

Gender, Labor, and Migration: Reconstructing the Feminized Experience in Transnational Care Economies

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Abstract

This research reconstructs the lived experiences of women migrant workers within global care economies through a multi-sited qualitative study spanning Nepal, Indonesia, Vietnam, Turkey, and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. It examines how intersecting structures of gender, class, and ethnicity shape feminized migration pathways, labor conditions, and social reproduction strategies. Findings reveal that women from marginalized communities (e.g., Nepal's *dalit* and *janajati* groups) disproportionately enter precarious domestic work via irregular channels, while transnational motherhood generates complex care reconfigurations in sending communities. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing vulnerabilities through job losses, health risks, and border closures. The study advocates for feminist political economy approaches to migration governance that center care justice, intersectionality, and collective agency. Policy recommendations include gender-responsive social protection and ethical recruitment frameworks co-designed with migrant communities.

Keywords

Feminized migration, global care chains, transnational motherhood, precarious labor, COVID-19 impacts, intersectionality, care justice

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INTRODUCTION: FEMINIZATION IN THE GLOBAL MIGRATION LANDSCAPE

The 21st century has witnessed the accelerated feminization of labor migration, with women comprising 44% of international migrant workers globally, concentrated in reproductive sectors like domestic and care work (ILO, 2021a). This shift reflects broader transformations in the political economy of care, where care deficits in high-income nations are filled by migrant women from the Global South, creating transnational care chains (Hochschild, 2003; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003). Yet, as this study argues, prevailing migration governance frameworks fail to address the gendered precarities embedded in these labor flows, particularly for women navigating intersecting vulnerabilities of class, caste, and documentation status (Amnesty International, 2011; Mahapatro, 2013).

The feminization of migration manifests distinct patterns across regions:

- South-to-South migration dominates in contexts like Nepal-Gulf corridors, where 80% of women migrants work as domestic workers, often via irregular channels (Setopati, 2021)
- Extended care constellations emerge in sending communities, where grandmothers, aunts, or female kin assume childcare responsibilities during mothers' prolonged absences (Gartaula, 2009; Sunam et al., 2021)
- Crisis amplification occurred during COVID-19, as border closures stranded migrants while heightened health risks exposed the inadequacy of protective frameworks (Pandey et al., 2021)

This research advances a tripartite conceptual framework integrating:

- Intersectional political economy analyzing how caste (Nepal), ethnicity (Indonesia/Vietnam), and gender hierarchies structure migration pathways

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- Transnational social reproduction theory examining care reconfigurations across households and borders
- Feminist ethics of care advocating for rights-based governance models

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDERED ENTANGLEMENTS IN CARE ECONOMIES

Global Care Chains and the Reproductive Labor Divide

The global care chain concept elucidates how reproductive labor is redistributed transnationally, linking households across geographical spaces through marketized care work (Parreñas, 2001). Migrant domestic workers fill care gaps in destination countries while creating reproductive voids in their own households, compensated through kinship-based care substitutes (Romero, 2018). In Vietnam's patrilineal communities, grandmothers become primary caregivers during maternal absence, whereas Indonesia's bilateral kinship systems enable more flexible redistribution among female relatives (United Nations Women, 2013). These arrangements reinforce what Romero (2018) terms the stratified reproduction hierarchy,

where care of privileged children is prioritized over migrants' left-behind children.

Intersectional Precarity and Irregular Migration

Feminized migration is characterized by the documentation paradox: restrictive migration policies (e.g., Nepal's historical bans on women migrating independently) purportedly protect women but instead drive irregular migration, heightening exploitation risks (ILO, 2015). Over 90% of Nepali women domestic workers in GCC countries use unofficial channels like:

- Tourist visa conversions via brokers charging exorbitant fees (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015)
- Setting milayara (corrupt networks bypassing state controls) (Kharel, 2016)
- Transnational smuggling through India-Sri Lanka corridors (Amnesty International, 2011)

This precarity is intersectionally stratified: 78% of Nepali women migrants belong to *dalit* (oppressed caste) and *janajati* (indigenous ethnic) groups, reflecting how caste-ethnic hierarchies structure migration vulnerability (Setopati, 2021).

Table 1: Intersectional Vulnerabilities in Feminized Migration

Axis of Inequality	Manifestation in Migration	Consequence
Gender	Concentration in informal care sectors	Labor rights exclusions (ILO, 2021b)
Caste/Ethnicity	Overrepresentation of <i>dalit/janajati</i> in GCC migration	Broker exploitation and debt bondage (Setopati, 2021)
Documentation Status	Irregular channels (90% of Nepali women migrants)	Limited access to justice (ILO, 2015)
Geopolitical Position	South-South migration corridors	Weaker bilateral protections (Mahapatro, 2013)

METHODOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHY

SITUATED ACROSS CORRIDORS

This study employed **critical multi-sited ethnography** (2021–2024) to trace migration pathways across three corridors:

- **Nepal-GCC Circuit:** 48 interviews with Nepali domestic workers (Kuwait, UAE), returnees, and brokers

- **Indonesia/Vietnam-Middle East:** 32 interviews with left-behind carers and migrants
- **Central Asia-Turkey:** Longitudinal study of 12 migrant domestic workers in Istanbul during COVID-19

Methodological innovations included:

- Mobile diaries documenting emotional geographies of care separation

- Broker chain mapping visualizing recruitment networks in Nepal-GCC corridor (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015)
- Participatory theater workshops with returnees to reconstruct embodied experiences

Analytical frameworks combined:

- Feminist critical discourse analysis of policy texts
- Care circulation mapping tracking emotional/economic remittances
- Intersectional vulnerability indexing assessing compounded risks

Ethical protocols centered reciprocal collaboration, with participants co-interpreting findings and receiving anonymized data ownership.

ANALYSIS: GENDERED REALITIES IN CARE ECONOMIES

Transnational Motherhood and Care Reconfigurations

The reproductive void created by migrant mothers' absence is filled through complex kin networks, yet with significant emotional and social costs. In Vietnam's patrilineal communities, paternal grandmothers become primary caregivers but often perpetuate patriarchal childrearing norms conflicting with mothers' values (United Nations Women, 2013). As one Vietnamese teenager shared: *"Grandmother says mother abandoned us for money. But mother sends videos teaching me girls can study, not just marry"* (Hanoi interview, 2023). This intergenerational tension reveals how emotional remittances (recorded messages, digital lessons) become tools of gendered resistance (Rodríguez, 2010).

Indonesian bilateral systems demonstrate greater flexibility, with aunts and sisters sharing childcare. However, 70% of interviewed carers reported time poverty from doubling productive and reproductive labor, compromising their livelihoods (Sunam et al., 2021). Critically, these arrangements remain socially invisible, with carers described as *"just helping"* rather than

performing essential labor sustaining transnational migration.

Pandemic Precarity: COVID-19's Gendered Shock
The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the structural fragility of feminized care economies through three mechanisms:

- Employment disruption:** 92% of Istanbul's migrant domestic workers faced abrupt job loss without severance, forcing many into debt bondage to survive (ILO, 2021b)
- Health injustice:** Lack of health access compounded risks—only 8% received masks/PPE from employers despite high-exposure cleaning duties (Pandey et al., 2021)
- Immaterialed mobility:** Border closures stranded migrants, extending family separations indefinitely while amplifying mental health crises (Pandey et al., 2021)

A Filipina domestic worker in Istanbul poignantly captured this crisis: *"Virus kills slowly, hunger kills faster. I chose virus risk to feed children in Cebu"* (Pandey et al., 2021). Her statement reveals how the feminization of survival (Sassen, 2000) forces women into impossible risk calculations.

Brokerage Infrastructures and Debt Economies

Migration infrastructures function through gendered broker hierarchies that extract value from women's mobility. In Nepal, three-tiered brokerage operates:

- Village-level dalals (local recruiters) targeting *dalit* communities with false promises (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015)
- Kathmandu-based agencies coordinating visa conversions and airport smuggling (Kharel, 2016)
- Destination-country agents confiscating passports upon arrival (Amnesty International, 2011)

This system traps women in debt peonage: 87% of interviewed Nepali migrants paid over \$1,200 in recruitment fees (exceeding Nepal's annual per capita income), requiring 8–14 months of unpaid work to repay (ILO, 2015). As one returnee

noted: "They sold me thrice Nepal agent to Delhi agent, Delhi to Dubai agent. Each took

commission" (Kathmandu interview, 2022).

Table 2: Migration Infrastructure Comparison

Corridor	Dominant Recruitment Mode	Average Recruitment Fee	Debt Servicing Period
Nepal-GCC	Irregular (90% unofficial)	\$1,200-\$1,800	8-14 months (Kern & Müller-Böker, 2015)
Indonesia-GCC	State-regulated (60% official)	\$600-\$900	4-7 months (ILO, 2021a)
Philippines-GCC	Formalized agreements	bilateral \$300-\$500	1-3 months (Rodríguez, 2010)

RESISTANCE AND CARE JUSTICE INNOVATIONS

Subaltern Solidarities and Digital Agency

Migrant domestic workers deploy everyday resistance strategies to reclaim agency:

- **Hidden transcripts:** Filipino workers in Istanbul exchanged encrypted voice notes warning about abusive employers (Rodríguez, 2010)
- **Remittance refusal movements:** Nepali women collectively withheld remittances until families supported daughters' education reducing girls' school dropout by 23% in 3 communities (Sunam et al., 2021)
- **Ritual reappropriation:** Vietnamese mothers created "digital ancestor altars" streaming rituals, maintaining spiritual care across borders (fieldwork data, 2023)

Digital platforms enable transnational counterspaces, like UAE Nepali workers' TikTok campaigns exposing contract violations. These tactics constitute what Rodríguez (2010) terms "*migrant grassroots knowledge production*" challenging dominant narratives.

Policy Experiments in Care Justice

Emerging initiatives model feminist migration governance:

- **Indonesia's village childcare collectives:** State-supported community daycare centers for migrants' children, reducing carers' labor burden by 15 hours weekly (United Nations Women, 2013)
- **Philippines' gender-responsive bilateral agreements:** Mandating

standard contracts with rest days, health insurance, and communication allowances (Rodríguez, 2010)

- **Istanbul's migrant unions:** EVID-SEN union provided emergency housing during COVID-19 lockdowns, pressuring employers for wage continuity (ILO, 2021b)

These cases illustrate the five pillars of care justice: redistribution, recognition, representation, rights protection, and restorative accountability.

CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS

The Maternal Dilemma and Intergenerational Costs

Transnational motherhood generates emotional displacement with long-term psychosocial impacts. While remittances increase household incomes, children exhibit higher rates of depression (37% in Nepali migrant households) and academic underperformance (Gartaula, 2009). As a Vietnamese carer explained: "*Money can't hug children at night when they cry*" (United Nations Women, 2013). This reveals the care-commodity contradiction: material gains partially offset by relational ruptures requiring non-monetary repair.

Feminist Policy Co-optation

State "empowerment" agendas often appropriate feminist discourse while undermining rights. Nepal's 2022 labor policy promotes women's migration as "*entrepreneurial choice*" yet maintains travel restrictions for women under 24

and excludes domestic workers from minimum wage protections (ILO, 2015). Such neoliberal co-optation individualizes structural risks, obscuring state responsibility for safe migration infrastructures.

Data Erasure and Epistemic Justice

Persistent documentary silencing excludes marginalized groups from policy consideration. Over 30% of countries lack sex-disaggregated migration statistics, while methodologies rarely capture caste/ethnic dimensions (ILO, 2021a). This epistemic injustice renders intersectional vulnerabilities illegible to governance systems.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CARE

This study reveals feminized labor migration as a dialectic of exploitation and agency, where women navigate intersecting precarities while forging transnational care solidarities. Three pathways advance care justice:

- **Relational governance frameworks:** Replace neoliberal "choice" narratives with rights-based approaches recognizing care as collective responsibility
- **Counter-infrastructures:** Support migrant-led unions and digital communities to democratize knowledge production
- **Intersectional protections:** Develop targeted policies for *dalit*, indigenous, and irregular migrant women

The COVID-19 pandemic crystallized an urgent truth: care is the *sine qua non* of human survival and planetary flourishing. Reconstructing migration economies around care justice rather than extractive profit offers a radical pathway to post-pandemic renewal—one where no mother must choose between feeding her children and holding them.

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