

# Unpacking youth engagement in agriculture: Land, labour mobility and youth livelihoods in rural Nepal

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## Abstract

Young people are increasingly turning away from agriculture in many parts of the global South, even where agriculture remains the backbone of livelihoods and the rural economy. This tendency among rural youth has become a critical research and public concern given that mass youth un(der)employment has emerged as a defining feature in many countries. In this paper, we interrogate and depart from the dominant narrative of the youth-agriculture disconnect by focussing on socio-economic conditions that shape diverse patterns of youth livelihood in rural areas. Our empirical evidence draws on ethnographic studies conducted in rural parts of Nepal with in-depth interviews with young people complemented by key informant interviews with local leaders and community workers who shared their experiences and local narratives of the links among youth, agriculture and migration. Findings show that youth aspiration to leave agriculture is hard to deny, although this is heavily mediated by economic status, caste and gender in rural contexts. Given the chronic livelihood insecurity and the structural barriers rooted in class, caste and gender, we find that youth from underprivileged backgrounds do not have the luxury of considering an 'exit' from agriculture despite their mobility aspirations. When a longer-term livelihood trajectory is considered, youth aspirations to transition out of agriculture show some degree of temporality regardless of

their background, suggesting their re-engagement in agriculture later in their life.

**KEYWORDS**

agrarian change, farming, land, rural labour, South Asia, youth

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

One in five people in developing countries are youth (15 to 24 years old) (Arslan et al., 2020). Across much of developing Asia, a majority of rural youth lack access to suitable non-farm employment (Aguilar & Sumner, 2020; White, 2020). Yet, extensive evidence suggests many young people are increasingly turning away from agriculture, thus resulting in agricultural decline across many parts of developing countries (Leavy & Hossain, 2014; White, 2020). Based on their multi-country study in Asia and Africa, Leavy and Hossain (2014) conclude that farming is no longer a preferred employment option for the younger generation, even when agriculture remains the backbone of livelihoods and the rural economy. This tendency among young people has become a critical research and public concern given that mass youth un(der)employment has become 'structural, chronic and permanent features of most economies' (IFAD, 2019; ILO, 2012; White, 2020: 6). The problem of youth unemployment and poverty may have been exacerbated by a rise in precarious forms of employment in cities and international labour markets (Ferguson & Li, 2018).

Building upon three case study sites in Nepal, this paper interrogates and departs from the dominant narrative of the youth-agriculture disconnect by instead focussing on socio-economic conditions that shape diverse patterns of youth livelihoods in the farming and non-farming sectors. It attempts to reveal a new way of understanding youth livelihood trajectories by addressing the pressing questions of why and how some young people turn away from agriculture while others remain (or aspire to be) engaged in it. Furthermore, with most research on youth neglecting longer-term life trajectories of young people, it is easy to overlook the fact that many youth, who 'leave', return to agriculture in later life, under conditions that may be the same or more or less favourable. The underlying processes are poorly understood. This paper undertakes a holistic analysis of multiple aspects of intersectionality—economic class, gender, migration status and caste/ethnicity. By doing so, this article responds to an important call for research that goes 'beyond the more common focus on why young people choose to leave farming, and explore young people's pathways into farming by documenting the experiences of young men and women who are establishing themselves as farmers (or are trying to do so)' (White, 2015: 331).

### 1.1 | The imperative to leave agriculture

Young people's aversion to agriculture is often associated with their migration imperatives and desire to move out of rural areas in search of employment, either to cities within their home countries or abroad. Most migrants in South Asia are men, while women tend to stay in rural areas (Gartaula et al., 2010; Leder, 2022; Sunam, 2020). In Nepal, the focal site of this paper, a growing body of research has shown that transnational labour migration—predominantly temporary work-related migration to outside one's countries of origin—tends to attract young people, leading to shortages of young farmers, land 'underutilisation' and reduced agricultural productivity (Ojha et al., 2017; Sunam & McCarthy, 2016). Based on their research on migration and agrarian change in Nepal, Maharjan et al. (2020) add support to the view that the aspirations of young people are shifting toward non-farming sectors and rural outmigration. Farmers meanwhile are experiencing the dual pressures of climate change, which is putting pressure on yields (Khadka et al., 2022), and rising costs of production, as well as society-wide shifts in consumption patterns and rising demand for cash (Sugden et al., 2018). Within this context, migration and other forms of non-farm

labour now fill in a critical gap in livelihoods (Sugden et al., 2022). Consequently, this form of outmigration has produced 'remittance villages' (Sunam, 2020), where remittance incomes have increasingly become key to rural livelihoods. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed migrant workers to greater precarity than before (Suhardiman et al., 2020), and young people may be in the process of reimagining their future livelihood pathways, although that remains to be seen, and if anything, the economic pressures for migration remain unchanged in many contexts (Murzakulova et al., 2021).

The desire to leave agriculture is cultural as well as economic. Some studies have highlighted a range of additional factors driving the shift of young people away from agriculture, including the low social status attached to farming and relatively low returns from agriculture (Leavy & Hossain, 2014). Labour migration, for instance, has become a 'rite of passage' in many rural societies (Altin, 2021; Conrad Suso, 2020) as young people enter adulthood and need to address economic distress. Youth studies have suggested that young people's aversion to agriculture in the global South is often associated with their changing aspirations that differ from those of previous generations (Jeffrey, 2010; Jones, 2009). Compared to previous generations, young people tend to engage in education for longer, and marry and enter the labour force later, thus resulting in a prolonged liminal youth stage before household formation (Scoones et al., 2019). With higher education, and a curriculum tending to devalue agriculture (White, 2012), not to mention changing cultural expectations, and increasing influence of globalised youth identities, young men and women aspire increasingly to gain employment in non-agricultural sectors (Elias et al., 2018). However, for growing youth population, a concomitant rise in jobs in cities and international labour markets is not only inadequate but also precarious (Ferguson & Li, 2018), adding to the youth livelihood crisis.

With regards firstly to non-farm jobs within their home country, many youth aspire to skilled employment, investing heavily in education. However, demand for skilled jobs, including public service positions, vastly outstrips supply. This condition suggests that careers in these sectors are an unrealistic target for many young people, fuelling unemployment even among the educated youth in the global South (Fox, 2019; IFAD, 2019; ILO, 2012). Many young people have, thus, found themselves in states of 'waithood', 'despair and boredom', while facing difficulties in maintaining independent livelihoods (Jeffrey, 2010). This status of waithood challenges the conventional assumption that there is a linear life course, progressing from childhood to education, employment, marriage and home making.

With waithood becoming a new normal for a segment of youth, many young people have moved to cities in their home countries and used their agency to generate more creative livelihood strategies, as has been observed in India (Young et al., 2017). However, with regard to agriculture, several structural constraints shape young people's disengagement. Issues relating to access to land, credit and other resources have emerged as a recurrent theme across Asian and African contexts (Bezu and Holden, 2014; Fox, 2019; White, 2015, 2020). There are thus vast swathes of rural youth for whom 'waiting' for an opportunity is not even an option, and they instead pursue non-farm livelihood activities locally or in cities that are often menial and casualised wage labour employment. Frequently, the wages earned fail to meet the subsistence needs of the household, and instead simply supplement agricultural income, representing an interdependence between the capitalist and peasant economy (Shah & Lerche, 2020; Sugden, 2019).

Regarding migration overseas, this carries its own unique form of precarity. Jobs in higher-income countries for youth from countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Bangladesh, are relatively accessible to households who can pay the agency fees and have relevant social networks to facilitate the process (Suhardiman et al., 2020; Sunam, 2020). Not all overseas migrants have the same experiences. While some can secure higher-paid service sector jobs with scope for upward mobility, others earn marginally more than what they can earn at home, after deducting agency fees and living expenses (Sugden et al., 2022). Meanwhile, incidences of 'deception' or a loss of one's job can even push some migrants further into poverty back home (Gupta et al., 2022; Sunam, 2020).

Therefore, because of the limited and precarious nature of the jobs available to rural youth, both at home and abroad (Ferguson & Li, 2018), un (der)employment and the livelihood crisis remain deeply ingrained problems for them, particularly for those with limited education and weak social networks. The COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened these problems. Given this, while youth aspirations are often incompatible with agrarian futures, the non-agricultural pathways, including migration, seem 'no less painful' (Pritchard et al., 2013; Suhardiman et al., 2020).

## 1.2 | An alternative view

Some recent research (e.g. Huijsmans et al., 2021; Srinivasan, 2023; Yeboah et al., 2020) presents an alternative viewpoint that highlights greater complexity than the simplistic narratives of the unidirectional youth-agriculture disconnect suggest. For instance, drawing on three rural commercialisation hotspots in Ghana, Zimbabwe and Tanzania, Yeboah et al. (2020) find little evidence to suggest that young people lack interest in agriculture. This view is supported by some, albeit limited, studies from rural Asia. Focussing on Thailand and rural Asia more broadly, Rigg et al. (2020) suggest that many young people are not completely detached from farming, rather they maintain some links to farming by alternating their working lives between urban and rural areas over their life courses. Similarly, using the life-course perspective, recent research focussing on multiple countries—Canada, China, India, and Indonesia—has shown that mobility out of farming to engage in education, labour mobility and non-agricultural work does not exclude ‘eventual farming futures’ (Srinivasan, 2023). In a similar line, based on their studies in India and Indonesia, Huijsmans et al. (2021) also suggest that young people follow ‘a strategy of keeping things open’ to enable them to deal with sudden and surprising life events, highlighting the role of class and gender in producing youth aspirations.

It is within this context, research on migration has shown that an initial desire to leave agriculture is not necessarily followed up in the longer term—particularly when faced with the precarious nature of migrant labour. Appreciating this context, there is a considerable literature on return migration (Cassarino, 2004; Ianioglo et al., 2021; Thieme, 2014). Following return, the outcomes, however, are diverse and may include successful entrepreneurship, continuation of previous livelihood and also failure to re-engage in agriculture and repeat cycles of migration (Junge et al., 2015).

Given seemingly contrasting old and new narratives around youth and agriculture, there is further scope to understand under what conditions young people (dis)engage with land and farming in rural areas—and the outcomes of this (dis)engagement. The problem with the existing literature is that they often tend to treat young people as a homogenous category, thus overlooking heterogeneity among them in terms of caste/ethnicity, class and other social markers as well as the diverse structural contexts in which they live and work. A simple focus on ‘youth’ as a category is insufficient, as the life chances of young people are wrapped up in the wider social and economic contexts (Scoones et al., 2019: 129). To address these gaps, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how young people from differently situated households engage with agriculture and other in situ and ex situ livelihood activities. It also assesses how they experience both disengagement from farming, while taking a longer view to understand the circumstances within which they *re-engage* in farming at a later date. This paper considers how the heterogeneity among young people in terms of not only class, migration status and ethnicity/caste but also the rural structural contexts in which they live shapes their aspirations, lived realities and their engagement with agriculture.

This paper makes contributions to the existing literature on agrarian and rural studies. Despite emerging research and growing concern among policymakers on youth issues in the global South (e.g. IFAD, 2019), ‘the literature on rural youth and their inclusion in rural transformation is *remarkably limited*’ (Arslan et al., 2020: 2, emphasis added). The geography of the existing scholarship on rural youth is also uneven. While a growing body of literature has focussed on rural African contexts (e.g. Scoones et al., 2019; Yeboah et al., 2020), developing Asia, and in particular South Asia, has remained comparatively neglected. Recent literature on young people in developing Asia includes Brown et al. (2017)’s work on youth in Darjeeling, a regional town in West Bengal, India; Dyson and Jeffrey’s (2018) and Deuchar and Dyson’s (2019) research on educated youth in North India; and Schut’s (2019) work on educated but un (der)employed youth in rural East Indonesia. These works have significantly enhanced our understanding of young people, particularly those educated and/or *residing* in towns and cities. Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of research that *specifically* investigates the livelihoods of *rural* youth from different educational, gender, economic class, migration and ethnic/caste backgrounds, and their different modes of livelihood engagement, particularly when initial plans to migrate or find work in the non-farm sector fail to materialise or when they

return to the farm. This research gap holds true for Nepal, where research has focussed on agrarian change and transnational migration from rural areas (e.g. Maharjan et al., 2020; Sugden et al., 2018) while paying little attention to the longer-term trajectories shaping youth livelihoods.

## 2 | METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: STUDYING RURAL YOUTH

This paper draws upon three separate rounds of ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal. The first is fieldwork undertaken in Panchayan, a rural village in Sunsari district of the far eastern Tarai-Madhesh, between 2012 and 2013. This village was revisited in 2019 for a follow up round of data collection. The second village is Thadi and neighbouring Jijha in Dhanusha district in the central Tarai-Madhesh. This community was visited initially in 2013 for an in-depth study on agrarian relations, migration and climate change, with a second round of fieldwork from 2019 to 22 focussing on outmigration and youth livelihood decision-making. The third site is the Chirkhuwa valley of Bhojpur district in the eastern hills. It was visited initially in 2015 for a study on agrarian relations, ecological change and migration, with a follow-up round of fieldwork from 2020 to 22, focussing on migration and youth livelihoods. For all three sites, the follow-up visits provided a longer-term perspective on young people's aspirations and lived realities because young people's aspirations and livelihood decisions may change over time.

While the study draws upon a large dataset based on three sites where the authors have been collecting data for around a decade, the primary source of data used for this paper was a series of in-depth individual interviews with farmers, including 12 in Bhojpur, 12 in Dhanusha and 28 in Sunsari. Our target group was young people. While the definition of youth varies in relation to economic, social and cultural contexts (Jeffrey, 2010), following research on the global South (Schut, 2020), this paper considers youth to fall within the 16–35 age range. One advantage of adopting this wider age range is that it provided an opportunity to have a more balanced number of non-migrant youth and migrant returnees, as well as married and unmarried youth. Interviewees were, therefore, for the most part, between 16 and 35 regardless of their marital status. Actual interviews also included some respondents who were older than 35 (but younger than 50), because we sought to gain a longer-term perspective of the livelihood transition of young people from adolescence into adulthood. In other words, these interviewees could no longer be classified as youth but could tell us about their transition into adulthood and offer insights into whether initial aspirations when young were matched with their actual lived experience in subsequent decades. We also interviewed local key informants, including politicians, community leaders and NGO workers who shared local narratives of the links among youth, agriculture and migration.

## 3 | SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF THE STUDY SITES

Panchayan, sitting on the far eastern Tarai-Madhesh (plains), had approximately 250 households in 2012. Given its location in the Gangetic plains, the village's agricultural land is fertile and suitable for growing rice. Villagers rely on both farm and non-farm livelihood activities including farming, casual jobs in construction and migration.

While the average landholding among landowning households was 0.51 ha, land ownership was highly uneven in this village where 70% of households held only 25% of the total agriculture land. Nearly one third of households were landless and had no land of their own at all, with many dependent on either tenancy, wage labour or both, for subsistence.

The region east of the Koshi River, within which Panchayan is located, has historically experienced very high levels of landlessness, with a strong association with caste, because of the nature of its integration into the state of Nepal. Many land grants were distributed to hill upper caste elites in the 19th century at the expense of the indigenous Tharu, and the hill upper castes also benefitted disproportionately from the state resettlement schemes in the 1960s (Sugden, 2013).

Panchayan village is heterogeneous in terms of caste and ethnicity, with one third of households being upper caste (Bahun and Chhetri) and around 55% belonging to indigenous or 'Adivasi' groups (Tharu, Rajdhani, Magar and Rai), and about 12% being Dalits. Dalits are historically marginalised people often considered 'untouchables', and they have long faced discrimination and exclusion because of the caste system (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Our ethnographic evidence suggests that caste hierarchy continues to shape everyday social and economic relations in Panchayan and other field sites, despite the legal prohibition of caste discrimination in Nepal. Because of their caste status and persistent control over resources and state apparatus, upper-caste individuals dominate the political and social spheres in Nepal (Sunam et al. 2022). They also hold more land than other castes because of the historical legacies discussed earlier, while Dalit households in Panchayan, as in other parts of Nepal (Adhikari, 2011), are predominantly landless and work on the land of upper castes as a tenant or sharecroppers. They also rely on caste-based occupations (tailoring, blacksmith, etc.), offering services for upper caste people in cash or kind. Many scholars have described that caste-based labour relations between Dalits and upper caste families are exploitative and discriminatory, although migration and remittances have rapidly eroded these caste-based occupational dependency relations (Adhikari & Gellner, 2024; Sunam, 2014).

The second village is Thadi and neighbouring Jijha in Dhanusha district in the central Tarai-Madhes. This is a village with a very high concentration of poverty with a rigid caste division between the Maithili-speaking middle (mainly Teli and Yadav) and upper castes (Brahmin) on the one hand and Dalits on the other. Both make up 41% of the sample, with the remainder from the Muslim community, who also experience a legacy of marginalisation. Our 2021 survey found that 53% of the sample owned less than 0.25 ha of land, with most farming also as tenants. Within this group, 56% were from the Dalit and Muslim community. While the old landlord class has declined in power, inequality remains acute. Only 18% of households own farms of more than 1 ha, yet this group owns 62% of the land, and 68% are middle or upper caste.

The third site is the Chirkhuwa valley of Bhojpur district in the eastern hills. Land inequality is more complex here and aligns to both caste and agro-ecological zone. Eleven percent of the sample in the 2020 random survey are upper caste Brahmin and Chhetris who migrated to the region following the Gorkha conquest in the late 18th century. Twelve percent are from the Dalit community, and the remainder are from the indigenous Adivasi groups of the hills such as the Rai, Tamang, Magar and Majhi. Through the political influence and money lending, upper castes were able to take control of a disproportionate share of the best irrigable *khet* land, and they hold 0.57 ha on average, compared to 0.33 ha for Dalit and 0.39 ha for Adivasi communities. Around 77% of farmers in the two villages on the fertile valley floor are tenants, all of whom are Dalit or Adivasi. In the three villages on the upper slopes of the valley, 74% of farmers are Adivasi, and while most have their own plots, just under three quarters are rainfed and productivity is low. There are limited in situ non-farm labour opportunities on this site.

Agriculture remains important to the livelihoods in all three sites. Nevertheless, with the outmigration of young people for overseas employment, mainly in Malaysia and the Gulf States, remittances are a key component of household livelihoods. Half of households in Panchayan had someone working overseas, while in Thadi Jijha, it was 45% and in the Chirkhuwa valley, it was 69%. Around two thirds of tenants are from the Magar community, an ethnic group from the western hills who had historically migrated to the region and mainly live in Aaptari village. A further 42% are from the Nepali speaking Dalit community.

## 4 | DIVERSE TEXTURES OF YOUTH LIVELIHOODS

In analysing young people's efforts to build their livelihoods within and beyond agriculture, four possible modes of engagement are considered here: (1) farm self-employment, (2) on-farm wage labour, (3) non-farm wage labour and (4) non-farm employment or business operation. Within each of these, there are many possible livelihood activities (see Table 1). Interviews conducted for this research revealed a complexity of views of agriculture among different groups of young people. While visiting the study sites, many people, mostly local politicians and NGO leaders,

**TABLE 1** Patterns of engagement of rural youth in farm and non-farm activities.

Activities	Privileged youth	Underprivileged youth
<b>Farming</b>		
Farm self-employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Farming a larger plot of land (&gt;1 ha) sufficient for household food security.</li> <li>Some production of a surplus, allowing limited commercial production of vegetables and niche crops (e.g., cardamom), with some accumulation.</li> <li>Commercial livestock farm or dairy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited land ownership (landless or near landless); greater dependency on tenancy (e.g. sharecropping).</li> <li>Cultivation mostly of staples; vegetables for self-consumption.</li> <li>Some commercial production of niche crops on land unsuitable for staples (e.g. cardamom or rudraksha) but limited accumulation.</li> </ul>
Farm wage labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No need to conduct menial off-farm labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local farm labour such as paddy harvesting, weeding and planting.</li> </ul>
<b>Non-farming</b>		
Local non-farm self-employment/business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Petty trade/grocery store; restaurant; phone repair; furniture workshop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small-scale trade, for example, buying–selling vegetables, cycle repair and cobbler.</li> </ul>
Local non-farm waged/salaried work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More likely to have skilled salaried jobs such as teacher or government employee.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-farm menial or semi-skilled labour such as construction work and carpenter.</li> </ul>
Labour migration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work in mid to higher level service sector jobs in the Gulf states or Malaysia, for example, shop assistants, mid-level managers, skilled jobs such as electricians or mechanics.</li> <li>Migration to more lucrative destinations, for example, Poland, Romania, Singapore, and South Korea.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work in low paid, difficult/elementary jobs largely in the Gulf states and Malaysia, for example, drivers, security guards, construction workers, canteen or restaurant workers.</li> </ul>

Source: Authors (2024).

noted: '*Achel ka thita thiti le khetipati ruchaudainan*' (The current generation of young men and women does not prefer farming). As we continued the fieldwork with young people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, this narrative held true but only partially. Based on an in-depth analysis of the interview narratives and the socio-economic data of each household, we identified four major livelihood trajectories in the study village: Firstly, the youth, categorised here as 'privileged', remaining in their home community; secondly, 'privileged' youth participating in overseas migration; thirdly, the youth, who could be categorised as underprivileged, remaining in the community; and fourthly, the underprivileged youth turning to migration to support their livelihoods. These four categories, we should note, are not rigid standalone categories but simply represent a typology of youth experience that aid our analysis. The general characteristics of privileged and underprivileged youth are discussed in the succeeding texts.

Privileged youth were typically from better-off, educated and upper caste families. They had strong social capital because they were well networked; their parents or household members were teachers or government employees, and many had relatives in government service. Many were also engaged in small businesses such as grocery stores or local teashops. Given their upper caste background, their social positions were also better. They had access to TV, motorcycles and other important household assets. While the privileged youth staying with their parents did not have land in their own names, their household owned 1 ha of land on average. Most of these young people were studying in Grade 12, while some had also completed undergraduate studies. All of them had a 'good' house by village standards, constructed using modern materials including concrete.

Underprivileged youth represented young people from poorer and lower caste backgrounds. In our study areas, they lived mostly with their parents or relatives in ‘traditional’ non-concrete dwellings, while some had built their huts in *ailani* (fragile, public land)<sup>1</sup>, where mostly the landless reside. As they were landless or near landless, they had no land of their own for farming. Most of them were school dropouts who could not continue school because of poor economic status. They worked as a wage labourer in various labouring work as masons, drivers, transport labourers (loaders/unloaders) or agricultural labourers. In social terms, they are Dalits, an excluded, marginalised caste group. Although caste discrimination is outlawed in Nepal, they remain untouchables and are discriminated against by upper caste people. They were poor by any measure of rural poverty and vulnerability.

In the sections that follow, we discuss diverse aspirations and realities faced by these different groups of young people in relation to their (dis)engagement with agriculture.

## 4.1 | Privileged youth

### 4.1.1 | Pursuing local non-farm employment

As noted earlier, privileged households were predominantly from upper caste backgrounds. There were six of these households in the Dhanusha interview sample and 11 in Sunsari. Only three households interviewed in Bhojpur could be classified as privileged, as most better off households had relocated to urban areas. Many better off households had also relocated to the Tarai, including Sunsari where Panchayan is located. The youth from these households had a more stable livelihood, as their parents generally owned a large area of land of over 1 ha, or in the absence of the parents, the young people themselves had inherited land.

In terms of their engagement in work, interviews revealed that privileged youth did not prefer farming as their future occupation as they considered it socially less prestigious. For the same reason, their parents also encouraged them to pursue a non-agricultural future. Typical of many other middle-class parents, an upper caste parent from Panchayan village said, ‘I want to see my children doing a professional job. I do not want to see them working land and experience the burdens of a farming life. That's why I am financing their studies.’

Within this group, however, there were two livelihood trajectories. The first involved ‘professional’ salaried employment while staying in the community (or in nearby towns), while the second involved overseas migration. With regards to the first, a common aspiration, particularly for young men from this group, was to find government employment, which could include teaching, administrative jobs or work in the security forces. Some also sought to start businesses. At least two young men had bought diggers to support local public projects (mostly infrastructure related)—a lucrative source of income following the creation of local municipalities with enhanced spending powers after 2015.<sup>2</sup> Local cultural and gender ideologies, however, dictated differences in the aspirations, types of work pursued and opportunities. In Panchayan, Sunsari, for instance, several women aspired to a nursing profession as it is considered a respectable profession within the country and can potentially help them grab job opportunities overseas (Shrestha & Sapkota, 2021), although none of the women from a lower caste background shared this aspiration. Nursing education is costly and often inaccessible to lower caste women living in extreme poverty. One of the upper caste interviewees in Bhojpur also had a daughter studying nursing in the capital.

However, in Dhanusha, respondents were from Maithili-speaking castes, where gender relations were more rigid, and it was more common even for upper caste women to remain engaged in household activities, while their husbands or brothers sought skilled jobs. We encountered only one woman who had taken on a skilled and salaried

<sup>1</sup>The state can demolish their huts and evict them anytime, and thus, they live in a constant fear of eviction.

<sup>2</sup>Nepal adopted federalism for the first time in its new constitution, which was enacted in 2015 and established a local government with power and financial resources.



job in Dhanusha, although some were involved in running family businesses, albeit in a subordinate role—more details on this will be discussed in the succeeding texts. There were two women with such jobs in Sunsari and none in Bhojpur.

Importantly, however, such young people were not entirely disconnected from farming. In almost all cases of young men, their parents would continue to manage the farm, and most of the young men lived in or near the community and they were rarely completely disengaged. They often helped the parents during busy times in parallel to their studies or non-farm job, although the nature of work was often quite different from their underprivileged counterparts and would include, for example, supervising labourers on the land, rather than working it themselves.

For women, compared to men, levels of engagement in agriculture were much higher, working own land in few cases, helping parents, or parents-in-law for those who were already married. This was not simply a case of gender ideologies dictating what work women could and could not do, but was at times linked to logistical challenges in lieu of the reproductive responsibilities expected of women. A young mother in Sunsari, for instance, noted that non-farm work was inflexible and their children were barely allowed to accompany them. By contrast, she could bring her child with her to the farm.

As noted earlier, establishing a small enterprise (rather than seeking salaried jobs) was more common for women from better-off households and offered relative flexibility. However, women still had to split their time between the business and farm work, creating a notable labour burden, with the latter offering fewer opportunities for direct economic gain. As noted in another study from Sunsari and Siraha, many married young women were engaged in small enterprises, for which they generally had control over the income and day-to-day operations. However, when it came to agriculture, their role remained subordinate and restricted to providing labour but not controlling the fruits of that labour (Karn et al., 2020). In this context, even relatively privileged married women often had to take on a considerable share of the agricultural work for their in-laws, and their ability to make decisions was often curtailed. Their levels of decision-making, however, did increase as they got older and became mothers-in-laws themselves.

For an insight into how migration and non-farm work co-exist for 'privileged' men and women, on a return visit to Sunsari in 2019, some unmarried youth, who were interviewed in 2013, had gone to Kathmandu for further studies. However, many had remained in the village, continuing their studies and helping parents with both farm and non-farm activities. Some married young men were involved in foreign employment (which will be discussed further), while few succeeded in obtaining government jobs in teaching, army and civil service. Not all who aspired for government jobs could succeed because the supply of such jobs outstripped demand. Many of the young women had married, and those with salaried professional employment were involved in teaching in schools while assisting their family in the farms.

In terms of longer-term trajectories, however, it was common for men who had initially sought professional, non-agricultural work locally to eventually return to farming as their primary livelihood. In some contexts, this would be because of a failure to secure professional employment, or because they felt they should look after the land. In particular, once young men take on the role of household head, because of the family separating (splitting the land) or the passing away of their parents—farming often becomes an inseparable part of their livelihoods. This is especially true when they have children and have been unable to secure reliable salaried employment or a successful business that can sustain a whole family. Sundar, an upper caste married man, from Sunsari said, 'The unmarried youth living with parents worried less about their day-to-day lives. They do not see the importance of farming until they get married and have children.' He was running a convenience shop while engaged in farming.

It is, however, worth noting that individuals from privileged households, who have returned to agriculture from a period of non-farm skilled work, would often pursue a more 'commercialised' approach to agriculture. For instance, several of such young people in Dhanusha had pursued an agro-enterprise such as a livestock farm, and one household head explained how his sons had purchased agricultural equipment to lease out such as threshers and tractors. However, the risks of commercial agriculture and agro-enterprises are high, a topic which will be discussed in greater detail in the succeeding texts.

#### 4.1.2 | Pursuing overseas employment for 'privileged' youth

A second subset of 'privileged' households, the vast majority of whom were young men,<sup>3</sup> sought a route out of agriculture, albeit through migration. This could involve, firstly, those who had secured professional employment, relocating to the city. Secondly, and more commonly, it involved overseas migration. It was not necessarily only a route out of economic distress, but it has increasingly become a cultural aspiration for youth—as they wanted to experience life overseas. As one father in Dhanusha explained: 'Initially only one or two people had gone abroad from this village. The trend started increasing...so much so that it became a 'fashion' and each house has its people abroad.'

While these cultural drivers are important, youth from privileged backgrounds also view migration as a way to enhance their financial wealth in the long term. In particular, privileged youth tended to seek to migrate to 'lucrative' migration destinations such as South Korea, Japan, Singapore or Romania. Migration to these destinations requires significant payments of up to Nepalese rupees (NRs) 600,000 (USD 6000)<sup>4</sup> or more to employment agents, unlike migration to the Gulf states which generally costs around NRs 200,000 (USD 2000). Sometimes migrants also need to arrange language training as well. Better-off migrants, particularly those from upper castes, also have favourable social and kinship networks that can help them access more lucrative destinations, including assistance with obtaining the necessary documents.

Even for those who have migrated to the Gulf states, the evidence suggested that migrants from better-off households were more likely to end up in better-paid skilled employment because of their higher levels of education, social networks and ability to afford the higher agent fees charged for arranging such jobs. This includes jobs in the service sector where there is an opportunity for upward mobility. For example, in several interviews, returnees highlighted the benefits of employment in institutions such as supermarkets or offices, where there is often scope for promotion. This came up repeatedly in interviews. Those unable to pay agents and with limited knowledge of English primarily ended up in construction work—where the vast majority of tenant farmers from Dhanusha were working.

The role of prior wealth in shaping migration outcomes is evident in our data, which suggested households owning less than 0.25 ha in Bhojpur were earning NRs 105,846 (USD 1058) on average in remittances, compared to NRs 334,615 (USD 3346) for those with 1–2 ha. Similarly, in Dhanusha, landless tenant households would earn on average NRs 153,200 (\$1532) compared to NRs 333,300 (USD 3333) for those with 1–2 ha. Prior wealth, including financial savings and mainly land (which many prospective migrants sell to cover migration costs), allowed them to afford the higher fees charged by migration agents for placement in better-paid jobs, ultimately resulting in more remittances.

Importantly, even among privileged youth who had sought an exit from agriculture, this was rarely permanent and, in many cases, they retained strong links to the land or eventually returned to farming. Importantly, while there has been an increase in female migration, either internally or overseas, migration was still predominantly the male domain. In this context, spouses of young migrants would continue to farm the land while their husbands were outside, with the husband sometimes contributing to household decision making from afar. A phenomenon was particularly common in Bhojpur, a relatively remote hill district. Young women from better-off households, whose husbands were overseas, relocated to a larger town to make the most of the better facilities and education. However, they still maintained a link to the family land, which was farmed by parents-in-law, leased out, or used for 'low labour' agricultural activities such as agro-forestry.

It was also becoming increasingly common for privileged youth to return to agriculture, after a spell outside. In most cases, overseas migrant labour contracts were fixed-term, and permanent resettlement was almost impossible

<sup>3</sup>Female migration in the study sites was negligible, although it is present elsewhere in Nepal. According to the National Labour Force Survey 2017/2018, around 20% of migrants are women (see *State of Migration in Nepal* <https://www.ceslam.org/our-publications/state-of-migration-in-nepal-2023>).

<sup>4</sup>The exchange rate of 1 USD = NRs 100 has been used, noting exchange rate may vary.

in destination countries like Malaysia and the Gulf states where most Nepalese migrants work, although anecdotal accounts suggest some migrants to the EU were eventually able to settle.

There were some cases of returnees settling in the city, but we encountered far more returnees resuming an agriculture-based livelihood. More privileged migrant youth often had access to initial working capital, land or assets, not to mention higher earnings than their underprivileged counterparts—and thus were in a relatively strong position to establish agro-enterprises, producing dairy, vegetables and meat-related products. In the course of fieldwork, one respondent in Sunsari, Jeevan Magar,<sup>5</sup> had just returned home after working in Saudi Arabia. Upon return, he got married and planned to stay in the village. He started tending dairy cows and vegetable farming. He did this jointly with other two fellow villagers. In 2013, they were building cow sheds and preparing land for growing grasses. When revisited them in 2019, they were doing good businesses—selling milk to dairies located in nearby cities—Dharan and Itahari, but the expansion of land for grass was a problem. Like Jeevan, Lal Bahadur, also from Sunsari, is a return youth migrant who spent about 5 years in Dubai. Now he has ventured into tomato farming in his land of half a *bigha* (1 *bigha* = 0.68 ha). He said that he saved about NRs 10,000 (USD 100) every month by selling tomatoes. In Dubai, he used to save about NRs 12,000 (USD 120) per month.

Two facilitating conditions are important to note here which enabled Jeevan and Lal Bahadur to engage in entrepreneurial agriculture. First, they had their own land to work. Second, they had their own initial capital to invest in agriculture which they accumulated from foreign labour migration. What Jeevan and Lal Bahadur have performed is not an exception but represents a trend. Many return migrants across Nepal are involved in goat keeping, vegetable farming and other economic ventures (e.g. KC 2015; Rai 2014). While in most cases, prior wealth and asset ownership shaped a more successful outcome on one's return—in some cases, young people who had not been privileged prior to going overseas were able to use their remittances to accumulate capital for investment on return. For instance, one respondent from Dhanusha, who had previously been landless, spent a long time overseas, where they had the opportunity to climb from an unskilled to a skilled job. He returned in his 40s and used his savings to invest in a fishery business.

## 4.2 | Underprivileged youth

### 4.2.1 | Aspirations and employment for underprivileged youth

Underprivileged youth's experience of their transition out of agriculture are somewhat different. This is important, given that they likely form a much larger share of the rural population than their more privileged counterparts. For example, marginalised farmers with less than 1 ha of land, the group from whom most of the underprivileged youth originate, represent 82% of the sample in Dhanusha, 43% in Bhojpur and nearly 70% in Sunsari.

Within underprivileged youth, there are also two groups—those whose livelihood is grounded in the home community and those who have migrated. With regards to the first, many of those who remained in the community are among the poorest in terms of their ownership of land and assets. For instance, the interviews in Sunsari included 17 youth from the marginalised Musahar community, who lived in their small huts, which were mostly located on *ailani* or public land.<sup>6</sup> Their community has remained landless for generations, although they have always worked land as a farm servant and a tenant farmer for landlords. When the Nepali state-initiated land registration and land titling, they did not receive a title to the land they worked because the state administrators, from upper castes, did not endorse their claims, instead the powerful local and non-local upper castes were able to register the land worked by Musahars in their names in cahoots with the administrators—a phenomenon widespread across the plains districts, including Dhanusha (Adhikari, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>All names used throughout this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>6</sup>The state can demolish their huts and evict them anytime, and thus they live in a constant fear of eviction.

Therefore, underprivileged youth's agricultural engagement was typically oriented around farm labour and tenant farming. Two forms of agricultural tenancy mainly existed in the study sites: fixed-rent tenancy and sharecropping. In fixed-rent tenancy, the tenant lease in land from the landowner(s) under a fixed rental contract of paying rent in cash or kind. Here, the landowner provides land while the tenant covers the costs of inputs. Those who could hire labour and a tractor, and can afford inputs such as fertilisers and seeds were involved in fixed tenancy. They were mostly return migrants (or farmers with land) who had more bargaining power with landowners. Given the lack of working capital needed for fixed-rent tenancy, landless Musahars and other Dalits were involved in sharecropping in which landowners provide not only land but also share costs of inputs such as seeds and fertiliser. They share outputs/harvests equally (50:50).

Some of the young people from most marginalised communities aspired for opportunities outside of agriculture, although options were far more limited and were largely restricted to few young men. In terms of their future aspirations, none of the Dalit community aspired for jobs in the government or security forces because accessing these job opportunities requires higher levels of education and strong social networks which they lacked. However, Nepal has implemented an affirmative action scheme with quotas in public service for Dalits, women and other marginalised groups which have benefitted educated individuals from these groups (Druzca, 2017; Sunam, 2022). Because of limited education and networks, most worked instead as wage labourers in various jobs, including masons and transport labourers (loaders/unloaders). Young women, however, showed even more limited transition out of agriculture, and a majority still worked as agricultural labourers or looked after sharecropped land. As noted earlier, upper caste youth from this group ran small businesses in local towns. In contrast, it was challenging for Dalits to invest in businesses, particularly food-related ones, as their caste status often deterred potential customers. Even in large cities in Nepal, Dalits struggle to operate businesses because of caste prejudice and the lingering effects of untouchability (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

#### 4.2.2 | Pursuing overseas migration for underprivileged youth

With limited local opportunities for upward mobility in the non-farm sector for underprivileged youth, migration appears as the most feasible transition out of agriculture. Nevertheless, as our interviews indicated, the migration pathway was primarily pursued by men. Among the landholding underprivileged youth in the two plains sites of Sunsari and Dhanusha, participation in some form of migration was widespread. Meanwhile, in the hills, all interviewees in Bhojpur classified as underprivileged had family members who had migrated overseas or had themselves migrated. However, even for the poorest landless households in the plains, migration is becoming more common, and it has increased significantly in the last decade (Adhikari & Hogley, 2015; Sunam, 2020). Despite it being a more challenging pathway for underprivileged youth given the high migration costs and precarious employment overseas, many Dalit young people viewed it as an escape, at least temporarily, from caste-based discrimination, untouchability and exploitative caste-based occupational relations (see also Sunam, 2014).

Our interviews found seven out of 17 members of the largely landless Musahar community in Sunsari wished to go abroad for employment, although two wanted to run cycle repair and grocery businesses locally. When they were further probed about their financial status and other preparation for migration, however, only two of those, Mitra and Pradip, who wanted to migrate overseas for work expressed some level of confidence or optimism about their plans. The rest were unsure how they could secure a loan and get the required information.

In a return visit to the village in 2019, it was found that Pradip went to Qatar as a construction worker. However, Mitra could not make his way to Malaysia as planned. He was hoping that his uncle would finance his migration to Malaysia. Instead, his uncle's contract was terminated unilaterally by the employer and returned home with meagre remittances. The other youth who aspired to go overseas also could not turn their plan into reality. During the revisit to the village, one of them said: 'I could not gather enough money. I searched for loan needed to go abroad, but no village lender [sahu] trusted me.' Two young people (those with plans) who wanted to run cycle repairs and grocery businesses failed to establish it because of their failure to secure initial capital.

Migration for underprivileged households also carried much higher risks when compared to 'privileged' households. As noted earlier, the average remittances earned were lower for migrants who were already in a weak economic position because they landed in a relatively low-paid job overseas because of their inability to pay higher agency fees and/or lower levels of education. On top of this, there were many cases of deception, which mostly impacted migrants from the poorest socio-economic groups because of their lower levels of education and limited social and political connections. A Dalit settlement in Bhojpur reported several cases of deception. A young woman who was staying at home and managing the farm and family, while her husband had recently migrated to Saudi Arabia, illustrated a case of deception her husband faced. She said her husband was involved in work he had not signed up for, was not paid salary and was physically abused by his employer. The family eventually had to arrange a loan of NRs 400,000 (USD 4000) to pay his employer to release him from his job. A Dalit man in Dhanusha also shared a similar story. He was in Qatar where he was mistreated by his employer although he had undertaken hard physical labour he had not signed up to do. When he ran away from the job, he was arrested and put in jail for breaking the terms of his visa (which binds a migrant worker to an assigned employer). The family had already sold all their land to meet the costs needed to pay the agent, turning them into landless sharecroppers, with the anticipation that the earnings would compensate for this loss. They were, therefore, in a much poor financial situation when he eventually made it home without savings and in even greater debt.

While overseas migration was a popular transition pathway out of agriculture, just like their 'privileged' counterparts, underprivileged youth also retained their link to the land, particularly in the longer term. In part, this is connected to the structural conditions of employment, whereby, for a majority of migrants, their salaries were rarely sufficient for their families to meet their simple reproductive needs through remittances alone. To an even greater extent than their privileged counterparts, underprivileged workers faced highly restrictive visa regimes and contracts, making permanent settlement overseas rare. Many migrants participate, thus, in multiple cycles of repeat migration, during which their families are unable to subsist entirely on remittances. Instead, agriculture supports the food needs of their family, while remittances address their financial needs. Agriculture also supports migrants on their return or retirement—with few having sufficient savings to 'exit' farming. This represents classic 'articulation' between the peasant and capitalist sector identified in the literature on labour migration (Meillassoux, 1981; Shah & Lerche, 2020). As Meillassoux (1981) argued with regards to post-war migrant workers from West Africa in France, migration wages and terms of employment meant that the cost of labour reproduction (including support for dependents at home and retirement) was covered as a 'rent' by the rural economy at home—a phenomena which is highly profitable for employers. This is very relevant in the case of migrant workers in the Gulf today (Sugden, 2019).

Importantly, all of the female respondents from underprivileged households in Dhanusha and Bhojpur remained engaged in agriculture. While some of their better-off counterparts had relocated to the nearby town to take advantage of better facilities (see also Gartaula et al., 2010), the costs of relocating and the need for food security from the land made this prohibitive for the young spouses of migrants from underprivileged households. As pointed out in Leder's (2022) study in Nepal and India, agriculture is considered a 'duty' rather than a choice by women whose husbands are abroad.

Women, in particular, bear a significant stress in the context of outmigration, as they have to manage the farm along with other social pressures. They experience an arduous workload, particularly if they come from underprivileged households that cannot afford to hire labourers, and 'parma' (a reciprocal labour exchange practice in which no monetary value is attached to labour) is declining because of acute labour shortage and rural people's increased need for cash for making a living. As one young woman from the Dalit community in Dhanusha remarked in the context of her husband's migration: 'We are managing, although it is difficult. We need to get the farm labour, and cook meals for them and take those to the fields ... We can't even always hire labour. Because we are short of money, I along with my children go to the fields and pluck out the weeds and work there even in harsh conditions.' These stresses associated with the so called 'feminisation of agriculture' have been well documented in Nepal (Gartaula et al., 2010; Leder, 2022).

It is clear, therefore, that the exit from agriculture for most households via migration is a partial process—and at a household level, they are still engaged in agriculture—although this lands in the female domain. However, there is a clear temporality to this in the case of migrant underprivileged young men. Migration often occurred as part of a cycle, with individuals moving abroad for a few years, and then returning at the end of their job contracts. As noted above, successful migrants, in some cases, were able to achieve class mobility and significantly improve their families' economic standing on return (i.e. make the transition to the 'privileged' group). However, during our fieldwork, we encountered no cases of migrants settling abroad; almost all would eventually return home by their late 40s or early 50s, either to the farm or to a nearby town.

For unsuccessful migrants, particularly those who had been deceived or experienced exploitation, an early return to farming was more likely. There is evidence that many migrants who faced such situations overseas changed their perceptions of agriculture. In foreign employment, they were mostly involved in manual, dirty, dangerous and difficult work (3Ds) as a low-skilled and low-paid worker (Rigg et al., 2016). Returnee young people said they worked in sheep farms, poultry and agricultural farms while they were employed overseas, and those jobs were not different from what they were doing in their own village in terms of hardships and payment. Some even noted their overseas jobs were more arduous than village work. These social remittances in the form of ideas and experiences seemed to help change their notion of agriculture as 'low status' and 'low paid' work. Like migrants from 'privileged' youth, they were interested in exploring investment opportunities in agriculture and other sectors in their own village with an ambition of *afnai thauma kehi game* (doing something in our own place). This feeling was generated mainly because of the hardships they faced while working overseas in farms, factories or construction sites.

Furthermore, some young people provided a family reason to return to the village and work land. Many suggested that they faced psychological stress when they had to live afar from their family and children. Married young people did not want to leave their family and children behind again. Most of them were newly married when they went overseas. While missing their wives and children, they were also concerned that long-distance relationships might not sustain their married life. In the case of the unmarried, they also wanted to stay in the village, get married and start making a family.

In Dhanusha and Bhojpur, all the eight men we interviewed had returned to a full-time agricultural livelihood after spending a period overseas. This appeared to be the most common long-term livelihood trajectory for underprivileged young men who had chosen to migrate. Many of these individuals displayed an acceptance that they would now be farmers, in spite of any earlier aspirations. Out of these eight respondents, two had returned in a weaker socio-economic situation, although the remainder had returned with at least some savings. One respondent from Bhojpur recounted how, at age 16, he had gone to Qatar with no education and having increased his age to travel overseas legally. He used his remittances to protect his land which was about to be auctioned off and pay for his daughter to go to a private school. He produced paddy and other subsistence crops, with some income from commercial rudraksha production (a sacred bead). He expressed contentment with his livelihoods after his return.

While some of these households had attempted to start an enterprise, they were not always successful as they lacked access to credit, social networks and assets of more privileged returnees. For example, one young Dalit woman recounted how her husband worked overseas for 8 years at a factory, where he suffered eye damage, costing them a lot of money on treatment, including the sale of their land. When he returned he tried to set up a small tailoring shop but was struggling because of the high competition—with many people in the community establishing similar enterprises. They have planned to send their son abroad for work when he turns 18.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have examined the vital contemporary agrarian questions of why and how some young people turn away from agriculture while others remain (or aspire to be) engaged in it, focussing on a holistic analysis of multiple aspects of intersectionality—economic class, gender, migration status and caste/ethnicity—often overlooked in the

existing literature on youth and agrarian studies. Key conclusions from this paper have challenged many conventional understandings of youth transitions out of agriculture.

First, while many existing studies discuss how young people are turning away from agriculture and rural futures, thus leading to an agricultural decline in many rural areas (e.g. Leavy & Hossain, 2014; White, 2020), we find that the aspiration to leave agriculture is heavily mediated by socio-economic status. Other research has also shown the significance of gender and class in shaping youth aspirations in the rural South (Huijsmans et al., 2021). Accepting that these are rough categories, those who were classified as 'privileged' youth had a clear desire to leave agriculture. Young men and, to a lesser extent, young women had their sights set on professional salaried work at home, 'lucrative' migration pathways mainly to Europe, South Korea or Japan, or higher paid jobs in the Gulf states. For 'underprivileged' youth, however, aspirations were more complex. While many did seek work outside and migration was widespread among this group, their ability to realise these aspirations was heavily limited by structural barriers rooted in class and caste. For the poorest groups such as the landless Dalit community in the plains, there was an acceptance that higher status non-farm jobs locally would be unattainable, and given the chronic livelihood insecurity, they did not have the luxury of considering an 'exit' from agriculture.

Second, in line with recent research suggesting mobility out of farming to engage in education and labour mobility does not exclude 'eventual farming futures' (Srinivasan, 2023), our evidence gained through an analysis of a longer-term livelihood trajectory indicates that the aspirations to make a transition out of agriculture show a degree of temporality. For 'privileged youth' who have successfully secured urban salaried work and left the community, as well as for those who remain, few make a complete exit from agriculture. In rural areas, young women in particular were far more likely to remain engaged in agriculture, particularly after marriage, while husbands work outside. Even for many young men, aspirations for high status work overseas or locally were often not realised, and with added family responsibilities (particularly after separation from parents), they were often obliged to continue their engagement in farming. Some privileged youth, particularly successful migrant returnees, aspired to a new subject position as the 'agricultural entrepreneur', with some establishing successful agro-enterprises or investing in commercial production.

For underprivileged youth, the livelihood trajectory in and out of agriculture is somewhat similar, although their choices and long-term opportunities for wealth accumulation are more limited. For many in the landless Dalit community, migration is not even an option, although for most other underprivileged youth, migration is possible, albeit at great financial costs. The earnings are often lower than their more privileged counterparts, and the likelihood of facing deception and exploitation is higher. In this context, an early return to agriculture is far more likely, and migration is reduced to being simply a temporary 'rite of passage'. As the vast majority of migrant workers return after their employment contracts overseas end, their only options are reintegration into farming or, if their age allows, a repeat cycle of temporary migration. For many of these migrants, there is evidence that their negative perception of agriculture changes because of widespread experiences of deception in the migration process and precarity faced overseas—encouraging their return to farming. For some, the transition back into agriculture is facilitated by remittance savings which allow them to invest in at least some assets to strengthen their livelihoods—even if they are not 'accumulating' wealth. For others, when the return takes place under duress, they may have to re-establish their agricultural livelihoods in a weaker position compared to their pre-migration status.

Finally, the paper offers important insights into how gender mediates youth transitions out of agriculture. Opportunities for young women to transition out of agriculture are not only far more limited but also, to an even greater extent than men, are mediated by class and caste. While some women from the 'privileged youth' were able to pursue higher education and salaried employment, particularly within Nepal, these opportunities are extremely rare among underprivileged young women who continued to work land as a sharecropper and/or a farm labourer. Even for many privileged young women who moved to local towns for better services and education for their children, their full exit from agriculture was rare. While they did not expand farming, they continued to engage in land and farming partaking in 'low labour' agricultural activities or leasing out land for sharecropping, suggesting only a 'partial exit' from agriculture.

This paper raises important policy questions. Migration and agricultural policy are often dealt with as separate policy issues, when in fact there is a critical need for integration. As many youths, especially the underprivileged youth, pursue labour migration and agriculture side by side rather than opting for a complete 'exit' from the latter, interventions to provide better pay and job security for migrant workers and lower the migration costs including recruitment fees could lead to an increase in agricultural investment and thereby agricultural production.

Youths continue to (partially or fully) rely on agriculture in the context of a lack of viable alternatives even though agriculture does not provide a livelihood guarantee either. For facilitating youths' continuous engagement in agriculture, it should develop into a viable livelihood option, where agricultural engagement is rewarding. Land or tenancy reforms to benefit landless households, mainly Dalits and other tenant farmers are crucial along with efforts to create an environment that will facilitate investment such as improved access to agricultural inputs and access to reliable markets for agricultural products and efforts to develop niche agro-processing enterprises. Special support programmes through collateral-free, subsidised loans or grants and serious debates about redistributive land reform are also critical for youths at the bottom of the socio-economic and gender ladder as well as for returnee migrants to support their sustained and productive agrarian engagement.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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