

Unspoken dreams: Using art as a language to tell stories of migration



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Art is an universal language that can be used to explore the experiences of marginalised communities.

Building new homes and sending their children to school were key dreams of the participants made possible by financial remittances.

Mobile phones play a significant role in womens' wellbeing, connecting them to their husbands who are abroad.

AUTHORS

Anita Ghimire, Director, Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER)

Meena Poudel, Advisory Board Member, MIDEQ



NEPAL INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL
& ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH



"म कसरी भनम मेरा मनका कुरा, मेरा सपना र व्यथा, मलाई बोल्न आउँदैन"
"I have no idea how to tell you my feelings, my dreams and agony, I don't know how to speak"

She was Rupa¹ Devi Ram of Saptari, southeast Nepal. Rupa's spouse Narayan Ram has been working in Qatar for last 10 years as a painter. He migrated to Qatar through a local agent paying two lakhs Nepali Rupees (1,600 USD). Ram's family arranged to pay this fee by taking a loan from a local moneylender who charged Ram's family 5% interest. Initially, the agent told Narayan that it was a vacancy for car cleaner's work in an automobile garage, however, the agent untruthful. Upon arrival, Narayan ended up working as stone breaker with no contract. Rupa represents thousands of unspoken voices of dreams generated by migration among the Ram community and similar marginalised groups in Saptari and its' surroundings.

Sharing emotions through arts

NISER organised a three-day painting workshop from 7 to 9 June 2023 in collaboration with the Women, Children, and Community Development Centre (WCCDC) in Rajbiraj, with the wives of migrants whose husbands work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia. The contractual nature of migration does not allow men to take their spouses hence these wives stay back in Nepal with the children and parents of the migrants. The workshop was part of MIDEQ's [impact interventions](#). It comprised of a painting workshop, a short survey and discussion about painting followed by three days of orientation training. The final day consisted of another painting workshop then a survey and discussion about paintings.

The aim of the orientation was to support the wives of migrants to understand the migration process - from life in the destination country to knowledge of formal support system for migrants and their families and how to deal with the psycho-social challenges of having a family member away. The painting workshop aimed to make migrant wives familiar with the team and comfortable to learn and ask questions during the orientation. The survey and discussion fostered understanding of how the wives experience the migration of husbands. It helped bring out the dreams and challenges facing wives of migrants performing a complex gendered role while their men, structurally considered as head of the family, are away for work.

Art work was chosen as a strategy to enable women with no formal education to speak about their experiences of managing, largely extended (joint) family. The women also manage relationships within their community and more broadly with wider society including schools, markets, and remit companies. For example, many women expressed how they encounter the moneylender when repaying their family's migration loan. In total, 108 women of various village and municipal councils of Saptari attended the workshop and attempted to draw their feelings.

¹ All names of person and place have been anonymised to protect participants from being identified.

Social context

Rajbiraj, the district headquarter of Saptari, is also one of the main cities of Madesh Province and famous for its agricultural products, spices, handicrafts (Mithila paintings) and Maithili culture. The Maithili are a rich, artistic culture in Nepali society. They are deeply embedded in conservative aspects of Hindu practices in which women are expected to follow more cultural rituals compared to other social groups. Thus, women from this culture are more vulnerable to gender based discrimination such as early marriage, sex selective abortion and dowries. Additionally, the "Ram" caste group, which falls under the Terai Dalit ethnicity, represents one of the most marginalized social groups in the caste based hierarchal Nepali societal structure. Their caste position pushes them to the bottom of the social strata.

Constitutionally, the caste system was abolished long ago but manifestation of caste division – particularly "untouchability" - is still prevalent across the country. People, particularly in the elderly generations, still follow it rigidly in both public and private spheres. Caste hierarchy and Hinduism are complimentary social features creating socio-cultural hierarchy by birth among people. In addition, women of all caste and ethnic groups are perceived as dependent to men for any decision that has social, cultural, economic and political significance in Nepal.

Restricted mobility and interaction with outsiders is another discriminatory feature of the people of Madhesi origin like the Ram community. Women have to abide by purdah system (covering face and hair with veils) and are stigmatised for being seen in public sphere or interacting with outsiders. Due to their limited interactions with and exposure to wider society, women of this community encounter numerous challenges resulting in a lack of basic information about themselves or in relation to their husband's migration. Many women who participated in the art workshop were hesitant or unable to write their own name and addresses on their art sheets. Most of them did not know which city their husbands were in or whether they migrated through formal channels.

However, the women lived with their dreams for their family. They envisioned that their children would have a privileged upbringing and access to higher education due to remittances received. Their dreams, visions and optimism were clearly articulated in their paintings.

Art as a universal language

Painting and related creative arts are widely considered as a universal language, which

transcends words. Renowned German sociologist and feminist Maria Mies has pointed out that art is a powerful tool for women in particular to help express not only complex feelings of anxieties, abuses and discriminations but also to enable them to visualize and share their resistance strategy². Art has no language barrier – helping women respond to abuses, anxieties and future dreams.

We heard from a newly married woman who had anxieties of being away from husband who left before their first child was born. Some women expressed frustration from having to negotiate with their in-laws to get few rupees from remittances sent by their husbands to buy things of daily personal needs. Others were in tears due to not being able to pay back their loans used to cover the cost of migrating. The conversations among migrant wives, NISER researchers and WCCDC were deeply engaging not only to listen to the women's agony created by migration of their men but also to extend gendered empathy and solidarity. The NISER team, the partner organisation representative and participants were all women.

Dreams, plans and priorities

When the women were asked to sketch their feelings and hopes the way they prefer to, consciously or not, the women began to communicate their dreams using their own Maithili culture, colour and language of expression. One of the best parts of their art work was that it transcended language barriers and spoke directly to their shared experiences, challenges and coping strategies. The art workshop was also an important forum for them to exchange and understand their shared anxieties due to their loneliness, children education and migratory loan and also to build group solidarity.

Through their colourful creations, the women articulated their plans to use remittances. While paying back their migratory loan was one of the top priorities they illustrated, replacing their current huts by a modern building was a second priority. We asked the women why building a new house was important. Most answered that living in a new house indicated that they have a socially and culturally dignified life. Their response clearly demonstrates how important a house is as an asset for these structurally marginalized community.

It was amazing to observe the women's interactions among themselves while drawing their dream house sketches. There were sounds of laughter, waves of hopes, deep solidarity to select the colour for the sketches and happiness in the workshop hall.

Investing in children's education was another key priority commonly articulated by the women participants through their art. Although Nepal's basic education in government schools is free in theory, many low income and socially–culturally marginalized families are unable to send their children to those schools due to associated costs and caste based discrimination. Caste based discrimination is not as explicit in private schools but these are comparatively quite expensive for ordinary people. While requesting the women to reflect upon their own art work, it was

interesting to hear their logic about investing on education. Many women said they want to see their children receiving better education like other non-migrant families. Basically they want their children not to dropout from the school due to non-academic, associated costs. There were several women who also said that they want to shift their children from the government public schools where the language of teaching is Nepali to private, English medium schools where the language of teaching is English. Considering their structural marginalization, migration generated optimism as migration presented with opportunities for a better life.

Digital miracle and emotional healing

Mobile phones have a significant impact on emotional wellbeing of these women. While sketching their dreams and hopes, some women were also busy talking to their husbands in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Dubai. Devi Ram was among them. She paused her drawing suddenly, stopped talking to me about her art and quickly picked up a long distance call. When asked, she began laughing and noted that her husband, Dipak Ram, called from Qatar during his lunch break. Most respondents shared that their husbands call them during the break time to ask about their families. Responding to our question about the main issues that the women normally discuss while online with their husbands, they often become shy and with a smile on their faces. Their common response was checking wellbeing. Perhaps to acknowledge such a vital role of mobile technology, several women were holding smart sets and included their sets in their drawings.

Reflections – lessons and takeaways

Art is a universal language. Art and other forms of creative expression are a powerful way to express personal unwritten and in particular, gendered feelings. There was no instructive guidance from NISER or WCCDC about how to draw their stories through arts. The organisers provided an open space for women, giving them paper and colour pens to draw their feelings, hopes and anything relevant to their present circumstances as working migrant's wives. While reflecting upon the artistic workshop and talking to women afterwards, it was fascinating to learn that women used artistic language to express themselves more intently than in bilateral conversations and interviews.

Financial remittances play an integral role in migration, which was strongly reflected in their art works. The social value of migration was reflected across women's architecture of their dream house and the generational significance was much more strategic. Many women said they did not want their children to follow their father's career as an overseas migrant. Their hope of a dignified future through ensuring capital assets such as new house with gardens and flowers and some land certainly speaks to broader aims to address their historical socio-cultural marginalisation, economic discrimination and political exclusion.

² Mies, M. (2005). Search for a New Vision. Dhaka: Narigrantha Prabartana.

Research has shown that migration stigma is gendered as migrants' wives encounter more challenges than their male spouses or spouses of men who have not migrated.³ A few women in the art workshop did share this established social reality, however many others did not express their feelings of stigma. This raises a question of whether the women who attended in art workshop hesitated to recall those negative narratives through art and rather needed structured guidance to articulate stigma through drawings.

Despite this, the artistic strategy employed by NISER and WCCDC was a powerful, innovative and culturally responsive way to understand the experiences of women who do not migrate with their

husbands. It enabled Rupa Ram and other participants to share their feelings, dreams, anxieties and agony, even when they think they don't know the language to share their stories. Despite structural marginalization, socio-cultural boundaries created by their specific context, gender discrimination, the women who "stay back" do have a universal language to speak, if the opportunities to tell their stories are available.

Partners

Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER)

Funding

MIDEQ is funded by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1]. The GCRF is a five-year £1.5 billion fund aimed at addressing the problems faced by developing countries.

(2023) Nepal: MIDEQ
Case study: Coventry University.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons CC BY NC 4.0 License.
Coventry University, 2023

Poudel M. (2023) Nepal. MIDEQ Case Study.

Photo credit

Photo via Meena Poudel, MIDEQ

³ Agrawal, A. (2006). *Migrant Women and Work: Women and Migration in Asia* (Vol. 4). New Delhi: Sage.

Poudel, M. (2011). *Dealing with Hidden Issues: Social Rejection Experienced by Trafficked Women in Nepal*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.