



Book Review

Nepali Migrant Women: Resistance and Survival in America. Shoma Hamal Gurung. 2015. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. 208 pages, ISBN 978-0-8156-3413-3. Cloth (\$27.90)

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In *Nepali Migrant Women: Resistance and Survival in America* (2015) author Shobha Hamal Gurung provides a timely and compelling account of a unique group of migrant women employed in the informal economy in Boston and New York City. Her 35 informants, who are between the ages of 28 and 57, originally entered the United States legally but now work without documentation. They are primarily employed in childcare, but also work in restaurants, beauty parlors, and other service positions. Before their migration, the majority were from middle class backgrounds, well-educated, and employed in respected professions. Their work in the United States represents a clear downward trajectory in terms of occupational prestige and class standing. Yet, they continue to stay and work in the U.S. This begs the obvious question of why? To find an answer, Hamal Gurung's book grapples with a variety of smaller 'how' questions: How did her informants initially make the decision to migrate from Nepal to the United States? How did they decide to stay? How has migration affected their sense of self? How has migration affected their families and communities?

Hamal Gurung's queries are framed by several literatures, including globalization and migration, intersectionality, and women's agency and empowerment. Throughout the book, the



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author emphasizes how her informants' decisions to work and earn in the U.S. transgresses normative gender roles and results in renegotiated divisions of labor and responsibility for those who remain in Nepal. She engages ethnographic methods and offers generous space for her informants' own words to guide her analysis. What emerges is a sense of contradiction and ultimately, as noted in the title, "resistance and survival." Contradiction, in fact, becomes the presiding theme of the book, as Hamal Gurung lays out three major points of friction for her informants. The first contradiction for Nepali migrant women lies in their experience of being both exploited workers in the United States and empowered agents of change for their families and communities in Nepal. The second contradiction is one of providing intimate care work as 'one of the family' while ultimately being hired and replaceable help. The third contradiction is a result of performing work historically identified as 'women's work,' while simultaneously being the sole and/or primary breadwinner—a role historically identified as 'men's work.'

The book is timely because Nepal continues to operate as a remittance-dependent state, with remitted monies from foreign laborers annually accounting for over a quarter of the country's GDP. Hamal Gurung's data are particularly compelling because the 35 informants represent a relatively understudied group of Nepal's migrant stream. The majority of labor migrants originating from Nepal are men traveling to India and the Gulf countries for manual labor and service work. Women who migrate are similarly concentrated in Gulf countries as well as Malaysia, and are predominantly of low socio-economic status. As noted above, Hamal Gurung's informants are not. This work thus adds important nuance to the story of Nepal's diaspora by giving voice to a particular subset of the millions of Nepalis laboring abroad.

The book is a succinct 150 pages of text consisting of seven chapters. Chapter one introduces the subjects of the book and outlines the methods and key conceptual frameworks. Although this chapter could use a more forceful and comprehensive discussion of how the various literatures she draws upon intersect and build on each other – and indeed, this section should probably be its own chapter – Hamal Gurung manages to efficiently position her analysis vis-à-vis key debates in the study of migration, globalization and feminist political economy. Chapter two provides historical context, giving the reader a clear sense of the social, political, and economic forces in Nepal that shaped her informants' migration decision-making. Importantly, Hamal Gurung emphasizes the complexity of her informants' decisions, noting the many non-economic factors that ultimately led her informants to working in the U.S.

After furnishing context, Hamal Gurung turns to an in-depth discussion of the labor conditions and labor relations that characterize her informants' work. Chapter three describes the contours of the informal labor market and recounts several reasons why the author's interlocutors choose work in the informal economy despite their previous high-status work in Nepal. The women cite their legal status, issues with licensure, the ease of finding work, and their ability to

avoid taxation as reasons for working without documentation. Chapter four considers the informants' labor relations and work conditions, focusing mostly on the experiences of women who perform childcare and domestic work. Hamal Gurung describes what she calls a "South Asian pan ethnic affiliation," that leads her informants to primarily seek employment with Indian families (11). The shared cultural, linguistic, and religious background is seen as beneficial to both employer and employee, yet results in employers leveraging socio-cultural hierarchies to demand unlimited work of their Nepali employees. Further, the closeness that develops between some employers and employees ultimately creates a troubling paradox of being one of the family but always susceptible to termination.

In the latter half of the book Hamal Gurung is more explicitly theoretical in her approach to the data. Chapter five explores how Nepali migrant women's labor and earning power re-structures the gendered division of labor in both the U.S. and in Nepal. For workers whose husbands are also in the U.S., a reversal of traditional roles occurs in which women are the chief earners outside the home and men carry out the domestic labor of cooking and cleaning. Workers whose husbands and families remain in Nepal rely on both male and female family members to provide care for their children, while they employ techniques of transnational mothering such as regular phone calls and sending money. Hamal Gurung deftly explicates how migrants and their families respond to such shifting gender roles and uses plentiful vignettes to elucidate the varied and deeply personal aspects of these negotiations. Chapter six contends with the idea of transnational community building, arguing that local and transnational practices provide Nepali migrant women with a sense of agency, empowerment, and community. Remitting money to their families as well as social and religious causes allow informants to have a positive and recognized impact on their homes and communities in Nepal. Active participation in local Nepali events and maintaining close networks with other Nepalis in the U.S. allows them to strengthen their own diasporic communities. Hamal Gurung forcefully argues that such transnational practices should not be understood simply as individual actions, but must be viewed as explicit acts of "global citizenship and civic responsibility" (138).

The book ends with a brisk conclusion that provides a synopsis of each chapter as well as a discussion of how the case study contributes to relevant literatures. To close, Hamal Gurung returns to the idea of contradictions, asserting that despite their marginalized position in the labor market, her informants manage to find agency in both local and transnational community building. She contends that her informants are empowered by their labor. However, she is careful to define empowerment in terms of real material and social gains, avoiding the frequently vague and catchall uses of this term. Hamal Gurung also notes the limitations of empowerment in an exploitative world system. The author's nuanced deployment of the term 'empowerment' is satisfying and

convincing, leaving the reader with a sense of the tempered promise that working abroad provides for her informants.

While excellent, the book would be improved with additional attention to the role of the state (both the U.S. and Nepalese) in shaping the gendered experiences of these migrant workers. Specifically, Hamal Gurung gives only scant attention to how U.S. immigration policies shape her informants' employment prospects. Moreover, while the author demonstrates that some women do prefer working in the informal sector, there is no counter narrative presented. Did any women find the precariousness of their labor unsettling? Perhaps more urgently, Hamal Gurung does not discuss the Nepali state's role in policing the labor migration decisions of women. Her informants' privileged social standing in Nepal is one important factor that allowed them to migrate to the U.S. initially. Nepal currently has a variety of gender discriminatory migration laws that severely limit women's foreign employment options. For most Nepalis, procuring a visa to the U.S. for any reason, is simply impossible. More analysis and explication of this reality would better situate the book in the existing literature on Nepali migration.

Finally, I appreciate the appendix in which Hamal Gurung provides a clear table of her informants' demographic information including caste, ethnicity, and religion. This is engaging and necessary information for anyone with an interest in South Asia broadly and Nepal specifically. The data reveal that nearly all of the informants were either high caste or from a small subset of Nepal's many ethnic minority groups. A section exploring and explaining this pattern would have contributed additional insights into this already fascinating book.