

SOCIETY / MIGRATION

The Generation That Left: How Migration Is Rewriting Rural Nepal

Migration has raised household incomes and helped reduce poverty, but it is also changing who farms, who stays, and what village life can sustain across Nepal.

OCTOBER 1, 2026



The Generation That Left: How Migration Is Rewriting Rural Nepal

Migration has raised household incomes and helped reduce poverty, but it is also changing who farms, who stays, and what village life can sustain across Nepal.

By Nepal Digest - October 1, 2026 - Nepal

In many parts of rural Nepal, migration is visible not in a departure lounge but in the people who remain. A field goes uncultivated for another season. A household is sustained by income earned thousands of kilometres away. Grandparents take on more of the daily work of family life. A young worker's most plausible route to a higher income begins with a passport.

None of these scenes, taken alone, proves that Nepal's villages are "emptying." That familiar phrase is too simple for a much larger transformation. Nepal is simultaneously receiving the economic benefits of migration and absorbing its social and productive costs. Money moves home. Workers move out. Families adapt.

Rural economies reorganise around the absence of people who might otherwise have supplied labour, raised children, farmed land or built businesses locally.

The scale is substantial. Nepal's 2021 population census recorded 2,190,592 people living abroad and absent from their households, representing about 7.5 percent of the country's population. They came from 1,555,961 households—23.4 percent of households in the relevant census measure. Men made up more than four-fifths of the absentee population. The pattern was geographically uneven, with especially high shares in some provinces.

Those figures describe more than labour mobility. They describe a country in which migration has become part of the architecture of ordinary household economics.

Migration is not simply a story of loss

Any serious account has to begin with what migration has achieved. For many Nepali families, foreign employment has financed food, housing, education, healthcare, debt repayment and a degree of economic security that domestic employment could not provide. At the national level, remittances have become one of Nepal's most important economic stabilisers.

The World Bank has described migration and remittances as central to Nepal's long reduction in poverty and resilience to economic shocks. Its 2025 Country Economic Memorandum noted

that remittances had reached roughly a quarter of GDP by 2023. That matters. A country cannot sensibly discuss migration only in terms of the workers it loses while ignoring the income, risk-sharing and foreign currency those workers generate.

But the opposite mistake is equally serious: treating a large remittance inflow as evidence that the migration model is costless.

The household has become transnational

The traditional economic unit in rural Nepal increasingly stretches across borders. Income may be earned in Dubai, Doha, Riyadh, Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo or elsewhere while major spending decisions are made in Nepal. A worker may remain formally part of a village household while being physically absent for years at a time.

The 2021 census gives a sense of the households behind the headline number. Among households with an absent member, 41.7 percent had three or four members remaining in the household, while 23.4 percent had only one or two. The census also found strong gender differences in international absence: 1,799,675 of the 2,190,592 recorded absentees were male.

That demographic imbalance changes the distribution of work inside families. Tasks do not disappear when a working-age adult leaves. Farming, childcare, elder care, household management and dealings with local institutions have to be redistributed among those who remain.

It is therefore misleading to describe remittance income as passive money arriving from abroad. It is produced through a family strategy in which one member's earning opportunity may depend on other members assuming additional responsibilities at home.

What happens to the farm when labour leaves?

Agriculture exposes one of the clearest tensions in Nepal's migration economy. Migration can give a household the money to invest in machinery, inputs or new livelihoods. At the same time, it can remove precisely the labour needed to cultivate difficult or fragmented land.

A 2023 study published in the *International Labour Review*, using nationally representative Nepali data and methods designed to estimate causal effects, found that households with international migrants were more than 50 percent more likely to have fallow land than households without migrants. The same research also found that migration encouraged some forms of agricultural intensification and livelihood diversification.

That combination is important. Migration does not produce one uniform agricultural outcome. Some families may use remittance income to mechanise or move into higher-value activity. Others may decide that cultivating marginal land is no longer worth the

labour it requires. Land can remain owned but cease to be actively farmed.

This is a rational household response, but when repeated across many households it becomes a structural question for rural Nepal: who will produce food, manage agricultural land and maintain local productive economies when working-age labour has better-paid alternatives elsewhere?

The geography of opportunity is changing

International migration is only part of the movement. Nepal is also experiencing powerful internal migration toward cities, provincial centres and accessible corridors. The result is not simply “Nepal versus abroad,” but a redistribution of people within Nepal alongside the international outflow.

Gandaki Province illustrates the pattern. An International Organization for Migration profile based on census and other data noted that only Kaski, Nawalparasi East and Mustang among Gandaki’s 11 districts showed positive annual population growth, while 11.6 percent of the province’s population was abroad. The report described rural areas as facing human-resource shortages associated with high outmigration even as more urban areas became increasingly concentrated.

That distinction matters because a municipality can lose residents without Nepal losing them internationally. A young person who

leaves a hill village for Pokhara changes the village's labour and demographic structure almost as surely as someone who leaves for the Gulf, even though the national economic implications are different.

Rural change is therefore being driven by two gravitational pulls: the domestic pull of urban Nepal and the international pull of labour and education markets abroad.

Schools reveal demographic change early

Migration also reaches the classroom. Families move internally; parents migrate seasonally; children may accompany them or live with other relatives. Where the number of children falls persistently, the economics of maintaining schools also changes.

A UNICEF-supported study of low enrolment in pre-primary education found migration to be a significant barrier in surveyed locations, with 38.6 percent of respondents citing it. The effects varied sharply by locality, and the study described seasonal migration as disrupting attendance and continuity for some children.

That finding should not be generalised into a claim that migration alone explains falling enrolment everywhere. Fertility decline, urbanisation, private-school choices, road access and changing parental preferences also matter. But migration is part of the demographic arithmetic local governments must increasingly

confront.

A school built for a larger cohort cannot indefinitely operate as though the population around it has not changed. Nor should consolidation be treated as a purely financial exercise: in mountainous terrain, the distance between a child and the next viable school can determine whether access remains meaningful.

The people who remain are not merely “left behind”

The language used to describe migration can itself obscure reality. “Left behind” suggests passivity. In practice, family members remaining in Nepal often manage farms, budgets, children, property, remittance spending and relationships with institutions while the migrant earns abroad.

Women in particular may acquire greater responsibility for household decisions when male family members migrate. Yet additional responsibility does not automatically mean greater freedom. More work, care obligations and agricultural responsibility can coexist with social constraints over land ownership, mobility or financial decision-making.

Older people face another version of the same contradiction. Migration income may improve their material security while physical separation reduces the availability of everyday care. Smartphones and inexpensive digital communication have

narrowed the emotional distance between migrant families, but they cannot perform the practical work of being physically present.

The relevant question is therefore not whether migration is “good” or “bad” for families. It is which benefits and burdens are created, who receives them, and whether institutions have adapted to the new distribution of responsibility.

Migration has become an economic system

Nepal’s foreign-employment infrastructure is now extensive. Recruitment agencies, labour approvals, orientation programmes, insurance, remittance companies, banks, government departments and destination-country agreements form an institutional system around the movement of workers.

The government’s *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2024* describes both the economic importance of foreign employment and persistent risks including debt, injury, illness, rights violations and difficulties accessing justice. It also documents efforts to extend social protection to migrant workers.

This institutionalisation is evidence of migration’s permanence in Nepal’s development model. Foreign employment is no longer an exceptional household response to a temporary shortage of jobs. For a large part of the population it is an established labour-

market pathway.

That creates a difficult policy problem. Making migration safer is essential, but an efficient migration system is not the same thing as a successful domestic employment strategy.

The remittance paradox

Nepal has benefited enormously from money earned elsewhere. Remittances support consumption, foreign-exchange reserves and household welfare. They can finance education, property and entrepreneurship. They can protect families from shocks.

Yet the success of remittances can partially conceal the weakness that generates them: insufficient numbers of attractive, productive jobs at home.

The World Bank's 2025 assessment makes this tension explicit. Nepal's long-term growth has trailed many peers even as migration-supported remittances helped drive poverty reduction. The challenge is not to suppress migration. Workers should be able to pursue opportunities wherever they choose. The challenge is to ensure that leaving Nepal is an option rather than the default route to economic advancement.

That requires more than programmes urging young people to remain in their villages. People respond to wages, services, education, infrastructure, markets and expectations. Sentiment

cannot compensate for a weak local opportunity structure.

What would make staying economically credible?

The future of rural Nepal will not be secured by trying to recreate the village economy of several decades ago. Migration, urbanisation, smaller families, better roads, digital connectivity and changing aspirations have already altered the country.

The more useful objective is to make rural and secondary-city economies productive with fewer workers. That means treating mechanised and commercial agriculture, reliable roads, market access, digital services, local enterprise and viable public services as parts of the same demographic strategy.

Some settlements will probably continue to shrink. That is not automatically a policy failure. Maintaining identical population distributions forever is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable. The real failure would be allowing demographic change to happen without adapting schools, healthcare, transport, land policy and local economic planning to it.

Return migration also deserves a more serious place in this discussion. Nepal Digest has previously examined the difficulty of coming home after working abroad. Returnees may bring savings, skills and different expectations, but those assets do not automatically translate into viable businesses or jobs.

Reintegration has to be treated as an economic problem rather than a ceremonial celebration of return.

The broader economic context matters too. As Nepal Digest has reported in its analysis of Nepal's record reserves and the gap between macroeconomic strength and everyday prosperity, strong external buffers do not by themselves create enough productive domestic opportunity. Remittance strength and domestic job weakness can exist at the same time.

A country connected by absence

Nepal's migration story is sometimes told through airport photographs: young people queuing with documents and luggage, families saying goodbye, another flight leaving Kathmandu. The more consequential story unfolds after the aircraft has gone.

It unfolds in the household reorganised around a monthly transfer. In the field that is mechanised, leased out or left fallow. In the school adjusting to a smaller cohort. In the older parent whose children live across borders. In the returnee deciding whether savings can become a business. And in the young person comparing a local salary with what the same years of work might earn abroad.

The 2.19 million Nepalis recorded abroad in the 2021 census were not simply missing from the country. They remained economically and socially connected to it. Their absence itself became a force

shaping the places they left.

That may be the defining contradiction of contemporary rural Nepal: migration can improve the lives of individual households while simultaneously weakening some of the local systems those households once depended upon.

The task is not to romanticise staying or condemn leaving. It is to build a Nepal in which geography does not predetermine opportunity—and in which a passport expands a person's choices rather than serving as the most reliable route to a decent livelihood.

Verification note: Key demographic figures are drawn from Nepal's National Population and Housing Census 2021 and thematic migration reporting. Economic context is based on World Bank analysis. Labour-migration context is based on the Government of Nepal's *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2024*. Agricultural findings refer to peer-reviewed research published in the *International Labour Review*. Education context draws on a UNICEF-supported Nepal study. Figures refer to their stated periods and are not real-time population counts.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/the-generation-that-left-how-migration-is-rewriting-rural-nepal/>