpersonal, and individual levels.” Therefore stigma can be presented in many ways and can be grouped into distinct areas (Nyblade et al., 2017). Pryor and Reeder’s (2011) conceptual model, as detailed in Bos et al. (2013), categorizes stigma into four interrelated domains: public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association and structural stigma.

Public stigma is comprised of the negative attitudes and beliefs that the public has towards the stigmatized group. One representation of stereotyping is perceptions of norm violation, where the public reacts with social exclusion, anger and without sympathy to the stigmatized group. Self-stigma is the internalization of the negative beliefs and acceptance of the public’s misconception of the stigma (Corrigan and Rao, 2012; Bos et al., 2013). Stigma by association is where others, such as family and friends, associated with the stigmatized person are disparaged due to their connection with the stigmatized person. In response to stigma by association, affected individuals may react negatively towards the stigmatized person (Östman and Kjellin,

2002). Structural stigma is the exacerbation or perpetuation of the stigmatized situation by the institutions and systems in society (Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Bos et al., 2013) such as the media, government or religion through their, often negative, representation of the stigmatized groups (Corrigan et al., 2005).

Empowerment is defined as the ability to make and undertake important life decisions (Mosedale, 2005), with the main objective to attain equality by bringing change to social and cultural structural factors (Mahat, 2003). The process of empowerment is the ability to exercise choice and can be explored through the interrelated concepts of agency, resources and achievements. Agency is the ability to actively exercise choice, even in ways that challenge power relations (Kabeer, 1999). Women's influence and participation in decisions at the family and household levels, their ability to have their own views, speak directly, and move freely in public are examples of empowerment (Yount et al., 2016). Resources are the tools and knowledge through which agency is exercised and form the conditions where choices are made (Kabeer, 1999). These include human resources such as skill development, social resources (participation in organizations), and economic resources (earnings and property ownership) (Yount, 2017). How these resources are accessed and gained is an integral part of the empowerment process (Kabeer, 2003). Achievements are the outcomes of agency and the choices made (Kabeer, 1999). In sum, "resources and agency make up people's capabilities and potential for living the lives they want. Their achievement refers to the extent to which this potential is realized or fails to be realized i.e. the outcomes of their efforts" (Kabeer, 2003:173).

Methodology

Data were collected as part of the South Asia Work in Freedom Transnational Evaluation (SWiFT) to examine the community intervention component of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Work in Freedom (WIF) intervention to reduce the vulnerability of women and girls migrating for work from South Asia. We conducted semi-structured interviews with female migrants (n=55), identified by ILO-Nepal's WIF implementing partners as potential targets for the community intervention. Data collection took place between March and April 2015 in Rupandehi, Chitwan and Morang districts. A team of four Nepalese researchers carried out the audio-recorded interviews with permission, transcribed them into Nepali and translated into English for analysis. The sample characteristics of the 55 women are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Sample Characteristics	Total (n = 55)
Age groups	
20–30	34 (61.8)
31–40	21 (38.2)
Districts	
Chitwan	19 (34.5)
Morang	25 (45.5)
Rupandeh	11 (20.0)
Caste/Ethnic group	
Dalit (Hill and Tarai)	17 (30.9)
Brahman; Chhetri	16 (29)
Rai; Magar; Tamang; Tharu	13 (23.8)
Other (Bote, Danuwar, Darai, Dhimal, Limbu, Tarai other, Thakur and Thakuri Rai)	9 (16.4)
Highest level of education attended	
None/informal	14 (25.5)
Some/completed primary	18 (32.7)
Some secondary	18 (32.7)
Passed Grade 10 or higher	5 (9.1)
Marital Status	
Unmarried	10 (18.2)
Married	28 (50.9)
Separated; Divorced; Widow	17 (30.9)
Number of children (among married women)	
None	1 (2.2)
1–2	28 (62.2)
3–4	16 (35.5)
Ever migrated for work	
Yes	22 (40.0)
No	33 (60.0)

We received ethical approval from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Nepal Health Research Council (Ref: 1441). Fieldworkers attended intensive training that covered research ethics both for the safety of participants and fieldworkers, in addition to research protocol and instruments. Participants provided written informed consent before interviews were conducted. Resources for further information and assistance were provided to all participants.

Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo 11.0, to facilitate coding and analysis. Transcripts were read in full and coded through an inductive approach. Each code was then reviewed within and between interviews to develop themes and sub themes (Green and Thorogood, 2014). Finally, an analysis was conducted specifically around the concepts and specific dimensions of stigma and empowerment. The codes used are detailed in table 2. Each woman is given a pseudonym for confidentiality.

Table 2: Stigma and empowerment domains and codes

Stigma and empowerment domains	Codes
Public Stigma	Community (village) relations
	Discourse
	Illicit work (prostitution)/Sleeping with men (employer)
Self-Stigma	Spoilt women ^a
	All depends on you
	Illicit work (prostitution)/Sleeping with men (employer)
Stigma by Association	Husband/Family
	Marriage
Structural Stigma	Discourse
	Illegal migration
Agency	Empowerment
	Women working and going aboard
	Personal development
	Women's status
Resources	Empowerment
	Women working and going aboard
	Personal development
	Women's status
Achievement	Empowerment
	Women working and going aboard
	Personal development
	Women's status

Note: ^a "Spoilt" or bigreko, which in this context means participation in inappropriate sexual behaviour.

Results

This section describes the stigma themes: public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association and structural stigma and empowerment themes: agency, resources and achievement.

Stigma

Public stigma

Public stigma is the public's attitudes and beliefs toward the stigmatized group. The women in this study described the negative perceptions of community members about women who migrate for work. Public perception of the work associated with labour migration was thought to be linked to prostitution. For example, one woman explained: "In [Nepalese] society, they may say that she earned money by going abroad and by having a bad relationship with a foreigner." (Uma, 36). This was a recurrent stereotype described by the women in this study. Returnee women described being spoken about negatively behind their backs, with rumours suggesting the women have been infected with sexually transmitted diseases or were involved in prostitution. Kriti, 26, a returnee migrant explains:

Now when I was abroad a rumour had started because I wasn't in touch. Some people said that they saw me in Delhi. Some said they saw me in India, in a prostitution house doing bad things... They even searched for me on the internet and saw all these bad stories.

Self-stigma

Self-stigma is the awareness of the public stigma that causes women to internalize and accept their stigmatized situation. Self-stigma was demonstrated by women who accepted the public's association of women working abroad to prostitution and being "spoilt" or bigreko, which in this context means participation in inappropriate sexual behaviour. Qia, 26, a returnee migrant, explained women migrating abroad engaged in illicit work, but should try not to:

I feel that they [women] should go abroad but they should not be spoiling themselves. I feel that they should remember their hardships and go abroad. Because a lot of them get spoilt. I have seen it with my own eyes that a lot of women have been spoilt.

Many women accepted the stigmatization by explaining that all choices, including those made abroad, are dependent on the women's character and honour. For example, one woman explained that for "women who want to go abroad, I will not tell them not to go, because if you are good then everything is good and if you are bad, then everything is bad" (Arpana, 32). While another felt this applied to women who faced abuse, stating: "it depends on oneself whether you get abused or not" (Neha, 32).

Stigma by association

Stigma by association is the impact on people who are associated with the stigmatized person, which can sometimes result in further discrimination towards the affected individuals. Many women reported their families did not support women's migration. They also stereotyped any work abroad as associated with prostitution. Mela, 23, described her husband's questions about her work: "... after coming back from abroad he asked me how many people I have slept with over there. He says 'Go be a prostitute.' those kinds of things". Some women also knew of withdrawn marriage promises or husbands leaving their wives following their migration. Some women resorted to lying about their previous migration. Gulab, 21, described:

I had one friend who had gone to Kuwait to work, and she wasn't married but she was about to. But later the boy she was going to marry didn't come to get her because they [the boy and his family] said that she was not of good honour.

Structural stigma

Structural stigma is the exacerbation of the stigmatized situation by society. Discourse in the media on women and labour migration heavily focused on difficult migration experiences often portrayed women in a very negative light, thus creating structural stigma. One woman stated: "They show it all the time on TV, so many women come back and their experiences have been terrible. They show it all the time, even on Facebook." (Gulab, 21). Women also reported only seeing negative stories on women migrants in the media, not in other contexts, such as in real life: "I have only seen on TV where people come and say that they had a bad experience and you should not go [abroad]. Only the ones on the TV say stay in Nepal get involved in agriculture." (Nirmala, 33). Women also compared this to how men are portrayed: "When a man goes abroad and earns well it's considered good but if it's a woman, then they say she slept with the foreigner that's how she earned the money." (Harsha, 31)

Women also experienced structural stigma when they migrated through irregular channels due to the restrictive migration polices. Chetna, 23, described how she had to travel to India to get her visa because of the age ban placed on Nepalese women:

They [agents] made me make the passport after going to India. Earlier they said that I was too young to work in this country [Saudi Arabia] and that is why my visa didn't come. All the friends who were going with me had their visa, they said my age was low and the person there said they would consider me a child... At that time, I was 18 years old. The medical report was all good, that is how I stayed for one month and one week [in India], after that finally my visa arrived.

Empowerment

Agency

Agency is the ability to actively exercise choice and put them into effect. The women in this study depicted their agency by actively choosing to migrate, gaining control of their own lives and improving their household financial situations. As Kriti, 26, explained, "...instead of staying here and complaining about I don't have this and that... It is better to go. You have money in your hand".

Women also decided to be self-reliant financially. Anita, 38, explained how she understood that family members, especially males might not always be able to support her:

And when you are old you need to have money, to save money for the future because all the sons don't look after their parents. That is why I think it is a very good idea to allow women to go abroad and work.

Women's ability to earn their own income also gave them the independence to decide how and what to spend money on, without asking permission from others. Daya, 31, said: "My mother is facing so many problems right now, but I cannot tell my husband that I will give money to my father and mother. If I earned my own money I could."

Resources

Resources are a medium through which agency is exercised and which can shape the conditions in which choices are made. Migration enabled women to gain knowledge and understanding of the world by living in a foreign country, learning another language and doing different work beyond their own domestic sphere, such as tailoring and beauty therapy. Such opportunities may lead to lifelong learning, self-development and the agency to push themselves to improve. Arpana, 32, explains:

Today there are a lot of good opportunities, they go abroad and learn so many new things, some who have worked as a cleaner for two years say that they want to learn parlour (beauty parlour) and go again to do work in parlour, they say they want to learn cutting (tailoring) to go to work in cutting, I will learn a little bit of English and go to do office work as an office girl, as they say that there will be a lot of opportunities.

Through her access to economic resources, Anita, 38, a Dalit returnee, described how she gained social status through her migration:

Because money is everything. I am Dalit caste. Now before if we had to eat together then everyone used to stay far away. Now after earning some money in 4–5 years now it doesn't matter. Now when I roam around the village, they call me to come and sit with them. Before it wasn't like that so that's why I say money is everything

Achievement

Achievements are the outcomes of agency and the choices made. Women described increased self-esteem, self-worth and recognition of their own abilities through migration. Migration also gave them the inner strength to understand they no longer had to depend on others as Mela, 23, explained:

There are so many women who have gone abroad to work. Now there are women who say I am not going to depend on any man I have skills and talents and I will stand on my own two feet, like me they must have also faced many hardships. So, I feel good about it.

Financial security is important as the main motivation to migrate is often to improve the household's financial status. The ability to earn money and gain access to economic resources also contributed to their increased confidence:

When you have money, you can do everything. But when you don't have the money, you will not know what to do, how to do, how to solve the problems, you will have those kinds of problems. I am the person who lived in another's land before, but now that I have money, I also have the confidence to build a house. I had loans from groups. I paid the loans. I sent the money for my children's expenses. When you have money, you have everything. (Chandani, 28)

Discussion

This paper explores the concepts of stigma and empowerment associated with Nepalese women and labour migration. Our results indicated that these women experienced the interrelated domains of stigma and pathways of empowerment in their migration experience, and through the analysis of their views, we can gain an understanding of how these concepts affect their migration experience from a social and cultural context.

Public stigma, where community members associated labour migration with prostitution was described by all the women in this study. This was also found in Chen Chen's (2006) study of Cambodian migrant workers who were perceived as sex workers and faced disparaging remarks by the communities on their return to their villages. The women in our study viewed this stereotyping as an aspect to be expected from their communities and part of their migration experience. This stigma domain aims at preserving the gender roles and norms and is not only sustained by men but also by the women themselves, perpetuating gender inequality. Similarly, in Devries' (2012:117) study villagers used "malicious gossiping" towards women who stray from gender expectations. Such stigmatizations limit women's advancement by disempowering them through removing resources and creating unfavourable conditions for choices to be made. They can also decrease any gains made by women through their migration, such as in Bélanger and Rahman's (2013:362) study where Bangladeshi women described public stigma through "social disapproval" and "derogatory comments", noting international labour migration decreased their social status.

Self-stigma comes from the internalization of the stigma imposed by others. The women in our study justified that "good" people would not be associated with "bad" work such as prostitution and that it was determined by the individual. The women's acceptance of the stigmatization associated with labour migration made them believe that the women themselves were responsible for their experiences. This was also found in Grossman-Thompson's (2016) paper. Self-stigma may lead to low self-esteem, loss of achievement and diminished hope (Jones and Corrigan, 2014), thus, disempowering the women.

Stigma by association was experienced by the women through their families. Stigma by association can be thought of as fulfilling the function of social norm enforcement by extending the stigmatized individual to a wider group, such as family and potential in-laws. This may lead to decreased support of the stigmatized person. The women in our study described the negative reactions of family and potential partners and in-laws towards women's labour migration are examples of stigma by association, which was also found in Dannecker's (2005) study on Bangladeshi women. While Hirano's (2015) study in Indonesia and Aswathy and Kalpana's (2018) in South India found that male family members of women workers also experienced stigma directly.

The women experienced structural stigma from the media and flowing from governmental policies. The structural stigma described by the women in our study explains how institutions can exacerbate the stigmatization by focusing on the negative experiences that in turn influence the scale of public stigma (Jones and Corrigan, 2014). Structural factors also play a part in the development and persistence of stigma. Power differences are needed for the development of stigma, with social structures empowering selected groups of people at the expense of others (Bos et al., 2013) and most effectual when used to deny choice and agency without actually seeming to do so (Kabeer, 2003). Structural stigma can cause bias and restrict women's ability to make choices (ibid.), therefore more likely to occur amongst people that lack social capital or live in poverty (Bos et al., 2013). Structural stigma was highlighted in the media, including social media and through restrictive gendered government policies. O'Neill (2001) explained the media's role in linking Nepalese women's migration to human trafficking adds to the structural stigma. Hirano (2015) also found the media contributed to structural stigma against women

migrants, by highlighting the difficulties some women have faced abroad, deepening the negative discourse and stigmatization of these women. In Sijapati et al. (2019:620) policy analysis on Nepal's labour migration, "policy measures introduced to 'protect' women have paradoxically denied women of important employment opportunities and also put them at greater risk of exploitation and abuses" causing structural stigma. While the media may be reporting actual situations and difficulties encountered by migrants that women should be aware of, the women in our study pointed out that only negative migration experiences were shown in the media, limiting the understanding of all aspects of the situation.

Empowerment works through an interrelated pathway of resources, agency and achievement. Our results show that migration can empower women. Despite some unfavourable contexts, these women choose to migrate for work, demonstrating their agency by actively exercising choice under challenging power relations. Agency gained through active decision-making was also found in Handapangoda's (2014) study on female Sri Lankan domestic maids. Labour migration gave these women the economic resources needed to increase their right to decision-making in their households. Migrant women that acquired knowledge and skills through migration improved their occupation options, as found in Balderrama's (2013) study among Bolivian women. The achievement of self-worth was also detailed in Nijbroek's (2016) study, showing that Filipino women migrant workers felt more confident and gained self-esteem from their labour migration.

Results from this analysis show the stigmatization experienced through public, self, by association and structurally by these women serves to exploit and dominate, to maintain inequalities and enforce social norms, and to encourage people to conform (Bos et al., 2013) as the migration of women for work challenges social and gender norms (Thimothy and Sasikumar, 2012) in this context. But despite the stigma experienced, women were empowered by migration because they were able to exert their agency by participating or leading in the decision-making process, gaining access to opportunities and resources. The independence and financial resources gained greatly enhanced women's feelings of self-worth. Because migration can elicit both of these contradictory concepts, women also struggle through their newly acquired independence and simultaneous social marginalization. Stigmatization of women labour migrants is present in societies where patriarchal norms exist. Such stigma has an underlying effect of devaluing and disempowering women. Our study shows that women experience both empowerment and stigmatization through labour migration making the experience complex for Nepalese women who will eventually return to communities that may not accept their newly acquired independence. These implications should be considered when formulating policies and interventions that address the broader social and cultural factors.

Limitations

The participants in this study were identified by the WIF implementing partners as potential targets for the WIF intervention. During data collection, a ban was in place restricting Nepalese women from migrating for domestic work. This may have contributed to the unwillingness of some women to disclose their migration intentions and may have resulted in their exclusion from our study. Therefore, the participants are not representative of female prospective labour migrants from Nepal and the findings may not be generalizable to other migrant populations, in Nepal or elsewhere. However, they do represent individuals that the intervention aimed to reach.

Conclusion and recommendations

Labour migration provides an opportunity to empower women through improved agency, access to resources and skills, but this also challenges traditional gender norms which may lead to stigmatization. Stigma in these cases is aimed at maintaining conformity in society. To facilitate the positive aspects of labour migration among women, future interventions will need to address the broader social and cultural factors that perpetuate gender inequalities.

Beyond the broader issues of gender inequalities, governments and other stakeholders can already start working on reducing the stigma attached to women migrants by:

- Raising awareness about the issue of stigmatization through campaigns. These could target public stigma and stigma by association by understanding and encouraging communities and families to examine their attitudes towards migrant women.
- Organizing programmes led by migrants themselves could encourage more personal empowerment, challenging the stigma against them, informing the public and other women migrants, leading to a reduction in self-stigma.
- Changing labour migration policies. Policymakers should be made aware of the structural stigma caused by gender-discriminatory labour migration policies to formulate policies that do not perpetuate further stigma.
- Shifting the discourse in the media. Positive migration experiences should also be included in the migration stories reported by the media along with the negative stories. This can help balance the narrative and provide women with the overall context to make an informed decision.

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