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Educational and Psychological Consequences of the Internal Migration: Left-behind Children in Nepal

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Abstract: One of the major socioeconomic trends observed globally is internal migration. In Nepal, this trend is particularly significant, with many families' experiencing separation as parents migrate for work while their children remain behind. Although internal migration can improve household income and living conditions, the psychological and educational consequences for left-behind children remain underexplored. This research paper proposes a review of the impact of parental internal migration on children aged 10 to 16, examining both its positive and negative effects and suggesting educational policy responses. Using a comparative research design focused on two residential districts (Salyan and Dang), the study surveyed 354 households. The research employed structured questionnaires to assess demographic profiles, family circumstances, child welfare, and educational outcomes. Statistical analyses, including chi-square tests, independent sample t-tests, and logistic regression, were used to evaluate the data. Findings suggest that while remittances from migrant parents may improve household conditions, the absence of parents often creates emotional and psychological gaps that affect children's educational attendance. Regression results indicate that parental absence significantly affects children's psychosocial well-being, although academic performance was not uniformly negatively impacted. Key factors influencing outcomes included quality of primary care, family functioning, and the presence of social safety nets. The study highlights the importance of community engagement and local support systems in mitigating the adverse effects of parental migration. It recommends policy measures that support the emotional development and education of left-behind children, as well as broader rural development initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes of migration.

Keywords: internal migration; left-behind children; education; absent parents; children's well-being

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1. Introduction

Migration brings individuals anywhere around the globe and is the shining play in all demographics, social, and economic practices to various extents and ends of the world (King and Skeldon 2010). The world may be concerned with international migration. This internal inter-country movement, however, is much more deeply rooted compared with what is usually heard of cross-country penetration, particularly in the majority pattern of cross-country migration within the host country and the influence it leaves on the kinship as well as among the community members (UNFPA 2014). The internal migration system tends to be manifested in the environments of developing countries, principally in household form, and its main objective is to minimize financial risk and raise status in the areas of education, health, and occupation (Stark and Bloom 1985). Nepal proves to be an extremely diverse geography with a good proportion of geographic diversity when it comes to prosperity (Khanal 2013). Conventionally, the movement in the land came into the picture as the region started marking the presence of populations in the hill and mountainous areas of the land, as they started yielding their land and making it agriculturally prosperous in the plains of the Terai (Subedi 2011). This migration has just erupted, and in most cases can be described by rural-urban migration that has been triggered by the interaction of two incentives: the set of pressure factors on the rural side, such as the insecurity of agriculture, lack of access and the inaccessibility to quality services, and the set of provincial pulls to the side of megacities-namely, the apparent economic opportunities and the better escape.

The lives of these children cannot be called straight. On the one hand, household poverty could be alleviated with the earned wages of the migrating parents at home in terms of the remitting wages, as well as the planned spending on nutrition and education, which could later translate into improved performance (Antman 2012). On the other hand, the absence of either parent is doomed to become

the genesis of such serious issues at the level of perception, i.e., the sense of loneliness, neurosis, and even depression, which is likely to damage the results of school education and the concentration level as well (Wen and Lin 2012; Jordan and Graham 2012). Such factors can also be scattered in the family patterns were taking care of one or more, such as older grandparents or siblings, can also become a factor that will equally determine the observation and provision of training support that the child is exposed to.

In spite of the fact that the question of migration in the context of a state has been reflected in increasing literature (Graham, Jordan, and Yeoh 2015), the issue of internal migration in Nepal has only been mentioned a few times. A majority of the studies conducted in Nepal on the aspect of migration addressed the causes of migration, economic effects of migration (Subedi 2011), or only briefly mentioned the demographic effects of migration (generally speaking) (CBS 2014). This is the case as there is empirical evidence, which we discussed, but we are not yet in possession of such an expansive image concerning how far the country could change and how much of an aftermath would be experienced by the parent who had moved out of their responsibility of childcare and could be experienced at the short end of education and welfare of their kids left at home.

In filling such a gap, during the conducting of this research, the researcher shall seek to determine the differences that exist between children of migrant families and those of non-migrant families in Nepal. The comparison between the peculiarities of the migration of parents and families, and the influence of the migration of parents and families on the academic achievements of the children in two districts (a sending district, Salyan, and a receiving district, Dang), is going to be presented in the paper. Devastating research on the impacts of parents' internal migrations on children in Nepal will thus be undertaken in the current research. To be more precise, both the sociodemographic and the household structure of the children of the internal migrants are going to be compared with the relevant information on children of non-migrants in the first stage of research. This is supported by the fact that they would be writing about their status, education, and psychosociological well-being in such a way that they can be capable of rating themselves in a position enclosed by the parameters passed to other students who were not lagging. With the aid of this comparative feature, the study provides an overview of the prominent attributes, which involve educational achievement, separating and thinking about the definite impact caused by the migratory status of the parents.

2. Methods

The present comparative cross-sectional trial looks at the performance of education among children whose parents cross geographic boundaries within Nepal. The sample size included primary caregivers and children aged between 10 and 16 years in two districts, Salyan and Dang. Specifically, the study was undertaken with the help of a multi-stage purposive sample structure to select 354 households; 74 among them had at least one migrating parent, and 280 had none. The collection of the data was based on a previously designed and culturally adapted questionnaire, and further statistical analysis was applied through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The exploratory descriptive statistics presented an avenue to Chi-square tests for categorical variables, and independent samples t-tests for continuous variables. The net effect of migration on academic performance was then estimated with the help of the binary logistic regression model. The research complied with all the ethical standards that are internationally acceptable; among them being authorization by the authorizing authorities, acceptance by the caregivers, assent from the child, confidentiality, and voluntarism.

3. Results

In this section, the analysis of statistics is carried out in the same sequence as presented above, and the results are accordingly mentioned below in the same order: demographic characteristics of the sample, comparison between migrant and non-migrant households, followed by regression analysis based on educational outcomes. Representation by socio-demographic aspects of the respondents was distributed based on a sampling size of 51.7 percent from Salyan and 48.3 percent from Dang. The sampling design aimed to closely reflect the assumed distribution, with migrant households expected to constitute 70.3 percent in the sending district of Salyan and 53.2 percent in the receiving district of Dang, though the latter was represented in smaller numbers. The highest proportion of households reported in both categories were located in rural areas (75.7%) and identified with the Hindu religion (90.4%). The major ethnic groups represented were Brahmin/Chhetri (43.5%), Hill Janajati (23.2%), and Terai Janajati (18.6%). Table 2 highlights that the proportion of Hill Dalit households is nearly double in reality compared to expectations. It is evident that the opportunity for better out-migration is more accessible to marginalized hill communities, with 13.5% of migrant households compared to 6.8% of non-migrant households. This result is statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.019, and the chi-square test confirms a correlation between migration status and ethnicity (Chi-square (6) = 15.21). Family size was also compared between the two household types. The average family size was 5.9 (SD = 1.8) for non-migrant households and 5.5 (SD = 1.9) for migrant households. However, the difference in means was not statistically significant ($t(352) = 1.78$, $p = 0.076$).

Table 1. According to parental migration, considering the position of a caregiver

Characteristic Caregiver gender	**Migrant (n=74)**	**non-migrant (n=280)**	**Total (n=354)**
Female	93.2%	90.7%	91.2%
Male	6.8%	9.3%	8.8%
Child-mother relationship			
Mother	87.8	82.9	83.9
Father	-	6.4	5.1
Grandmother	2.7%	1.4%	1.7%
Sister	5.40	3.60	4.00
Other	4.1	5.7	5.3

The percentage of women serving as caregivers was very high (91.2%), and this figure was significant across both groups, as shown in Table 1. In non-migrant households, the mother typically played the role of the primary caregiver, and the same was true for migrant households, with an average of 83.9% respectively. It is worth noting that, in some cases, caregiving responsibilities were taken on by siblings (5.4%) or grandparents (2.7%) among the migrant population-an aspect that should not be overlooked. There are some striking differences, such as the absence of fathers as primary caregivers in migrant households, whereas in non-migrant households, 6.4% of fathers assumed this role. This difference aligns logically with the research design. Regarding household food security, more than 87% of both groups reported experiencing fear at times that they would not have enough food to eat. However, the correlation between migrant and non-migrant households in this regard was not statistically significant ($p = 0.178$), suggesting that remittances have had an insignificant impact on alleviating food insecurity in migrant households. The overall emotional wellbeing of children in migrant households revealed a concerning trend. Half of the children (50.0%) in migrant families reported being unhappy, compared to 70.4% of children in non-migrant families who reported being happy. This emotional distress can be attributed to the absence of parents, particularly when children are left behind with their fathers. It is also important to note that the nature of caregiving may not differ significantly between the two groups.

Table 2. Parent Migration, parent-child well-being measures

Indicator	Migrant (n=74) %	Non-Migrant (n=280) %	*P*-value
General Happiness			
Very Happy / Happy	50.0	70.4	.002*
Neither/Unhappy/Very Unhappy	50.0	29.6	
Primary Source of Unhappiness			
Father Away	78.4	55.4	<.001*
Being Alone	55.4	61.8	.315
Perceived Caregiver Kindness			
Always' Treated Kindly	78.4	77.9	.931

There exists a positive percentage value in each group, and significance was determined using chi-square tests of independence, with a threshold of $p < .05$. The subjective reports of happiness also showed a stark contrast. Children in non-migrant households reported significantly higher levels of happiness, with 70.4% stating they were "happy" and 12.4% "very happy." This suggests a high prevalence of emotional distress among children lacking a parent, with the emotional cost of such absence quantified at 16.54%. When asked about the least happy aspect of their lives, a large proportion of children from migrant families (78.4%) cited the absence of their fathers, compared to 55.4% in non-migrant families. This difference was statistically significant χ^2 (1) = 13.68, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the idea that parental absence is a major contributor to emotional imbalance among left-behind children. Further investigation into non-migrant families confirmed the consistency of positive interactions as a key component of family functioning (see Table 2). For example, a larger proportion of non-migrant children (45.4%) reported being confident that their family would support them if needed. In contrast, only 28.4% of migrant children expressed the same confidence ($p = 0.007$).

Interestingly, households that reported never experiencing serious arguments were more common among migrant families (68.9%) than non-migrant ones (51.4%). This counterintuitive finding may be due to reduced parental interaction in migrant households, which limits opportunities for conflict and communication alike. Children involved in scouting activities used peer comparison to assess their academic performance. However, contrary to expectations, parental migration status did not significantly influence self-rated academic standing ($F = 2.48$, $p = 0.289$). Interestingly, although a higher percentage of migrant children (79.7%) reported feeling more successful than their peers compared to non-migrant children (70.6%), this may reflect the perceived benefits of migration, particularly financial, despite its emotional drawbacks.

Table 3. Comparison of Self-reported academic performance with classmates based on

Performance Level	Migrant (n=74)	Non-Migrant (n=280)	Total (n=354)
Better	79.7%	70.4%	72.3%
Same	14.9%	22.9%	21.2%
Worse	5.4%	6.8%	6.5%

The percentage load is presented for each group. Among students from migrant households, the percentage was observed to be on an upward trend regarding their perceived ability to compare themselves with other students in their classes. This suggests that, according to their own assessment, they felt better and significantly uplifted (79.7%) compared to their peers, as was also the case in non-migrant households (70.4%). Nevertheless, the disparity was not statistically significant ($p = 0.289$). This indicates that the negative correlation between a child's academic experience and the mobility of their parents cannot be defined as direct. These findings are based on projections that attempt to offset the psychosocially adverse impacts reflected in the percentages reported by each group. Interestingly, the number of students from migrant households who believed they were academically superior and more improved (79.7%) than their classmates was on the rise, compared to those from non-migrant households (70.4%). However, the difference remained statistically insignificant ($p = 0.289$). This implies that the negative association between a child's academic self-concept and parental mobility is not immediate or straightforward. These results challenge the commonly held interpretation that migration has a direct psychosocially negative effect on academic self-perception. Instead, they suggest that such effects may be mediated or offset by the potential economic benefits of migration, such as improved access to educational materials or better teachers.

N = 354. Self-reporting was used as the primary measure to assess academic performance, coded as 1 = Better and 0 = Same/Worse. The level of differentiation in this index was statistically significant, as indicated by $\chi^2(5) = 38.45$, $p < .001$. The model yielded an $R^2 = 0.10$ (Cox and Snell $R^2 = 0.15$; Nagelkerke R^2). In the logistic regression analysis, the reference categories included non-migrant households and male gender. Coefficients (B) were unstandardized, with standard errors (SE) reported. Significance levels were set at $p < .05$ and $p < .01$.

Table 4. Odds of a Higher Academic Achievement: Binary Logistic Regression

Predictor	B	*SE*	Wald χ^2	*P*	Odds Ratio
Migration Status (1 = Migrant)	0.46	0.36	1.61	.205	1.58
Child's Gender (1 = Female)	0.65	0.28	5.31	.021*	1.92
Ethnicity (1 = Brahmin/Chhetri)	0.90	0.30	9.04	.003**	2.46
Family Functioning Score	0.13	0.05	6.78	.009**	1.13
Child Well-being (1 = Happy)	0.73	0.29	6.46	.011*	2.08
Constant	-1.54	0.55	7.94	.005	0.21

At the individual level, logistic regression was employed to examine the factors influencing educational success (see Table 8). The model performed well, correctly classifying 74.3% of the cases. Among the most important predictors of improved academic performance were: Migration status, which did not yield statistically significant results (p= 0.205), reaffirming the findings from the bivariate analysis. This suggests that the migration status of a left-behind child alone does not significantly predict lower academic performance as self-assessed. Gender emerged as a significant factor. Girls were nearly twice as likely to report doing well academically compared to boys (OR = 1.919, p = 0.021). Ethnicity was also a strong predictor. Children from Brahmin/Chhetri families had significantly higher odds of reporting better academic performance (OR = 2.457, p = 0.003), nearly 2.5 times greater than their Janajati and Dalit counterparts. Family functioning was another effective predictor. Higher scores on family functioning were associated with improved academic performance (OR = 1.133, 95% CI [1.009, 1.133], p= 0.009). Child wellbeing also played a crucial role. Children who reported being happy were significantly more likely to report better academic performance than those who did not (OR = 2.081, p = 0.011). This regression analysis supports the concept of an oblique mechanism: the direct negative impact of parental migration on a child's perception of academic achievement is not evident. However, migration has significant indirect effects, particularly on child wellbeing and family functioning, which in turn are key predictors of educational outcomes. These findings highlight the complex interplay between emotional, familial, and socio-economic factors in shaping academic self-concept.

4. Discussion

The results of this study contribute to a clearer understanding of the consequences of internal migration, particularly as perceived by parents who choose not to send their children away in Nepal. Migration appears to serve as a useful economic strategy for many households, especially given the minimal difference observed in food security between migrant and non-migrant families. It is also plausible that remittances help lift families out of poverty, a finding supported by previous research conducted in Nepal (Lokshin et al. 2010). However, what this paper has effectively highlighted is the social and emotional cost of such a strategy. The emotional toll of parental absence is reflected in the disparity in self-reported happiness and family functioning among children in low-income migrant households. The lower levels of happiness reported by children in migrant families align with global findings that document the psychosocial distress experienced by left-behind children (Su et al. 2013; Graham et al. 2015). Parental absence is not a neutral or passive condition; it is often experienced by children as a deeply unsettling and painful reality. Many children equate the absence of a parent with the emotional weight of bereavement, classifying themselves as if they had lost a parent altogether. One of the most compelling conclusions of this study lies in the paradox of educational perception. While left-behind children reported poorer psychosocial wellbeing, they did not necessarily perceive themselves as performing worse academically. In fact, a higher proportion of them believed they were doing better in school, as indicated in a broadly answered self-assessment survey. This contradiction suggests that while migration may not directly impair academic self-perception, it does carry significant emotional consequences that must be acknowledged in any holistic evaluation of its impact.

5. Conclusions

This study reveals two key dimensions of parental internal migration in Nepal, particularly the impact of leaving children behind. To this extent, the emotional cost to children, especially in terms of happiness, is substantial. While migration may sustain the economic wellbeing of the family, it comes at a psychosocial price for the children left behind. The erosion of foundational supports for educational success, such as emotional stability and strong family bonds, has, in other contexts, been shown to carry severe psychosocial consequences. However, in this particular study sample, these emotional costs were not directly associated with a decline in self-rated academic performance. This raises a broader dilemma for Nepal: must the country sacrifice the wellbeing of its youngest and most vulnerable generation in order to secure improved living standards for future generations? The findings suggest that while migration may offer economic relief, it also introduces complex emotional trade-offs that must be carefully considered in policy and practice.

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