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# "They Moved to City Areas, Abroad": Views of the Elderly on the Implications of Outmigration for the Middle Hills of Western Nepal

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*Massive outmigration from the Hill Region of Nepal has various implications for the older people left behind. This article assesses their situation and the challenges they face. To capture older people's experiences and views on the effects of outmigration on their living conditions, I applied a livelihoods perspective. This study, based on in-depth qualitative interviews and group discussions carried out in 3 mountain villages, found that outmigration has had a profound effect on local economic and social conditions. Economic effects have included reduction and in some cases abandonment of agricultural land due to lack of labor. Socially, the elderly have experienced disrespect and neglect from the young, and they lament the demise of traditional Nepalese norms and values in society and in the family. Outmigration in combination with shifting demographics has created entirely new life situations for the elderly and has made their lives more difficult. This article contributes to an underresearched topic relevant to the mountain regions of the global South and draws attention to a social group that has frequently been overlooked in both development and migration research.*

***Keywords:*** *Outmigration; population aging; rural aging; elderly; livelihood strategies; Nepal.*

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## Introduction

> *They moved to city areas, abroad. Only old people remain in the village. Only women. What to say? The condition of almost all villages is like that; which one should I mention? I feel bad. All the people who are able to work, they are outside. And in the village, only those who are not able to work remain.*
>
> *(Interview 158, 2016)*

Outmigration from the Hill Region of Nepal has economic, social, and cultural implications for the local population. As the initial quote shows, older people feel left behind as the support they receive from the younger generation declines. The hill regions have been described as overburdened with older people because many young people have migrated away from their villages to city areas or other countries for work and education (Subedi 2005; Shrestha and Shrestha 2014). This study examines the implications of outmigration for the life situation of older people in 3 upper-elevation villages in the Western Development Region of Nepal.

Migration, besides fertility and mortality, is one of the main drivers of demographic trends. Population dynamics in mountain areas are particularly affected by outmigration. Migration from the rural mountains to urban areas or foreign countries is not a new phenomenon; it was well documented in the 1990s in Europe (Bätzing et al 1996) and Japan (Okahashi 1996), and more recently in Latin America (Grau and Aide 2007) and the Himalayas (Bose 2000; Hoermann and Kollmair 2008; ICIMOD 2016).

Depopulation and outmigration are widely known trends in the hill and mountain regions of Nepal (Bose 2000; Childs et al 2014; GoN 2014e). Unemployment, poverty, lack of non-land-based income opportunities, and a decade-long civil war forced people to find new ways to secure a livelihood. As a result, migration emerged as a major livelihood strategy for a large portion of the rural population. The majority (82.9%) of Nepal's population lives in rural areas, but only 60% consider farming their primary livelihood strategy (GoN 2014e). Consequently, the Nepalese economy did not remain an agricultural one but shifted to an economy of remittances (Seddon et al 1998). In the last decade, migration and remittances continuously increased, with remittances counting for almost 29.6% of Nepal's gross domestic product in 2016 (World Bank 2016).

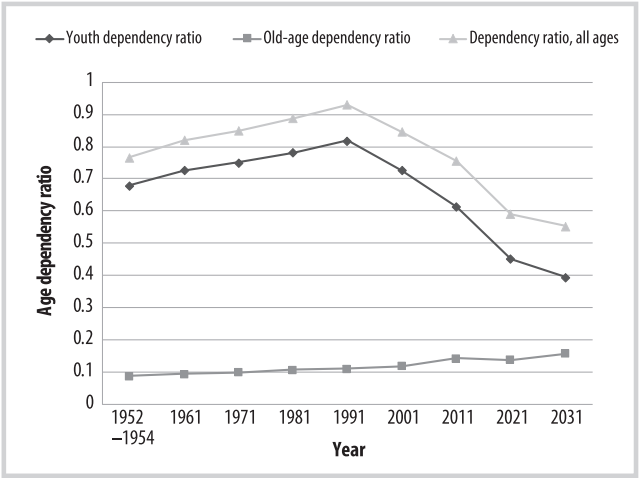
### The graying of Nepal

The aging of society is directly linked with rates of fertility and mortality and is one of the great achievements of the



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**FIGURE 1** Age dependency ratios in Nepal, 1952–2011 and projected for 2021–2031. (Data sources: HMG 2003; GoN 2014a, 2014e)




21st century, indicating the development and progress of a society and the final stage of demographic transition (Vos et al 2008; UN 2015). Nepal is in the midst of such a demographic transition, with the youth and working-age population (15–59 years) currently predominating but a tremendous growth of the elderly population expected soon. The main reasons for this are increasing mobility and migration (both internal and external) among younger people, rapidly increasing life expectancy (from 36.3 years on average in the 1950s to 66.6 years in 2011), better health and nutrition, and continuously declining mortality and fertility rates (Feeney et al 2001; GoN 2012b, 2014e). The latest population census found 2.1 million elderly people (defined as age ≥60 years; GoN 2006; UN 2015) living in Nepal. The annual growth rate for the elderly (3.1%) is more than twice that for the population as a whole (1.35%). The annual growth rate of the very old (≥75 years) is even higher at 3.8%; this group currently makes up 1.7% of Nepal's population but is expected to grow rapidly (Chalise 2006; GoN 2014f).

A *dependency ratio* compares the depending portion of a country's population that is either too old or too young to work to its working-age population. This can be further broken down into youth and old-age dependency ratios. Because of the trend described above, Nepal's old-age dependency ratio is increasing (Figure 1). The demographic shift to an older society is accelerated in the hill areas by the outmigration of working-age people. Internal migration has changed the spatial distribution of the population, and external migration has restructured the country's demography (Chalise 2010, 2012; Dhital et al 2015). The subject of aging in Nepal was overlooked in both policy and research until recently. Nepal's government introduced a noncontributory pension for people aged 70 and older (60 for Dalits and residents of the remote Karnali region) in 1995, and passed the Senior Citizens Act in 2006 (GoN 2006, 2012a). The aging of the population is an emerging concern in Nepal that should be assessed from both demographic and socioeconomic perspectives.

Demographic and migration trends affect population distribution and structure not only at the national and regional levels but also at the household level. A common household in Nepal is defined as one or more people "who make common provision for food or other essentials for living" in a particular house and "share a common kitchen" (GoN 2014a: 288). Census data show that average household size in the upper hills ranges from 4.6 to 4.9. This suggests that nowadays a typical household consists of parents and children only. Nuclear families have replaced multigenerational households, and household size has gradually decreased since the 1980s—largely due to decreasing fertility, increasing outmigration, and changing family norms and concepts (HMG 1993, 1995, 2003; Macfarlane 2003; GoN 2014e).

## Previous research

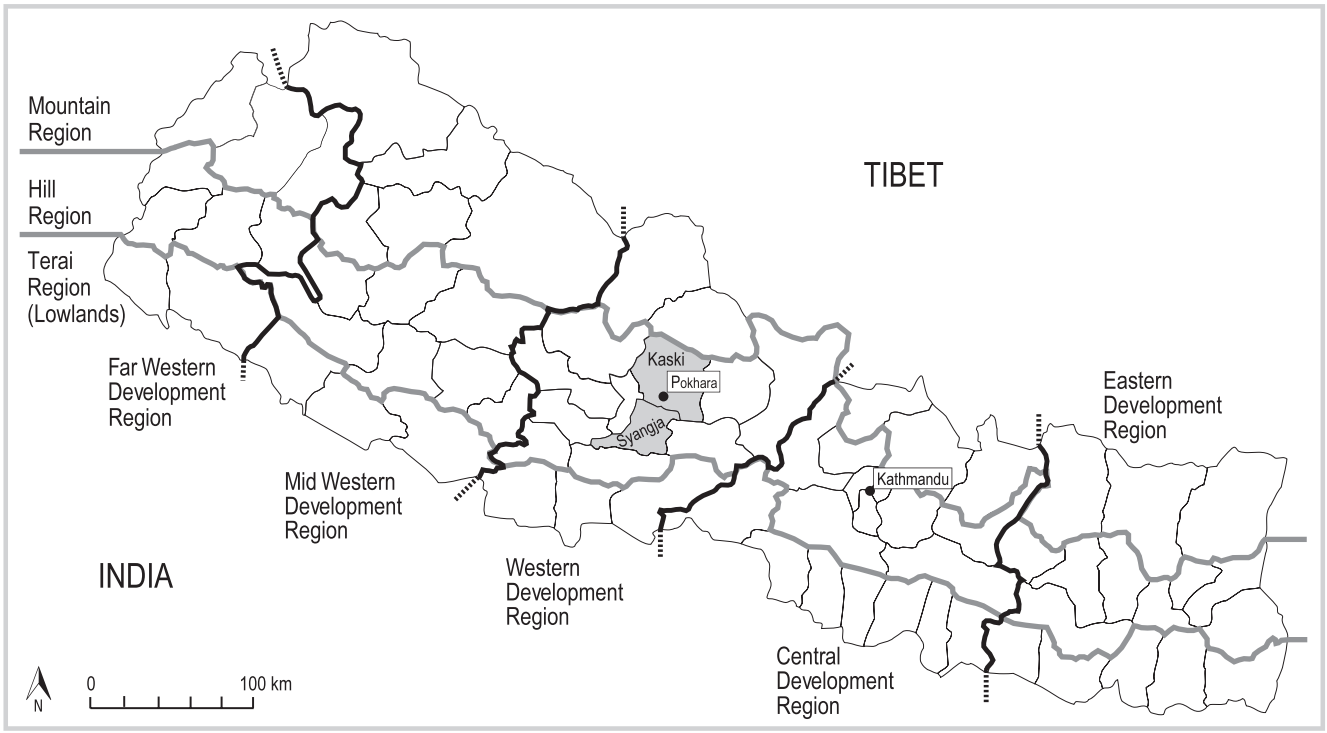
Several studies have looked into labor migration as a livelihood strategy (eg Seddon et al 1998; Von der Heide and Hoffmann 2001; Thieme and Wyss 2005; Müller-Böker and Thieme 2007; Bruslé 2008; Poertner et al 2011), the implications of remittances (Seddon et al 2002; Kollmair et al 2006; Graner 2010), women remaining behind (Shrestha and Conway 2001; Thieme et al 2011; Gartaula et al 2012; Adhikari and Hobley 2015), and labor brokers (Kern and Müller-Böker 2015). Researchers have mainly focused on migrants themselves and their destinations, or on migration's impact on agricultural land use (eg Khanal and Watanabe 2006; Jaquet et al 2016). Apart from Gautam's (2008) study, the consequences of migration for the older people who remain behind have not received much attention. Another exception is the work of Goldstein and Beall (1980, 1981, 1982, 1986), who in the early 1980s looked into the impacts of modernization and migration for the elderly in Helambu, Nepal. A few studies have addressed aging from a medical (Jonas 1992; Bhattarai 2014) or ethnological (Mandoki and Mayer 2015) perspective. Among scattered reports on the socioeconomic situation and geographic distribution of the elderly (Subedi 1996, 2005; Subedi and Kirkley 2003), a report titled *Social Change and the Senior Citizen in Nepal* (Pun et al 2009) presented the first comprehensive assessment of the current state of senior citizens. Several studies on rural–urban migration and its impacts on the older people who remain behind have been carried out in other countries, but not in mountain regions (eg Sando 1986; Sorensen 1986; Lloyd-Sherlock 1998; Bastia 2006; Biao 2007; Knodel and Saengtienchai 2007; Guo et al 2009; Chang et al 2011; Ye et al 2013).

## This study

This study aimed to help fill this knowledge gap by recording the views of older people living in mountains,


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**FIGURE 2** Location of the study area within Nepal. (Source: Adapted from Poertner et al 2011)




documenting the effect of outmigration on their living conditions, and raising awareness of this highly neglected social group in Nepal. I hypothesize that the combination of prolonged high outmigration, population aging, changing concepts of cohabitation, and an increase in multilocal households has aggravated social and economic hardships for older people in rural mountainous regions. Outmigration of one or more household members has increased the labor, economic, and social responsibilities of the elderly people, children, and spouses who remain behind (Kaspar 2005). At the same time, people are living longer and thus are more likely to eventually suffer from age-related problems such as illness and limited mobility and to need care and support—which households reduced by migration often cannot provide.

To find out how older people cope with these rapidly changing conditions, I asked them about their perceptions and experiences of aging in a rural and hilly place, and about how outmigration has changed household composition and living conditions—including their current living arrangements, work activities, and the opportunities and challenges they face in daily life.

## Study area

Fieldwork was conducted in the Western Hills of Nepal in 3 village development committees (VDCs) located in the districts of Kaski (450–7939 m above sea level [masl]) and Syangja (366–2515 masl) (Figure 2) (Intensive Study and Research Centre 2014). Two of the VDCs, Ghachok (28°20′3.93″N; 83°56′14.55″E) and Machhapuchhre (28°21′57.54″N; 83°57′35.54″E), are located in Kaski district, north of Pokhara submetropolitan city, while the third, Thuladihi (28°6′4.9968″N; 83°56′14.55″E), is in Syangja district, south of Pokhara. The sites are inhabited by people of diverse ethnic groups, though the majority are Gurung, Hill Brahmin, or Chhetri people whose primary livelihood is subsistence farming (Boxes 1 and 2). The Western Hills are well suited for this study, as the region has the highest proportion of migrants in Nepal (21.9%). In the 3 study villages, the share of current migrants ranged from just under 10% to almost 20% and the proportion of older people from almost 12% to almost 15%, higher than the averages for their districts (Kaski 8.7%, Syangja 12.2%) (Table 1). Districts with relatively high Human Development Index values (Kaski 0.576, Syangja 0.527) within the country were chosen to ensure a certain level of infrastructure and modernization as well as proximity to city areas where labor recruitment agencies operate, which enables high rates of migration (GoN 2014d; Kern and Müller-Böker 2015).

## Methods

Livelihoods perspectives have been essential to rural development studies; thus, I applied an extended, critical livelihoods perspective following Scoones (2009, 2015), Geiser et al (2011), and Geiser (2017), to investigate and


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**BOX 1: Livelihoods of older people in migrant households**

Of the 43 older people participating in the study who lived in migrant households, the majority were smallholders whose main livelihood was subsistence farming. Arable land holdings varied in size up to 27 *ropani* (1 *ropani* = 0.05 ha). Two respondents had livestock only, and 1 respondent owned a small garden but no farmland. Other income sources were pensions (based on age or status as a single or widowed woman) and remittances. These income sources were in most cases just enough to cover most necessary expenses.

***Example:*** In one migrant household participating in the study, a 65-year-old Chhettri woman lived with her husband. All sons and daughters had moved away from the village. The couple did not own any arable land, just a small garden where they cultivated vegetables for their own consumption. They used to raise buffaloes and goats, but after the children moved out, this became too difficult and they sold all their livestock. Two sons were working abroad, in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but only 1 of them sent money home; the couple barely had enough money to make ends meet and have a proper meal twice a day. For additional income, they worked on farmland belonging to another person. The husband had recently turned 70 years old and thus become eligible for a pension; they hoped this would improve their living situation. (Interview 191)

**BOX 2: Livelihoods of older people in nonmigrant households**

Among the nonmigrant households of 13 older people interviewed for the study, 10 owned no land and the remaining 3 owned less land than the migrant households (10 *ropani* or less). Only 6 elderly people lived with their children, who in 4 cases were disabled. The elderly in nonmigrant households faced similar difficulties with agricultural and household work to those in migrant households, because either the married daughters lived with the husband's family or the children were unable to work. One of the elderly persons was childless.

***Example:*** In 1 nonmigrant household participating in the study, a 63-year-old Gurung man lived with his wife (59 years), his mother-in-law (97 years), and his sister-in-law. The couple's 2 daughters had married and moved to their in-laws' house in another village, supporting their parents financially from time to time. The man owned 6 *ropani* of land and 1 buffalo; his mother-in-law owned 4 *ropani* of land, and they combined the 2 land parcels for subsistence farming. Further income sources were his mother-in-law's old-age pension and his sister-in-law's single-woman pension. He and his wife were still able to manage farming tasks and support themselves and the 2 other family members, but he expressed deep concern about the future and how they would continue to survive and get enough to eat. (Interview 182)

understand elderly people's livelihoods in the global South. Livelihoods perspectives focus on what people do to ensure a livelihood, and what they own and acquire within disabling or enabling institutional processes and organizational structures and different social contexts (De Haan 2012; Scoones 2015).

The empirical part of the study was based on 58 semistructured problem-centered interviews, an appropriate technique for exploring people's views regarding a phenomenon (Witzel 1985; Bernard 2006). Additionally, 8 biographical interviews and 2 group discussions were carried out, applying participatory methods (Kumar 2002). Random purposeful sampling (Patton 1990) was undertaken of people aged 60 years or older. Opportunistic sampling (Patton 1990) was applied to collect further data from family members, VDC and District Development Committee employees, teachers and former teachers, and social workers. These sampling methods do not aim to achieve statistical representativeness but to assess the overall situation of older people and to get a maximum variation of viewpoints and experiences. Of the 58 individual interviews, 2 were conducted in the Pokhara Aged Shelter, which revealed first insights on new and emerging support facilities. The data were collected in January, February, and August to October 2016. Participatory observation was applied to gain fine-grained information (Girtler 2001; Bernard 2006). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated from Nepali into English with the support of a local field assistant. The data were analyzed with MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, inspired by Mayring's (2010) qualitative content analysis with a focus on structured content, which makes it possible to detect, extract, and summarize specific and relevant content from the material.

## Findings and discussion

The majority (76.8%) of the elderly study participants reported that members of their family had migrated. In 86% of migrant households, at least 1 member had migrated abroad; the remainder had internally migrated members. The vast majority of migrants were sons; only 3 daughters had migrated. During fieldwork for this study, most of the migrants were absent; some had just returned, and some were preparing to go abroad again (on circular


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**TABLE 1** Demographic characteristics of the study sites. (Sources: GoN 2012b, 2014b, 2014c)

| Village | Kaski District | | Syangja District |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Ghachok | Machhapuchhre | Thuladihi |
| Total population | 2707 | 1729 | 3225 |
| Percentage of population age ≥60 years | 11.9% | 14.3% | 14.9% |
| Percentage of population that are migrants | 9.6% | 14.0% | 19.3% |
| Total households | 588 | 395 | 874 |
| Average household size | 4.6 | 4.38 | 3.69 |

migration, see Ellis 2000). In 2 cases, the parents had not seen or heard from their children for months, thus did not know their whereabouts or condition.

Conversations with the elderly about the implications of outmigration and societal change covered a wide range of topics, including the lack of a labor force and its effect on agriculture, changing behavior of younger people, changing living arrangements, living conditions, mobility on uneven terrain, support from family members, access to pensions and other allowances, land ownership, poverty, exclusion, marginalization, and ageism. To present all aspects would be well beyond the scope of this article. This section focuses on the aspects that were considered the most relevant by the elderly themselves.

**FIGURE 3** An 82-year-old Tamang man braids a *doko* (bamboo basket) to sell, Machhapuchhre VDC, 2016. (Photo by S. Speck)



## Fallow fields, frail bones

Findings from other case studies in Nepal (eg Gartaula et al 2012; Adhikari and Hobley 2015) have revealed that the absence of younger people results in a higher workload for the people remaining behind, especially the women. Goldstein and Beall (1981, 1982, 1986) and Gautam (2008) explicitly discussed implications for the elderly. Almost all older people interviewed for this study complained about the heavy workload. The absence of children, mainly sons, meant the lack of labor needed to plough fields, maintain irrigation systems, take care of livestock, and carry out other physically demanding work.

All elderly people with absent children wanted them to come home as fields lay fallow. Of the 44 elderly interviewees who said that their household owns land, 16 stated that they had to cultivate it by themselves, although they were well into their 70s or 80s. Some of them said that, due to physical weakness, they had to limit their farming to less steep and distant fields, and consequently parts of the arable land were not cultivated. Six respondents said that their land was cultivated by tenants in an *andhiya* (sharecropping) arrangement, or that they hired people to work on their land. Respondents aged 80 years or above changed their income-generation activities to less demanding ones, such as braiding *doko* (baskets made of bamboo—Figure 3) or beekeeping. Two of the respondents said that they worked on land belonging to other people, and 2 raised livestock. Only 12 had sons- or daughters-in-law who helped cultivate the land. In some cases, the labor shortage had led to a total abandonment of farming. One 66-year-old woman said: "Later no one was there to do the farming. I also couldn't do field work. As my son- and daughter-in-law couldn't find the time


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because of their other work, and I couldn't do it, we quit farming" (interview 145, 2016). She was one of 6 elderly people who had arable land but did not farm it at all. Those who still farmed expressed concern that they would have to reduce their workload or stop farming. Comparable changes in land use have been observed in neighboring regions (Jaquet et al 2016).

Not only the migration of their own children but also that of other villagers made the management of agricultural land in the area more difficult. Traditionally in the region, farmland (mainly owned by Gurung and Brahmin people) was leased to Dalit tenants (cf. Macfarlane 2003). However, nowadays even people who were traditionally exploited and discriminated against can access alternative, more profitable income opportunities outside the village or country. Some of the elderly respondents who had always hired other people to do their farming have been affected by this trend. One 74-year-old Gurung man said:

> *In the past, I did not plough the field. Now, I have no energy, so I can't plough it. Before, in this village, there were a lot of Kami and Damai. We had people to hire for field work. Now they are not here. In the past, we were accustomed to hiring people for field work. Now as they are not here, and we can't do field work by ourselves. I have also grown old and have no energy, so I can't plough the land. … Also the majority of Dalits have gone abroad.*
>
> *(Interview 180, 2016)*

Even though the elderly are no longer able to farm their land, the male landowners try to keep the land registered in their names as long as possible, unless their sons can take over the farming. Only 1 elderly man said that he had already transferred his property to his son. Elderly respondents saw ownership of arable land as important, not only directly as a livelihood source, but also as a form of security, crucial to their relationships with their children and their access to care in old age. As one group discussion participant said: "Only one thing I would like to say—the family's love and care depends on [the elderly person's] property" (group discussion 2, 2016). This statement is consistent with another researcher's findings that "having land increases confidence that sons will provide old age support" (Niraula 1995: 77). To pass on their land to their children, so the elderly hope, will tie the children to the home and provide an emotional and financial safety net in old age. Without land, the connection and relation to their children will be lost.

### Toothless villages, commuting elders

The presence of older people (*baajebajai*) and small children and the absence of young and working-age people are striking in the study villages. The elderly are worried and sad about the development of outmigration. They frequently expressed the fear that no one would be left to live with them except their "toothless companions," meaning other old people and small children. Respondents said that even their daughters-in-law were present only occasionally in the village as they traveled increasingly to urban centers to shop and sell, work, or look after their children who go to school there. This increased female mobility due to male migration has been observed in other regions as well (Adhikari and Hobley 2015). Although it was not possible to obtain detailed information on the mobility of the daughters-in-law, it was clear that not many young or working-age women were present. This higher mobility of young women implies that their preschool-age children are staying with the aged in-laws in the village. As sons are traditionally expected to take care of their parents and to inherit the land, daughters-in-law are not perceived as replacements for sons or daughters. The feeling that was conveyed was that having sons abroad amounted to having no children, even though daughters-in-law and grandchildren were present.

The elderly said that even when they were present, their daughters-in-law only did part of the cooking and housework. When asked about their current living arrangements, 3 who said they lived in coresidence (more than one generation under one roof) also said they had a separate kitchen (Figure 4). For the elderly interviewees, having one common kitchen in a household indicated completeness of a family. Having a separate kitchen made them feel neglected or abandoned by their own children. Others did not mention having a separate kitchen but said that their daughters-in-law did not help them while their sons were away. Thus, they also had to grow crops, harvest, and cook by themselves. Nevertheless, most of the elderly (41) said that they lived in coresidence, with or without a separate kitchen arrangement, with at least 1 child or son- or daughter-in-law. Of these, 12 were widowed and 2 were separated from their spouses. Of the coresidential households, 25 were home to 3 generations and 16 to 2 generations. Only 7 elderly lived completely alone, of whom 6 were widowed, 7 shared their households only with a spouse, and 1 lived with her sister (Table 2).

Migration of children to urban areas within Nepal also led to temporary changes in living arrangements for the older people. Three respondents said that they had begun to commute between their ancestral home in the village and their children's home in the city. They mentioned other older people in the village (not included in this study sample) who had relocated to their children's home and made irregular return visits to the village. They did this mainly to be with and look after grandchildren and to gain better access to services and infrastructure. However, the vast majority of the elderly said that they avoided moving around a lot, as the steep hillsides were too difficult to cross. They stayed near the house, only going to the forests to collect fodder.

The elderly, especially men, mentioned feeling bad about the increase in migration and the resulting changes


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**FIGURE 4** An 83-year-old Gurung woman stands in her kitchen, Ghachok VDC, 2016. The woman's daughter-in-law and 2 grandchildren, who live under the same roof, have a separate kitchen. (Photo by S. Speck)



in household structure. Though the traditional patrilineal joint-family structure is still solidly embedded in people's minds, this cultural norm is declining in practice. As a 66-year-old woman said: "At that time, we used to have a joint family. Sons, daughters-in-law, and children, everybody used to live in the same house … but now, from an early age, children are sent to school. After completing 10th or 12th grade, they go to foreign countries" (interview 145, 2016). The speaker, a widow, lived in a coresidence arrangement but still missed the time when all family members lived together and supported each other.

Negotiation and readjustment of roles and responsibilities can also present opportunities for elderly people. Despite the difficulties described above, some older people also emphasized their contributions to

**TABLE 2** Living arrangements of the elderly respondents in this study.

| | Ghachok | Machhapuchhre | Thuladihi | Total sample ($n = 56$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Average age of people age ≥60 years | 72.4 | 73.9 | 73.0 | 73.1 |
| Living arrangement | | | | |
| Coresidence[a)] | 19 | 15 | 7 | 41 |
| 2-generation household | 3 | 9 | 4 | 16 |
| 3-generation household | 16 | 6 | 3 | 25 |
| With spouse only | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| With adult relative(s) only | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Alone[b)] | 4 | 2 | 1 | 7 |
| Total | 24 | 22 | 10 | 56 |

[a)] Person lives with at least 1 child or son- or daughter-in-law.
[b)] Person has a child living nearby or is childless.


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family and society. With changed living arrangements, the elderly often care for grandchildren, manage and maintain the house and garden, and even take on new responsibilities such as monitoring new house construction or investing their children's financial capital. Elderly respondents explained that they felt obliged to maintain the house and land for their sons, allowing them to return without losing their connections and maintaining the social fabric of the village. Having such responsibilities gave them more self-esteem; with grandchildren around, they said, they felt less lonely and more useful. However, elderly interviewees also said that they felt marginalized and excluded by younger people.

### Attitudes toward the elderly

Lack of respect, a decreasing sense of commitment, and loss of authority are among the experiences elderly respondents described. A 78-year-old man said that he always felt misunderstood and dominated by his children, that their behavior had become rude, and that they only gave orders instead of expressing respect and appreciation. After thinking about this change of behavior, he concluded that young migrants acquired bad habits abroad and brought them back to the village. Education, jobs abroad, and the English language were listed by several elderly interviewees as factors in this negative development in Nepali norms and values. Further, some of the elderly interviewees explained that the attitudes of the younger generation distract them from traditional culture, thereby creating a generation gap, lack of understanding, and disruption of the traditional patrilineal system. As mentioned above, the elderly said that daughters-in-law, for example, were not as strongly tied to their husband's family as they had been one or two generations ago.

Neglect of or indifference toward elderly people was noticeable in the villages. A couple of times my field assistant and I were turned away at the doorstep when asking to speak to older household members. It seemed to us that people were embarrassed or even intimidated to admit to having older coresidents. One woman explicitly lied to us, denying the presence of older family members although her father-in-law lived with her. Elderly women said they felt unwelcome in their families. One 72-year-old woman said: "The time is like this now. Maybe this generation, son and daughter-in-law, don't like the elderly—maybe the time is such … all elderly [are] being teased, discriminated" (interview 162, 2016). Ageism was brought up by older women several times in Kaski district but never in Syangja. Verbal abuse or insults, such as teasing the elderly about their age, frailty, or decreasing ability to work, which was associated among younger people with laziness, were mentioned quite often. A 78-year-old widowed Damai woman referred to verbal insults metaphorically: "Nowadays, the children—they don't respond properly. Although we speak politely, they hit us with stones" (interview 157, 2016). Another elderly woman showed a scar on her head where she said that she had been hit with a *gagri* (water vessel) by family members because she could not contribute to the household's income anymore due to old age. However, she said she was forced to stay with them as she had nowhere else to go. Physical harm and rude behavior toward the elderly were said to happen within the family but also in public. Such occurrences reflect Cowgill and Holmes' (1972; Cowgill 1974) theory on modernization and aging. They suggested that in rural, traditional societies older people enjoy high social status, but "with increasing modernization the status of older people declines" (Cowgill 1974: 124).

### On uneven terrain

Older people's limited mobility restricts their ability to access services. Long distances, steep steps, and uneven paths make it hard for the elderly to collect their pensions and other allowances (see also KC et al 2014) or medical treatment on their own. For example, respondents said they preferred not to take the difficult path to the health post themselves or to ask someone else to take them there. To collect pension money in the VDC office every 3 or 4 months, many elderly people relied on their children. They needed their sons either to accompany them or to go on their behalf to the VDC office. Support was also needed to fill in forms and keep track of documents; 52 of the elderly respondents were illiterate. Three elderly interviewees explained that in 3 cases, when issuing new citizenship cards, their age was deliberately underestimated so they would not be able to get their pensions yet. An additional difficulty emerged when pension payments were changed in October 2016 from cash disbursements to bank deposits (Figure 5). Elderly respondents expressed their concern at not being able to walk down the steep slope to the nearest bank to get their pensions. They clearly described their need for the presence of young people in upper-elevation villages.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates the effects of outmigration from the Hill Region of Western Nepal on the living conditions of older people. Frequent outmigration paired with demographic change are creating a shift to an older society with fewer children, changes in household structure, and a decline in the importance of land. These changes create both problems and opportunities for the elderly.

Outmigration has created more burdens for older people who stay behind in the villages, looking after the family home and land, when young and working-age people migrate—a trend that has been confirmed by other studies across Nepal (Goldstein and Beall 1981; Subedi 2005; Pun et al 2009; Chalise 2012). One of the increased


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**FIGURE 5** Elderly people wait to register for a bank account to be eligible to receive their noncontributory pensions, Ghachok VDC, 2016. (Photo by S. Speck)




burdens is farm work; but due to age-related physical limitations, older people are also often compelled to reduce their farming activities or give them up altogether. Though farmland is still seen as a valuable resource by the elderly, as they connect land ownership with security in old age (see also Niraula 1995) and with authority within the household, there are indications that land ownership is not that important anymore. Migrants who provide a large proportion of the household income are seen to have a better reputation than people who stay at home and continue farming. This was also apparent in this study when elderly people reported feeling ignored and marginalized, excluded for example from the common kitchen, which means they do not have a say in the household anymore now that they are not the main contributors to the household budget. The traditional idea of farming as a joint project of a whole household has declined due to alternative, non-land-based livelihood strategies in combination with outmigration, which radically modifies this familiar structure.

The "toothless village" phenomenon indicates changes in traditional family life induced by migration and multilocal living arrangements. Modified forms of living together include 3 generations living under one roof but with separate kitchens and household budgets, and elderly family members commuting between 2 homes. An increasing trend toward smaller households and new forms of household composition, with missing middle-aged children for example, which Subedi (2005) earlier described as empty nests, are becoming more common. Similar empty nests or skipped-generation households (grandparents with grandchildren) have been noted in other countries experiencing increased rural-to-urban migration (see Skinner 2006; Lee 2008; HAI and Cordaid 2011), though these studies have not focused on mountainous regions. Redistribution and renegotiation of work and responsibilities due to changed household composition also bring opportunities for the elderly who remain behind. Being in charge of important tasks, such as managing and investing remittances while sons or daughters are abroad, makes older people feel useful and important. A similar trend has been described for Bolivia (see Bastia 2006). These small but important contributions of older people to family and society have not yet been investigated in depth (see Pun et al 2009).

In Nepal, massive outmigration has been accompanied by demographic change. Lower fertility and higher life expectancy are indicators of development and progress in remote mountainous regions. However, a combination of multiple factors—new, smaller household forms, absence of the working-age population, the trend toward having fewer children, and longer lifespans—has led to an increase in the old-age dependency ratio. At the same time, the capacity of the children to support and care for older people is decreasing, especially in the hill and mountain regions where services are provided in places


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that are difficult to access. The decrease in the number of young people in the villages aggravates the overall situation for the elderly living in mountainous parts of the country. Efforts to provide alternative living arrangements, such as old-age homes or day-care centers, are just beginning to emerge, though society and older people are rather skeptical of these institutions. As a 78-year-old man commented: "You are not cared for by your own children, how can you trust that institution to look after you?" (interview 141, 2016).

This study has limitations. An aspect that has not been considered in detail is the traditional social security structures among different ethnic groups. I sought varying views across the group of elderly people apart from their ethnic belonging. Further, the perspective of younger people and changes in traditional patrilineal structures need more attention. Today's older people in remote rural places are experiencing a completely new development—a transition during which traditional family support is vanishing while government services remain poorly implemented or lacking. The findings of this study provide a foreshadowing of the developments likely to occur in the near future for mountain dwellers in the global South experiencing outmigration and the demographic transition to an aged society. The socioeconomic situation of older people depends heavily on how coming generations develop livelihoods in a sustainable manner in mountain regions for the young and old. My investigations reveal that today's older people live in a complex and rapidly changing environment in which the individual components and institutions need a closer investigation but also have to be seen as a coherent whole.

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