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# Shifting Landscapes: The Effects of Male Out-Migration on Food Security and Food Sovereignty in Rural Nepal

Emma Brown  
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**Shifting Landscapes:**

**The Effects of Male Out-Migration on Food Security and Food Sovereignty in Rural Nepal**

Emma Brown

SIT Nepal: Social Change, Gender, and Development in the Himalaya

Spring 2020

## ABSTRACT

Rural Nepal is experiencing rapid demographic changes, significantly impacting the socioeconomic and agricultural landscape of these areas. Growing percentages of the male population are migrating out of the country in search of better livelihood opportunities. This is largely a result of poor development processes and governmental policies that have failed to create adequate domestic livelihood opportunities and incentives to work in agriculture, as well as changing ideas on what it means to be successful, spurred by globalization. Further, dominant neoliberal ideology and the commercialization of agriculture is decreasing the profitability of agriculture, making migration a lucrative option. Due to out-migration, rural areas are experiencing serious labor shortages, therefore impacting food security and food sovereignty. When men migrate, remittances allow for short-term food security, however declining agency over what and how crops are farmed due to the de-intensification of farming practices is eroding food sovereignty. Further, while short-term food security for some may be achieved, it is due to a reliance on cheap imported food that is dangerous and unsustainable. This impacts people of varying castes and exacerbates the vulnerability of both migrating and non-migrating families. This may lead to serious nation-wide consequences in the future.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

The topic of food security and access dominates many development agendas as global hunger continues to rise. Globalization has promoted a free market of agricultural products, which has led to fluctuating food prices, impacting subsistence farmers worldwide at varying levels. Simultaneously, increasing global interconnectedness has facilitated the movement of employment-seeking migrants encouraged by various factors. Particularly for rural agriculturalists, the privatization and liberalization of food production has resulted in subsistence farming's failure to provide a "sufficient livelihood", causing their displacement to urban areas in order to provide for themselves and their families (Ghale 2010, pp. 195). Such is the case in rural Nepal, where although 65% of the population is dependent on agriculture, approximately one-third of the total working male population are recorded as working abroad (Tamang et al. 2014; Sunam & Adhikari). This shifting demography is causing a labor shortage in rural villages that rely on agriculture, forcing the remaining women to take on the added burden of the work left behind. Out-migration is greatly affecting the agricultural landscape, in turn, the food security and sovereignty of rural families, as they turn to remittances and the global market for food in lieu of farming. As rural communities continue to experience this shifting demography, food sovereignty and food security of these areas are undoubtedly affected as agricultural production declines.

The trend of migrating abroad to seek employment is not new in Nepal; in fact goes back as far as 200 years (Khanal et al. 2015). For decades, Nepalis have gone abroad to work as wage laborers or Indian and British *lahures* (soldiers), and although 77% still move to India, in recent years destination countries have stretched to the Gulf States, Malaysia and South Korea (Sunam

& Adhikari; Gartaula et al. 2012). Labor migration to India is cheap due to low travel and transaction costs, and does not require a visa or work permit, whereas various barriers stifle the ease of migrating to other countries (Maharjan et al. 2012). Despite this long-standing trend of migration, foreign labor migration has recently risen phenomenally, and Nepal is now one of the largest labor sending countries in the world (Sunam & McCarthy 2015). Over 50% of Nepali households have at least one member living in another district or abroad, and consequently, remittances now largely contribute to Nepal's economy. According to the Nepal Living Standard Survey, 56% of households in Nepal received remittances in 2011, contributing to 25% of the Gross Domestic Product (Khanal et al. 2015; Gartula et al. 2010). Nepal is currently the largest remittance-receiving country in South Asia and this money was largely responsible for reducing Nepal's poverty to 25% in 2011, from 42% 15 years prior (Sunam & Adhikari).

While employment driven out-migration is not uncommon, what separates Nepal from other countries is that its migration trend is highly gendered, with most migrants being male. In many parts of the world women make up about half of the migrant population, but according to the 2011 census, out of every 10 Nepali out-migrants (permanent and temporary), around nine were men (Gartaula et al. 2012). This leaves women to take on the added burden of the agricultural tasks their husbands leave behind, on top of their pre-existing share of farmwork and household responsibilities (Tamang et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2019; Maharjan et al. 2012). This phenomenon is referred to as the "feminisation of agriculture." Gartaula et al. (2010) states, "'feminisation' refers to increased participation and authority of women in certain areas. In agriculture, it refers to women's increased labour participation and role in decision making." This has wide-spread negative effects on agricultural productivity, which can exacerbate food

insecurity and malnutrition problems. The slim labor force and added burden on top of their normal workload causes women to manage farms with less attention, adopt less-intensive farming practices, plant fewer crops, or even abandon their land (Tamang et al. 2014).

This massive migration of male laborers is set amidst a backdrop of widespread food insecurity, and the decrease of agricultural laborers only contributes to this problem. 42 out of the 75 districts in Nepal are food insecure, with the brunt of hunger and malnutrition hitting mostly poor and marginalized communities (Tamang et al. 2014). There is mixed literature regarding whether this migration exacerbates or alleviates “food insecurity” and “food sovereignty,” based on the definition and perspective from which the author stands. While food security considers the financial and physical access to food, central to food sovereignty is the agency farmers have in producing and consuming their food. I will provide much more in-depth explanations for these terms in the following literature review.

In this paper, I will consider the relationship between out-migration and food security and food sovereignty in rural Nepal. I will explore the causes of migration, as well as how out-migration is affecting people differently, changing the perception of food security and sovereignty, exacerbating rural vulnerability, and transforming the physical, social, and economic landscapes of these rural areas. Existing literature and research suggests that out-migration has noticeable impacts on food security and food sovereignty in Nepal. While short-term food security is alleviated thanks to remittances<sup>1</sup> that allow migrant families to purchase imported food, food sovereignty is eroded as farmers are forced to de-intensify their practices, and therefore have less agency over what they produce and consume. Further, this

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<sup>1</sup> Remittances are “the money or goods that migrants send back to families and friends in origin countries” ([www.migrationdataportal.org](http://www.migrationdataportal.org)). In this paper, I will be using this term to refer to the money sent back to migrant families in Nepal by the family member working abroad.

short-term food security is unreliable as market dependency can cause future vulnerability for many socioeconomic groups, which may exacerbate food security and sovereignty issues in the long run. Out-migration therefore has negative long-term impacts on food security and food sovereignty, especially as the perception of food security has shifted away from having home-grown crops to financial capital. These effects are driven and exacerbated by broader forces such as globalization, neoliberal ideology<sup>2</sup>, and the commercialization of agriculture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Food Security and Food Sovereignty

Central to this paper are the concepts of “food security” and “food sovereignty,” both of which must be defined clearly in my research. There is a plethora of literature that engages with both of these terms, however, the two are often conflated. The term food security often stems from a neoliberal lens that highlights trade and the financial means to access food. According to the United Nation’s FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 2006). This concept regards the procurement of food — whether it is by individual production, trade, or state and non-state programs; however, does not prioritize improving food production systems and local resource-based livelihoods.

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<sup>2</sup> Neoliberalism is a policy model that seeks to transfer control of economic factors from the public sector to the private sector. It tends towards free-market capitalism and supports fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade, privatization, and significantly reduced government spending. Neoliberalism is the dominant ideology in public policies of many governments in “developed” and “developing” countries, and of international agencies including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization. There are many criticisms of this ideology, such as its potential to endanger democracy, workers’ rights, and sovereign nations’ right to self-determination ([www.investopedia.com](http://www.investopedia.com); Navarro 2007).

Alternatively, food sovereignty “focuses on local control over the food system with emphasis on strengthening local food production and livelihood systems, so that all people, especially poorer people and peasants, continue to gain food through proper use of resources such as land, livestock, water and forests, even if there is a market failure to supply food” (Sunam & Adhikari). The concept of food sovereignty was developed by La Via Campesina, a group of peasant farmers whose livelihoods were threatened by industrial agriculture and neoliberal policies, as a reaction to the term “food security” used largely by NGOs and governments (ECVC 2018). Food sovereignty emphasizes things such as “the right of farmers, peasants, to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced,” and “the right of countries to protect themselves from too low priced agricultural and food imports” (La Via Campesina 2003). It emphasizes agro-ecological agricultural practices, local markets and consumption, and is argued to be a precondition to genuine food security (Gartaula et al. 2017; Ghale et al. 2018).

Gartaula et al. (2017) argues that Nepal’s situation is complex, and rather than food sovereignty or security, they have developed a “food wellbeing approach” that “combines insights from food security, food sovereignty, and social wellbeing perspectives,” arguing that it is “key to understanding a paradox of increased food security, yet decreasing sustainability of small-scale agriculture.” It is important to acknowledge the multi-layered and complex definitions of these terms.

### **Migration and Remittance Use**

Researchers have identified many reasons for rural out-migration. Some argue that the economic push factors of inadequate rural credit, unemployment, inadequate land and general

rural are the main drivers, while others draw on the economic pull-factors such as high wages in urban areas (Khanal et al. 2015). Johnson recognized that rural out-migration caused low incomes in agriculture, and conversely, the deterioration of the agricultural sector was a driver of agricultural laborers' plight (Johnson 1948; Khanal et al. 2015).

Many studies have researched migration's relationship to its contribution of remittances, working conditions in destination countries, but less have considered the relationship between out-migration and land, farming, and food production in the communities of origins (Sunam & Adhikari). Some have argued that remittances from labor migration has saved Nepal from dire economic crisis. There is evidence that remittances are critical to the survival of communities in many "developing countries," however there is much literature debating whether remittances have a positive or negative impact overall on the receiving country's economy (Khanal et al. 2015).

Regarding remittance use, much literature concludes that there is little investment in agriculture. Tamang et al. (2014) found that families receiving good remittances are less active in agriculture as they spend their remittances on food from the market and invest in other household activities, such as their children's education. Similarly, Khanal et al. (2015) found that both migrant and non-migrant families spent a large portion of their income on food, clothes, education, land purchases, and household improvements, leaving only 5% to be spent on agricultural purposes. They also found that investment in agriculture and social functions was significantly higher in families without an out-migrant.

When looking at how remittances impact food security, there are various conclusions depending on how the author defines "food security." Research by Kim et al. (2019) found that

male out-migration both “alleviates and exacerbates households’ experiences of insufficient quantity and inadequate quality of food, and uncertainty and worry about food”. They concluded that remittances help cover basic expenses and “alleviates anxiety about having enough to eat.” However, they also found that limited agricultural labor stifled agricultural productivity, increasing reliance on markets. They argue that not enough attention has been paid to the “non-financial effects” of migration on food security, and that “by not reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of food security in assessments of the effects of migration, there is a ‘singular failure to understand, and manage’ the relationship between migration and food security” (Kim et al. 2019). Craven and Gartaula (2015) question the assumption that the shift from an agricultural to remittance-based economy increases food access, and their research shows that large-scale outmigration makes the agricultural sector in the place of origin more vulnerable, unproductive, unsustainable or unattractive, leaving a long-term impact on food security.

Research has shown that the focus of remittance usage is not on agricultural enhancement. Yet, about two-thirds of Nepal’s population is dependent on farming as their primary occupation while the share of farm income accounts for approximately a third of the GDP — indicating poverty is concentrated among agriculturalists (Sunam & Adhikari). While some families can access food with remittances, Tamang et al. (2014) found that those who do not receive enough remittances struggle to provide as the women left behind are forced to take on added agricultural work, and cannot fully utilize their lands and must reduce their cropping calendar.

The shortage of laborers due to emigration has caused lots of agricultural lands to be underutilized and kept barren, decreasing agricultural yield, forcing the nation to import large quantities of food grains (Khanal et al. 2015). Similarly, work by Sunam and Adhikari in two villages found that the under-investment of remittances in agriculture and the absence of male labor lowered agricultural production. They also argue that remittances do not necessarily equate to food security as the influx of capital into the country has raised the price of food in absence of local food production, making food less accessible. Additionally, their research showed that remittances in some cases benefitted non-migrant families who were not directly affected by them, however, this benefit was unreliable. They concluded that food sovereignty is deteriorating, and food imports have continued to rise, thus exacerbating the problem. This review of pre-existing literature led me to the following questions.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- I. What are the impacts of male out-migration on food sovereignty and (in)security in rural Nepal?
- II. How are different socioeconomic groups' food security and sovereignty affected?
- III. What are the rural perceptions of food security?

### **METHODOLOGY**

I conducted a meta-analysis on the existing literature to understand the general issue, gain a well-rounded perspective on the topic, and answer my research questions. I reviewed existing works regarding out-migration in Nepal, food security and sovereignty in Nepal, as well as literature involving both. I then identified and color coded broader themes based on why people are migrating and the subsequent impacts this migration is leaving on agriculture, food security,

and food sovereignty. This then led me to identify broader forces that are driving up the desire to migrate and subsequently decreasing agricultural production.

As this research is dependent on pre-existing literature, there are obvious limitations. I was not able to conduct in-person research with Nepali citizens, or witness the phenomena first hand. This could hinder my ability to understand important background information or nuances that are not mentioned in the literature. However, it allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the bigger picture, the issues, and provide insight to potential solutions.

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

### **Reasons for Out-Migration**

Existing research cites multiple reasons as to why migrants are moving out of Nepal, including economic, political, and social factors. The Nepali government does not provide necessary and adequate support for subsistence farmers to continue their work, causing them to look elsewhere to find the financial means to support their families; yet there are little other livelihood options domestically. Additionally, as globalization facilitates the exchange of cultural ideas, it has triggered a social and cultural change that encourages a “modern” lifestyle achievable through migration. Labor migration therefore does not serve solely as a means to mitigate financial hardship, but is also spurred by cultural and social pressure and aspirations of upwards mobility.

### ***Nepal's Policies***

Nepal does not have adequate policies that support or incentivize small-scale agriculture. Approximately two-thirds of Nepal's population relies on farming as their main occupation, yet farm income comprises only about one-third of the GDP. This suggests that much of Nepal's

impoverished people are farmers and farmworkers (Sunam & Adhikari). For many, agricultural work is not sufficient enough to provide for themselves and their families. A study by Gartaula et al. found that 94% of households in their study area had income from more than one occupation, with only 58.5% reporting agriculture as their main occupation (2017). The deregulation of agricultural policies followed the country's democratization, influenced by structural adjustment policies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to encourage growth via economic liberalization. These policies include the removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs (Gartaula et al. 2017). There are no policies in place that support small-scale agriculturalists such as minimum support prices or other subsidies that would incentivize more production (Sunam & Adhikari).

Furthermore, farm sizes are decreasing due to limited agricultural land, yet the population is continuing to grow. Thus, agriculture is unable to meet these growing demands and provide household food requirements, forcing farmers to look beyond farming for income. Yet, Nepal's combined political instability and poor economic situation has limited the off-farm income options within the country (Maharjan et al. 2012). The lack of political support is making the livelihoods of small-scale farmers vulnerable, and these structural policies leave farmers with little other option other than to search for employment abroad. Moreover, there is an increasing demand for financial capital to pay for health, education, and other services. Therefore, farming is no longer an economically viable option for many Nepali smallholders (Tamang et al. 2014).

### ***Shifting Culture and Social Pressure***

Amidst these political and economic backdrops, globalization is simultaneously altering what it means to be successful, which is driving up the desire to migrate. Craven and Gartaula

(2015) state, “the desire to migrate is born largely from a need for cash incomes — or the desire to live a more Western lifestyle.” The spread of “modern” lifestyle aspirations has raised consumption desires, thus encouraging migrants to seek liquid capital. Sharma’s 2008 study reported that going to India or elsewhere allows for possibilities to be “modern” or “developed” and develop a “modern” concept of manhood. This extends beyond being the breadwinner of the family in charge of sending back remittances to provide for their families, but also allows the male migrant to experience the outside world (Sharma 2008). Consequently, migration has become not only a way to improve rural Nepalis’ way of life, but also their social status (Kim et al. 2019). However, this has simultaneously led to the degradation of the once very important occupation of farming, as the social value of agriculture has declined. On top of the aforementioned unfavorable political and economic circumstances, these shifting mindsets urge Nepalis to migrate in search of non-agriculture related work, and there is a social expectation for many men to do so.

Further, this social change will continue to shift as younger generations grow older. As ideas of “modern” Western lifestyles spread, village youth are less inclined to engage in agricultural work. While many young workers recognize the cultural significance of farming and the social status of land ownership, they often find the work unattractive and seek “dry and tidy” jobs instead (Gartaula et al. 2012). Respondents of Gartaula et al’s research described farm work as dirty, instead preferring alternative livelihoods (2012). Social influences and globalized ideas of “modernity” are therefore large contributing factors to the shifting demographic, and in turn physical, landscape of rural Nepal.

### ***Seeking a “Better Life”***

The combination of poor domestic conditions and livelihood options as well as the growing social pressure to move has engendered the idea that migration will provide a better life for Nepalis. Because of the limited opportunities in and outside of agriculture, many Nepalis see migration not as an option, but a necessity. Kim et al. (2019) argues that rather than a livelihood “opportunity,” migration is a remittance-based livelihood “strategy” — claiming that if it was an opportunity, migrants would prefer to stay home with their families. Respondents of Craven and Gartaula (2015)’s research viewed migration to be “inevitable.” Remittance is the third most important income source in Nepal overall, and the second most important in rural areas (Pandley 2019). When looking at the share of remittances in the national GDP, Nepal is ranked fifth in the world (Maharjan et al. 2012). Remittances are an integral part of Nepal’s economy and are a means for many to access “a better quality of life” (Gartaula et al. 2012; 2017). Many younger migrants also move to urban areas to gain an education, which serves as a stepping stone to this “better life” outside of agricultural work (Tamang et al. 2014). The two forces of Nepal’s poor policies and social change have created the idea that migration is key in experiencing a better life.

### **Impact on Agriculture**

There are two main effects of out-migration that impact rural agriculture in Nepal, and in turn Nepal’s food security and food sovereignty. First, there is a primary and direct impact in that agricultural production is physically impacted due to labor shortages, causing inefficient farming practices and even land abandonment. This is causing households to consume less traditionally preferred foods, the production of an insufficient quantity of food, which increases reliance on

labor markets. (Kim et al. 2019). Second, there are secondary impacts on agriculture through remittances and shifting mindsets, which encourage remittance-receiving families to purchase food from the global market rather than engage in agriculture. These consequences are a result of globalization and neoliberal ideology, which are large forces simultaneously making out-migration desirable and agriculture undesirable. Therefore, the causes and effects of out-migration are very cyclical and self-reinforcing — forces driving migration are also impacting agriculture, which perpetuates a vicious cycle that is difficult to break out of.

### ***Primary Impacts***

#### **Labor Shortages and the “Feminization” of Agriculture.**

The most obvious and immediate impact out-migration has on rural agriculture — in turn affecting food security and sovereignty — is the lack of labor left in the villages. 90% of Nepali migrants are men, leaving the women behind to do the work migrants leave behind. Prevailing traditional practices have limited women to access other opportunities, therefore they have little option other than agricultural work. This phenomenon — the increase of women in agriculture — is referred to as the “feminization” of agriculture, and the reduced availability of farm labor has serious consequences for the quality and quantity of output (Tamang et al. 2014).

Interviewed women expressed that they would migrate to find work abroad, but that there are various barriers in place that inhibit them from doing so. Cultural expectations require them to care for their children, land, and animals, thus prohibiting them from leaving even if it is to provide for their families. One interviewee in Kim et al. (2019)’s research expressed that it would render a woman “characterless” to migrate. Additionally, women are legally prohibited from migrating to certain areas in the Gulf States (Piotrowski et al. 2013). In the absence of male

workers, women are forced to take on all of the agricultural work in addition to their pre-existing household and community responsibilities. Furthermore, the existing agricultural system is male-dominated, thus much of the work is “unfriendly” to them, divulging unfair social practices causing them to employ unproductive and non-intensive practices (Tamang et al. 2014).

### **De-Intensification of Agricultural Practices and Land Abandonment.**

While women face the physical challenges of carrying out agricultural work on their own, there are unfair social practices in place that exacerbate the difficulties that hinder the productivity of women in agriculture. One significant reason for agricultural ineffectiveness is that plowing with oxen, a vital part of farm work, is considered taboo in Hindu culture if done by women. It is believed that a woman who plows with oxen will curse the land and cause drought, thus women are often only permitted to plow with their hands and inefficient small tools (Kim et al. 2019). Further, farming practices such as irrigation, fertilization, and pesticide application are traditionally done by men, thus women tend not to carry out this work (Maharjan et al. 2012). Thus, due to the gendered divide in farming practices, women are unable to farm efficiently and substantially. Kim et al. (2019)’s research also found that if women choose to hire male labor (which is often a financial burden), men plow fields only once completing their own work, and found that the task was often completed carelessly. This urges women to use less intensive farming practices, hindering both the quality and quantity of their harvest.

This has serious effects on food sovereignty as women have less agency over what they are planting as they are forced to lessen their crop variety simply due to the lack of labor. Rather than planting important cereal crops with short rotation cycles, agriculturalists are preferring to plant trees and perennial crops as they are easier to maintain (Sunam & Adhikari). Tamang et al.

(2014) found that 74% of households in their study area which once grew three seasonal crops had lessened their cropping cycle to two or even one due to labor shortages. Particularly, the cultivation of indigenous crops such as barley, buckwheat and millet are decreasing, and households are consuming less preferred foods such as maize (Tamang et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2019). Some areas experienced a decrease in paddy production, a preferred crop, and found that many grains ran out sooner than previous years (Kim et al. 2019). This indicates that there is an inadequate quality and quantity of food, and the lack of agency over what is planted and therefore consumed highlights a decrease in food sovereignty.

A less obvious effect that the feminization of agriculture has on food security is that many women are overworked to the point that they are unable to find time in the day to eat (Kim et al. 2019). While having a migrant working abroad appears to alleviate women's worry about having *enough* to eat, Kim et al. (2019) reported that due to the immense workload of women both on and off the farm, they work from early morning to late evening therefore limiting the time they have to feed themselves and prepare food for their families. This also divulges class inequalities, wherein higher caste women have social connections and networks that mitigate this stress, or have the means to hire external labor. Meal patterns are disrupted, and women are "forced to eat less, if at all," during the day which significantly impacts the nutrition of both themselves and their families (Kim et al. 2019; Ghale et al. 2018). Thus, women are not only concerned with providing physical food access, but also worry about finding the time of day to eat and feed their children, significantly impacting their food security and sovereignty.

Further, labor shortages are causing many to leave land idle (*bajho*) instead of growing crops. Some villages experienced 25 to 30% of agricultural lands being abandoned in the last 20

years (Sunam & Adhikari; Tamang et al. 2014; Khanal et al. 2015). In many cases, land in use is not cared for properly, and the maintenance of terraces and landslide affected land has decreased (Sunam & Adhikari). Less intensive practices and land abandonment are reducing food production, affecting physical access to food (food security), as well as hindering food sovereignty by limiting the agency over agricultural practices. Practices such as crop diversity are also crucial to farmers in order to mitigate vulnerability, uncertainty, and unanticipated shocks and stresses (Gartaula et al. 2017).

### **Livestock Reduction.**

Another key element to the productivity of small-scale agriculture is the integration of livestock; however, as labor decreases, some areas are experiencing a subsequent livestock reduction (Sunam & Adhikari; Maharjan et al. 2012). Khanal et al. (2015) reported that the livestock population in their study area had declined by about 1.6% per year from 1950 to 2000. The reduction of livestock directly decreases the supply of organic fertilizers, forcing families to purchase expensive synthetic fertilizers from the market (Sunam & Adhikari). Crop-livestock integration, in addition to providing organic fertiliser, plays a large role in ecological sustainability and also provides additional proteins, vitamins, and minerals to household diets (Gartaula et al. 2017). This livestock reduction exacerbates the poor productivity of agriculture that is already suffering due to the labor shortages.

### ***Secondary Impacts on Agriculture***

#### **Remittance Use.**

While out-migration lowers the amount of available laborers thus physically impacting the productivity of agriculture, incoming remittances also significantly affect the agricultural

landscape as well as food security in rural Nepal. Current out-migration is set amidst increasing globalization that has facilitated worldwide imports of food growing at unprecedented rates. Nepal, a net exporter of food until the mid-1980s, has now become a net importer of food as remittance flow has increased. Specifically, imports to Nepal from India have risen, due to increased road connectivity between the two countries (Sunam & Adhikari). The shift towards a remittance-based economy has facilitated rural Nepali villagers' ability to purchase imported food from the global market, in turn encouraging land abandonment as it is often cheaper and easier for villagers to buy food rather than grow it themselves (Craven & Gartaula 2015). This has de-emphasized the importance of agriculture for food access. Out-migration and increased food trade reinforce the necessity of one another and perpetuate a mindset and economy that is increasingly based around food purchase rather than production.

Remittance flow has shifted the perception of food access, as many prefer purchasing imported food rather than grow their own produce (Craven & Gartaula 2015). Regarding food security, remittance access has alleviated many villagers' worry about having an insufficient quantity of food, as remittances provide its short-term and immediate physical access (Kim et al. 2019). Remittance-receiving families are less inclined to invest in agriculture as they spend their money first and foremost to purchase food from the market, and then use the surplus to invest in other livelihood diversification strategies such as education (Tamang et al. 2014). Due to reasons beyond farmers' control that make agriculture unprofitable, including the lack of subsidies and supportive policies as well as expensive chemical inputs such as fertilizer and insecticides, it is more financially sound for villagers to purchase cheap imported Indian rice (Sunam & Adhikari). Because of these imports, the prices of traditionally farmed hill cereal crops have declined — in

many cases, the cheap prices of imported goods outweigh the effort and resources it takes to farm crops (Sunam & Adhikari). Khanal et al. (2015) found that only 5% of income in their study area was spent on agricultural purposes. While not immediately obvious, the increased flow of remittances due to out-migration is altering the agricultural landscape, food security, and food sovereignty of rural Nepal as it shifts the economy away from an agricultural based one to one that relies on external capital.

The increase in remittance use reveals inequalities regarding food access in rural Nepal, as marginalized communities have limited access to alternative income for market food. A reliance on the market for food availability would therefore put many poor people at risk (Tamang et al. 2014; Sunam & Adhikari). However, there are cases in which remittances have created off and on-farm employment opportunities for lower caste workers who otherwise have limited access to remittances and imported food (Gartaula et al. 2017). Many remittance-receiving families view farming as an unattractive occupation, thus have elected to lend out their land to landless or lower caste people, allowing their engagement in small-scale farm activity. This practice, sharecropping, has allowed for some small-scale cultivation and subsequent food access for marginalized groups. While this may seem like a positive side effect of out-migration, sharecropping is often hard to implement for many low caste or marginalized groups as farming inputs such as fertilizer and external labor are unaffordable to many (Sunam & Adhikari). On one hand, it can be argued that despite the lack of money, both food security and food sovereignty improve for marginalized groups who now have access to sharecropping due to the inflow of remittances. It gives marginalized groups like Dalits access to more cultivated lands, giving them the agency to diversify their food sources. However, because sharecropping

does not permit complete control over the land, there are associated risks; it can be unreliable for Dalits often blocked from fully acquiring land (Gartaula et al. 2017). Thus, it is unsustainable in the long-term, especially due to the increased trend by remittance-receiving families to “plot” their land, which I will describe next.

Remittance-receiving families who are increasingly moving away from agriculture are beginning to “plot” their land, which is when agricultural land is fragmented and converted into residential land to sell for profit (Sunam & Adhikari). This hinders agricultural production as it limits the amount of available agricultural land, therefore limiting the land accessibility for aspiring farmers. This reduction of agricultural land is an effect of out-migration, as this trend was facilitated by the remittance based economy. This causes adverse effects on food security and food sovereignty in rural areas. Moreover, the influx of remittances into rural areas are speeding up the rural-urban migration process, leading to further decline in agricultural production in rural villages (Sunam & Adhikari).

While remittances are certainly increasing physical and financial food accessibility for many migrating families, remittance flows are often unreliable and comes at a cost for long-term food security and sovereignty for both migrating and non-migrating families. Remittances are often sent infrequently and in small amounts, thus families can go extended periods of time without receiving (Kim et al. 2019). In some places, the rise of remittances in the absence of local food production has caused a surge in food price, making those without remittances less food secure. Reliance on the market puts many, especially non-migrating families, at risk, due to unforeseen market failures. Even small-scale food production can mitigate the consequences of international market failure and various food supply and cost fluctuations (Sunam & Adhikari).

However, as aforementioned, there is a shifting mindset that has rendered agriculture an undesirable job, eroding its cultural significance. So while the feminization of agriculture, labor shortages, and remittances are certainly driving down agricultural production, this is set in a background of shifting cultural priorities where young generations aspire to move towards off-farm occupations. The movement towards consuming imported food rather than home grown crops due to labor shortages and increased liquid capital is unsustainable, unreliable, and is decreasing food sovereignty that is essential to the well being of rural communities.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Impacts on Food Security vs. Food Sovereignty**

There are clearly many primary and secondary impacts that male out-migration has on the agricultural, economic and social landscape of rural villages, subsequently affecting the food security and sovereignty of these areas. Labor shortages as well as increased remittance flows are greatly changing how people perceive and interact with agricultural land. Beyond affecting the more noticeable physical and financial access to food, the consequences of out-migration are severely eroding the agency over what and how crops are cultivated, how people are eating, and the agricultural landscape and sustainability of small-scale farming. Thus, while immediate food security has improved for remittance-receiving families, food sovereignty is noticeably decreasing.

To reiterate, food security “exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 2006). This definition stems from a neoliberal lens highlighting trade and financial means to access food, rather than home production. This has

led to a shift in the perception of food security in rural Nepal, as the emphasis has moved away from land cultivation to having the financial capability to purchase imported goods. On one hand, the shortage of physical labor is decreasing the amount of local agricultural production which limits local food access, however, the influx of remittances into rural areas has facilitated the purchasing of food for many migrant families (Kim et al. 2019; Pandley 2019). Many find it easier and cheaper to buy imported foodstuff rather than growing crops themselves (Craven & Gartaula 2015). Thus, short-term financial access to food is indeed improved for families receiving remittances. However, this is contributing to declining local agriculture and is damaging to marginalized groups and poor people without easy access to the market or sources of alternative income. This can result in negative impacts for future generations as reliance on the market is dangerous and can heighten vulnerability, especially for low-income families (Sunam & Adhikari).

Further, due to increased workload, there are cases in which women are unable to physically access food despite having the financial means to do so. A study by Kim et al. (2019) found that as a result of added workloads, respondents were forced to work from early morning to late in the night, physically hindering their ability to feed themselves and prepare food for their children. Ghale et al. (2018) adds on this by stating, “discriminatory socio-cultural norms, behaviors and practices hinder access to food for women.” Thus, even though remittances allow financial accessibility to imported products, increased workload on women due to male out-migration has debilitated their food security regarding the actual consumption of food. At first glance it appears as though out-migration has improved food security in rural Nepal; while this is true, it is important to acknowledge the class inequalities this perpetuates. While the food

security of some is improved thanks to remittances, out-migration is hindering food access for others.

The findings suggest that food sovereignty has significantly decreased in rural villages due to the immediate impacts of out-migration. Food sovereignty emphasizes local control over the food system centered around “strengthening local food production and livelihood systems, so that all people, especially poorer people and peasants, continue to gain food through proper use of resources such as land, livestock ... even if there is a market failure to supply food” (Sunam & Adhikari). This “aims to give farmers a central role in defining their own food and agriculture system,” and “decision-making autonomy in order to promote ecological sustainability and the preservation of nutritional culture through diversity of cultivated food crops” (Gartaula et al. 2017). Unlike food security which focuses purely on accessing food, food sovereignty seeks to strengthen the agency of small-scale farmers. After reviewing both the primary and secondary effects that out-migration has had on rural towns, it is evident that food sovereignty has declined.

Local food production and farmers’ agency over crop choice and production practice, which are key elements to food sovereignty, have declined due to the shortage of labor. Because of the lack of labor, farmers are forced to de-intensify their farming practices. To alleviate their workload, farmers have downscaled their crop rotation and varieties, limiting the quantity and nutritional quality of local diets (Sunam & Adhikari; Tamang et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2019). I argue that this is not “proper use of resources,” which is an element of the definition of food sovereignty. This shift in practice limits the agency over what is consumed and how it is produced. According to the participants in Gartaula et al. 's 2012 study, not having access to rice is considered not having proper food, despite other available options. As farmers move away

(often without choice) from cultivating rice towards more low-maintenance crops, it is clear that food sovereignty is in decline. Further, while it can be argued that some poor people's food sovereignty increases due to sharecropping opportunities, this is an unreliable system that does not allow prolonged food sovereignty and land access. This will only continue to diminish as plotting becomes more widespread. Reliance on the market diminishes food sovereignty, and the findings suggest that increased remittance flow is creating market dependency for many as people move away from agricultural work and emphasize food access via financial capital (Gartaula et al. 2012). The lack of food sovereignty will make the agricultural sector more vulnerable, unsustainable, and contribute to its "unattractive" perception ubiquitous among the younger generation. Food sovereignty will continue to erode as imports rise and agro-ecological practices and local market and consumption decline.

When studying the effects of out-migration on food access and agricultural landscapes in Nepal, it is necessary to not focus solely on physical supply or financial access to food, like many development agendas suggest. Understanding the importance of food sovereignty is imperative in order to ensure long-term food access. Overlooking this and looking solely at objective measures of food security may cause damage to the agricultural situation in Nepal that will be hard to recover from or even irreversible. Once land and resources are put to non-agricultural use, it takes lots of time and resources to rebuild the pre-existing indigenous agricultural and food system (Sunam & Adhikari).

### **Broader Forces: Globalization, Neoliberal Ideology, the Commercialization of Agriculture**

As briefly touched on throughout the course of this paper, there are broader forces driving the consequences on food security experienced in rural Nepal. Certainly, the physical act

of the migrants moving out of rural areas is decreasing the number of much needed laborers — yet, there are larger forces at play that must be acknowledged in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of the situation. It is not simply and solely the physical movement of migrants that is inflicting these aforementioned changes in food security and food sovereignty. New cultural norms, mindsets and ideas engendered by globalization, neoliberalism and the commercialization of agriculture are key elements driving out-migrants as well as eroding the agricultural landscape, and subsequently food security and sovereignty.

The effects I have described experienced in rural Nepal is an example of very localized impacts of globalization. Not only is there an impact on society in how people are perceiving the world and what it means to be successful, but globalization is affecting the physical landscape of Nepal. Globalization drives migration, and migration accelerates globalization; it is a self-reinforcing cycle that is eroding the agricultural landscape and having a net effect on food security and sovereignty. It is driving social change — agricultural practice is losing its cultural centrality and significance, affecting the physical landscape. Due to ideas of urban and migrant aspiration encouraged by globalization, being a migrant is seen as successful, which then places a stigma on those who choose to remain in the agricultural sector (Craven & Gartaula 2015). This is “undermining the moral economy of the family in small-scale subsistence agriculture,” causing families to out-source their food, which then reinforces the idea that migration is necessary (Gartaula et al. 2017).

This phenomenon, and the dominant neoliberal ideology that controls the world economy has promoted a free market of agricultural products. Professor and researcher in land, food and poverty Laya Uprety states “the indigenous system is rapidly being replaced by a cash-based

system. The capitalist model of economic growth is followed, which ignores the focus on strengthening farming communities by promoting local landraces” (Ghale et al. 2018). Further, globalization and the commercialization of agriculture has fostered the dominant industrial paradigm of mechanized and corporate agriculture which has shifted the definition of food to be a commodity produced and traded for profit, rather than a source of nourishment (Shiva 2017). This is driving up the prices of agricultural inputs, which is a factor driving out-migration up and small-scale agriculture down. These ideas are spreading to rural areas and are eroding the importance of agriculture, moving villagers away from this livelihood. Moreover, it is contributing to the degradation of environmental resources, affecting food security and food sovereignty. Therefore, interests of large multinational food corporations are shaping rural people’s access to food (Sunam & Adhikari). These broader forces have impacts on society and are changing the perception of success and food security in rural Nepal, but also have impacts on a very physical level. In Nepal, where 65% of the population depends on agriculture, this will undoubtedly affect future patterns of agricultural production and land-based livelihoods, with consequences for potential hunger throughout the country.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is evident that male rural out-migration has serious and impactful effects on food security and food sovereignty in Nepal. By altering both the physical, economic, and social landscapes of rural villages due to subsequent labor shortages and incoming remittances, migrating men are inadvertently contributing to long-term issues regarding food security and sovereignty. While initial short-term food security may be improved for remittance-receiving families, this reveals inequalities among different social groups with an overall decrease in food

sovereignty. If food sovereignty continues to decline, rural Nepalis may experience both an inadequate quantity and quality of food in the future. Implications of food security entail eroding environmental landscapes, declining nutrition, and the loss of agency for small-scale farmers. Further, perceptions of food security that were once tied to agricultural land is increasingly being associated with external markets and financial capital.

These impacts can have serious implications for the future of Nepal. Losing food sovereignty can lead to future vulnerability to food insecurity not only for low-income groups but remittance-receiving families who are able to buy food from the market. Nepal is subsequently becoming more reliant on imported food, which is especially dangerous due to its position as a landlocked country (Gartaula et al. 2017). Food self-sufficiency from domestic agricultural production is imperative in order to mitigate unforeseen effects of market failure and supply chain issues. Economic security does not equate to food security, and as the world is experiencing currently with supply chain issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic, disruptions can be sudden and cause serious, long-lasting damage. Additionally, if the demand for migrant workers declines and remittance flow slows, everyone will be adversely affected, further illustrating the importance of domestic food production (Sunam & Adhikari). Furthermore, as climate change worsens, farm production and productivity will continue to decline, which will exacerbate the existing issues (Gartaula et al. 2017).

Looking forward, in order to mitigate issues that out-migration presents, it is important to acknowledge the current context of urban aspiration and the social pressure to migrate. Migration has now become a large part of Nepali culture and people should have the freedom to do so. Yet, people also have the right to be food secure and sovereign. The broad forces driving migration

up and agriculture down are incredibly powerful and individuals alone cannot fight back effectively. Thus, it is important for the government or other large institutions to advocate for the rights of these farmers who wish to remain in this livelihood, and reform policies to support subsistence and small-scale agriculture. Policies that support women are especially important given that the feminization of agriculture has put the brunt of the work on women. Further, policies should support land acquisition for marginalized groups like Dalits, who remain committed to small-scale agriculture, which would be “a good investment” towards fostering agricultural self-sufficiency for the country as a whole (Gartaula et al. 2017). Ghale et al. (2018) suggest that “the government needs to ... ensure self-sustaining strategies, as well as promo[te] export led agriculture to strengthen national food systems.” Khanal et al. (2015) argues that improving the rural agricultural sector will not only increase marginal productivity of labor, but is important to increase the prestige of those involved in agriculture through increased income and quality of life, attracting more people and investment in agriculture, in turn moving the country toward self-sufficiency.

Governmental action is not the only productive route; grassroots level organizing can also be productive in combating these larger forces. Navdanya Biodiversity Farm in Dehradun, India is an example of an organization that strengthens both food sovereignty, food and nutritional security, and farmers’ freedom and incomes. Through the promotion of indigenous agro-ecological practices, seed saving, and the creation of farmer networks, Navdanya is proving that commercialized agriculture is not necessary to feed the world ([www.navdanya.org](http://www.navdanya.org)). The formation of farmer cooperatives can also be a successful way to mitigate the damaging effects that imports have on small-scale agriculture. A farmer cooperative is a “formal form of farmer

collective action for the marketing and processing of farm products and or for the purchase and production of farm inputs,” and can help individuals achieve collective goals that would be difficult to achieve on their own. Cooperatives “can help farmers benefit from economies of scale to lower their costs of acquiring inputs,” and “empower their members economically and socially by involving them in decision-making processes that create additional rural employment opportunities, or enable them to become more resilient to economic and environmental shocks” ([www.ag4impact.org](http://www.ag4impact.org)). Farmer cooperatives in countries like Uganda, Ghana, and Ethiopia have been successful in promoting food sovereignty and domestic production ([www.ag4impact.org](http://www.ag4impact.org)). While it is difficult for individuals alone to combat the large forces driving agricultural production down, larger organizations and cooperatives can be productive in promoting farmers’ food sovereignty and well-being.

Food access is and will remain a pressing global issue in the foreseeable future, especially in Nepal where the perception of food security is increasingly focusing on financial access rather than domestic production. In a country lacking livelihood options and supportive agricultural policies, migration can be a lucrative option for those struggling to support themselves and their families. However, research suggests that this has negative long-term impacts on food security and food sovereignty in rural areas, which will then impact the country at a national level. I hope my research can provide insight into how to find meaningful solutions to these growing issues, and contribute to the greater and dynamic conversation about the accessibility and control of food that continues to shift as free trade and corporations dominate agriculture.

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