Changing Livelihood of Tibetan Women Migrants in Nepal: How Does Gender Values Matter?

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Abstract: This paper employs a feminist approach to examine Tibetan women migrants residing in Nepal. While most Tibetan studies in Nepal adopt a political perspective, this study explores the multidimensional construction of gender in terms of livelihood, identity, and cross-cultural exposure among Tibetan women migrants. The research was conducted in the purposively selected Choejor Bouddha Tibetan settlement in Kathmandu, Nepal. Utilizing a post-positivist approach, the study primarily employed quantitative methods through a rapid questionnaire survey, supplemented by five key informant interviews as a qualitative tool. This paper highlights local perceptions and practices regarding the construction of Tibetan women migrants' livelihoods in Nepal. It concludes that the livelihood of Tibetan migrants in Nepal should be viewed through a feminist lens as it is 'gendered' in nature to better understand their identity, struggle, and socio-economic life.

Keywords: gender, migration, livelihood, Nepal, Tibetan women.

1. Introduction

Feminist critique of livelihood asserts that livelihood is gendered (Oberhauser et al., 2004). It is androcentric because of the domination and hegemony of male occupied resources. The livelihood of women encompasses the various means by which women secure their socio-economic well-being and improve their quality of life and living standard. It is multidisciplinary in nature which intersects with diverse facets of social, economic, and cultural dynamics. In specific terms, livelihood issues of women includes employment and income generation activities. For a sustainable livelihood strategy, it might be further opted by formal employment, informal sector and entrepreneurship, education and skills development, legal and social protections and empowerment and representation, cultural and social norms (Cruz-Torres & McElwee, 2017; De Haan, 2012; Harcourt & Stremmelaar, 2012; Oberhauser et al., 2004).

Theoretical studies on livelihood studies are much linked with the discourse and practice of sustainable development, often focusing on the collective well-being of society (Dankelman, 2012; Harcourt, 1994; Rahabhi et al., 2021; Scoones, 2015; Scoones et al., 2020). On the other hand, empirical studies often concentrate on the impacts of livelihood outcomes in gender construction and the effect of gender values in making and unmaking the sustainable livelihood for women.

The representative readings include Apusigah (2009) in context of Ghana; Mashapure et al. (2023) in context of Zimbabwe; Raniga (2021) in context of south Africa; Kc et al. (2017) and Adhikary & Hobley (2015) in context of Nepal; Gaetano (2015) in context of China; Agarwal (2020) in context of India). Most of these studies, both from theoretical as well as empirical grounds, often emphasize on the livelihood strategies and their changing dynamics among the local residents or communities. On the other hand, the livelihood of migrant workers is a complex issue that involves economic, social, and legal dimensions. It has been less focused in academic studies & (Buscher, 2011; Skran Easton-Calabria, Wickramasekara, 2013).

Tibetan migrants have been living in Nepal since the 1950s, following the Chinese liberation of Tibet into its mainland. The livelihood of Tibetan women migrants in Nepal is shaped by their unique migratory experience, cultural heritage, and the socio-economic environment of their host country. While they face significant challenges, particularly related to legal status and access to formal employment, various initiatives and strong community networks provide critical support. Enhancing their livelihoods requires a multifaceted approach, including improving legal recognition, expanding educational and economic opportunities, and fostering cultural preservation. International and NGO support remains vital in addressing these needs and advocating for the rights and well-being of Tibetan women migrants in Nepal. in this context, the analytical question for the study is set as whether and how the Tibetan women's livelihood has been structured and sustained in Nepal.

2. Methods and Materials

This study examines the livelihood and entrepreneurship status of Tibetan women migrants within the empirical context of Tibetan settlements in Nepal. It employs both subjective and objective realities for exploration and analysis. The study adopts a post-positivist paradigm, which emerged from criticisms of positivism, viewing reality as probabilistically true and real. A mixed research design is employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, with a greater emphasis on the former and the latter used complementarily (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Creswell & Clark, 2017). Various scholars (e.g., Ackerly & True, 2019; Maynard, 2013) have

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argued that feminist critical approaches are required in social science research, which have been largely overlooked in conventional studies despite their significant historical contributions. Therefore, this study also follows a feminist approach in data collection and analysis to carefully listen to the voices of migrant women, respect their experiences and feelings, and navigate their agitations towards society. This approach aims to better theorize their critical perspectives on society and existing realities.

The study focuses on the Choejor Bouddha settlement, one of the 12 Tibetan settlement camps in Nepal, situated near Kathmandu. According to the official records, the population of Tibetan migrants in this camp is not maintained in a scientific database, but approximately 3,996 individuals are listed under this settlement office, including migrants in the Jorpati area of Kathmandu. A cluster sampling method was utilized, with the main market area of Bouddha selected purposively. This cluster, with an estimated population of 1,350, exhibits urban characteristics dominated by trade, commerce, and the service sector. The sample size (n) was determined using Slovin's formula: $n=N1+Ne2n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}n=1+Ne2N$. The population size (N) is 1,350, with an acceptable margin of error (e) at a 95% confidence level (0.05 margin of error), resulting in a calculated sample size of 308.57. Therefore, the researchers decided on a sample size of 310.

A rapid questionnaire survey was conducted among 310 respondents in the main market area of Bouddha from May 1-5, 2023. The sample included 143 males and 167 females, selected through cluster sampling combined with random sampling, though the major inquiry questions were asked only to the women respondents. This personal rapid questionnaire survey approach is commonly used in quantitative methods where the study universe and household units are not clearly defined or the sampling frame is doubtful (Kumar, 2014; Buckingham & Saunders, 2004).

To triangulate the findings from the rapid questionnaire survey, the researchers conducted six key informant interviews in May 13-16, 2023 with stakeholders from the settlement camp, including heads of women's saving groups (1), the camp leader (1), a local ward representative from Kathmandu Metropolitan City (1), representatives from the local business/entrepreneur sector (2), and a representative from local NGOs working on Tibetan women's issues in the Bouddha study area.

3. Findings and Discussion

A. Demographic and Social Characteristics of the Sample

The total sample size is 310 individuals, out of these, 143 are male, and 167 are female. The sample has a slightly higher representation of females (i.e. 53.87%) compared to males (46.13%). As summarized in Table 1, the sample includes a balanced representation of both genders, with a slight majority of females. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and livelihoods of Tibetan women migrants, which is the focus of the study.

Table 1
Demographic status of the sample population

Gender	N	%
Male	143	46.13
Female	167	53.87
Total	310	100

Ensuring girls and women have access to literacy and formal quality education is fundamental in their livelihood making. It becomes more critical in context of the migratory decision and living in the new destination with host community. This includes primary, secondary, and higher education as well as vocational training. Table 2 presents a summary results of literacy status and educational attainment of the Tibetan migrant women in Nepal.

Table 2
Literacy status and educational attainment of the Tibetan migrant women

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	N	%
Illiterate	17	10.18
Basic literacy rate	59	35.33
Primary level	36	21.56
Secondary level	31	18.56
Higher education	24	14.37
Total	167	100
Mean Percentage		20%
Standard Deviation		9.59%

As the data reveals, the highest percentage of women, 35.33% (59 women), have basic literacy. This suggests that many women have acquired fundamental literacy skills, which is a positive sign for foundational education efforts. Following this, 21.56% (36 women) have completed primary level education. This level of attainment shows that a notable segment of the population has moved beyond basic literacy to formal primary education. Similarly, 18.56% (31 women) have reached secondary level education. This indicates that a substantial number of women continue their education beyond the primary level, which is crucial for acquiring more advanced skills and knowledge. Moreover, 14.37% (24 women) have attained higher education. While this is a smaller proportion compared to those with basic or primary education, it reflects that higher education opportunities are accessible to some women, which can lead to better economic and social outcomes. On the other hand, 17 out of 167 women are illiterate, making up 10.18% of the sample. This indicates that a small but significant portion of the population lacks basic reading and writing skills.

The mean value (20%) indicates a general trend towards basic education among the sample population while the standard deviation of 9.59% signifies moderate variability in educational attainments. There is a clear correlation between the level of educational attainment and the livelihood opportunities available to Tibetan women. Higher education levels are associated with better job prospects, higher incomes, and greater economic stability. The distribution shows a positive trend in literacy and education among Tibetan women, with the majority having at least basic literacy and a significant portion progressing to primary and secondary education. The

high percentage of women with basic literacy and primary education levels indicates successful outreach and educational programs at these stages.

The field narratives during the data collection reveal that health status of women is also important in making the social capital along with educational attainment of the migrant people in destination. A women activists working in the women sector in the settlement camp shared that:

Health issues are more critical for women than educational concerns. Tibetan women face restrictions on leaving the camp, requiring permission for evident cases, which can exacerbate their health conditions and increase their vulnerability. Access to comprehensive health services, particularly reproductive and maternal care, is vital for their well-being and work capacity. Implementing policies like maternity care, subsidized and affordable health care services, special childcare and nutritional assessment, and flexible working hours is essential to help women balance their professional and family responsibilities (Based on personal conversation, 13 May, 2023).

B. Employment Status

The employment status of women is a fundamental determinant of their livelihood. While employment enhances financial capital, it also plays a crucial role in shaping and mobilizing other forms of capital, including social, cultural, human, and institutional. Women's income generation through employment is particularly essential for migrant communities in host destinations, ensuring a decent standard of living. Table 3 provides a comparative analysis of employment status among men and women in the settlement camp.

Table 3
Employment status of Tibetan migrants in Nepal

	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	(N)	
Unemployed	47	32.87	68	40.72	115	
Employed in job or self-business	56	39.16	44	26.35	100	
Employed in group activities	40	27.97	55	32.93	95	
(entrepreneurship)						
Total	143	100	167	100	310	

As the data reveals, 115 individuals (i.e. 37.10%) of the total sample are unemployed, which includes 47 males (i.e. 32.87%) and 68 40.72% females from their respective population. The relatively high unemployment rate, particularly among women, highlights significant challenges in securing employment. This disparity indicates potential barriers such as limited access to job opportunities, skills mismatch, or socio-cultural factors affecting women's employment.

Similarly, 100 individuals (i.e. 32.26%) of the total sample were employed in job or self-business including 39.16% of the male population and 26.35% of the female population. Employment in jobs or self-business indicates a level of economic engagement and self-sufficiency. The higher percentage of males in this category suggests that men may have better access to formal employment or resources to start their own businesses compared to women.

Following this, 95 individuals (i.e. 30.65%) of the total sample were engaged in entrepreneurship activities including

27.97% male and 32.93% female from their respective population. Indeed, a significant number of women participate in group activities or entrepreneurship, indicating a trend towards collaborative economic efforts. This form of employment can be crucial for women's empowerment, providing opportunities for income generation, skills development, and social support.

In overall, 99 women i.e. nearly a two third of the women respondents (67.34%) out of 167 were employed, including formal and informal activities. Similarly, some women run small businesses, such as shops selling Tibetan goods or food stalls. These enterprises can be a vital source of income, especially in areas with significant tourist traffic. However, there is limited job market for formal and large scale business activities. Due to their suspicious refugee status and lack of documentation, Tibetan women often face barriers to formal employment, limiting their opportunities to low-paying, informal sector jobs. Women in the formal sector often face challenges such as the gender pay gap, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and workplace discrimination. Efforts to improve this include enforcing equal pay legislation, promoting women in leadership, and creating family-friendly workplace policies. Illustrating this, a Tibetan small trader reflect that:

Many Tibetan women, like me, engage in traditional crafts such as weaving, carpet making, and producing artisanal goods. However, there is not a big market of these products for the small producers like us. But, these crafts are not only a source of income but also a means of preserving their cultural heritage. Its income has quite supportive to my personal as well as household needs (Based on personal conversation, 15 May, 2023).

C. Skill and Training for the Women

Skill development is a fundamental component of sustainable livelihood. Providing training in areas such as awareness, entrepreneurship, use if ICT and e-learning, business management, and marketing strategies women's significantly enhance employability and entrepreneurial capabilities. As reflected in Table 3, out of 167 women, 99 are employed in business, service, or entrepreneurial activities. These employed women were further surveyed regarding their participation in training and skill development programs. The summary of these statistics is presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Status of skill, training and start-up among the employed women

	N	%
Skill promotion and training received	27	27.27
Skill promotion and training not received	58	58.59
Start-up support also received	14	14.14
Total	99	100

The data shows that the majority of employed women (i.e. 58.59%) have not received skill promotion and training, which may limit their career advancement and job opportunities. Lack of training can lead to lower job security and income instability, making these women more economically vulnerable.

Following this, the 27.27 percent of respondent women have

received skill promotion and training. This is not encouraging to sustain the livelihood strategies of women. Receiving skill promotion and training is critical for enhancing the quality of employment among women. Those who have undergone training are likely to have better job performance, higher productivity, more income, competitiveness and greater job satisfaction.

The data further revealed that among the employed women, a few i.e. 14.14% have got start-up support. Women who receive start-up support are better positioned to initiate and sustain their own businesses. This support can include financial assistance, mentorship, entrepreneurial growth, economic empowerment, innovation and business success and access to markets.

D. Entrepreneurship Engagement of Women

Entrepreneurship in sustainable livelihood is often regarded as a potent attribute. It fosters self-confidence and enhances decision-making abilities while cultivating a collective sense of profit-sharing and distribution. Encouraging women entrepreneurs through access to finance, business training, and networks is crucial. Before that the ownership of the entrepreneurship is most important. As the above table reveals, only 55 women out of 167 total sample women. They were further asked whether the entrepreneurship is shared with other members or it is established under a single endeavor or leadership (Table 5).

Table 5
Sharing of entrepreneurial activities by women migrants

N %

Classical activities by women migrants

N %

	N	%
Shared with male partner/ family member	32	58.18
Single (self-led)	13	23.64
Total	55	100

As the results reveal, majority of women (58.18%) engage in entrepreneurial activities in partnership with male partners or family members. This collaborative approach can be beneficial in pooling resources, sharing responsibilities, and combining skills and knowledge. Family involvement can provide additional financial backing, labor, and emotional support. But, it is also important to delineate such support along with cultural norms or economic necessities.

A significant portion of women (23.64%) lead their entrepreneurial activities independently. This indicates a level of autonomy and leadership, suggesting that these women are capable of managing businesses on their own making them empowered and self-reliant. It could have enhanced their leadership capacities and decision-making power. Nevertheless, operating a business independently can pose

various challenges, including limited access to capital, increased responsibility, and the need for a broader skill set to handle all aspects of the business.

Indeed, there were some women who work in the informal sector as domestic workers, or in home-based businesses. There is no official data adhered in the settlement camp for this. This sector is characterized by a lack of job security, benefits, and legal protections. Supporting women's informal work involves improving access to credit, legal recognition, and social protection measures.

E. Changing Gender Roles

Social relations and cultural values of any society are constructive elements to sustain the society. It is also taken important attribute of identity for a migratory group. In this context, the following table will analyze how the women of Tibetan migrants perceived different kinds of gender related and other types of discriminations in Nepal's host community (Table 6).

The findings reflect that out of 167 women, 49 of them, i.e. 29.34 percent said that they did not have any kinds of discrimination while remaining all other 118 women (almost 71%) shared that they had any kinds of discrimination. A significant proportion of Tibetan women migrants (29.34%) perceive no discrimination within the host community. This indicates a relatively positive interaction between Tibetan women and the Nepali host society, suggesting some level of social integration and acceptance. This perception could be attributed to successful cultural assimilation, supportive community relations, and equitable social practices within the host society.

Following this, approximately 18% of the respondents perceive discrimination in gender roles, indicating ongoing challenges related to traditional gender norms and expectations within the host community. This form of discrimination can limit women's participation in various social and economic activities, reinforcing gender inequalities and hindering their empowerment.

Thirdly, political discrimination, including participation, voting, and citizenship issues, is perceived by 18% of the respondents. This reflects significant obstacles to full political integration and civic engagement for Tibetan women migrants. Such discrimination can disenfranchise women, limiting their influence on decision-making processes and reducing their representation in political institutions.

Statistically, the mean percentage of perceived discrimination across different categories is approximately 20%. This average suggests that, on the whole, discrimination

Table 6
Changing gender roles perceived by women migrant

Changing gender roles perceived by women migrants		
	N	%
No any discriminatory	49	29.34
Discrimination in gender roles	30	17.96
Discrimination in economic opportunities (income, business, trade, employment)	33	19.76
Social discrimination (health and education)	25	14.97
Political discrimination (participation, voting, citizenship)	30	17.96
Total (n)		100
Mean Percentage		19.99
Standard Deviation		5.50

is a significant concern for Tibetan women migrants, impacting various aspects of their lives. On the similar ground, the standard deviation of 5.50% indicates moderate variability in the perceptions of discrimination. This variability reflects diverse experiences among the respondents, with some perceiving high levels of discrimination while others experience relatively lower levels. Addressing these concerns through targeted policies and programs is essential to promote equality, empower Tibetan women migrants, and foster a more inclusive and supportive community.

Cultural acceptance and coexistence seemed in favor of the relations of Tibetans and Nepalese. The discrimination in livelihood behaviors did not appear as the most referred factor to affect the relationship of Tibetans and the Nepalese. It is mainly because of religious faith of Buddhism that is largely respected in Nepal as a birth place of Lord Buddha, as well as cultural similarity between the Tibetans and some indigenous groups of Nepal. This is further asked to the non-Tibetans whether they could have similar perspective of the different one. A 35-years young tourist entrepreneur in Bouddha shared that:

We are happy with Tibetan's settlement nearby our community. The identity and recognition of this place is also increased with their settlement. They do their own livelihood activities which never harm us. Rather, we feel good to see their devotion in culture and tradition including Buddhist faiths. We love and respect the lord Buddha although majority of Nepalese are Hindus. Buddha was born in Nepal (Based on personal conversation, 14 May, 2023).

In some occasions, these communities were culturally assimilated along with Buddhist faiths and marital relations. Nevertheless, the relationship was affected by political influence. It includes lack of refugee status and identity card and restrictions to have the Nepali citizenship. A few people therefore reflected that it has increased discriminations on livelihood strategies among Tibetan and Nepalese. The legal problems including registration, marketing and banking system are not same for both the communities as per the existing provision.in consequence, livelihood strategies of the Tibetans have been affected; sometimes demotivated as well. It could be due to the legal barrier to be faced by the Tibetans in establishing large scale entrepreneurs or productions (including private property) as per the legislation prevailed in Nepal.

Opening the floor for discussion on these matters, Table 7 illustrates the engagement of women in the Tibetan community of Bouddha across various activities encompassing a broad spectrum of social, cultural, economic, and political issues.

Table 7
Tibetan women migrants and their community participation

Tibetan women migrants and their community participation			
	N	%	
Social and community engagement	82	49.10	
Political participation and decision making	27	16.17	
Economic empowerment	58	34.73	
Total	167	100%	
Mean Percentage		33.33%	
Standard Deviation		16.51%	

As the result shows, nearly half (49.10%) of Tibetan women

migrants are involved in social and community engagement activities. This high level of participation suggests that community and social networks are vital for these women, providing support and a sense of belonging. Following this, over a third (34.73%) of the women are involved in activities related to economic empowerment, including business, trade, and employment. This indicates a substantial engagement in economic activities, which is crucial for financial independence and economic stability. However, a relatively low percentage (16.17%) of women are engaged in political participation and decision-making processes. This indicates that Tibetan women migrants face significant barriers to political involvement, which may include cultural norms, lack of access to political platforms, and possible legal restrictions.

Statistically, the mean percentage of participation across different categories is approximately 33.33%. This average suggests that, on the whole, Tibetan women migrants are moderately engaged in various community activities, with the highest engagement in social and community activities. Similarly, the standard deviation of 16.51% indicates considerable variability in the levels of participation across different categories. This variability reflects the diverse roles and levels of engagement among the women migrants, with some areas having significantly higher participation rates than others.

4. Conclusion

Improving the livelihood of Tibetan women requires a multifaceted approach that addresses economic, educational, health, legal, and social dimensions. Culturally, it is a gender construction of livelihood. Sustainability in livelihood is achieved through comprehensive policies, community engagement, and international cooperation. Empowering women and exploring their livelihood capitals in the host community contribute to the overall development and prosperity of societies. The enhancement of the livelihood of women is not just a matter of equity but a strategic imperative for the overall development and prosperity of the Tibetan migrant community. It requires coordinated efforts across economic, educational, health, legal, and social spheres, underpinned by comprehensive policies, active community engagement, and robust cooperation. Government of Nepal, Government of China and welfare-based non-political organizations can provide such a conducive environment to explore the livelihood outcomes of Tibetan women living in the allocated settlement camps in Nepal.

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