Gendered Migration, Food Insecurity, and Nepali Women Migrant Workers in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intersections of gender, food insecurity, and transnational labour using a qualitative study of Nepali women migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Drawing on multi-sited fieldwork conducted between May and November 2025, the analysis applies feminist food justice and intersectional frameworks to highlight how hunger, nourishment, and everyday food practices of these women are shaped by gendered power relations, restrictive migration regimes, and hierarchical global labour markets. The study situates the women workers' mobility within Nepal's broader neoliberal and agrarian transformations, in which declining agricultural viability, indebtedness, and intensifying care burdens have made labour migration both a survival strategy and a rare pathway to socioeconomic mobility. The main findings highlight a central paradox associated with this form of transnational female mobility: while remittances significantly enhance the food security and well-being of sending households, women migrant workers often face food insecurity, diminished personal autonomy, and emotional hardship in the UAE. We discuss how food is a terrain on which inequality, belonging, aspiration, and resistance are negotiated in the daily lives of Nepali women migrant workers.

Keywords

feminist food justice, gendered migration, Nepali women migrant workers, care work, food insecurity, social reproduction, remittances, United Arab Emirates

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Cover Image

A woman prepares *momo* in Chame village, Manang district, in northern Nepal. Photo credit: Frank Bienewald/Alamy

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Introduction

Migration scholarship tends to treat food security as the outcome of remittance economies rather than a key driver of migration, while food security research often centres on sedentary populations, overlooking the roles and experiences of mobile and feminized labour (Crush & Tawodzera, 2016). Despite being a critical theme, the relationship between food insecurity and women's labour migration remains understudied. In the case of rural Nepal, household food insecurity is a decisive motivation for women to migrate, driven by declining agricultural yields, insufficient household food stocks, rising food prices, and the social economy of care. By framing migration through a feminist food justice lens, it becomes clear how global labour markets, household food strategies, and intersecting inequalities shape women's mobility, agency, and aspirations. Ultimately, understanding women's migration requires interrogating the politics of food: who eats, who goes hungry, who provides care, and who bears the embodied costs of sustaining transnational livelihoods.

This paper examines how food insecurity, care responsibilities, and gendered social reproduction shape both the root causes of migration and the lived experiences of Nepali migrant women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There are five interrelated themes that illuminate the gendered politics of food and migration:

- *The motivations and moral economies of mobility* shows how women frame migration through idioms of care, sacrifice, maternal duty, and household food insecurity. Their narratives illustrate how entrenched gender norms both constrain women's mobility and compel them to migrate to meet moral and material obligations (Sijapati, 2017; Silvey, 2006);

- *Aspirational food security* considers how remittances reshape diets, consumption patterns, and aspirations for social mobility in Nepal. Here, food functions symbolically, signifying modernity, progress, and well-being, and thus influences both decisions to migrate and expectations of what migration should achieve (Boccagni, 2017; Probyn, 2016);

- *Disembodied food security and embodied deprivation* capture the core paradox of women's transnational labour. While women secure household food security at home, they themselves endure employer-controlled kitchens, irregular meals, and emotional and sensory deprivation abroad. This contradiction highlights how nutritional dignity is unevenly distributed within global labour regimes (Anderson, 2000);

- *Collective care, solidarity, and everyday resistance* show how women recreate Nepali dishes, pool ingredients, and form communal kitchens. These practices cultivate relational resilience and act as micro-political strategies that counter isolation and structural control in restrictive workplaces and living environments (hooks, 1990; Williams-Forson & Wilkerson, 2011); and

- *Structural inequalities across borders* interrogates how caste hierarchies, gendered mobility bans, debt-dependent recruitment, exploitative labour governance, and the *kafala* system collectively shape women's food autonomy and vulnerability.

These interlocking themes demonstrate that migrant women's food insecurity is produced across transnational political economies that differentially value and discipline their labour (Federici, 2021; Mies, 2014; Sharma, 2012). These dynamics reveal that women's migration emerges not from individual choice but from the intersectional effects of agrarian crisis in Nepal, gendered moral responsibility, restrictive state policies, and structural inequalities. Within these constraints, Nepali women navigate limited options to fulfil expectations of care, secure food and income for their households, and manage the burdens of indebtedness and precarity. Their personal narratives reveal how the moral economies of care overlap with the political economy of intersecting crises, producing a gendered migration system that relies on women's sacrifices to sustain families across borders.

This paper draws on an integrated framework of feminist food justice, feminist food security, and intersectionality to analyse Nepali women's migration for work in the UAE. This approach begins from the premise that hunger, food insecurity, and nourishment are not simply nutritional or economic conditions but are produced within overlapping and historically entrenched systems of power tied to patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, class inequalities, uneven global labour markets, and state migration regimes (Collins & Bilge, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; Sbicca, 2018). Unlike conventional food security models that define food primarily through availability and access, this framework foregrounds the cultural, emotional, and political meanings of food (Carney, 2012; Crush & Ahmed, 2025; Moffat et al., 2017; Slocum, 2007). Moreover, it understands food insecurity as a structural outcome of global capitalism, employer control, border regimes, and the gendered organization of social reproduction (Hennebry et al., 2021; Parreñas, 2001; Yeates, 2009).

The analytical framework is particularly relevant to the Nepali context, where patriarchal restrictions on women's mobility intersect with the destabilising effects of neoliberal reforms, agrarian decline, and globalized labour demand. These overlapping forces shaped women's lifeworlds long before migration occurred, undermining traditional livelihood systems, intensifying their care burdens, and creating new forms of precarity. However, the framework does not depict women's migration as a deterministic response to crisis. Instead, it locates migration as arising from the interaction between structural pressures and women's aspirations, agency, and moral obligations, a dynamic particularly evident when examining food insecurity and care. Women migrate not only because agrarian livelihoods have collapsed but also because they seek dignity, a better future for their children, and autonomy within these constraints.

Three conceptual pillars further guide this analysis. The first aspect is intersectional oppression, which views women's

food insecurity and migration trajectories as shaped by the intersecting hierarchies of gender, caste, class, age, marital status, and legal precarity under systems such as Nepal's restrictive mobility controls and the GCC's *kafala* (sponsorship) regime (Malit & Tsourapas, 2021). Still active in most Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the *kafala* system ties a migrant's legal residency and employment status to a single employer (*kafeel*). This system has been widely criticized for perpetuating labour exploitation, restricting migrant mobility, and creating conditions of dependency and precarity, especially for low-wage migrant workers employed in domestic, construction, and service sectors. Second, food is treated as a site where power is exercised and contested, revealing how employers, recruitment brokers, and migration regimes shape access to nourishment and the conditions of eating (Sbicca, 2018). Third, women migrant workers' narratives are positioned as central epistemic sources, in line with feminist methodologies that privilege experiential, relational, and embodied forms of knowledge (Alcoff, 2020; Haraway, 2014).

The first section of the paper situates Nepali women's migration within agrarian change, neoliberal restructuring, patriarchal mobility controls, and labour demand in the Gulf. The next section outlines the qualitative methodology used in the UAE. The third section develops the empirical analysis with a focus on migrant decision-making, food deprivation, solidarities forged through cooking and care, and the paradox of long-distance mothering. The fourth section discusses these findings through a feminist food justice lens, and the conclusion reflects on the implications for migration governance, labour rights, and transnational food justice.

Gender, Structural Inequities, and Nepali Women's Mobility

Contemporary patterns of labour migration from Nepal must be understood within a broader historical context that predates the liberalization reforms of the 1990s. For more than a century, Nepali men migrated seasonally or permanently to India for agricultural work, military service, and wage labour, facilitated by the 1950 Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty and earlier colonial-era recruitment of Gurkha soldiers into the British and Indian armies (KC, 2022). This cross-border migration route became a vital livelihood strategy for households facing land fragmentation, caste-based exclusion, and the challenges of Nepal's subsistence farming economy. By the mid-twentieth century, migration to India served as a social safety valve for surplus labour from the hills and the Terai region, embedding cross-border mobility into local norms of masculinity, household provisioning, and risk diversification (Shrestha, 1998).

The political and economic restructuring of the early 1990s dramatically reshaped Nepal's mobility landscape. The restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990 coincided with the adoption of neoliberal reforms under Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which dismantled agricultural subsidies, liberalized trade, and reduced state investment in irrigation, extension services, and grain price stabilization (Adhikari, 2025; Khanal & Bracarense, 2021). As state support for farming declined, rural livelihoods became increasingly precarious: input prices rose, productivity stagnated, and subsistence farmers faced growing exposure to market volatility (Adhikari, 2025; Khatri & Timsina, 2023). These pressures required households to combine subsistence farming with wage labour and pushed them towards new forms of mobility beyond India, including migration to Malaysia and the Gulf (Childs & Choedup, 2019). The Maoist insurgency of 1996 to 2006 further accelerated this shift. The conflict militarized rural areas, disrupted local markets, and heightened insecurity, prompting many to seek income security and safety abroad (KC, 2025; Sharma & Donini, 2010). Migration thus emerged simultaneously as a political refuge, an economic necessity, and a livelihood strategy amid deepening inequality.

Outmigration became structurally embedded in Nepal's development model by the post-conflict era. Successive governments embraced a "migration-as-development" paradigm, celebrating migrant workers as national heroes and positioning migrant remittances, which constituted nearly one-quarter of GDP by the early 2020s, as engines of poverty reduction and macroeconomic stability (KC & Shivakoti, 2025; World Bank, 2024). However, this optimistic narrative masked profound contradictions. Nepal increasingly exported labour while importing food, fuel, and industrial goods, thereby intensifying its dependence on global markets (KC, 2025; Patel, 2012). As male outmigration intensified, rural labour shortages worsened, prompting the feminization of agricultural work combined with unpaid care responsibilities (Federici, 2021). At the same time, traditional agroecological food systems weakened. Driven by globalization, the declining viability of smallholder agriculture, and new consumer aspirations, many Nepali households shifted from diverse diets based on millet, maize, and legumes toward purchased rice, processed foods, and remittance-driven consumption patterns (Bhattacharjee, 2016; KC, 2022; Probyn, 2016). It is within this evolving political economy that women's migration as precarious workers emerged at the intersection of structural constraints, increased economic pressures, and changing social expectations.

In Nepal's deeply patriarchal social order, migration has traditionally been regarded as a masculine pursuit. Nepali men represented the visible face of mobility for a long time (KC, 2022). In contrast, women were socially, culturally, and spatially confined to the household and agricultural fields, with their sociocultural identities defined by domestic duties, caregiving, and other filial responsibilities (Adhikari, 2025). Patriarchal norms long idealized female immobility, equating women's migration with moral risk. Legal frameworks reinforced this ideology through restrictive inheritance rules, unequal transmission of citizenship, and limited access to land and property, which limited women's bargaining power and economic autonomy (KC, 2022). Until the 1990s, cross-border mobility by women was frequently stigmatized as trafficking or sexual transgression (KC & Shivakoti, 2025). This gendered imaginary produced a differentiated mobility regime in which male migration symbolized duty

and national pride, while women's movement was rendered morally suspect and subjected to constant surveillance.

Political and economic restructuring following the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990 reshaped the gendered dynamics of migration. Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) liberalized trade, eroded agricultural subsidies, and reduced public-sector employment, disproportionately harming rural women reliant on subsistence farming (Adhikari, 2025; Childs & Choedup, 2019). Longstanding inequities in land ownership and education, especially among historically disadvantaged groups such as low-caste Dalit, indigenous Janajati, and women in rural areas, further narrowed livelihood options. As male outmigration intensified in the 1990s and 2000s, women inherited expanded responsibilities for farming, childrearing, and household provisioning. Yet, rising input costs, deteriorating yields, and escalating food prices intensified agrarian precarity by deepening household food insecurity. The Maoist conflict compounded these pressures, compelling poor rural households to diversify their income sources through increasingly feminized migration (Sharma & Donini, 2010). These intersecting crises of agrarian decline, neoliberal restructuring, escalating indebtedness, civil war, and the exclusionary culture of masculinized migration generated new gendered pressures that pushed women toward wage labour and precarious forms of international migration, even as patriarchal norms continued to stigmatize their mobility.

At the same time, the rapid growth of oil-driven economies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states created unprecedented demand for feminized, low-wage service and care labour (Sahu, 2025). Nepali women migrants were embedded within these transnational "global care chains", increasingly entering the domestic work, cleaning, caregiving, and hospitality sectors, joining workers from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and the Philippines (Mahon & Robinson, 2011; Parreñas, 2001; Yeates, 2009). For poor, landless, widowed, or abandoned women, migration offered one of the few viable routes to secure income, repay debts, finance children's education, and sustain household food security. Yet these opportunities were stratified, with disadvantaged Dalit and Janajati women disproportionately channelled through informal recruiters and high-interest loans, increasing their vulnerability to wage theft, contract substitution, and increased exploitation in the Gulf (KC, 2022).

State regulation further entrenched women's precarity. Since 1998, the Nepali government has imposed bans, age restrictions, and occupation-specific prohibitions on women's migration to the Gulf, framing these measures as protective (KC & Shivakoti, 2025). Feminist scholars argue these policies constitute state paternalism and structural violence by curtailing women's mobility rights, criminalising their autonomy, and pushing them toward irregular, riskier routes (Federici, 2021; Mies, 2014). Upon arrival in destination countries, the *kafala* system ties workers' residency to employers, governing their movement, access to food, working hours, and ability to rest (Mustaqeem, 2025).

Methodology

The study employed a multi-sited qualitative research design in three cities in the UAE: Sharjah, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi. These cities are major hubs for Nepali women migrant workers employed in domestic work, cleaning, hospitality, and service-sector occupations. Data collection methods included in-person and virtual semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and informal group conversations conducted by the primary author in person between May and June 2025, followed by virtual interviews via Messenger and WhatsApp until November 2025. Since most participants worked long hours in cafés, restaurants, hospitals, schools, hotels, and private households, interviews often took place during short breaks, after evening shifts, or on the few weekly rest days. Parks, cafeteria corners, public benches, and shared dormitories served as accessible interview settings. For women migrants working as *khadamas/khadimas* (live-in domestic workers), conversations were primarily conducted in the Bur Dubai area, a major hub for South Asian migrant workers. These interactions often took place on Fridays, the weekly day off for many domestic workers, when women could visit this locality. These spontaneous and situated exchanges proved especially valuable for eliciting personal reflections on food, care, and the embodied realities of migrant lives. Nineteen Nepali migrant women participated in semi-structured interviews and conversations, complemented by consultations with representatives from the Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA–UAE), migrant rights groups such as Shramik Sanjal, and officials at the Embassy of Nepal in Abu Dhabi.

Full-length semi-structured interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed and translated into English. Brief conversational encounters, often lasting 5–15 minutes, were documented in detailed field notes written immediately afterwards. The interview guide was thematically organized around five broad areas: (a) migration history; (b) pre-migration food and livelihood conditions; (c) food practices and constraints abroad; (d) household food changes linked to remittances, and (e) gendered reflections on autonomy, care, and well-being. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 49 and included first-time migrants as well as those employed on their second or third contracts. They included domestic workers dependent on employer-provided food, cleaners and service workers who cooked communally in dormitories, and retail workers navigating irregular shifts. A focus on food was organic throughout the fieldwork. Participants shared stories of cooking for their employers, of eating routines shaped by their hectic work schedules, of memories of meals cooked and eaten at home, and of their emotional relationships with certain foods, such as *momo*. What appeared to be "ordinary" talk about meals cooked, served and consumed became rich material for evaluating how food mediates identity, belonging, vulnerability, and resilience. Discussions about cooking, grocery shopping, or communal eating frequently opened into broader reflections on sacrifice, identity, aspiration, and emotional resilience.

Feminist Food Justice and Transnational Politics of Migrant Women's Survival

Moral Economies of Migration: Agrarian Decline, Maternal Duty, and Restructuring of Survival

The study participants consistently framed their migration decisions through moral narratives of duty, sacrifice, and maternal responsibility. Migration was rarely described as an individual aspiration; rather, it was articulated as an extension of care work and as an obligation to secure food, education, and a viable future for their children. This result aligns with broader findings that women's migration is embedded in gendered expectations of selflessness and familial obligation (Gamburd, 2021; Silvey, 2006). As one participant working as a cleaner in Abu Dhabi explained:

> *We come here so our children can eat well. But we eat cold rice or noodles because we have no time.*

Another respondent with children noted:

> *I came here so that my sons can study in an English-medium school… There was no future for us.*

These statements exemplify how the moral economies of motherhood and sacrifice shape women's decisions, producing migration as a form of transnational care work undertaken at high personal cost.

Beneath these moral logics lie powerful structural conditions rooted in agrarian decline and the monetization of rural Nepal. Although the families of many of the participants still retain small plots of land and grain stores, they emphasized that subsistence agriculture no longer guarantees security, dignity, or social mobility. This echoes the common findings of research on Nepal's agrarian crisis (Adhikari & Gellner, 2019; Sugden et al., 2022). One participant captured this shift succinctly:

> *We had land and food grains, but no money… You eat rice, but you still feel poor.*

Her comment illustrates a central transformation. Food grains may sustain the body, but cash sustains the possibility of mobility, education, and modernity. As markets penetrate deeper into rural life, households increasingly rely on remittances to purchase food, pay school fees, cover medical expenses, and build social status. Thus, migration becomes a livelihood imperative shaped by the neoliberal restructuring of subsistence, where families must secure survival by exporting labour rather than producing food at home.

These material pressures are compounded by gendered state policies and the burden of high-interest debt. Restrictions on women's mobility, such as age bans and occupation-specific prohibitions, push many into unregulated recruitment channels, where unscrupulous brokers and informal high-interest loans are common (KC, 2025; Sijapati et al., 2019). One participant recounted their experience with an unscrupulous broker as follows.

> *I borrowed 12–15,000 rupees at high interest to pay a broker who said he would arrange a tourist visa. He took the money and disappeared. The police told me to go to Kathmandu, but nothing happened. I am still paying that debt back, little by little.*

Women migrant workers' dependence on informal loans reflects a broader pattern in which debt serves as an instrument of economic capture, binding women to migration even before they leave their homes (Alowais & Suliman, 2025). High-interest loans create immediate pressure to migrate, while state restrictions channel women into riskier pathways, layering financial vulnerability on top of patriarchal mobility controls.

Embodied Precarity, Daily Food Politics, and Migrant Labour Regimes

Nepali women migrant workers' everyday experiences with food in the UAE expose the stratified forms of embodied precarity that are shaped by time scarcity, employer surveillance, inadequate cooking facilities, and the emotional strains of displacement from home and family. Across different worksites, meals are often repetitive, mainly consisting of rice, lentils, and pickles, with meat or fresh produce reserved for special occasions. For domestic workers, who generally live in their employers' homes, autonomy over food is even more constrained. Several women described receiving leftovers or lower-quality portions, reflecting what feminist scholars call the "body politics" of global labour regimes (Anderson, 2010; Parreñas, 2001). Within these hierarchies, migrant women's bodies are disciplined not only through wages and working hours but also through the regulation of nourishment, rest, and desire. Participants repeatedly recounted monotonous diets, irregular meals, and limited access to fresh food as central features of their daily lives. For many living in shared or employer-controlled accommodations known as 'hostels', limited kitchen access meant relying on leftovers or instant noodles. As one woman living in a 'migrant worker hostel' explained:

> *We wait our turn to cook… Otherwise, we cannot eat when we're hungry. Sometimes there is a long line.*

These food-related practices render visible the intimate modalities through which migrant labour regimes exert control over migrant bodies.

Physical deprivation of nutrition is closely intertwined with emotional hunger. Women described eating alone and often with cold food after long shifts, tasting food that felt "empty," and experiencing a persistent sense of sensory and affective dislocation. As one participant observed, "Here even when we eat, we don't feel satisfied." These accounts underscore nourishment as relational and affective rather than merely biological. Food becomes a site where migrant women confront loneliness, the absence of familiar flavours, and the emotional costs of care labour performed in households or in 'hostels' that are not their own. This emotional-culinary

dissonance illustrates how the embodied experiences of migration reverberate through taste, appetite, and meanings attached to eating.

A vivid example of this embodied precarity occurred on a Friday morning in Bur Dubai, the city's historic quarter and a popular spot for South Asian migrants to gather weekly. Near the metro exit, a simple tea-and-breakfast shop faced the park colloquially called 'Love Park', a popular meeting place for Nepali migrant workers. There, a group of five Nepali women who worked as cleaners at a school on the city's outskirts shared tea and stories on their day off. They had come to shop at a Nepali grocery store to celebrate a co-worker's birthday. This celebration constituted a rare occasion to cook a special meal of chicken curry, rice, *aloo ko achar* (pickles made from boiled potatoes), and *kakro ko achar* (cucumber seasoned with spices such as *timur* and chilli). Yet even this moment of happiness was circumscribed by the logics of scarcity. They needed to return quickly to their company accommodation to secure limited kitchen time before others started cooking.

The participants' descriptions of daily life in the flat provided by their employer revealed the constraints that define the everyday politics of food. Fifteen women shared a single unit, sleeping on bunk beds, queuing for the stove, and storing cooked food without refrigeration. As one woman explained,

> *We cook at night for the next day. By the time we eat at school, the food is cold and tastes bad, but we have no choice.*

Warm food, let alone favourite dishes such as *momo*, were a rare luxury. "There is no pot for *momo*, and no time," another added. A popular dish in Nepal, *momo* is a dumpling that symbolises cultural identity, social belonging, and communal tradition. Among the Nepali diaspora, it serves as a culinary link to home, preserving heritage and reinforcing a sense of belonging across transnational spaces.

Food access is structured through the intersection of low wages, long working hours, and inadequate living conditions, making even basic culinary pleasures out of reach. These daily culinary struggles are inseparable from the structural vulnerabilities embedded in their migration trajectories. Each woman had paid between 100,000 and 150,000 Nepali rupees (CAD930 to CAD1,400) to recruitment agents, often borrowing money at high interest rates to pay these agents. One participant recounted being defrauded by a broker who disappeared with her savings. She reported it to the police, who told her to go to Kathmandu, but "nothing happened." Despite such exploitation, they rationalized their migration through maternal obligation and intergenerational aspiration. For example:

> *No one comes for fun. We have children. We need money for school, for food. We had land but no income.*

Their remittances fund their children's diets and education, even as their own meals are sparse and repetitive. As one noted: "Our children eat better now, but we don't." These narratives foreground how women's bodily sacrifices abroad subsidize nutritional security at home, exposing the asymmetric circulations of care and sustenance that sustain transnational households.

Shared Kitchens, Micro-Worlds of Care, and Feminist Politics of Everyday Resistance

Despite operating within highly restrictive labour and living environments, Nepali women migrant workers actively carve out spaces of solidarity, dignity, and mutual care through shared food practices. In company hostels, dormitories, and crowded apartments, women pool money for groceries, coordinate cooking schedules, share utensils, and contribute ingredients like spices and pickles brought from Nepal. These practices exemplify what feminist scholars call the micro-politics of survival. These are ordinary yet politically meaningful acts through which marginalized women produce community and sustain one another amid structural precarity.

Participants emphasized the emotional significance of these practices. As one woman noted,

> *There are a hundred Nepali women in our building… Sometimes we make chicken curry together. Even if we can't eat it regularly, we laugh and feel like home.*

Despite time constraints, unequal incomes, and the absence of proper utensils, the preparation of *timur achar* is an assertion of cultural identity and a form of collective healing. Similarly, the group of school cleaners planning a modest birthday celebration with chicken curry and *achar* shows how shared cooking transforms scarcity into connection. Their excitement over securing kitchen time, even when it required cooking late into the night after long work shifts, illustrates the emotional labour involved in sustaining one another.

These solidarities were deeply shaped by intersectional identities. Study participants came from diverse caste, ethnic, and class backgrounds, including those from historically disadvantaged groups such as Dalits and Janajatis. Their experiences abroad were further differentiated by age, marital status, debt burdens, family responsibilities, and prior work history. However, shared kitchens often become spaces where differences fade in the face of common precarity. Within the constraints of the *kafala* system, such collectivities function as quiet refusals of isolation and subordination. Sharing food becomes a political act, signalling mutual recognition, support, and the affirmation of each other's significance.

The Friday gathering in Bur Dubai vividly illustrates this form of communal care. The five Nepali school cleaners clustered around a café table, coordinated a birthday meal, embodying both deprivation and everyday resistance. Their anticipation of buying chicken, rice, and spices was tinged with urgency: they needed to return to their accommodation before others occupied the shared kitchen. "If we get there late, we can't cook," said one. Even in a congested flat shared

by fifteen women, without refrigeration and adequate utensils, they created moments of warmth through collective cooking. The birthday dinner was described as "our small happiness," symbolising how micro-celebrations remake the kitchen into a political and emotional refuge within a labour regime that otherwise fragments community.

Acts of relational care are themselves profoundly intersectional. The women came from different regions, such as Chitwan, Jhapa, and Itahari, and navigated varying burdens tied to caste, debt, and filial responsibilities. Married mothers carried the emotional weight of separation from children. Single or widowed women contended with stigma but sometimes enjoyed marginally greater autonomy. Under the *kafala* system, their legal dependence on employers intensified the 'double marginalization' of women migrant workers through exploitation abroad and patriarchal moralism at home (KC, 2025). Yet these same structural constraints also made their collective cooking practices powerful gestures of refusal, and moments when they reimagined endurance not as submission but as care. Ultimately, these everyday practices reveal that food is not merely a material resource but an emotional and relational infrastructure that migrant women actively build to survive. Cooking together, sharing ingredients, and creating small moments of joy constitute feminist acts of resilience and the quiet yet powerful ways of reclaiming agency and asserting humanity in systems designed to constrain them.

Long-Distance Mothering, Contradictory Empowerments, and Reframing Food Security

Food anchors the emotional geographies of transnational life by structuring how Nepali migrant women navigate distance, longing, and responsibility across borders. Many participants described their daily rituals of calling home to monitor their children's diets: "Every evening, I ask my mother-in-law, did they eat vegetables?" Such practices of mothering from afar illuminate the affective labour embedded in global migration chains, in which women must guide household nutrition remotely even as they struggle to adequately feed themselves abroad. This emotional strain often manifests as what participants called a "hungry heart," the feeling of emptiness that accompanies meals consumed in isolation. One woman explained, "Sometimes I cry while eating. Food goes down hard." Eating is entangled with longing, guilt, and anxiety about children's well-being. Food thus embodies both transnational connection and rupture: it evokes memories and flavours of home while continually reminding women of the distance separating them from those they care about.

The Friday gathering in Bur Dubai made this emotional geography visible in everyday life. The five who met for tea spoke proudly of sending remittances for their children's food and schooling, but admitted they rarely tasted a warm meal themselves. They described calling home at night, asking what their children had eaten, instructing mothers or mothers-in-law on preparing nutritious meals, and worrying whether sons and daughters had finished their food. "Our children eat better now, but we don't," said one woman. The warmth of imagined family meals in Nepal starkly contrasted with the cold rice packed for lunch in Dubai, capturing the emotional dissonance of migration: nourishment flows across borders, but affection and appetite rarely converge in the same place.

At the same time, migration produces contradictory forms of empowerment. Income earned abroad allows women to repay debts, finance children's education, and gain a measure of authority within households and communities. As one woman commented:

> *Now I can speak up at home. Before, I had no voice. Even if I suffer here, people respect me when I return.*

Yet, such empowerment is precarious and moralized, and it is granted on the condition that women endure hardship and maintain steady remittance flows.

Discussion: Reframing Care Migration Through Food, Power, and Justice

Feminist political economy reminds us that global labour markets extract not only economic value but also emotional energy from migrant women, generating empowerment inseparable from exhaustion and loss (Kunz, 2011; Rajan & Neetha, 2019). Nepali women's decisions to migrate to the Gulf are rooted in gendered moral economies shaped by agrarian decline, household food insecurity, and expectations of maternal sacrifice, underscoring how structural constraints and moral responsibilities co-produce mobility. Once abroad, women's bodies become sites of extraction and deprivation as they work long hours, endure employer-controlled kitchens, and experience nutritional, sensory, and emotional hardship, thus highlighting the embodied contradictions of securing food for others while going hungry themselves. Despite these constraints, women cultivate solidarity and micro-worlds of resistance through shared cooking, pooling ingredients, and recreating Nepali dishes, transforming everyday food practices into acts of cultural affirmation and relational care. Food is also central to managing long-distance emotional ties, and the paradoxical forms of empowerment migration generates, simultaneously enabling women to provide for their families while exposing them to social isolation, longing, and moralized expectations of endurance. Together, these findings reframe migration not as individual economic mobility but as a deeply gendered, relational, and nutritional endeavour shaped by structural inequalities, affective labour of care, and the politics of survival across borders. Agency is thus shaped and constrained by the very labour regimes, gendered expectations, and migration policies that produce precarity.

There is a fundamental paradox in Nepali women migrant workers' insertion into the regime of labour migration and food insecurity in the Gulf. That is, women's hunger and monotony abroad underwrite abundance and stability at home. Moreover, food operates both as a site of sacrifice

and a terrain of everyday resistance. Through practices such as saving leftovers, sharing provisions, organising cooking schedules, and sustaining culinary rituals despite chronic scarcity, Nepali migrant women expose the moral and material contradictions of global care economies. Their embodied strategies illuminate how the politics of food in migrant labour regimes are inseparable from the broader inequalities that shape mobility, labour, and transnational survival. Transnational food insecurity is, therefore, not only a material condition but also a deeply embodied phenomenon. Food becomes a symbol of the distance between mother and child, labour and love, sacrifice and self-care. The warm rice cooked and eaten at home sharply contrasts with the cold leftovers hurriedly consumed at worksites in Dubai. This exemplifies what feminist theorists describe as reproductive alienation, involving the separation of women's care labour from their own physical and mental well-being (Federici, 2012). Yet within these constraints, participants fostered small but meaningful acts of resistance and dignity. By cooking and consuming birthday meals together, sharing cooking ingredients and commensality, and collectively navigating kitchen queues, Nepali women migrant workers creatively reassert agency over their bodies and time.

These affective and material practices demonstrate that food is simultaneously a medium of control and a site of resistance. Food is also a prism through which the entanglements of labour, care, emotion, and justice become visible. Hunger faced by Nepali women migrant workers is not only about physical deprivation. It is also deeply relational, produced by physical distance, unshifting filial and maternal duties, and the gendered organization of global care. Food becomes the connective tissue of transnational life. It connects women to the families they nourish from afar, even as it exposes the real hierarchies that determine who eats, who cooks, and who sacrifices. These experiences underscore the need to rethink food security beyond metrics of availability or access. For migrant women, food insecurity is shaped by emotional well-being, moral expectations, structural inequalities, and the relational politics of care. A feminist food justice lens insists that the right to eat well, live with dignity, and maintain meaningful family relationships must be central to any framework addressing migration and labour rights. As one participant poignantly expressed, "We came here for our children to eat better. One day, I hope we also eat in peace." Her words capture the core insight of this analysis: food justice and migration justice are inseparable, intertwined through women's labour, emotions, and everyday struggles across borders.

Food – rather than wages, remittances, or labour markets – is the central analytic through which South–South migration must be understood. Feminist food justice scholarship conceptualises food as a site of social power, embodied politics, and moral struggle (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Anderson, 2000; hooks, 1984). Building on these insights, we suggest that food is a constitutive force shaping the conditions, choices, and constraints of women's mobility. This conceptualization challenges migration theories that treat food security as a neutral household variable and instead situates food within transnational systems of gendered labour, state regulation, and affective responsibility. The lived experiences of Nepali women migrant workers emerge here as the epistemic foundations underscoring how hunger, nutritional responsibility, and relational care shape migration trajectories in ways that existing theories are unable to capture.

The paper further advances feminist food security theory by conceptualising food insecurity as relational, affective, and embodied, dimensions which are rarely accounted for within the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)'s technocratic pillars of availability, access, utilization, and stability. Drawing on feminist notions of hunger and care (Carney, 2015; Probyn, 2016), we theorize how food insecurity under the Gulf's *kafala* system operates as a technology of labour discipline. Nepali women's experiences of cold leftovers, limited access to cooking facilities, and emotional depletion from long-distance mothering illustrate how hunger is both material and affective. Food insecurity must be understood through the intertwined geographies of labour control, emotional reproduction, and transnational care, elements that are obscured by dominant frameworks on food security.

The paper also elaborates how migrant Nepali women enact micro-forms of sovereignty within highly restrictive labour regimes. While food sovereignty scholarship has primarily focused on collective rural struggles and state-level autonomy (Patel, 2009; Wittman, 2011), this study demonstrates how everyday acts, such as pooling ingredients, recreating Nepali dishes, communal cooking, and refusing employer leftovers, constitute embodied refusals of devaluation. These practices illustrate how women reclaim cultural identity, emotional connection, and temporal control through food, even under conditions of structural unfreedom. By theorising these practices as constrained food sovereignty, the paper shows how resistance emerges through quotidian acts of nourishment and relational care (hooks, 1990; Lloro & González, 2022).

Conclusion

This study of the experiences of Nepali women migrant workers in the UAE reveals that hunger, nutritional deprivation, and the emotional weight of feeding families from afar are a structural outcome of a global labour system and restrictive mobility regime. While women's migration can stabilize their household's food security in Nepal, it does so by transferring the physical, emotional, and temporal burden onto the women migrants themselves. Women migrant workers sustain the nourishment of their children and family members, while simultaneously being denied nutrition, rest, and dignity. This contradiction exposes the core logic of a migration system that privatises survival, disguises dependency as empowerment, and moralises migrant sacrifice through remitting as a contribution to the Nepali nation. The paper thus argues for a fundamental reframing of food as a central domain of power, care, and justice, which moves beyond the tokenistic consideration of women migrant workers in migration governance frameworks such as the Global Compacts.

Food, labour, and migration governance need to be seen as overlapping political arenas rather than discrete policy domains. A feminist food justice lens makes visible how nutritional deprivation, curtailed autonomy, and gendered expectations of care for Nepali women migrant workers are embedded in broader political economies of inequality. Bringing feminist food security's emphasis on entitlements into dialogue with food justice's focus on structural power, agency, and sovereignty offers an integrated framework for understanding the material, embodied, and affective dimensions of transnational survival. This approach positions food insecurity not as a household-level problem to be solved through wages or remittances, but as a systemic condition inscribed across women's bodies, relationships, and everyday practices.

Recognising food as both a labour condition and a moral terrain prompts a critical re-evaluation of remittance-centred development narratives. Nepali women migrant workers sustain households, communities, and national economies, yet their own labour and deprivation are largely absent from the metrics and imaginaries of development. Centring women as rights-bearing workers shifts the moral grammar of migration governance toward justice, dignity, and recognition. It demands policies that protect incomes, as well as the social and nutritional conditions under which women migrant workers labour and live.

The everyday food practices documented in this study, such as sharing meals, recreating Nepali dishes, pooling ingredients, and cultivating communal kitchens, illuminate the micro-politics through which women reclaim autonomy, solidarity, and cultural belonging in spaces structured to diminish them. These acts are not merely coping strategies; they are quiet yet potent assertions of agency that render life livable. They remind us that food is a language of resistance, care, and continuity through which women sustain themselves and each other even within deeply exploitative labour regimes. As one participant reflected, "We came here for our children to eat better. One day, I hope we also eat in peace." Her words crystallize the core argument of this paper: the right to migrate and the right to food are intertwined struggles for transnational justice. Future research must deepen this nexus by examining comparative South-South migration routes, and the food politics of emerging labour destinations. Advancing this agenda through research, policy, and advocacy is essential for transforming global labour migration into a system that values not only productivity but also the dignity, care, and well-being of the women whose labour sustains it.

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