

Shobha Hamal Gurung. 2015. *Nepali Migrant Women: Survival and Resistance in America*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Nepali Migrant Women: Survival and Resistance in America seeks to shed light on the contemporary Nepali migration to the United States. Based on Gurung's long-term fieldwork, conducted over two separate periods (1991–1996, 2001–2008) in New York City and Boston, the book examines the close interconnection between gendered labor practice and transnational migrant-community building processes. Drawing upon interviews, anecdotes, and personal reflections on the working lives of highly educated, urban Nepali migrant women employed in low-paid domestic and care work in these metropolitan cities, the author asks: “What structural and personal factors compel educated women to migrate to the United States for work? How do they enter into the informal sectors of the US economy, and what kinds of labor relationships do they experience? Finally, how does Nepali women's involvement in the public sphere through paid work and transnational activities destabilize or reinforce gendered relations in Nepali families?” (p. 3). Gurung posits, “describing the everyday lives of Nepali migrant women” (p. 4) is key to addressing these questions.

A brief introductory chapter situates Gurung's argument within the broader body of scholarship on globalization and migration studies, feminist and gender studies, and migrant transnationalism and activism. Switching focus, Chapter Two offers another broad overview of Nepali historical and political context contributing to the contemporary mobility of Nepali women

outside Nepal. Many of her interlocutors are urban, highly-educated women from upper- and upper-middle-class families in Nepal who find themselves making personal and professional compromises upon their arrival in the US. Gurung complicates the prevailing migration “out of poverty” narrative and highlights, instead, the multiple and intersecting causal factors influencing women’s decision to migrate.

Chapter Three and Four further the author’s observation that Nepali migrant women’s transnational networks enable their access to and successful integration into “informal labor” within the US domestic work industry. In Chapter Three, Gurung outlines various aspects of the “informal economic sector” facilitating women’s downward social mobility. In particular, she examines the paradox of the readily accessible employment for Nepali migrant women in the pan-ethnic or “co-ethnic segmented labor markets” of domestic work within the upwardly mobile South Asian and South Asian American households. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and case studies, Chapter Four documents women’s participation in their own labor subordination. It highlights how specific (unequal) relational dynamics and degrees of intimacies unfold in a highly exploitative and informalized working conditions that are physically and emotionally demanding. However, the key assertions that the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender and nationality complicate “informal sector work” remains underdeveloped. Notwithstanding this omission, the strength of these chapters lies on rich and self-reflective as well as messy and fragmented narratives of her interlocutors.

Allowing the emic approaches of affect deployed by her informants to express intense feelings of anger, guilt, injustice, and “emotional suffering” would have potentially strengthened Gurung’s analysis. The author tries to fit every possible opening, both self-critical and self-deprecating commentaries and observations, offered by her interlocutors into etic categories of marginalization, resistance, and discrimination in the informalized labor sector. Part of this is informed by Gurung’s interest in locating “women’s agency” firmly in the transformation of their conjugal lives and extending outwardly to their roles as community organizers, leaders, donors, and relentless participants in a variety of transnational activities in Nepal and in the US. The downside of this approach is it lacks theoretical engagements with how such narrations of personal struggles, professional contradictions, and overall lived dilemmas of women potentially exist in their own terms, even parallel to the etic categories.

The second half of the book offers glimpses into women's negotiations in their conjugal lives, including their collective activities in shaping and sustaining migrant transnational communities and networks. Taking a rather conventional division between public and private spheres as an analytical starting point, Chapter Five locates the ongoing reconfigurations of transnational families and gendered dynamics, and, in particular, women's economic independence through employment in the exploitative and informalized domestic and care industry. Such a focus on familial aspects tends to overlook political and structural conditions sustaining the pan-ethnic segmented labor economy and the production of migrant illegality and labor subordination (De Genova 2002). More importantly, the increasingly self-selective US immigration laws and policies (i.e., diversity visas)—within which her informants' lives are entangled complicates any simple narrative of agency. Viewing migrant women's participation in their own labor subordination as a form of enacting agency at best naturalises "informal" migrant-labor economy and at worst confines any (and all) discussion of agency within the trite framework of victim-agent dichotomy.

Gurung's key argument that women's everyday resistance existed in parallel to their agentive roles as transnational actors is noteworthy. At the same time, her lack of engagement with key feminist literatures that have problematized resistance-agency dichotomy (Abu-Lughod 1990) and liberal subject formation are missing (Mahmood 2005). Such elisions risk reinforcing a narrow reading of "women's agency" (i.e., in their professional background, physical mobility, and socio-economic achievement) and reconstructing a monolithic and homogeneous category of "Nepali [migrant] woman" (Tamang 2009) thereby flattening out diversity within the Nepali transmigrant communities in the US and beyond.

Chapters Six and Seven rely on her informants' transnational connections, activism, and community building practices in Nepal and in the US to expand the question of "women's agency." Gurung references wide-range of scholars whose key theoretical contributions to migrant transnationalism and gendered labor practices in the US are well-established. In this, Gurung offers a useful bibliographic resource for students of transnationalism. However, her lack of sustained and in-depth engagements with these works makes it rather difficult for readers to see how rendering visible "the complex personal and structural factors motivating Nepali women's migration" (p. 8) advances the prevailing debate on migrant transnationalism. For Gurung never explicitly

characterizes these women as “transmigrants” (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1995). Nor does she explain how their experiences qualitatively differ from that of other transmigrants in the US. A more careful analysis of Nepali women’s long-distance participation in social organizations at “home” and Nepali nonprofit organizations in the US, for instance, using Levitt’s (1998) concept of “social remittances” would have brought more nuances to the chapter. Similarly, an interpretive examination of how the Nepali transnational activities map onto and/or shift the prevailing “transnational social field” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) would have been effective at illustrating how the particularity of Nepali case could complicate the dominant frames currently employed in the gendered transnationalism literature.

The most compelling and potentially useful part of the book lies in its representation of the emergent socio-political identity of “Nepali” as newly arrived South Asians. In doing so, the narrative challenges and renders visible the problematic representation of “South Asianness” in the US. In particular, Gurung’s discussion of migrant women’s changing roles as primary breadwinners, and their emergent roles in transnational activities makes a contribution to the burgeoning literature on transnational feminist praxis. And yet foundational works on those themes by Mohanty (1988, 2003) and Grewal and Kaplan (1994) go unmentioned. Thus, the key argument in the book—“Nepali women’s involvement in transnational activities allows [sic.] them to exercise new agency on a global stage” (p. 3)—remains unsubstantiated, leaving its readers bewildered and disappointed.

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