

Out-migration and Changing Gender Relations: A Study of Women in Hills of Uttarakhand

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Priyanka Danu

Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Sociology
Jamia Millia Islamia University
Email address: priyankadanu28429@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article provides insights into women's lives in Uttarakhand against the backdrop of male out-migration. It also highlights the shifting gender subjectivities and gender norms reinforcing gender inequality. The data is based on qualitative research, including focus group and non-participant observation of their day-to-day experience in the agriculture, household, and public spaces. A conceptual framework has been borrowed from Stephanie Leder's scholarly (2022) work on "Rural out-migration, shifting gender relations and emerging spaces in natural resource management." The findings of the study are discussed under the framework demonstrating how gender norms and power relations shape socio-spatial struggles over resources, influence in agrarian households and communal spaces, and aspirations in the context of out-migration in hilly societies.

Keywords: Out-migration, gender, agriculture, household, and public space, Uttarakhand

Introduction

Rural areas comprise about 69.77% of Uttarakhand's population (Census, 2011). Uttarakhand is separated geographically into ten hilly districts and three plain districts. Out-migration, on the other hand, is limited to the hill areas. There have been few opportunities for livelihood diversification in areas where subsistence agriculture is the primary source of income, characterized by human capital deterioration, skewed development, rural poverty, and high vulnerability to natural disasters,

resulting in the giving up of farmlands or the burden being placed on the few left behind. Despite the difficulties, the women of the region have played essential roles in the home and agricultural sectors and are the backbone of the rural economy.

According to Jolly and Reeves, migration is a social process embedded in various other social practices. Furthermore, gender-influenced cultural expectations, norms, and institutions are essential in shaping migration's causes and effects (Tiwari et al., 2015). In view of women's prominent participation in rural economies and a significant rate of male out-migration, the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand provide an opportunity to explore the implications of out-migration on gender relations and processes.

The concept of 'gender' refers to socially created roles, identities, norms, interactions, obligations, and opportunities gained from a specific culture and community merely by being a man or woman (West & Zimmerman, 1987; WHO, 2011, as quoted by Panday, 2019). Gender inequality is inherent in this 'conventional' labor division since women are the unpaid and invisible labor force (Contzen et al., 2023). The feminist study has drawn attention to the uneven power relations between men and women. It examined how gender activities, roles, and relative privileges are socially created to favor males.

We have established a relationship between male out-migration and women's inherent unpaid invisible labor in the hilly region of Uttarakhand, which unfolds gender processes and relations in the rural economy. This study intends to explore changing gender roles concerning agriculture, household, and the public sphere of rural areas. The main research question is how male out-migration affects women's lives in the village highly characterized by out-migration. In this context, the paper examines the complexity of shifting gender subjectivities in resource management, agricultural households, communal spaces, and aspirations & insecurities.

The conceptual framework used in the study has been formulated by Stephanie Leder (2022) to explore the gendered implication of out-migration. This framework moves from a conventional descriptive narrative to a new conceptual framing based on gender norms, power relations, and subjectivities. Unlike the pre-existing literature, it shifts from the question of vulnerability and empowerment to emphasize an emerging gender space of influence.

The paper is structured as follows: A literature review on women in agriculture, Household drudgery, and autonomy, followed by the Method used to study the changing gender relations, Results/ Discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review: This literature review includes the themes as follows:

Women in Agriculture: Agriculture Productivity and Farming

For a long time, research on family farming has been gender-blind. Family farming, on the other hand, has been highlighted as a stronghold of patriarchal labor relations after the impetus provided by feminist studies in social sciences.

De Brauw et al. (2008) identified two forms of feminization in their study of the myths surrounding women's engagement in farming in China. According to the authors, labor feminization occurs when women in a household conduct an increasing percentage of on-farm labor. Managerial feminization, on the other hand, refers to women's increased engagement in agricultural decision-making and access to agricultural resources. According to scholars, labor feminization is more widespread than management feminization (McEvoy et al., 2012). Managerial feminization has the potential to empower and empower women by implying that more women become major decision-makers regarding home farms and have more access to the wealth generated by these farms. Pattnaik et al. (2018) discovered that agricultural hardship, shifting labor organization, and time poverty characterize the feminization of Indian agriculture, resulting in a double (or perhaps triple) burden. As a result, labor feminization has not always resulted in management feminization.

Gomes et al. (2022) have linked a trilogy of discourses to the feminization of agriculture: "the discourse of the family farm" (Men as "Public figures" and women occupying secondary positions depicting the patriarchal character of family farming), "masculinization" (The prevailing masculine connotation to Agriculture, which continues to hold taboos against women plowing the land in India context), and "detraditionalization and diversity" (Young women farmers pursuing agriculture as a profession, Men have access to different technological talents than women, and it is widely assumed that men have superior skill sets.) Furthermore, women are prevented from learning new skills, which forces them to perform physically demanding and time-consuming tasks like as replanting, weeding, and hand harvesting (Aswathy & Kumar, 2022). Rural women continue to labor as seasonal unpaid family employees on farms owned by their fathers, brothers, or in-laws. As a result, they are not entirely free of patriarchal labor relations in agriculture, which means that attachment to formal work in non-agricultural sectors is insecure (Kocabicak, 2022).

Ece Kocabicak explains, using the case of Turkey, how gendered

patterns of agriculture impede women's mobility, access to education, and paid work in non-agricultural industries. According to findings in Nepal, the feminization of agriculture caused by migration has reduced agricultural output and exacerbated food insecurity for women who are already overburdened with labor but must bear more work (Pandey, 2019). Notably, in Nepal, husbands' absences and women's participation in farming increased the likelihood of agricultural land being registered in women's names.

Uneven gender labor division might cause inefficiency, reducing a household's agricultural productivity (Pandey, 2019). Food productivity has declined due to lower human capital, more wild animal conflicts, and uncertain rainfall. As a result, with few household members needing assistance to meet the manpower requirement, considerable land was left fallow (Sharma, 2019). According to Lourdes Beneria and Gita Sen, female labor in agriculture was viewed as subsistence labor that did not contribute to the economy (Aswathy & Kumar, 2022). Banerjee contends that women who work as wage laborers are better than those who work on family farms. Working on family farms implies losing financial revenue, devaluing labor, being invisible in official records, and laboring longer hours.

Household Drudgery: Gendered Labor Roles and Access to Resources

The patriarchal inequality model continuities are permanent. Toynson (2016) investigated the aftereffects of migration on men and women. Women were seen participating in unequal gender domestic duties and rarely taking time for leisure activities as a result of male out-migration. Although the presence of adult women and daughters extends a helpful hand in women's aggravated responsibilities, it reveals deeper patterns of patriarchy at work.

Sex differences in the allocation of time to housework and leisure, as Connell noted, constitute a significant feature of patriarchal gender regimes, which rely on the division of private and public realms and allot money-making tasks to men and domestic chores to women (Torosyan et, 2016).

In developing countries, empirical data suggests that women get lesser productive resources within households and hence have less ability to negotiate. It can be related to the patriarchal social structure and institution in which houses are embedded. Masculine migration may push women to take over masculine responsibilities, increasing household authority. Furthermore, none establish whether migrant absence impacts last or varies when migrants return (Trosovyan, 2016).

Several studies have found that male migration may result in negotiating decision-making authority over resource allocation and rural-generated revenue (Eva et al., 2019). On the other hand, scholars emphasize the role of landowning male peasants in excluding women from landownership through discrimination in land inheritance, limiting women's access to resources, or using violence. The empirical conclusion implies that as the size of the household's land ownership grows, the likelihood of more women employees engaging in unpaid labor increases (Swati Dutta, 2016).

The findings show that the migration of male members has no effect on the ownership of resources by female family members (Maharajan et al., 2012). The feminization of poverty is caused by women's access to scarce natural resources. Furthermore, Tiwari and others (2015) emphasize that the increased burden of natural resource depletion and climate change makes them more vulnerable.

Autonomy: Decision-making (sex-disaggregated responsibilities)

In his research on women's autonomy, decision-making, and ownership, Mahajan (2012) discovered that women's role in rural life has increased. Migration of spouses from a family can foster gender equality by giving women more access, control, and authority since they can function as household decision maker (Fleury, 2016, quoted in Pandey, 2019).

Further investigations suggest that left-behind women's decision-making authority does not advance; in extended families with senior members, such as parents-in-law, women suffer from lower decision-making capacity and more constraints on their movement in public settings as their husbands migrate.

Moreover, the public/private dichotomy is visible in the gender dimension, particularly in the decision-making regime: formal and public places are dominated by males; informal and within the couple (private) are equal or controlled by the woman farmer, frequently with consultation with the male partner. In the pretense of status formation, caste is critical in undermining women's autonomy (Eswaran, 2009).

The research also revealed that remittance does not inevitably increase women's autonomy in spending money or making family and agricultural decisions. Significant decisions are made primarily by male members. Even though men and women participate in economic pursuits, decisions on livestock, education, health, and modest family purchases are made jointly.

In summary, male out-migration has resulted in changes in the gendered division of labor, which has resulted in improved mobility,

autonomy, access to resources, and overall empowerment for certain women. Researchers discovered that male out-migration resulted in financial instability, limited access to resources for women, and disempowerment for the women left behind. According to some research, both scenarios are possible.

Studies on the changing gender relations in the milieu of out-migration have merely focused on the feminization of agriculture and the question of empowerment through decision-making and resource ownership. However, not many studies explore how women navigate in highly gendered spaces and redefine gender subjectivities.

Methods

This study focuses on the experiences and narratives of women in households with male migrants in Uttarakhand. The research was conducted in Uttarakhand, and the district selected for the study was Bageshwar, considered one of the higher rates of out-migrants in the district.

Based on the findings from qualitative research in the hilly region, I intend to explore gender subjectivities in different spheres of women's life. It is intended to contribute to the construction of knowledge on out-migration, focusing on its gendered dimension and the need and relevance of including women's points of view in this field of studies. Hence, this work reveals and understands the discourses of rural women that have yet to be explored.

The methodological approach used in this study is qualitative, seeking the experiences and narratives which will allow us to explore meanings, taking as a unit of analysis the voice and discourses of the participants. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to see the reality of the study. As an outcome of the participants rather than the existing quo, the focus groups were held to understand the female participants in the research better. It could generate threads of conversation, life stories, and experiences that are shared during the sessions. This sort of group discussion is a qualitative research approach that provides more in-depth knowledge and analysis of a group of selected participants' perspectives (individual and collective) on specific issues. The two focus groups included women farmers (6 members in each group in Karmi village of Bagehswar district). These individuals were selected depending on their availability. As a result, this is a non-random sample for purposes of convenience.

Results and Discussion

The following analysis focuses on fieldwork based on the conceptual

framework (broken down into three themes), which is representative of broader gender struggles in the context of rural out-migration.

Shifting Socio-spatial Struggle over Resources

Gender subjectivities can alter when women enter the sphere of agriculture tasks that males previously dominated, as they have learned to communicate with male neighbors for irrigation and plowing the fields.

“I always felt shy and underconfident talking to men purposely for work in the village, but now the situation has changed.”

It reveals a significant shift in the way women and men wield power. Women’s confident interactions with males demonstrate a change in gender subjectivities. These changes result in her being recognized by home and community peers. This transition is more pronounced in households where the daughter-in-law has some qualifications or lives in a nuclear family.

“I always wish to be accompanied by a woman to cover long distances. It is preferable to with family members either.”

Women, on the other hand, are uncomfortable sharing their space with their male counterparts due to uneven power dynamics and constant public criticism. This perpetuates patriarchal gender standards in the private-public space dichotomy.

“I have been asking a farmer (who is hired to plow the land in the village) to plow the land for days now; the money sent home does not suffice to supplement agricultural machinery, so in return, I help their family on the farm.”

“I do not know how to repair a broken water pipeline, and for that, too, I must request men multiple times.”

Some of the women stated that they are not always heard. They cannot pressure someone or a group as their spouses used to. As a result, during the change of socio-spatial struggle for resources, gender discrimination dominates. Furthermore, access to plower and tractor facilities was extremely difficult for women. They often devote more time to their work than males. Delays at each level of agriculture production indirectly influence women’s labor and family food security. These subjectivities have helped to explain why agricultural output has dropped in households with male migrants.

“My husband would manage everything related to the farm, so I was never required to know much about the market.”

“When I cannot finish my work, my husband has to intervene over calls.”

The exhibiting of masculine characteristics shapes socio-spatial struggles appearing in resource disputes. The feminine approach can be less robust in demanding irrigation, applying pesticides and fertilizer, and plowing. When male family members are absent, being socially and physically excluded from predominantly male networks can exacerbate women’s problems in obtaining resources such as water and land. It has been alleged that women are overcharged for using tractors and plows under the guise of earning remuneration. As a result, the socio-spatial challenges that result from out-migration are heavily influenced by gendered norms that have been reinforced.

“My son and brother are always there to support me with agriculture whenever I need their assistance managing resources.”

In specific households, women depart from public life and confine themselves to domestic duties. This reproduces gender inequalities and exacerbates women’s reliance on others in the context of out-migration. Caste and class relations appear to have influenced the accessibility and availability of natural resources.

“When you do not have information about the agrarian inputs, people tend to fool you with overpricing, so we prefer to get my material by men in the neighborhood, brother, or son. They know the market better than us.”

Along the same lines, Gender stereotypes might limit their capacity to bargain for seeds, fertilizer, and pesticides in a male-dominated market. Women require more significant information on the actual price of agricultural inputs. As a result, it reinforces the present dominant dynamic in markets.

Shifting Influence in Agrarian Households and Communal Spaces

In-laws are the new household heads, and the daughter-in-law has no say in the matter at hand. Mother-in-law restricts their agency by controlling remittance money, putting them to work on the farm and at home, and limiting their mobility. Women wish their spouses were home to manage money and other duties. On the contrary, in some households, women feel a sense of dominance since they keep the money supplied by their spouses.

“My husband sent me 5k last month. I kept 2k and handed over 3K to my father-in-law. I have the freedom to spend my own money, but for the other expenses, I give money to my brother-in-law.”

It was discovered that they are given an amount of money to invest in their daily expenses, but the money for purchasing TVs and other appliances is not given to the women. This has far-reaching implications for their mobility and shifting in their daily struggle with new opportunities.

“Mostly, I am late for the panchayat meetings due to my home responsibilities, but my in-laws attend the local meeting. Through them, I get to know the minutes of the panchayats.”

Village panchayats must be as approachable to women as they are to males. Panchayat meetings are scheduled according to men’s time availability, not women’s. Land ownership has declined due to out-migration and unprofitable agriculture, causing hardships for women in terms of food security. At the same time, the absence of men can lead women to struggle and feel insecure.

“When free from my agricultural and household responsibilities, I work as a wage laborer in contractual projects and MNREGA. One should not sit ideal if they have opportunities to earn to support the family.”

If remittances are inadequate to support their family, women participate in non-farm activities in addition to home and agricultural labor. On the other hand, women in prominent landholding families withdraw from paid jobs, resulting in a gender income difference.

Recent developments have been in proliferating shops, Restaurants, and tea stalls. These are becoming new meeting spots for men in the villages. Women cannot cross their household boundaries with workload and the question of morality. It depicts how gender plays out in public outside the home.

“We all get together for gossip when we go to the jungle early morning and in the evening to collect fodder and gazing cattle; thus, some spots in jungles are our meeting points where we can talk things out.”

The notion that women ought not to breach patriarchal boundaries for their aid restricts women’s geographical mobility. Their inequitable access to growing public areas may relegate them to the kitchen domain. Men now have more access to information, skills, and public places due to out-migration and the transformation of rural communities. Meanwhile, their female counterparts are confined to agricultural homes with restricted mobility.

Shifting Aspirations, Feelings of Insecurity and Self-determination

One overlooked aspect of the literature on out-migration and its influence on gender relations is gender relations and well-being (Leder, 2022). As they take on more agricultural labor and farm management, women farmers' subjectivities evolve as they become more aware of their abilities to earn and engage with others, as well as their limits, since they rely on others to irrigate and cultivate the land. At the same time, the absence of their spouses might induce everyday worry about being able to develop and care for their families on their own. While some women saw migration as beneficial to their self-determination and increased mobility, others felt uneasy dealing with "male tasks." They sympathize with male migrants' working conditions and undermine their burden on the family farms and households.

"I am at least near home; my husband is working far from home, and I do not know in which conditions."

"My husband was engaged in daily wage work; he never extended me a helping hand but consumed liquor with his friends. At least now we receive some remittance to meet our needs."

Several women mentioned that their husbands are a burden when they do not work or care for the home or children. This was particularly prevalent in homes with alcoholism and solid patriarchal relationships.

"We work hard, but no one recognizes that because we do not earn money."

They recognize that women's labor in fields is just as necessary as men's, but they underestimate it because they possess less authority. They consider themselves farming assistants, whereas males are perceived as "real farmers."

"My skin was flawless and fair when I was married in this family, and today, my skin turned dark with defined pigmentation and wrinkles."

This reveals that female farmers consider working on the land to be affecting their dignity. This perception is closely connected to young, attractive looks—such as the desire for appearance features that conform to gender standards. Conversely, women have no time for personal care and amusement in their leisure time.

"Earning money is not easy; I wish I was educated and could also help to run my family."

As previously said, women desire to become financially independent, which contradicts established gender norms.

Conclusion

The empirical data demonstrates that male out-migration unevenly impacts women's life. It would be fallacious to generalize the findings of one study to women across caste, class, and family structure. Hence, we can draw the following conclusions from the analysis of the results in the context of the hilly region of Uttarakhand.

Firstly, the Out-migration of husbands has higher detrimental effects on women in agriculture. Men's migration could drastically change gender relations and shift socio-cultural ideas that constitute conventionally gendered practices at their origin; nevertheless, such transition may take time since such transformation has not been witnessed. Changes in gender roles and women's life depend upon family structure, class, caste, and women's relationships with husbands and in-laws.

Secondly, in households, Women's autonomy and decision-making power are undermined by family elders. Women in nuclear families reported a sense of autonomy and decision-making authority on some matters of household, agriculture, and children.

Thirdly, the private and public dichotomy of gendered public space is perpetuated through occupying new emerging spaces in the village. For a woman to carry out the responsibilities of men must struggle between these two spaces.

Lastly, Women's aspirations and feelings of insecurity are closely intertwined with shifting everyday struggles over resources and demonstrate the dilemma between aspirations and the place of security.

To sum up, Schuler and Hashemi argued that the process of empowerment begins at the level of a woman's consciousness and becomes externalized through greater physical mobility, remunerated labor, a decisive role in the household, and, eventually, meaningful participation in the wider community (Sinha et al., 2011). Many studies have demonstrated that economic factors are important in women's empowerment. However, given the cultural and social constraints imposed on women in India, economic factors alone cannot bear the desirable results of gender equality.

Limitations of the Study

This research was conducted in a village with a relatively lower SC and ST population. The intersectionality approach could be employed to investigate the lives of Dalit and tribal women in rural communities. These women's life histories and experiences can contribute immensely

to the literature on gender & migration and bring gender subjectivities at the intersection of marginality and exclusion.

The focus of this study was on the married women of the village who are burdened with most of the labor in the rural areas. Studies can be conducted on the impact of out-migration on girl and boy children and their education in migrant families.

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