BETWEEN DISSENT AND CONSENT

Gendered Negotiations of Nepali Male Migrant Workers in Port Klang, Malaysia

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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Abstract

With more than 90% of the world's cargo traveling through the ocean, port areas and their hinterlands around the world hold enormous economic importance. As a newly industrializing country striving to become a "fully developed nation" by 2020, Malaysia has aggressively pursued foreign investment through the creation of zones and industrial parks, particularly in and around its ports, which rely heavily on foreign migrant labor. This thesis broadly looks at how Malaysia's world-class city-making aspirations coincide with and diverge from migrant realities influenced by a highly precarious labor regime. Addressing the paradox of why male migrants from Nepal keep going back to Malaysia despite widespread coverage of labor exploitation, this thesis asks the following questions: How do male migrants deal with the disempowerment that may follow varying degrees and forms of marginalization abroad? How might an understanding of gender and male masculinities then allow for a more persuasive account of the sustained rise in male labor migration? The research is based on interviews with and participant observation of migrants working in the zones and industrial parks of Port Klang, one of the world's largest trans-shipment centers, and its hinterland. This thesis finds male migrants to be constantly negotiating their sense of subordination through gendered narratives and everyday activities that hinge upon ideas of male providership and modernity. I argue that such modes of belonging, however, do not fit neatly within reiterated narratives through which migrants have become legible and knowable as either victims or agents in response to their status as laborers. I argue that while such everyday negotiations may allow migrants to endure various forms of exclusions, they also serve to mask male vulnerabilities and exploitation, thus maintaining both structures of labor exploitation and patriarchal gender ideologies.

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Contents

1 Introduction

This thesis draws attention to the ways in which Nepali male migrants mobilize ideas of manhood and masculine responsibility to constantly reassert their masculine selves amidst disempowering conditions abroad. Relying on gendered practices to reconcile their precarious working lives abroad, migrant men ultimately maintain their conditions of exploitation and vulnerability, while reinforcing hierarchical gender relations.

The scale of transnational labor migration from Nepal can be discerned through its sheer pervasiveness in every realm of Nepali society. From the striking absence of men in the villages; to folk songs about betrayal, loneliness and love; to newly married wives learning how to use Facebook on their new Samsung Galaxy phones; to private businesses and banks facilitating the inflow of remittances; to economists at the World Bank discussing remittances with government officials, academics and I/NGOs, the influence of migration, as a practice or phenomenon, is invariably felt at all levels of society.

Nepal has witnessed an unprecedented growth in labor out-migration in the past 20 years. The number of labor permits issued by the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE) has risen from just 3605 in 1993/94 to 453,543 in 2012/13.[1] The World Bank (2011) estimates nearly half of all households in Nepal to have at least one member who is either currently abroad or a returnee. According to the latest census in 2011, male migrants account for 88% of the total migrants abroad. Similarly, sex-disaggregated data on labor permits since 2006/07 corroborates the existence of an overwhelming male migrant majority.[2] Most migrants going

[1] Data on labor permits issued is available and updated monthly at www.dofe.gov.np.

[2] At the same time, destination-specific data also needs to be factored since female migrants comprise a much greater majority in countries such as Lebanon, where the demand for domestic workers is greater. Similarly, the "irregular" migration of female migrants who travel via transit countries such as India to evade ad-hoc government bans on female migration can also contribute to the underestimation of official data.

to Malaysia or Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are likely to be under 30 years of age, less educated; and originating from rural areas in the Central and Western regions of Nepal (Sharma et al. 2014, 34).

The acceleration of labor migration since the early 1990s to countries beyond India can be understood in the context of greater domestic and global connectedness. In agreement to the Structural Adjustment Programs implemented since the mid-1980s, Nepal adopted various liberalization policies that induced large-scale changes in the economy such as the price hike of everyday commodities and decline in real wage and employment (Adhikari and Bohle 1999, 191). These transformations occurred amidst already long-standing socio-economic grievances held by a vast majority of Nepal's population against centralized political power. It is in this context that the 10-year long Maoist insurgency broke out in 1996, a period that also witnessed a significant rise in labor migration to Malaysia and the Gulf countries (Sijapati and Limbu 2012).

Similarly, the democratic movement of 1990 ushered in a new level of openness within the country, including a more liberal policy regime related to foreign travel and employment.[3] It was during this period that foreign employment beyond India received more serious state attention. The need for greater state regulation eventually led to two amendments to the first Foreign Employment Act of 1985, which coincided with the rise in labor migration from Nepal in the 1990s (Sijapati and Limbu 2012). The demand and supply of cheap and transient labor to meet flexible foreign direct investment (FDI) needs has also been facilitated by the "migration industry" consisting of private recruitment agencies and governments in both "sending" and "receiving" countries. At the same time, this has also made it possible for many Nepali men and women to realize their migratory aspirations founded in particular

[3] It must be noted that the first Foreign Employment Act of 1985 was more regulated in comparison to its two amendments and the new Foreign Employment Act of 2007 that served to promote foreign employment by recognizing and incorporating the roles of private recruitment agencies.

social and material realities.

Similarly, the concurrent and rapid economic growth of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, following the "oil boom" in 1973, and of newly independent and rapidly growing industrialized nations in Southeast Asia, following export-oriented policies promoting FDI, has also prompted greater demand for cheaper foreign labor from countries in South Asia such as Nepal and Bangladesh.

The sheer scale of migration and remittances, amounting to almost a quarter of the country's GDP, has attracted considerable policy and political interest. Politicians constantly refer to the plight of migrants while saluting them for sustaining the country's economy through remittances. Development agencies and academics, likewise, have endlessly deliberated on Nepal's "remittance boom" or the "remittance economy" of Nepal (Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung 1998). The idea of male providership has thus expanded from the scale of the family and household to that of the nation itself. This is evident not only in media representation and state policies that actively promote male migration, but also in the ubiquitous discourse of "migration and development" among policy makers and international development agencies who call for the need to fully "harness" the economically productive potential of remittances for national economic development.[4]

Besides the obvious impact of remittances on the economy, documented in reports and articles by experts in various fields, the more insidious impact of these changes are manifest in the collective psyche of the nation that seems to have taken migration for granted as a permanent safety net. While governments are actively facilitating migration, individual households are doing it themselves by actively "investing" in these "opportunities."

[4] For instance, the Joint Migration and Development Initiative (JMDI) in Nepal that is funded by the European Union and Swiss Development Cooperation and led by UN agencies: https://www.iom.int/news/nepal-launches-joint-migration-and-development-initiative-project

Everyday landscapes of Nepal are marked by the various scales of mobility occurring from and within Nepal. The steady growth of out-migration from the country has been encouraging migration from villages to newly emerging towns and cities. The growth of the construction industry in addition to the inflow of remittances has accelerated the urbanization of many "village" units that have now been re-categorized as "municipalities" by the government. As a result of these processes, Nepal is currently the "fastest urbanizing" country in South Asia (United Nations 2015). In many places, what used to be a seamless mosaic of terraced paddy fields is now marked by plotted land and isolated concrete houses with steel rods protruding from columns on the top floors (see figure 1). These everyday landscapes represent concretized expressions of many households' growing urban aspirations.

Given the fact that various social and material relations are implicated in migration, it is crucial to understand how gender influences migration processes and outcomes. However, as in many other contexts, discussions on "gender and migration" in Nepal have tended to prioritize the "female migrant" as its most legitimate subject. This in many ways is reflective of the general genealogy of migration scholarship where attention to the "female migrant" was seen as a necessary corrective to the male bias and unmarked male norm that shaped accounts of migration until the 1970s. Migration scholarship today is dominated by studies on female migration; while such studies are important, the over-emphasis on female migration has led to the apolitical and false equation of "gender" with the category of "women."

The vast majority of academic and policy studies and development interventions on "gender and migration" have focused primarily on female migrants. Without undermining the importance of female-centered studies and interventions, this thesis attempts to re-center the simple yet profound understanding of gender as a relational concept or practice by viewing male migrants as no less gendered subjects. If we are to view "gender as a constitutive

element of migration" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000, 117), we need to move beyond discussions of "gender and migration" that focus solely on men or women without considering how they are situated within hierarchical gender relations. At the same time, as Parreñas (2009) has rightly pointed out, the seemingly corrective approach of including both men and women can also be unhelpful if it remains merely comparative in analysis. In other words, it is crucial to look at gender as a relational concept in order to understand how gendered processes of migration and produce particular migrant subjectivities.

An understanding of gender as a central aspect of migrant subjectivities can reveal a multiplicity of desires and aspirations that shape migration, beyond overly deterministic and unproductive cultural/economic or rational/irrational explanations that have plagued classical migration scholarship. A gendered analysis of migration reveals the inseparability of the social and material. For instance, amidst increasing precarity and even "illegality", labor migration seems to make little "economic sense." However, labor migration is, time and again, reductively explained as solely an outcome of poverty. There is thus a need for a more nuanced analysis that can offer some insight into the conundrums surrounding migrant lives, in which social and material realities are intertwined.

The escalating demand for cheap labor in today's global economy has been accompanied by a growing concern over various rights violations occurring during the recruitment and employment of migrant labor. Migrants are constantly shown in the media, I/NGO and policy reports as victims who are duped by unscrupulous "agents," "sub-agents" or "manpower companies" with false promises of high wages and attractive jobs. In this context of widespread coverage of exploitation, one of the earliest puzzles that motivated this thesis was: *What then accounts for the sustained rise in the number of migrants going abroad? What explains the seduction of life and work abroad despite the obvious difficulties*

and challenges abroad?

Here, it is perhaps fruitful to take a closer look at the ways in which male and female migrants are perceived in relation to labor exploitation or vulnerabilities. In Nepal as elsewhere, there is a tendency to view female migrants as always already sexually vulnerable. In other words, their gendered subjectivity is reduced to their sexual vulnerability. In contrast, male migrants are rarely seen as gendered subjects but simply as laborers. Male and female migrant subjectivities thus become narrowly defined by their labor and sexual vulnerability respectively. In this context, it becomes as important to consider male migrants as gendered subjects as it does to view female migrants as economic agents. It is thus crucial to take into account the very diverse socio-economic and political realities that produce different vulnerabilities that cannot be naturalized as fixed attributes of particular individuals.

Even though narratives foregrounding female migrants' sexual vulnerability and abuse have been leveraged by rights organizations to advocate for female migrants' greater security, they have also been used for conservative ends such as the ad-hoc bans on female labor migration to Gulf countries. A foregrounding of sexual vulnerability can also be counter-productive to female migrants who want to move freely without stigma and can serve to reinforce myths of the "resilient man." While the curtailing of female mobility has led to irregular migration and the heightening of existing vulnerabilities, the "male privilege" of male migrants to travel freely seems to rest on the assumption that male vulnerability is either negligible or secondary to breadwinning "duties" that are seen as crucial for not just individual families but the nation as a whole.

Having previously been engaged in research related to labor migration from Nepal, I have witnessed the work of many I/NGOs advocating for migrants rights. While my professional life was surrounded by the noise of media and human rights groups advocating

for migrants' rights, daily encounters with my uncle who had spent years working in Qatar was marked by silence on his life and work abroad. This was a recurrent observation during my encounters with other male relatives who had returned from working abroad. The cacophony of rights-based advocacy and claim-making based on singular narratives of victimhood was a stark contrast to the muted everyday realities of migrant returnees. Being constrained by my own position as a niece and a female, I, too, found it difficult to ask my uncle and others about their working lives abroad. To suggest that their work was anything but respectable would have been offensive. This is the personal subtext that motivates this thesis: to understand *how male migrants make sense of their migration and how they are able to gain a sense of (masculine) respectability abroad*, which to an extent could explain their silence at home as well as the continued rise in out-migration.

This thesis is driven by the assumption that the rising trend of out-migration can be partly explained by the imperative of migration that has come to define successful manhood. This imperative may be informed by desires rooted in notions of masculinities that surround ideas of successful migration. Narratives of successful migration can be understood by looking at the ways in which migrants attempt to mask subordinate (work-related or otherwise) positions abroad. While we may not know to what extent migrants are able to successfully endure exploitative conditions, there is widespread optimism on possibilities of exception - "That won't happen to me (again)" - or endurance - "Everyone is going. I'll probably be able to handle the situation." The perceived optimism, as modest as it may be, can be understood in light of the adage "safety in numbers," where the sheer pervasiveness of migration provides a green signal for many men. The rising trend of migration and its normalization itself engenders an assumption of endurance or exception. The thesis attempts to understand this imperative through an analysis that centers on the gendered relations and aspirations of working men in Port Klang, Malaysia.

Through interviews with Nepali male migrants at the port and its adjoining industrial zones, the thesis seeks to understand how male migrants make sense of their migrancy and working lives abroad. More specifically, it asks the following questions:

- How do male migrant workers deal with the disempowerment that may follow varying degrees and forms of marginalization both at work and non-work spaces?
- How can an analysis that centers on male masculinities provide a more persuasive account of the sustained rise in male labor migration?
- What implications might these gendered negotiations have on either challenging or maintaining both structures of labor exploitation and patriarchal gender ideologies?

The urgency of these questions become apparent when contextualized within the larger context of Malaysia's precarious labor regime that governs many Nepali migrant workers. While the Malaysian government has proudly promoted its "free zones" and industrial parks as hallmarks of openness, development and freedom; such representations have been increasingly challenged by "watchdogs" such as rights organizations and the media who foreground the exploitation of migrant workers. Free zones can be conceived within two major narratives that tend to oppose each other: a space of freedom and openness on the one hand, and a space of exploitation on the other. I argue that migrants' lived realities cannot be entirely defined by or reduced to these dominant narratives of "conceived space" (Lefebvre 1991, 38-39). An analysis of migrants' everyday lives reveals a more nuanced reality where migrants are constantly negotiating these competing narratives. The particular male migrant subjectivities produced in specific local settings suggest neither complete celebration of "development" nor an absolute submission to their marginal conditions. Taking into account the site of free zones in Klang valley as a "domain of contested power relations," (Silvey and Lawson 1999, 122) I argue that male migrant workers constantly re-negotiate existing power

relations through which their subject positions formed. I recuperate Agamben's (1998) concept of "zones of indistinction" in order to illustrate the interstitiality of migrants' "bare life." Drawing upon Coles' (2009) concept of "field of masculinity," I further explore how migrant men may draw upon their gendered agency to negotiate their conditions of "bare life." The two core chapters of the thesis attempt to highlight this process by building on these concepts. Through an analysis of male migrant subjectivities, the thesis draws attention to the ways in which ideas of manhood become mobilized during the migration process and their time abroad. More specifically, I highlight how particular male migrant subjectivities emerge through notions of male providership and modernity. This process, to an extent, may displace the disempowerment faced by migrants who are in otherwise subordinate positions as low-wage migrant workers. At the same time, I argue that these everyday gendered "negotiations" that may allow migrants to endure marginality abroad also serve to mask male vulnerabilities and exploitation, thus maintaining both structures of labor exploitation and patriarchal gender ideologies.

1.1 Nepali Male Migrants in Malaysia

Malaysia continues to be one of the major destinations for migrant workers in Asia despite sporadic attempts at hardening immigration policies to curb "illegal" migration (FIDH and Suaram 2008). The sustained demand for migrant labor, which currently accounts for almost 20% of the total working population (Soon 2015), can be situated within Malaysia's aggressive pursuit of export-oriented industrial policies since the 1970s. In its drive for economic growth, Malaysia has established at least 200 industrial estates, 18 free trade zones and five economic corridors (Wulandari 2012, 213). The transformation of Malaysia's agrarian economy to a manufacturing one through centrally planned state-led capitalism was

largely fueled by the relocation of foreign production plants to Malaysia's free zones and the supply of migrant labor from countries such as Nepal (Garcés-Mascareñas 2008).

For this reason and others, such as migrants' perception of Malaysia as relatively "more free" compared to Gulf countries, the country has become a popular destination for Nepali men pursuing foreign employment. While Nepalis are considered the second largest migrant working population in Malaysia after Indonesia (Verité 2014), Malaysia is also the most traveled destination for Nepalis pursuing foreign employment. Based on the total number of labor permits issued to migrant workers by the DoFE from 1993/94 to 2012/13, Malaysia is the most popular destination for Nepali migrant workers (31.9%) followed by other GCC states, mainly Qatar (27.2%), Saudi Arabia (20.2%) and UAE (12.7%). However, most media, academic and policy attention related to labor migration from Nepal or South Asia has largely focused on the Gulf (Sharma et al. 2014).[5]

Still, there have been many reports in the local media documenting the various forms and extent of rights violations of Nepali migrant workers in Malaysia. While migrant workers are entitled through the Trade Union Act 1959 to join a trade union, they face many hurdles. The threat of deportability from employers remains the biggest obstacle for migrants seeking redress (Wulandari 2012). There are also multiple reports on the extent of police surveillance and violence against migrant workers. As one of my interlocutors described the RELA (auxiliary police in Malaysia): "They are really bad. They don't even have a little bit of dignity. They're sold for even one cigarette. Even if you have a work permit, they can stop and take away everything you have."

[5] Much of the media focus on precarious labor regimes in the Gulf is focused on Qatar as the 2020 FIFA World Cup host. A cursory look at the comments sections of many of such news articles is sufficient to see how as Vora (2013) also argues, civilizational narratives on the Middle East are being reproduced and ideas of liberal exceptionalism are becoming further legitimized (11).

Similarly, all migrants I spoke to had their passports confiscated by their employers, a trend that is also common in many GCC states. A representative at CARAM Asia, one of the most active NGOs focused on migrants rights, described how migrants' conditions in Malaysia was similar to migrants under the Kafala system in GCC states, where the employer has full control over the legal status of the worker. Employers point to their "investment" - payment of recruitment fees and other costs borne by employers and the advanced lump sum of migrants' monthly levy - to justify the confiscation of passports.

One of the most problematic aspects of the governance of labor migration both in Nepal and Malaysia is the privatization of recruitment and the absence of state monitoring or regulation that can hold fraudulent firms and individuals to account. The sense of impunity among private recruitment agencies and agents and the lack of state responsibility from both sides can also be seen as being part of the same structure that tends to naturalize most of migrant deaths in Malaysia as "natural deaths." Official Nepal embassy data stated 166 deaths in just four and a half months last year (Sedhai 2014). As such, migrants who arrive in Malaysia paying as much as NPR 160,000 (USD 1,574)[6] have to face both immediate financial problems as well as enormous long-term challenges such as loan and interest payments.

1.2 Research Site: Port Klang, Malaysia

More than 90% of the world's cargo currently travels through the ocean. While the centrality of maritime trade in maintaining today's transnational polity is undeniable, the

[6] This amount is equivalent to about six times the monthly minimum wage in peninsular Malaysia and twice the amount of Nepal's per capita income (USD 694). In 2012, Malaysia introduced the minimum wage system that required employers to pay workers a minimum of RM 900 (USD 250) and RM 800 (USD 222) per month in the Malaysian Peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak respectively.

ocean has largely remained the "forgotten space[s]" of modernity (Sekula and Burch 2011). This thesis attempts to foreground the importance of the maritime space in discussions on globalization and labor migration through a focus on the strategically located Port Klang in Malaysia.

The sea is a lifeline for Malaysia, a country where 95% of its total trade is sea-borne (Khalid 2013). In this context, the largest Malaysian port, Port Klang, is a key facilitator of Malaysia's export-oriented economic growth. The Malaysian government's establishment of free zones across its economically vibrant western coast and the resulting demand for cheap migrant labor can be understood in the context of increasing regional and global competition for maritime trade between port cities. In the past decades, cost reductions have been achieved by logistical advances such as the introduction of containerization in the 1960s and the reduction in ship turnaround time and labor costs (Hill 2012). Today, 'just-in-time' methods along with the availability of cheap foreign labor has allowed for greater cost reduction. A growing number of South Asian migrant workers (mainly from Bangladesh and Nepal) work for the port's various operators, and in the factories that populate the adjacent industrial zones of the Klang Valley, stretching from the coast to Kuala Lumpur. The free zoning of ports and heavy reliance on migrant labor have been central to the revival and intensification of maritime trade through Malaysia. As such, a study of migrants' negotiations of their marginality in a site such as Port Klang becomes even more urgent.

The Malaysian peninsula has historically been the hub of trade and transit between China and India, the Middle East, and Europe. Its many historic port cities such as Melaka and Penang have been wrought by histories of labor migration across both the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Labor migration intensified with the advent of colonialism: Port Klang (then Port Swettenham) was built by the British in 1886 on a mangrove swamp near

the city of Klang at the terminus of the colonial rail network. In the nineteenth century, the port was used mainly as a cargo depot for tin, rubber, and natural latex used for the insulation of underwater telegraph cables (Hill 2012 and Amrith 2013).

The port's proximity to the plantations industry made it the locus of mass labor migration across the Bay of Bengal, at a time when Malaya was ruled by the East India Company from Calcutta. Malaya quickly became the most valuable of the British Empire's tropical colonies, drawing mainly Tamil migrant workers to tap the rubber trees on its vast plantations. The already mixed communities of the Malay peninsula were further diversified by labor migration under the British Empire. It is estimated that between 1840 and 1940 up to 4 million people traveled from India to Malaya (Amrith 2013). Despite being essential to the plantation economy, Port Swettenham, like most ports in the region, was overshadowed by the "free port" of Singapore. In 1965, when Singapore withdrew from the Malaysian Federation, the Malaysian government invested in the development of Port Klang and constructed additional wharves. A strong emphasis on infrastructure development between 1965 and 1985 led to the further construction of berths, transit sheds, and warehouses. By 1986, the government and private sector organizations began measures to privatize the port industry, beginning with the profitable container terminal, which was sold to Kelang Container Terminal (KCT). By 1992 the rest of the port's operations were privatized, including the responsibility for port authority employees (Hill 2012). Mass labor migration from South Asia to Malaya, which peaked in the colonial period and has waned since the rise of independent nation-states, has been reactivated today by the demands of a growing export industry and market-driven competition between ports in the region.

Port Klang today refers to three separate ports in the area: Northport, Southpoint, and Westport. Though the Port Klang Authority, a government agency, functions as the

"landlord" of the ports, operations in each port are managed by private corporations. In 1993 the government of Malaysia created the Port Klang Free Zone (PKFZ), a 4 km^2 area offering tax exemptions for companies. The corporatization of the previously nationalized port industry, effectively separating its regulatory and commercial functions, has been widely debated. Studies have pointed out that the profit-seeking growth of the sector is often at the cost of the exploitation of migrant workers in particular, both in the port itself and in the adjoining industries (Hill 2012).

The corporatization and free zoning of Port Klang, as with many other free zone industries in Malaysia, has led to a growing informalization of labor in which migrants negotiate a labor regime that lacks accountability, discourages collective organizing and prevents legal recourse (Hill 2012). Port Klang is thus a site in which processes and conditions of global labor migration are most tangible and visible. Field research in Port Klang enabled me to think through questions of how migrants develop a sense of self amidst contrasting narratives of the spectacular "world class port" and the precariousness of their everyday lives.

1.3 Methods

The thesis is primarily based on conversations with 34 Nepali working men. While most of them worked in in the Port Klang area, some of them worked in the adjoining areas of Klang. My conversations were both one-on-one and in groups, and included both planned meetings and spontaneous encounters. The number of people in my group conversations ranged from 2 to 8 people. Meetings that were planned ahead usually lasted longer (2 to 4 hours) than spontaneous occurrences that lasted anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour.

While specific questions regarding their family's socio-economic background were not asked, the thesis relies on existing studies and reports that point to the pre-dominance of

migrants coming from Nepal's rural and (lower) middle-class families (Sharma et al. 2014). Without actively seeking to conduct "participant observation," I was also able to observe and participate in migrants' everyday lives during many of our meetings in the various migrant enclaves and housing clusters in the PKFZ. This process of meeting, knowing and talking entailed shared practices such as eating and visiting Nepali shops together.

The migrants I spoke with include dockworkers at Westport, storage workers at a logistics and transshipment operator in Port Klang, and men working for electronics companies located in the industrial area of Bandar Sultan Suleiman near Northport (Samsung); Bukit Raja Industrial Park, Shah Alam (Tamco Switchgear) and Sungei Way Free Industrial Zone, Petaling Jaya (Western Digital). Another group of migrants I spoke with worked at a plastics factory in the industrial estate of Sungai Rasau in Klang.

The thesis also draws on conversations with Nepali shopkeepers in the Port Klang area, a Nepal Airlines in-flight supervisor, a Nepali pastor, a Malaysian representative from a local Christian organization supporting migrant workers (Migrant Ministry Klang - MMK)[7], and representatives from two of the most active and visible groups working on migrants' rights in Malaysia – Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) and CARAM Asia.

The three key entry-points in getting access to Nepali migrant workers were local organizations in Nepal and Malaysia, chance conversations with migrant workers in shops and restaurants, and my own personal network. From each entry-point, I was able to get in touch with more people. While I was not in touch with any Nepali migrant worker in Port Klang prior to arriving in Malaysia, one Malaysian organization and my brother in-law in Melaka had assured me of their assistance.

[7] MMK has been active in Klang and surrounding areas since 2002. It is involved in various relief and outreach activities that target the low-income earning migrant population. Currently, there are 8 migrant-based ministries. Each ministry is organized by nationality - including Nepali, Burmese, Indonesian, Bangladeshi and Vietnamese ministries.

A combination of factors also influenced the expansion of my research site from the specificity of PKFZ to its adjacent city of Klang, which was relatively more accessible. Migrant workers in general are considered among the most "hard-to-reach" populations in research. This challenge was exacerbated by the spatial isolation of the PKFZ and the unpredictable working hours of most migrants. I was told that I would only be able to meet most migrants during evenings and weekends. Since the PKFZ is isolated from public transportation, I also did not have the option of living nearby or meeting migrants after work. As a female, I was constantly cautioned by my brother in-law in Melaka, migrants I met in Klang, and a representative from a local organization to not go to the port area on my own. While my first visit to Westport was made alone, the following visits to Westport and Northport were made accompanied by Nepali men. Here it is important to note that my ethnic identity as a Gurung also enabled greater access and mobility as a female researcher.

My brother-in-law in Melaka had referred me to some Gurung migrants in Klang who were supportive of my research project. For instance, I remember one of the Gurung men encouraging me by saying, "We Gurungs are not very well-educated. That is why it is good to see you. We will support you in whatever way we can." My status as a Gurung and educated person thus conferred some level of respect and support. As such, even though I had only vaguely hinted at the prospect of being able to visit their living spaces, they were very forthcoming in inviting me to visit their hostel while also repeatedly stating that it was "not nice." As is common in Nepal when guests and family visit each other's house, they also brought biscuits and drinks for me, and insisted I take everything when I left. I tried to modestly accept their generosity, which though rooted in brotherly affinity and shared ethnic membership, also brought other challenges. How could I reciprocate their goodwill and be thankful while maintaining a healthy "professional" distance and warding off inappropriate actions possibly warranted by shared ethnic membership? During my last week in Malaysia, I

kept receiving calls late at night by a Gurung man I had not met. Apparently one of the Gurung migrant men had given him my phone number and he just wanted to have a chat.

The study is based on one month of field research, where I commuted each day from my rented room in Subang Jaya to Port Klang and other areas in Klang.

1.4 Methodological Issues

During the initial phase of my research, I realized the enormous challenge of reconciling the interplay of various power relations that disturbed typically assumed hierarchical researcher/interlocutor relationships. As a female researcher interacting with male interlocutors, I struggled to constantly maintain a balance between simultaneously appearing "non-threatening" and being "in-control."

Inspired by long-cherished feminist methodological principles of "reciprocity, equality and rapport" over "distance and hierarchy" (Pini and Pease 2013), I began my fieldwork conscious of my privileged social position as a researcher. However, in retrospect, I realize how this "guilt" of privilege might have elided me from my own argument: to move away from reductive representations of male migrants as primarily disempowered workers and take into account the diverse social relations operative in their lives, including gender relations.

This is not to claim that all men equally or similarly perceived my presence as a female researcher as "threatening." It is important to consider that the men I spoke with are, themselves, internally diverse. Similarly, perceptions of threat depended on the context in which my interactions took place. My conversations in group-settings were varied. For instance, I had a lively discussion with a group of eight men as we sat in the afternoon under the shade of a tree on an empty football ground. As men teased and fought with each other on many issues, I sensed a greater sense of competition with each person claiming to speak from

a more authoritative position. In this context, interviews can be seen as both a “threat and an opportunity” to reassert one’s masculine self in relation to other men and myself (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001). At the same time, as Pini and Pease (2013) have argued, the reticence I observed in some other groups can be seen as an attempt to retain power. Schwalbe and Wolkomir discuss how female researchers can pose both a “baseline” and “surplus threat.” They argue that a “baseline threat” is in-built within the sheer nature of interviews that necessitate a degree of taking control (researcher who questions, probes and regulates interaction) and “giving up” control (research “participants” who are expected to answer). However, they also argue that in the particular context of female researcher/male interlocutors, a “surplus threat” might arise from particular "questions that might expose the masculine self as illusory" (91).

In this context, my interlocutors and I can be seen as having attempted to “manage” both threats in various ways. As a researcher, I opened myself to questions before and after interviews. In one instance, where I met a group of four men who were relatively more reticent, one migrant who was particularly unforthcoming began asking me one question after another regarding my personal life and my research for about half an hour. He kept a serious demeanor while the others giggled. I also began conversations with relatively more “feel-good” issues by asking them, for instance, to explain the technical sophistication of their work. In order to avoid asking direct questions about vulnerability and exploitation, I asked hypothetical questions and asked migrants to talk about other migrants. I also incorporated narratives emerging out of the interview with hypothetical scenarios. For instance, I asked a relatively older migrant what advice he would give upon return to a younger migrant such as the young man who was sitting next to him, who had, minutes before, stated having dropped out of college to come to Malaysia.

Similarly, as described above, migrants also engaged in what can be seen as "compensatory control" strategies to prevent the relinquishing of power (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001, 93). While one migrant took photos of me while I was picking up a phone in the middle of an interview and kept winking and flirting with me throughout the interview, some others requested more photos on Facebook despite having taken group photos with me in-person upon their request.

I value the significance of being aware of differential social positions as researchers; the importance of a participatory research approach; and the need to provide reassurance and take caution, given the precarity surrounding migrant lives and the "danger" of "ethnographic disclosure" to become "quite literally become a kind of surveillance" (De Genova 2002, 422). At the same time, I feel that "assumptions and orthodoxies" (Pini and Pease 2013, 7) of feminist research methodology that advocate for reciprocity and equality over the hierarchy and distance of "objective" research can actively be negotiated with by researchers caught in intricate webs of power relations in relation to their research "subjects." As Lee (1997) argues, the experience of female researchers working on issues related to men calls into question "the assumption of rapport and reciprocity as inherently positive and necessary in feminist research encounter" (in Pini and Pease 2013, 7).

In this context, I felt that it was, at times, necessary to accentuate my status as a researcher by showing my university ID card, notebook and recorder to retain some element of formality that would establish a level of respectability and seriousness that was at risk of being undermined by my status as a female. As such, I had to constantly analyze the extent to which I was able to put on an agreeable and non-threatening persona to get migrants' trust and cooperation without compromising my own ethical and feminist beliefs.

2 Theoretical Framework

The thesis can be broadly situated within two lines of research that have recently gained much critical attention. The first deals with the migration-citizenship nexus where many migration scholars have deliberated on the usefulness or (lack thereof) of relating Agamben's (1998) concepts of "bare life" and the "zone of indistinction" to the case of migrant workers. The second deals with emerging scholarship on masculinities and migration, which highlights the fluidity and multiplicity of masculinities.

2.1 Migration-Citizenship Nexus and Bare Life

Many critical migration scholars have critiqued the applicability of Agamben's concept of "bare life" to the case of migrant workers. They argue that the concept does not allow room for political agency beyond the parameters of formal citizenship. A common line of critique problematizes what they view as the construction of migrants as "passive, almost helpless beings" rather than "agents in their own right" (Walters 2008, 188). In this context, scholars have drawn attention to the various overt and covert ways in which (undocumented) migrant workers, refugees or asylum seekers "become (a)political subjects" by claiming "the rights one does not have" (Isin and Rygiel 2007). Isin and Rygiel (2007) are perhaps the most articulate in their proposal for an alternative conception: they argue that rather than reduce migrants to the depoliticized status of "bare life," it is more productive to look at how "abject spaces" prompt contestation and resistance and thus operate as "political spaces" (196). Similar-spirited endeavors have sought to expand socio-political definitions of citizenship to accommodate a growing vocabulary of metaphoric conceptualizations that denote alternate forms of migrant belonging in such "abject spaces" of "rightslessness". Scholars have variously described such acts of resistance that are publicly staged or collectively organized (such as protests, petitioning) as "protesting citizenship" (Tyler and Marciniak 2013); "acts of

citizenship" (Isin and Nielsen 2008); "non-citizen citizenship" (Gordon 2005); and "insurgent citizenship" (Isin 2002). Others such as Derks (2013) underscore the importance of moving "beyond the public political space" of explicitly political acts by looking at the diverse forms of "'offstage' dissent and 'everyday forms of resistance'" (Scott 1990, 4-5 and Scott 1985 in Derks). Lee (2010) describes such non-explicit everyday forms of resistance as the "third space of citizenship."

While it is important to highlight such "enactments of citizenship," both the spectacular and the everyday, to foreground political subjectivities, it is equally important to understand that such practices may not necessarily be oppositional to conditions of "bare life." While scholars who highlight explicit forms of dissent have been relatively more optimistic of its "transformative potential" to create a "rupture in the given," (Isin 2008, 25) other migration scholars have been more cautious not to romanticize everyday acts of "citizenship" as necessarily transformative or emancipatory. However, it is uncommon for scholars to recognize that such modes of claiming belonging are not necessarily oriented towards subversion or opposition. Similarly, while it is certainly important to reveal the various ways in which migrants become "political," the metaphoric usage of citizenship (which can perhaps be replaced by "political belonging/membership") can serve to lessen the importance of its original meaning and usage and also belittle the importance of formal citizenship and the very real social and material consequences that has on non-citizens.

Besides critiquing the conceptualization of "bare life" as an absolute depoliticized remainder of political life that is bereft of any political or social agency, others have also pointed towards the homogenizing and de-subjectifying notions of "bare life" (Butler 2004) and the relativization of its "spaces of exception" such that it is seen as a permanent "norm" characterizing contemporary modern life (Cobarrubias et al. 2011). Taking into consideration

the various criticisms surrounding the concept, it still remains relevant to this thesis to the extent that migrants can be seen as inhabiting an interstitial "zone of indistinction" marked by both inclusion and exclusion. Low-wage migrant workers in many contexts are, as McNevin (2006) has articulated, "immanent outsiders" - simultaneously "incorporated into the political economy as economic participants" and "denied the status of insiders" (141).

For Agamben (1998), "bare life" represents a life that can be killed with impunity but not sacrificed or executed (156). It is, however, not a banished life that has severed all relations with state. In contrast, its relation with the state is founded on a negative relationship, that of its own exclusion. While critical migration scholars seem to either argue for or against the concept, I find it more useful to compliment what I find the most politically productive aspect of the concept, which is its explanatory power to articulate how structures of domination work through selective and strategic forms of both inclusion and exclusion. "Bare life" does not necessarily represent a static undifferentiated whole. Rather, I find it useful to think of "bare life" as a constant potentiality of paradoxical conditions that reproduce marginality. The readings of "bare life" mentioned above that claim migrant subjectivities to have been reduced to "passive, almost helpless beings" (Walters 2008, 188) largely stem from the understanding of "zoe" as bare life, which scholars such as Ziarek (2012) claim to be a misunderstanding:

> I would like to stress the point that is made sometimes only implicitly in Agamben's work and not always sufficiently stressed by his commentators: namely, the fact that bare life, wounded, expendable, and endangered, is not the same as biological *zoe*, but rather the remainder of the destroyed political *bios*. (195)

De Genova (2012) similarly describes how the concept's "rapid and diffuse prominence in recent scholarly discourse has been rather too presumptively and reductively degraded to a mere figure of abject "exclusion" (134). Such reductions have largely overlooked the subtleties of the concept and how it relates to "the zone of indistinction

between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion" (Agamben 1998, 181). He further argues that the "politicization" of bare life occurs at the very "threshold" of this contradiction that co-constitutes the inside" and "outside" and legitimates both bare life and sovereign power. Such an understanding then allows one to understand bare life as not a biological given that "ontologically precedes sovereign power, as if in a 'state of nature'" but as a "*product* of the [biopolitical] machine" (Agamben 2005, 87–88 in De Genova 2012). As such, an emphasis on the "zone of indistinction" as an area productive of bare life allows for a more useful approach to understanding contradictory conditions that make migrants "subject to the law but not subjects in the law" (Agamben 1995,181 in Salter 2008).

In a similar spirit, this thesis attempts to highlight how migrant lives are characterized by a combination of various forms of exclusion and inclusion in relation to the socio-political order. For instance, migrants (not just undocumented) are "excluded" by virtue of the very state regulation that is supposed to "protect" migrant workers. As Nyers (2003) argues, new technologies of control (detention) and strategies of exclusion (deportation) are increasingly using legal measures to "exclude" migrant workers. However, as De Genova (2002) has argued, the possibility of deportability itself becomes a characteristic feature of "illegality." By the same token, "detentionability," possibilities of other "quotidian forms of intimidation and harassment" (De Genova 2002, 438) such as police surveillance and extortions (commonly cited by my interlocutors), and the "containing" of migrants within socio-spatially isolated spaces become equally powerful "tools" to "regulate" migrant bodies.

Such "control" is intensified in countries such as Malaysia that have opened doors for foreign investment through its many industrial parks and free zones such as the Pork Klang Free Zone. Easterling (2014) describes a "zone" as an "extra-state" space - a "cocktail of enticements and legal exemptions that are sometimes mixed together with domestic civil law,

sometimes manipulated by business to create international law, and sometimes adopted by the nation in its entirety" (33). She describes zones as embodying what Palan (2003) has described as "'sovereign bifurcation,' where "states intentionally divide sovereign space into heavily and lightly regulated realms" (8 and 182, in Easterling 2014, 49). Such "hypocritical sovereignty" (Krasner 1999) allows state and non-state actors to employ one another as "proxy or camouflage" to juggle between many jurisdictions that may have contradictory allegiances and laws. This then allows for state and non-state actors to selectively exhibit "regional cultural ethos, national pride or global ambition" (Easterling 2014, 49). The zone, for Easterling, is a "quintessential example of a state of exception" (53) that wishes lawlessness even though it differs from traditional usages of "exception" that have been limited to a nation. As such, the "matrix of exceptions" in zones through state and non-state jurisdictions – produce much more complex forms of exception.

The "tools of exclusion" that are operative in the everyday lives of migrant workers are evident in the various compensatory strategies they use to evade such control, which has, in turn, produced a "practical, materially consequential, and deeply interiorized mode of being" (Peutz and De Genova 2010: 14). As such, I argue that migrant workers' bare lives do not foreclose possibilities of negotiating with the structures that produce "bareness." While there can be confrontational or subtle forms of oppositional migrant politics that seek varying extents and temporalities of redress, migrants also seek other forms of belonging that I would hesitate to label as "resistance" insofar as it translates to an oppositional orientation towards relations and structures of power. The preoccupation with "resistance" in its spectacular or everyday forms forecloses possibilities of locating agency in and through other realms that may arise in response to oppressive logics of "inclusion and exclusion." It can also prevent us from understanding how power operates in more deceptive and circuitous ways.

It is in this context that I recuperate Agamben's (1998) concept of "bare life" characterized by interstitiality rather than as an oppositional status to "political life" that has commonly been associated in migration literature with "legality, rights, and citizenship" (Lee 2010, 63). Negotiating the logics that produce "bare life" does not necessarily entail oppositional migrant politics involving either ostentatious or everyday forms of resistance. However, such "negotiations" often reproduce the very conditions of "bare life." As such, it becomes even more urgent to look at the often circuitous ways in which migrants attempt to offset conditions of "bare life." One central resource that migrant men can draw upon to displace "bareness" is their gendered agency as *men*. This is where the literature on gender and migration focusing on masculinities and conceptualizations of multiple masculinities becomes relevant to my thesis.

2.2 Male Masculinities and Labor Migration

The thesis can be situated within a body of literature that attempts to understand how male migrants negotiate restrictive structures abroad by adopting strategic gendered practices. As Gidwani and Kalyanakrishnan (2003) claim, the academic curiosity to understand how "migrants apprehend, negotiate, and transform the social structures that impinge on their lives," is increasingly gaining traction, where migrants are viewed as belonging to a "traveling culture" constantly negotiating "shifting frames of reference, always facing new possibilities and constraints" (193). While the thesis is aligned with this trend, it does so in the specific context of Nepali male migrants in Malaysia, Asia's "global factory" (Chang 2009).

The question of how migrants' negotiations relate to the re-configuration and reproduction of masculinities abroad is a central theme surrounding recent work on gender and labor migration. While gender has featured prominently in many studies on low-wage

labor migration, this literature has been dominated by studies highlighting the vulnerabilities of female migrants. Although this body of work is important in its own right, there is relatively little interest in understanding the particular ways in which male migrants subjectivities are also gendered. It is only recently that some scholars have attempted to address this gap by analyzing male migrants as gendered subjects, with only a handful of them analyzing masculinities in relation to hierarchical gender relations and feminist theory.

More specifically, this thesis borrows from and contributes to the existing studies of male labor migration where many migrants work in relatively low-status, low-paying, often "feminized" precarious jobs. Perhaps one of the foremost studies to analyze male labor migration in relation to masculinities and market-based social relations is by Osella and Osella (2000). Since then, there has been a growing body of scholarship foregrounding how men's aspirations to attain successful manhood can be tied to imaginaries of global modernity. For instance, Ahmad (2008) points to the romantic mystique surrounding "illegal" labor migration of young Pakistani men. He argues that migration is not always an economic household imperative but can also be heavily influenced by youthful desires rooted in local dominant masculine ideologies that sanction worldly pursuits of travel, risk-taking and adventure; the embrace of global consumerist cultures; and sexual transgression. Using the concept of "relative deprivation," Ahmad underscores how life abroad becomes constructed as more desirable to men who remain behind feeling inadequately masculine. Migration, thus, becomes an important marker of success and an end or a commodity in itself.

In the context of Nepal, migration has rarely been analyzed in relation to masculinities. So far, there has only been one study that has specifically attempted to understand male migration along these lines. Sharma (2014) looks at labor migration of young men from the western hills of Nepal to India. Citing Pigg's (1992) work, he argues that

the development discourse's spatialized construction of rural and urban in terms of temporal linearity has constructed India as more "modern." Sharma argues that this trend of migration can also be understood as a "rite of passage" and a "social requirement" motivated by gendered ideas of breadwinning; independence; adventure; and consumption abroad (359). Such studies have proven useful in situating masculinities within the process of male migration and tracing continuities or discontinuities abroad. This thesis builds on this existing literature by focusing specifically on migrants' negotiations abroad.

More recent studies highlight migrants' engagement in "strategic and fluid masculinities" abroad (Ye 2014; McKay 2011; McDowell, Batnitzky and Dyer 2008; Broughton 2008; Datta et al. 2009; Ahmad 2008 and Pease 2006). These studies discuss how masculine notions of breadwinning, non-work subjectivities, and re-valorization of work facilitate the re-configuration of perceived power relations and reproduction of masculinities in particular contexts.

One of the ways in which notions of breadwinning become central in negotiating dis-empowerment abroad is through the practice of separating "home" from "abroad." Herbert (2008) finds some male migrants in the UK attempting to "reclaim and reconcile a masculine identity" within the home in order to "restore a dominant position" which they felt had been displaced at the workplace (153). Similarly, Mckay's (2011) study among Filipino seafarers underscores male migrants' "double masculine consciousness", where their future validation as successful migrants by their families and communities enables endurance. While the idea of short-term suffering for "delayed gratification" (Mckay 2011, 7) may not be new, understanding the phenomenon in terms of masculine ideals of providership and adventure can bring forth novel insights. The notion of "save there, eat here" (Watkins 2003) is important to analyze not just in terms of their roles as migrants but also as consumers. The

need to balance both responsibilities to "provide" and desires for travel and adventure has been highlighted by Osella and Osella (2000) and Sharma (2014), among others.

An analysis of migrants' non-work subject positions as consumers provides new ways of understanding migration. Mills (1997) argues that the consumption of both material goods and images facilitates the negotiation of subordinate positions and the construction of "socially satisfying and valued identities" (41). Sharma (2014) builds on Mill's analysis to argue that Nepali male migrants attempt to achieve a desirable kind of manhood by consuming material goods and marketed images abroad (359). Similarly, studies on South Asian migrants in the Gulf states (Bruslé 2012b, Gardner 2012) foreground the importance of migrants' consumerist participation in constructing a modern self-image. These studies also discuss how their projection of a sanitized image of life abroad masks difficulties abroad. That migrants rarely divulge details of their employment is another issue that has been discussed by Osella and Osella (2006) and Ye (2014).

The centrality of non-work subject positions in offsetting disempowerment at work has been observed in studies related to male labor migration and working class men. For instance, Kimmel (1996) finds working class men in the United States dealing with the loss of autonomy at work by engaging in sports, risk-taking and other leisure activities to regain their masculine status. Similarly, Johnston and Mclvor (2007), in their study on working class men in Glasgow, mark homosocial spaces of the pub and football ground as domains where masculinity becomes produced, thus allowing for a re-validation of masculine identities (16). Thus, one of the ways in which non-work subjectivities become important is within peer groups in different non-work settings.

Another major theme surrounding male labor migration is the validation of migrants' status as "labor migrants" or workers, which is often achieved through gendered and

racialized re-interpretations of work. McKay (2011) finds migrants re-interpreting 3D (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) work "into heroic exercise[s] of manly confrontation" (Willis 1997, 150). Similarly, Herbert (2008) argues that the narrative of "heroic men" who "survived against the harsh working conditions" allows for a reassertion of masculine identity and restoration of value to their work. She also draws attention to the racialized nature of such valorization, where "hard work" becomes constructed as a defining characteristic of all South Asians (152). Similarly, Datta et al. 2008; Herbert 2008 and McKay 2011 have also claimed that migrants elevate their status by racializing and gendering the national Other, where for instance, non-South Asians, are seen as more "meek" or "feminine."

2.2.1 Theorizing Masculinities

I draw upon the aforementioned three themes in the thesis: the centrality of providership, non-work subject positions including consumerism, and the seemingly contradictory valorization of one's status as a worker. These three aspects of "masculine belonging" validate theorizations of masculinities that have critiqued Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity for its hierarchy and rigidity. Demetriou (2001) introduces the idea of "dialectic pragmatism" in which subordinate and hegemonic masculinities are dialectically, rather than hierarchically or oppositionally, related. While this may allow for constant reconfigurations and the emergence of new hybrid forms, such gendered practices can nonetheless maintain patriarchal relations. At the same time, while Demetriou argues that ''hegemonic masculinity is not a purely white or heterosexual configuration of practice but a "hybrid bloc" that unites practices from diverse masculinities to ensure the reproduction of patriarchy,'' (2001, 337) it still subscribes to an idea of hegemonic masculinity. The process of hybridization that takes place in the "hegemonic masculine bloc" such as the growing cultural prominence of "gay masculinities" in Western societies still reflects *a* reconfigured and hybridized yet exclusive "hegemonic masculinity"

and not multiple dominant masculinities. A more useful concept for this thesis is Coles' (2009) "field of masculinity" that seeks to show how men can exhibit dominant masculinities despite being seen as subordinate to a cultural ideal. Coles argues that many men are able to comfortably adopt dominant masculinities in their everyday lives despite their inability to attain a hegemonic ideal. As such, Coles provides a more persuasive and applicable theoretical model for this thesis. By incorporating Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field into Connell's hegemonic masculinity, Coles argues that the existence of sub-fields within a larger "field of masculinity" allow for the possibility of multiple dominant masculinities to co-exist at any given time (31). The concept of "field of masculinity" thus allows for possibilities of negotiations that resist the categorization of male migrants as overdetermined subordinate subjects.

The concepts of "bare life" and "field of masculinity" thus become important in understanding how structure and "agency" interact while also co-producing each other – a process that is key to understanding both hierarchical gender relations and structures of labor exploitation.

3 Becoming Providers

"*But in numerous contexts these men made it abundantly clear that obedience, along with the acceptance of hardship and danger, are explicable in terms of obligations towards kin and family: the compelling need to provide support of the household. Ultimately, these are the paramount values for which they are willing, albeit reluctantly, to sacrifice everything*."

—Lionel Caplan, *Warrior Gentlemen*, 2009

As an attempt to re-imagine migrants' lives beyond singular depictions of indentured labor,[8] this chapter explores how male migrants draw upon notions of providership to negotiate their subordinate status abroad. The arguments presented here can be situated in the context of existing literature within gender and work that explores the centrality of paid work in men's lives and the construction of masculine identities in various contexts of work.[9] While the centrality of "breadwinning" in the construction of masculine subjectivities is well-known, interrogating migrants' notions of male providership offers new ways of looking at how they might make sense of their migrancy. In the context of singular accounts of labor exploitation in media, academic, and policy contexts, it is important to bring an analysis of male providership to bear on discussions of transnational labor migration.

While this chapter looks at male migrants in the context of their labor, it does so to the extent that they are not *just* disempowered and exploited workers. Rather, it calls for a shift in the frame of analysis whereby the ideological valuation rather than the specific content of work is taken into account, such that "work," in its association with the potential for providership, becomes an important affirmation of migrants' masculine selves. In this context, ideas of masculinity and male providership become key to understanding how male

[8] Vora (2013) has discussed how narratives of migration focusing on "human rights, coping strategies, remittances, or modern-day slavery effectively collapse[s] migrant lives into economic terms" while erasing the diverse modes of belonging through which migrants stake their claim to the city (11). While this thesis retains the usage of the word "migrant," it does so with the intent of destabilizing common evocations of the term where migrant realities become intelligible only through narratives of labor exploitation.

[9] As much as waged work is central to notions of male masculinity, the reverse is also true, where the site of work itself allows for constructions of work as a preserve of the male "masculine."

migrants negotiate the precarious conditions of the very work they derive their status as "providers" from.

The separation and connection between the sites of "home" (providership) and "abroad" (work) in migration is crucial to understanding how ideas of male providership are mobilized. Migration entails separation and the crossing of borders – physical, legal and psycho-social. However, these two sites are not bounded and impermeable; they allow for leakages and connections. As McKay (2013) points out, male migrants are in a position to instrumentalize their simultaneous separation and connection by anchoring themselves within the sphere of the "home" through ideas of providership that depend on their status "abroad" as "workers." Similarly, "separation" allows migrants to selectively omit particular aspects of their lives abroad such that the disempowerment faced in one sphere (abroad) does not necessarily threaten the overall sense of self-worth that men can potentially gain from the other sphere (home) as "providers." As such, the physical separation constructs a "unique space for the renegotiation and production of flexible and strategic masculinities" through which male migrants might deal with low-status and/or low-wage work (Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2009, 1278).

3.1 Home as a Contested Site of Power

The sphere of the "home" in its association with male providership responsibilities is not necessarily a site of guaranteed strength, respect or authority for male migrants abroad. However, despite migrants' varying obligations depending on their socio-economic backgrounds and ability to provide, "home" represents a constant reminder of filial responsibilities. While the physical distance involved in migration enables social distance, new communication technologies are increasingly making it difficult to remain socially isolated from friends and family at home and abroad. The aim of this chapter is not so much

to discuss whether the "home" represents a site of empowerment or constraint. Rather, the chapter explores a related but slightly different question: How central are *ideas of male providership* to migrants' sense of self-worth and what can that tell us about how they deal with their disempowerment abroad? For instance, how do migrants talk about providership? How is this talk *gendered*? Do all migrants consider remitting important despite their different abilities? How important is this awareness to their overall sense of self as *men*? To what extent are men affected by their ability or inability to "provide"?

This chapter thus engages with the contradictory realities of male migrants for whom providership can simultaneously be a constant source of stress as well as an effective validation of their masculine status and self-worth as "providers."

3.2 Articulating Male Providership

The uninterrupted trend of male foreign employment from Nepal, standing in contrast to the frequently interrupted flow of female foreign employment, can be better understood in the context of historically constituted notions of male providership and protection. While female migrants are frequently stigmatized as victims of sexual abuse or censured for abandoning their roles as mothers, wives or daughters, male migrants are valorized as sacrificial husbands and breadwinners. Thus, male and female migration can be respectively seen as affirming and threatening traditional divisions of labor and the associated privileges and power relations. As in Pribilsky's (2012) study of male migrants in Ecuador, it is rare to have an "amplified discussion" during informal conversations on male providership and migration beyond the expected narratives of "feeding the family or children." In the context of increasing labor migration from and within Nepal, while narratives of what a "good mother should be like" are ubiquitous, what constitutes a "good father" remains a largely unquestioned and unspoken practice that "goes without saying." In this context, fatherhood

and motherhood can be understood as doxa and heterodoxy, to borrow Pribilsky's (2012) application of Bourdieu's terms (1979: 13). What is left unsaid in public conversation is not necessarily a sign of its absence or insignificance. The importance of male providership and what it entails is seen as self-evident given to many Nepalis. For instance, cheerful advertisements in Kathmandu's international airport of hardworking husbands abroad sending remittances or gifts to wives back home reflect the extent to which notions of male providership and sacrifice through migration have become ingrained in everyday images and discourse. The narratives of hardship and sacrifice pervasive in these images also point to the deeply normalized understandings of labor migration as being a manly undertaking that naturally entails hardship and sacrifice. In this context, the sense of masculine fulfillment that economic migration makes possible can be seen as an important means for individual migrant men to negotiate their subordinate status abroad.

To understand the salience of ideas of male providership despite the silence surrounding it requires an exploration of how assumptions of male providership are deeply embedded and naturalized in the everyday interactions and practices of migrants. Pribilsky (2012) argues that "tracking 'transnational fatherhood' requires an exploration of a host of quotidian micro-practices and experiences of daily life that ultimately constitute meaningful situations in which migrants confront identities as 'men in their role as *men*', including roles as husbands and fathers" (Gutmann 1997). While the analysis of everyday practices is an important way to understand how masculinities get constructed around ideas of providership, such an undertaking demands greater access to migrants' lives and spaces over a long period of time. Given the methodological limitations to conduct a full-fledged ethnographic study, I undertook a close and careful analysis of the findings that I had collected in my conversations with migrants in various public and private spaces.

During my fieldwork, I observed the notion of providership at work in the construction of dominant masculinities in relation to women and other men. While migrant men's positioning of themselves as "providers" in relation to women reveals ways in which hierarchical gender relations are maintained, migrant men also distinguish themselves from other men as "better providers." These two processes reveal how male migrants articulated their male responsibilities of providership as *men* and made sense of their work abroad as dignified and worthwhile.

If male migrants draw upon notions of "good providership" to elevate their masculine status over competing masculinities, then, that process can be seen as both reflecting the legitimacy and further legitimizing notions of male providership and the "nature" of men's and women's "places." As such, this section attempts to look at the micro-relations between men and women in particular social settings, which, perhaps, can offer a more grounded approach to understand how masculinities emerge through and do not pre-exist outside of specific relations and contexts.

3.2.1 *Bigreko* Women and Sacrificial Men

When asked what they thought of women who go abroad to work, most men that I spoke to opposed the idea but for different reasons. The following is a conversation that took place with a group of eight migrants (20-30 years old) working in a logistics and storage company:

What do you think about women going abroad to work?

A 23-year old man immediately responds.

It is bad for women to go abroad.

Why?

An older man who is married with children replies.

> I feel that it's bad because if we are treated like animals here…then the way *ladies* are viewed here is much worse and they are under more pressure. If we as men are not secure, how can they be?
>
> *Another man continues.*
>
> I wouldn't say that it's bad for everyone but many women have been forced to even sell their bodies. What can we do? This is how it is. It is better in top-level jobs for women who are educated than for women who go to work in houses in Gulf countries... The Sri Lankan women here live with Sri Lankan men. They say, "He's my husband" but then that woman will have another husband in Sri Lanka.

While the conversation above may be rooted in good intentions (safety), all three migrants echo commonly heard associations of female migration for domestic work as being "bad" in its association with *bigreko* women. *Bigreko* literally translates to "damaged/ruined" and in the context of migration, refers specifically to female migrant domestic workers (MDWs) who are seen as having had sexual relationships during their time abroad. As such, in this context, where MDWs are often stigmatized as sexually unchaste and loose, migrant men see themselves as men who need to "protect" their wives and sisters from becoming *bigreko* by not just limiting their mobility but also by removing the need for them to migrate in the first place, by being good sacrificial providers. The protection of women's sexual reputation, then, can also be read as an attempt to avoid humiliation and protect one's own reputation as able protectors and providers; brothers and husbands. This becomes even more urgent as Nepali women are increasingly taking up employment as (domestic) workers either abroad or within Nepal, creating greater insecurity among their male counterparts. Such comments reveal the ways in which traditional divisions of labor continue to be justified through differential moral standards of what good men or women should do. Furthermore, they also reveal the extent to which the relative independence of female migrant workers poses a threat to (male) familial authority at home, animating cultural anxieties and creating discomfort among family members who may no longer have control over women who migrate.

Another category of *bigreko* women that figures in conversations is that of "wayward wives" in Nepal, through whom notions of male martyrdom and providership become reinforced. This subject was frequently brought up when I asked about some of the common problems male migrants face abroad. A Nepali pastor, who had initially entered Malaysia as a worker in a pipe-making company and had been in Malaysia for 10 years, told me an elaborate story of a man who stabbed himself after he found out that his wife had eloped with another man. Another younger migrant working in an electronic company, described wives as the "biggest source of tension for men abroad" and asked, "Why do wives go out with other men while their husbands are abroad to feed their families?" This was a commonly expressed sentiment among the migrants I spoke to and is also reflective of the conservative discourse in Nepal where female migrants are often seen as having abandoned their duties as "good" mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law. At the same time, such pervasive demonization is also what adds moral force to their status as male providers and saintly husbands.

Similarly, locally printed Nepali newspapers in Kuala Lumpur that publish poems by migrants provide space for migrants to express their heartbreak and anger while allowing others to sympathize with them. Central to these narratives is the image of the sacrificial husbands who are betrayed by ungrateful and unfaithful wives. While marital break-ups are undeniably difficult for the person who is "left behind," the sympathy for the sacrificial husband "toiling hard abroad" has gone to the extent of justifying violence against women in media representations. For instance, an article published in a major daily described the story of a migrant who had killed his wife after he found out about her extramarital affair (Rai 2014). The newspaper describes how "he and his family were already aware of her wanton ways" and had "long been admonishing [her][10]to mend her ways" but her "defiance" drove her husband to "eventually lose his temper" and "commit a crime that he had never

[10] Name removed

imagined." He is quoted saying, "I had never even thought that my wife would have an extra-marital affair knowing that I had been toiling hard in a foreign land for her and my children." The article describes this as a "representative case" and a "common feature in families of migrant workers who return home after toiling hard for years in a foreign land."

As such, everyday talk and widespread media coverage of "wayward" wives and "sacrificial" husbands ironically also provides strong moral validation of male migrants' status as heroic providers. For instance, in the aforementioned article, the reporter interviews a Deputy Superintendent of Police who says, "…they have complete liberty as there is no one to discourage them from baser human temptations…Sadly, it is the children who bear the brunt after their parents part ways." While the wives are seen as "bad mothers" for causing marital break-up, the comment refers to the husbands' helplessness in "keeping their women in place" while they are away. The policeman's confident reference to women's "complete liberty" as the source of "baser temptations" is also illustrative of the extent to which the roles of migrant husbands as rightful "keepers" or "regulators" of women's mobility and sexuality is socially sanctioned.

Similarly, a conversation that I had with a group of migrants[11] in Klang illustrates how the narrative of wayward wives is sustained in the contemporary context of (women's) increasing access to mobile technologies:

> Before we had mobile phones, we didn't have the problem of *chelibeti bigriney* (girls and women becoming damaged/wayward)…women didn't go astray…there are those who make good use of it…they're in their own place…but if you just hang on the mobile…and do useless stuff…call random people…that's the reason so many girls are going astray and bad these days.
>
> *Why only women? Don't men go astray too?*
>
> Without women's sweet talk…men won't go astray.

[11] Group mentioned above consisting of eight migrants working in a storage company.

It's like this…if women are already *bigreko,* men are also going to be influenced and become *bigreko*!

(Everybody claps)

The mobile phone, here, is seen as a key facilitator of women's transgression of newly emerging moral boundaries between permissible "purposive talk" and immoral "random talk." Since a mobile phone becomes a technology that allows women greater access to a wider social network, it allows women to inhabit a "public" space while staying within private spaces. Additionally, for many women living as daughters-in-law away from their natal homes and friends, mobile phones can often provide quiet and private moments of self-reflection, that also allow women to engage in acts of mobile-mediated mutual care beyond the private spaces of their conjugal homes. As Doron (2012) has suggested, women's usage of mobile phones, while allowing greater vigilance over their mobility in the name of safety, also represents a form of documentation of everyday life away from the "gaze and instruction of family." Women who use mobile phones are seen as undermining the authority of the family and as going astray from their "place" in the family. As Wilson (1991, 6) has argued, a "public woman" has often been seen "as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation." Thus women's mobile phone usage becomes considered "virtuous" or "appropriate" insofar as it remains instrumental, rational, and purposive rather than self-indulgent and pleasure-seeking. This relates to existing studies on how the use of mobile phones is disturbing existing cultural boundaries of "inside/outside" spaces (Dickey 2000) and "breach[ing] the home boundary by facilitating romantic relationships" (Donner et al. 2008, 332). At the same time, mobile phones also allow migrant men to "extend this innermost boundary…to carry a piece of home with them when they leave the house" (ibid. 332), which, in turn, allows men a chance to "regulate" women's actions from afar and retain

their overall male authority in the sphere of the home.

In these discussions of female migrants and migrants' wives, migrants are also quick to share stories of other male migrants. In doing so, they selectively reaffirm their status as hardworking providers while removing themselves from the category of migrant men who may be devalorized and feminized as "victims", "inadequate providers" or "meek" husbands. In this context, where migrants talk about the *bigreko* wives or sisters of other migrant men to uphold their status as good providers, migrant masculinities are constructed in relation to other masculinities.

3.2.2 Male Providership and Mature Spending

As a female Nepali student in Malaysia who was often treated as a "sister" (older or younger) or from a similar age-group, I often found it difficult to ask direct questions about providership, knowing that this often bordered on questioning their ability to provide. Knowing their financial constraints, it was also not always appropriate to ask questions about remittances and gifts. The conversations that I cite below should be situated within this researcher-interlocutor dynamic, where some accounts of remittances and gifts, in particular, might be slightly exaggerated. Nonetheless, most migrants expressed discontent with their jobs and incomes and described their remittance-sending frequency and amount as being very modest. Regardless of whether migrant men were actually able or even willing to "provide," the themes that emerge in this chapter speak to the overall moral elevation of male providership and attest to how migrants drew legitimacy from this "resource" as migrant workers.

Many of my conversations with male migrants revolved around migrants' spending habits and money management. Men tended to talk up how they spent and managed their money in relation to other men, clearly distinguishing themselves as mature providers. Most

noticeable were the tensions between spending and saving, where migrants had to constantly project themselves as frugal but not miserly; generous but not self-indulgent. When I asked migrants how often they went out, many of them would state that besides the first few trips to Kuala Lumpur, Klang bus station or Port Klang in the early days, such visits were rare. While most of them spoke of going in a group to send money home, some of them described going to eat at Nepali restaurants. Karan, a 30-year old father of two, described how he had been to Klang bus station only five times in the past two years and that one needs to "control" such spending:

> When you're abroad, there are so many things you can spend your money on. There are many distractions but you have to be able to control yourself…be it by talking to friends, using Facebook…or other ways to *timepass*.

While the emphasis on frugality may have been partly inspired by the need to appear as responsible men in front of me, most of my conversations were in groups and there seemed to be a consensus that frugality was considered morally good. At the same time, migrants also highlighted certain spending as necessary and "okay." As will be further elaborated in the following chapter, migrants' desire to appear "modern" through consumption practices competes with the traditional role of the male provider that largely depends upon frugality, saving and remitting. In the context of this double bind, male migrants engage in "responsible spending" which includes occasionally going to Nepali restaurants with friends or engaging in one-time investments on phones or gifts for family members. Such spending allows men to participate in seemingly competing masculinities without much stigma of being either wasteful or greedy.

During interviews and informal conversations in Nepali restaurants in Klang, I observed how the gendered dynamics within such restaurants could also explain their allure, given that they were expensive compared to local restaurants. While such restaurants represent a strong symbolic space that allows one to claim belonging to a larger Nepali

migrant community, they also allow for the simulation of gendered relations that might exist in their own homes during meal times, where typically a female family member serves food and asks the man if he needs second-helpings. The restaurant experience for many Nepali migrant men thus seemed to provide them with the closest experience they could have abroad of being "served food" just like at home. In addition, such restaurants can also replicate the dynamics of restaurants in Nepal characterized by loud Nepali music, Nepali waitresses serving food and drinks, and men playing pool and engaging in publicly competitive behavior (see figure 3 and 4).

I soon realized that they would never allow me to pay for their food nor my own. Whether it was out of male pride or brotherly affinity, no matter how many times I tried through different strategies, they would almost never allow me to pay. As such, micro-practices such as serving food and paying for food can be seen through notions of male providership and production (through income) and female reproduction (through food). They reveal the ways in which particular gendered subjectivities are reproduced abroad and how this process is facilitated by the growth of migrant enclaves or ethnic hubs. The validation of migrants' masculine selves within the confines of such restaurants can also explain why such spending on "*just* Nepali food such as *momos* and *dal bhat*", as one migrant stated, can be seen as a sign of maturity compared to other "shameless" men who spend their money on alcohol and women or "wasteful" men who engage in unwise and reckless spending on things like the lottery.

In this context, narratives of "irresponsible" men also reflect ways in which migrants articulate a more "mature" masculine self-identity as "better providers." The following section attempts to highlight how migrant subject positions also become formed through their negation of "immaturity" largely associated with self-indulgent spending of young migrant

men and illicit relationships of mostly older migrants with non-Nepali women.

At the same time, however, I also observed a certain tendency to excuse such "irresponsible" behavior through the gendered framing of men as naturally prone to youthful hedonism and the sexual enticement of women. As such, while denigrating and excusing the "immaturity" of some migrant men, they also projected themselves as having overcome and risen above these temptations as all good men and providers should.

3.2.3 *Khattam*[12] Men as Failed Providers

The standards of "good" providership can be seen as constantly being maintained and regulated through a process of collective moral policing. As mentioned above, one way in which migrant men constructed their sense of masculine self was in relation to other migrants who were portrayed as "wasteful" men as "failed" providers. Tirthaman, a 30-year old migrant who had been working in Malaysia for eight years reflected on how the massive influx of young male migrants has created a culture of irresponsible and self-indulgent spending in Malaysia:

> In the past, you would only rarely meet one or two Nepalis…it would be like meeting family. Nowadays, there are too many people and they fight with each other…some are lying drunk on the streets…mostly on weekends and public holidays, they don't fear parental disapproval here…and a lot of the young men get into bad company. Before I got married, I also used to walk like these guys, wearing fashionable clothes, boots, dying my hair and making it go straight up. I came to this place today only to talk to you, otherwise I rarely go out.

At the same time, unmarried men like Dharam echoed a similar sentiment. When we were talking in a restaurant below one of the migrants' living quarters, I observed many young men with yellow hard-hats and safety vests going in and out of the building, returning

[12] The word, *Khattam* generally denotes a complete wipeout of something that becomes seen as worthless. As an adjective, it is used to describe a person who is seen as a worthless good-for-nothing. As a verb, it can be used to describe an act of complete consumption where to do *khattam* is to thoroughly consume or finish something, almost destructively.

from or going to work. During our conversation, at one point, I saw some pieces of paper fly out of the window. After they fell to the ground, I realized those were playing cards. I asked Dharam about this and he replied saying:

> They stay inside and play cards all night, drink and fight. Nepalis are number one *khattam* (bad or useless)! Malaysia is a free country and Nepalis walk around drunk without shame or fear, fight and kill each other. This is why so many Nepalis die abroad. They are mostly unmarried…Us, we've already gone past our teenage years. Young guys are hot-blooded and do stupid things…Those who just come here neither have wives nor care much about their families. Even I was like that before but those days are gone now. I'm 24 now and I have to think of the days ahead.

Both Tirthaman (married with children) and Dharam (unmarried and without children) engage in constructing a mature masculine self-image based on the selective negation of "immature" masculinities associated with youth and irresponsible spending. At the same time, both Tirthaman and Dharam also seem to resort to a generational logic of excusing irresponsibility as a natural part of youthful masculine hedonism. As another migrant described it, older migrants sometimes also assume a kind of parental responsibility for migrants who are still in their teens:

> When we go to restaurants, we see really small brothers drinking…sometimes, even in the morning. And the *didis* (sisters) in the restaurants also give them as much as they want. But we talked to the *didis* and told them not to only think of money. They were very young brothers drinking hard drinks.

Maturity can be seen as following a temporal logic, whereby younger "irresponsible" men are seen as going through a natural stage in life, which they will eventually grow out of as they grow older. Ironically, as Dharam describes below, many migrants attribute their newfound maturity to their relatively older age, which corresponds to their accumulated experiences of hardship abroad. Self-realizations of the importance of money, frugal spending, hard work and familial responsibility can be seen as having been enabled by the very conditions of exploitation abroad. Dharam had paid about 1400 Euros to the Nepali agent who promised a job at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Upon reaching Malaysia,

however, he was taken to Kajang for a few weeks before he was brought to Westport. Here, he worked for a few months at a flour mill after which he was given work as a dockworker:

> My first few months here were depressing. I had no job and income. But now it's okay. I've learnt the value of money…how it takes hard work…I've learnt what life is after experiencing life myself, I realize I was very wasteful in Nepal. I used to consider my relatives abroad very stingy because they would only send like 10,000 rupees as gifts. Now I realize the value of money.

Such narratives, however, also need to be situated within the context of its audience consisting of other male migrants and myself, a Nepali female researcher from a similar age group and sometimes, the same ethnicity. When some migrants such as Dharam talked about their exploitative conditions, I observed their need to simultaneously compensate for the possible shame they may have experienced in front of me or other migrant men by framing their "suffering" as "opportunities" that taught them life lessons on the "value of money" and perseverance.

As mentioned above, migrants having relationships with non-Nepali women were also often denigrated as being "irresponsible." A particular one-on-one conversation with Tirthaman in a public space at Klang bus station is most relevant here. In the midday sun, being wary of other male migrant workers sitting next to us underneath a Frangipani tree (See figure. 6), Tirthaman began speaking in a barely audible voice. He first looked around and admitted that it was difficult for him to talk about such issues with me, as a "sister" and a Gurung. Maintaining his whispered tone, he described how there are many Nepali men who have become *bigreko* through either affairs or marriage with women in Malaysia despite having their own wives and families in Nepal. As a husband and a father himself, Tirthaman denigrated such men for having deserted their wives and children. Dharam similarly criticized "uncaring" men who have forsaken their filial duties:

> There are shameless people who have been here for a long time and learnt the language and go around with Malays and Vietnamese women. They don't think about anything and have forgotten their families…some of them are even married and have forgotten about their wives and children.

While such men were vilified for being unfaithful husbands, uncaring fathers, and unsuccessful providers; in general, such narratives co-existed with those of impressionable men being duped by scheming female temptresses. Migrants I spoke with also seemed to naturalize such acts as stemming from men's natural disposition to succumb to women's seduction. When I asked them about their encounters with women, they would often refer to local Malay women or female migrants from Vietnam or Indonesia as salacious aggressors and retell events that had allegedly occurred in different parts of Malaysia – Penang, Johor Baru, Klang and Kuala Lumpur.

A Nepali pastor, who commands great respect among many Nepalis in Klang, narrated a story of a Vietnamese woman who was engaged in a business of selling her own babies to local Chinese families. The babies were apparently conceived with impressionable Bangladeshi and Nepali migrants who were easy targets since they would also provide her with food and shelter. He told us how she was finally caught while trying to give birth to the sixth baby. Similarly, 24- year old Dharam, the dockworker, described his own story of being lost in KLCC when a young woman grabbed his hand and took him away to a corner. He narrated the incident in great detail, with a hint of pride, and described how his brother later warned him, "It's like this in Malaysia. Women make you disappear!" He concluded the story by stating how "the guys" keep teasing him to this day and "laugh about it." Similarly, in a group conversation with five 20-something year olds in a Nepali restaurant, one young man stated:

> You know, everything is free in Malaysia...what can I say now? Some people, who've stayed for 4 or 5 years haven't even been able to repay their loans…some get married

> here…its uncomfortable to talk to you *didi* (older sister) about these things…it is also very free for things related to girls…you get called by girls when you're walking in the streets…These girls aren't good girls for sure…They are obviously ill-intentioned…Its not love…its like love for one-hour…They're usually Indon, *Filipini,* Vietnamese…

The young man attributes the difficulties of becoming a dignified man in Malaysia to the "freedom" in Malaysia that allows "free" women to intercept the paths of otherwise hard-working honest good men. Such men are depicted as being helpless to the lures of predatory foreign women, which potentially explains why some Nepali men "haven't even been able to repay their loans." As such, local Malay women and other female migrants become easy scapegoats for male migrants to justify their inability to be good providers and husbands.

These stories reveal the widespread acceptance of philandering as a "natural" masculine inclination among young migrants even while the migrants I spoke to completely disassociated themselves from such men and elevated their status as faithful husbands and responsible providers despite all sorts of temptations.

As such, looking at the everyday lives of male migrants in Klang allows one to look at the various scales (transnational and translocal) in which migrants constantly negotiate various forms of power relations. Such negotiations can be seen through the construction of masculinities that emerge in relation to other men and women and center on their status as male providers.

3.3 "Save There, Eat Here"[13]

The centrality of providership in regaining a sense of masculine respectability abroad can also be observed in migrant narratives that detail the life they envision upon return to Nepal. Many migrants talked about building a house or buying whatever things their children

[13]Watkins 2003

asked for. The ability to display one's abilities as a provider in front of family, children and the community seemed to be a key motivating force for many migrants. A young 22-year old migrant who had previously worked as a transmission line worker in Himachal Pradesh, India, for four years, stated how "nothing was going to happen by staying in the village ploughing the land (*halo jotney*)" suggesting the salience of not just the economic imperative to migrate but also the aspirational valuation of paid-work as a means of upward mobility, represented by the construction of a new house for the family, or a mobile phone for the wife.

The importance of returning as successful providers is also reflected in a comment made by a Nepali shop-keeper in Northport when I asked him why they were selling trekking boots and jackets and blankets in a place as hot as Malaysia:

> When returning to Nepal, they also want to wear good Nepali clothes and shoes. Things that are considered stylish in Nepal like Goretex half jackets, UK boots, safety shoes, leather jackets, and gold watches. Also, foreign-made make-up kits, UK sweaters, *lungis* from Singapore, Indonesia. If anyone has to go to Nepal, they just come to our shop!

The popularity of such shops in Northport, Port Klang and Klang bus station reflects the importance for migrants to be seen as successful providers upon return (see figure 7). While migrants claimed to prioritize frugality abroad, the opposite seemed to be true at home. As 31-year old Mohit who had previously worked in Qatar and Bahrain stated:

> In Nepal, you tend to spend more. When you buy meat, you always buy a little more than you need. For your wife too, you feel like buying her nice clothes. If my child asks for something, I feel like giving something to my child. They have more hope because I'm someone who has returned from abroad.

The physical separation that migration entails spares migrants from the divulgence of their lowly work status. As such, migrants are in a position to split the "moment and site of wealth accumulation from its moment of consumption" (Osella and Osella 2006, 83) thus allowing, to an extent, the concealment and displacement of current disempowerment to their future validation as providers. In this context, where the outcome (cash earned) becomes

foregrounded over the process or means of its accumulation (work), migrants such as Mohit are able to avoid possible shame and re-gain self-worth as providers upon return. In addition to memories, hopes and desires also play a part. McKay (2011) describes this as "delayed gratification" whereby migrants draw upon future validation as successful providers as a means to cope with current discrimination. In the quote below, 22-year Asmit reveals the centrality of filial piety in motivating migrants to work and repeat migration despite neither wanting to work nor re-migrate:

> I don't really plan on returning to Malaysia but we'll see. The situation here is not good…there is even danger when you go out to save money. Even at work, they shout at you a lot. But you also want to stay here when you know that you can earn some money…everybody has dreams. Since you're a son, people have expectations. You know, maybe open up a business once you're in Nepal or buy a tractor…I probably can't buy a car right now…you'll probably have to stay for four five years if you want to buy a car…A tractor would cost 4,5 lakhs second hand…You can buy that with your savings and a little bit of loan. I'll probably have to go abroad a second time.

While male migrants do talk about being relatively more generous in their spending at home, such spending does not necessarily lead to the recurrence of conspicuous spending. Those migrants who had previously worked elsewhere in Malaysia or other countries described having spent whatever savings they had in the first few months. As such, who can be seen as a "successful provider" is also subjective and does not necessarily entail extravagant spending or long-term investments.

Similarly, while fathers described the frequent and long absence from the home as a worthwhile sacrifice, they also expressed how they valued the little time they spent with their children at home. In this context, men's efforts to make up for their absence and become loving fathers necessitate the assumption of traditionally female responsibilities. This is how one 31-year old Mohit who had previously worked in Qatar and Bahrain described his experience as a father:

> My daughter was about 20 months old when I returned to Nepal and from the first day that I got there, she would always be with me and I would do everything for her. She would sleep with me…I had to bathe her and she wouldn't let anyone touch my clothes. If I gave mummy some money, she would take it back and give it to me. That is the kind of daughter I have.

While such care-work can be seen as transgressive, it is still temporary and done in a context where the man's overall masculine status as a returnee male migrant and a good provider may be secure.

Migrants' future validation as caring fathers and providers also unfolds in plans of relocation from villages to towns. While building a new house is a goal realized by very few, it is nevertheless increasingly becoming an ideal that many migrants aspire for and perhaps one of the most important markers of successful providership. Tirthaman's quote below illustrates how the "home measure[s] the masculinity" (Parreñas 2005, 70) of many Nepali migrant men.

30-year old Tirthaman stated having first entered Malaysia as an 18-year old by increasing his age by 4 years in order to migrate legally. His current and third job in Malaysia was doing electric wiring work at a switchgear company. In the 12-year period, he had gone back to Nepal twice, gotten married and become a father. His discontent with his status as a provider stemmed largely from his inability to relocate and build a house. Furthermore, like many other migrants, Tirthaman attributed his "inability" to his individual bad luck:

> Despite having undergone this much *dukkha* (hardship), I haven't been able to fulfill even 50% of my dreams. I had many dreams. I had thought, 'How much longer shall we live in the village? Perhaps I should also move to the cities like all the others? Whether it is by buying or building a house there, it is time to really offer my family a life of peace.' I thought of these things a lot. But I realized that you couldn't do these things because you can't always get jobs that you want. Some get lucky though…like my brother who got a job in a good company and now he has his own business in Nepal.
>
> The growing desire to "own" a private house away from the "village" "like all the

others" reflects changing notions of providership that are influenced by notions of development and modernity and the adoption of liberalization policies since the 1960s that has seen a shift from subsistence-farming based local economies to remittance-based economies. In this context, while migrant men's aspirations are shaped by the heightened importance of private residential spaces, modern education and availability of well-connected roads and market commodities, among others, they also face the contradictory imperative of maintaining filial piety, with parents who are often unwilling to relocate. Tirthaman's quote below is illustrative of the challenges that migrant men confront in negotiating competing masculinities based on two dominant notions of providership:

> I talked about relocating to the city where there would be services and better schools for the children but my parents were reluctant. They said, "We are going to stay here son. We are not going to go anywhere. If you want to take the children, you can take them with you." And as you know how it is in our *Gurung jaat*, the youngest has the responsibility to take care of his parents.

Tirthaman's heightened responsibilities as the youngest son in a Gurung family becomes more important when seen through the historical context where many Gurung and Magar men migrated abroad to enlist in British and Indian armies. Tirthaman stated that his own father had served in the Indian army for 70 years and had also fought in Malaya as a young man. In this context, Tirthaman had to take into consideration his own father's "sacrifice" while weighing his decisions to relocate. As such, while delayed "gratification" is not always possible and is highly dependent on the compromised abilities of migrant men to earn and spend, the centrality of migrant men as husbands, fathers or sons is a crucial force in constructing a positive self-image as hardworking, sacrificial providers, which they draw upon to deal with their subordinate status abroad as vulnerable workers and non-citizen foreigners.

3.4 "Hardworking and Obedient" Workers as Good Providers

Another recurrent theme that emerged in my conversations were narratives of good providership that were associated with being "good workers," which, for many, translated to being industrious, obedient and resilient workers who saw temporary suffering abroad as a worthwhile sacrifice. When I asked Tirthaman how he would describe a "good man" abroad, he stated:

> A good man is someone who thinks about his home, takes care of his wife, his children, parents. And you should also be a good worker. Do whatever your boss tells you. This way, you have to be able to fulfill, to the extent possible, whatever dreams you have for your family. If you are someone who is always wandering around, you're never going to be anyone.

Tirthaman's description began with the usual responsibilities of "feeding the family and children" but also touched upon characteristics such as obedience ("do whatever your boss tell you"); frugality (not "always wandering around"); and sacrifice (to "fulfill whatever dreams you have for your family").

As such, in addition to frugality, men's abilities as a provider were also reflected in their sincerity as workers who were obedient and hardworking. Whenever I asked any migrant about their work, in general, most of them would begin by talking about "OT" (overtime). Since the stated salary (on paper) rarely matched the real payment that migrants received, the hourly real wage for most migrants was below minimum wage. In this context, "OT" is not seen so much as one's right to be paid for having to work extra hours, but more of a necessary condition for most migrants who want to earn a decent amount of money. As such, there seemed to be a general acceptance that migrants had to find "OT" jobs in order to have "good jobs." For instance, when I asked 22-year old Kamal, a newly married man, about his job he replied, "If it gives OT, then it's good. The more work, the better."

Similarly, migrants such as Tirthaman, who often have high-interest loans in Nepal,

can be seen as working their ways around work-related exploitation through narratives of hard-work and martyrdom: “We are workers after all. We are here to work and we shouldn’t waste our time.” Tirthaman was discussing his experience in the third job that he had taken up in Malaysia. Despite facing problems during the first two times he emigrated, he had arrived in Malaysia with the hope that this time things would be better. His “agent” had promised him a “company job” where migrants get paid directly through the company and not “agents” as in “contract jobs.” However, despite ending up with a “contract job” again, he seemed to make peace with the fact that he was at least getting good hours to compensate for the many deductions in salary by Malaysian “agents.” Tirthaman resorts to his status as a worker (“we are here to work”) to re-validate his status as a hard-working and sacrificial provider. As such, a good provider is seen as one who is able to work hard and long despite difficult conditions. In a separate group conversation, Mohit expressed similar sentiments of worthwhile sacrifice as a father:

> If by selling my labor, as one person, I can feed my family of five, why not? People have their own reasons in life. I have a specific goal, that I will endure *dukkha* (hardship and suffering) for my family. Of course, I miss my children. My daughter talked to me the first four months after I got here but now she doesn’t talk to me because she’s angry.

Even though comments such as Mohit’s might be commonplace, they still reflect the centrality of fatherhood or providership for male migrants abroad. The separation and connection of “home” and “abroad” are reflected in Mohit’s comment whereby his separation from “home” (and his child) is also what constitutes his connection with “home” and provides meaning to his status as a migrant worker/provider. This also relates to Herbert’s (2008) observation of how male migrants attempt to “reclaim and reconcile a masculine identity” within the home in order to “restore a dominant position” which they felt had been displaced at the workplace (153).

3.4.1 "Feel-good" Work Amidst Vulnerable Employment

Narratives that discuss hard work and obedience in the context of the "home" and male providership also need to take into consideration the various power relations existing in the context of "work." Strategies that allow migrants to negotiate vulnerability at the workplace are also important to migrants' overall sense of self as male providers. As described above, migrants' sense of themselves as good providers in the context of precarious work necessitates resorting to narratives of sacrifice through hard work, flexibility and compliance at the work place. It thus becomes important to look at how the various strategies migrant men adopt to assert a dignified position at work sustains narratives of the sacrificial and hardworking male migrant provider. In addition, such strategies also work to counter the possible disempowerment or humiliation (in front of me) that they may experience through narratives of hard work and compliance that entail a certain loss of power and control. While they may be overworked, they are able to resort to complimentary ideas of male providership and "feel-good" aspects of work to re-insert a level of agency and control over their lives.

The strategies that men adopt reflect the extent to which migrant men, as gendered subjects, respond to the gendered power relations within the workplace. This process, in turn, produces particular masculine subjectivities at work. One such strategy that stood out during my conversations was the invocation of group-based solidarity based on nationality through which Nepali migrant men constructed a more positive self-image of themselves as better workers than other non-Nepali workers, mainly Malay men. I often heard migrants taking pride in being more hard-working and smarter than Malay men. In a conversation with 24-year old Dharam about his work as a dockworker at Westport, he proudly described how Nepalis had replaced most Malay workers:

> Previously, there were no Nepalis at Westport…only Malays who only work for 8 hours. They have a difficult time even working those 8 hours…but Nepalis, they can work for any amount of hours, 12 hours, 15, 16, 20 hours. This is why, while previously there were no Nepalis, today there are *maximum* Nepalis. In Westport, there are all Nepalis! Even in driving, there are many Nepalis now…those big trucks. Right now, the crane operators are all Malays…but there's talk of Nepalis also working as crane operators soon.

Here, illegal and exploitative labor practices (working above standard OT hours and receiving below minimum wages) are accepted as a means through which migrants prove their hardworking ability or superiority as workers, in opposition to Malays who, in general, have much higher paying jobs. As such, what can be observed in these accounts where migrants pride themselves as Nepali workers "who can do anything" is a process through which migrants seek "equalization" between themselves and the "local*"* people in order to be similarly or superiorly situated. This process is similar to Tinajero's (2014) observation among migrant farm workers in Italy who attempt to "equalize" their status with their rural farmer-employers through a process that requires a certain denial of class hierarchy.

I encountered a similar narrative wherein male migrants positioned themselves as technologically more adept in comparison to female workers, particularly in the electronics companies that hire both men and women, sometimes for the same job. For instance, Suman who works at a Samsung company described how "the guys" have to teach "the girls" (female Malay workers) at work because they are very slow. Similarly, Tirthaman and Salil, who both work at Tamco Switchgear described how their wiring work requires a lot of "brains" and concentration and women would simply not be able to do it.[14] Salil also showed me photos that he had taken on his phone and uploaded on Facebook of the switchgears with electric

[14] Recent estimates reveal that female migrants account for almost 60 – 80% of the total number of migrants employed in Malaysia's electronic sector (Verité 2014, 28). Even though Nepali men are a majority in terms of nationality in Malaysia, they may comprise a male minority within many electronic companies of Malaysia. As such, work-place power relations based on gender and nationality is an area that can be further explored in the future.

wires intricately plugged into different slots and proudly claimed that these switchgears were being transported to Qatar for the FIFA world cup. As such, male migrants also seemed to secure a sense of masculine prestige and worldliness through their status as male workers in "global" companies such as Samsung. As such, aspirations of modernity that are realized by working in such companies coincide with notions of being hardworking, flexible, and obedient; all characteristics that are central to being "good providers."

As such, hard work, flexibility and competence were expressed as "naturally" endowed qualities of Nepali men. Through the construction of a competing masculinity based on nationality and a masculine dignity in relation to female workers, migrant men were able to regain a sense of dignity that may have been lost at work and through just narratives of hard work and sacrifice. Migrants' validation of themselves as "better workers" thus facilitates the projection of themselves as both dignified workers and providers.

As opposed to female migrants, male migrants often see themselves as having the resources to deal more easily with arduous working conditions abroad. However, such "resources" are largely derived from the fulfillment they receive from the moral legitimacy of being hardworking male providers. While the importance of "providing" for the family seemed more urgent for men with children who held multiple responsibilities as father, son, and husband, both young and old migrants embraced notions of maturity rooted in notions of being male providers, not only as sons, fathers and husbands, but also as future fathers. For instance, 22-year old unmarried Brikha, whose parents were deceased, stressed the importance of being a capable provider in the future by being able to "stand on your own feet" so that "your son does not spit at you."

3.5 Reminders of Home and Responsibility

In all of this, the role of emerging communication technologies in facilitating the ability to "exert agency from a distance" (Osella and Osella 2000, 128) is undeniable. While physical separation may allow for concealment of downward mobility, it also allows for selective mutual display of care by both migrants and those in Nepal. Whenever I asked migrants about how often they spoke at home, I would get a range of responses – from everyday, to a few times a week to once or twice every three months or so. While the variation can be attributed to the variation in socio-cultural and economic capital, and in the relationships between migrants and their families, in general, the availability of technology has greatly facilitated migrants to draw upon their providership status by being able to "anchor" themselves in the sphere of the "home" (McKay 2011) Migrants' use of Facebook also provides examples of how particular masculine subjectivities are produced through the conveying of one's intimate emotions online. Facebook has provided migrants a platform to make public otherwise private emotions, such as by writing intimate love poems dedicated to their wives in a public forum. In this context, roles of providership may not necessarily "narrow in transnational families" (Parreñas 2005, 34). In contrast, migrant men may engage in long-distance "care-giving" and forms of providership through the phone and internet. In these instances, men's acts of care may be seen as acceptable or encouraged only to the extent that their masculine status as hardworking migrant workers remains unthreatened. Ultimately, the connection between "home" and "abroad" can strengthen men's rootedness within the sphere of the "home" and provide a strong reinforcement to their status as male providers in the family. At the same time, such technologies also make it easier to maintain male authority from afar by being involved in everyday decision-making processes in the family. Thus, migration does not necessarily entail a complete discontinuity of existing gender relations at home. The maintenance of transnational linkages across borders through routine and everyday

activities such as talking with family members or decorating one's wall with photos of family can reveal important ways in which male migrants deploy their masculine selves in the context of their disempowerment abroad.

3.6 "Surviving through *bidesh*"

While communication technologies have inspired greater connectedness with "home," these linkages may not always foster a sense of motivation for migrant workers abroad. For many such as Ambar, such technologies may facilitate unwanted reminders of filial expectations or problems at home.

Ambar, as described in the first chapter, had been to Malaysia before. After returning to Nepal, he described how the shame of having returned pre-maturely without any earnings prompted him to re-migrate. By more closely exploring Ambar's migratory trajectory, one can observe how migrant men constantly face a double bind that facilitates a permanent state of temporary migration and possibly illegality. While migration is prioritized at home, once you are abroad, there is a strong imperative to remit or return as "successful providers." However, migrant men are also in a position to retain their masculine status by either returning home for a brief period of time (as long as their earnings last) or not returning for an extended period of time (as "overstayers" or "illegals") to avoid possible humiliation.[15]

As such, while at home, migration becomes an end to itself as a marker of successful manhood; once abroad, even though migrants may not be able to fulfill familial expectations as a son, their status as migrant workers can still be seen as providing greater fulfillment as

[15] The widespread presence of "illegalized" (De Genova 2013) Nepali migrants and the normalized regularity is of illegality was reflected in an advertisement in a popular Nepali newspaper printed in Kuala Lumpur. The advertisement was for "Lali Gurans Restaurant." Below images of traditional Nepali food, was a list detailing the various items sold in the shop such as LED/LCD televisions, "UK sweaters" and "Singapore Saris". On the same list were the following services: "Assistance to bothers and sisters, who have been staying illegally, to return to Nepal"; and "Advice to any Nepali who is in trouble."

men in comparison to the perceived status of men who stay behind. Additionally, being away from home also provides migrant men the opportunity to avoid face-to-face confrontation. In this context, the centrality of (any) paid work (abroad) to constructing respectable male masculine identities is also what can potentially offset and/or conceal migrant men's material disempowerment at work.

An ideology of work is operative in this process wherein the moral and masculine imperative to work is so strong that any work becomes worthwhile regardless of either the quality of the work or the ability to "provide" and meet familial expectations. In this sense, migrants' lives represent a particular example of the paradox in which deteriorating working conditions coincide with, and are enabled by, a heightened valuation of work by migrants.

While work may represent a site of disempowerment abroad, that very site can be used by migrants to regain a sense of respectability back home as workers or providers. The content of work may be seen as disempowering but the separation of "home" and "abroad" in migration also allows men to fall back on their status as workers in order to re-construct their masculine identities as providers. Thus, migration allows for a foregrounding of men's worker status over the content of work. While male providership is central to migrant masculinities, the ideological valuation of work itself can also, at times, prove to be a more central resource for men whose ability to provide may be limited. These conditions, however, foster a vicious cycle where many Nepali migrant men are forced into a perpetual state of temporary migration. This was well-put by a relatively older and more experienced migrant worker who said, "Brother, whatever you say…I am 100% sure that you will live in and survive through *bidesh*" in response to a younger migrant who described how he had come to Malaysia now so to avoid leaving his wife after marriage like the older migrants.

3.7 Conclusion

Migrants' positive validation of themselves as good providers who are hardworking and frugal ultimately maintains both gender ideologies and structures of labor exploitation. As countless studies have highlighted, the vulnerabilities of Nepali migrant workers as already indebted people is exacerbated abroad: migrants have very limited bargaining power and as many migrants in my interviews expressed, those who "talk" are the ones who face deportation. As such, the highly unregulated recruitment process both in Nepal and Malaysia has produced a system where employers get their ideal workers who are cheap, obedient, and hardworking. This is similar to other contexts of illegality and precarity where migrants are seen as naturally "good workers" with "good work ethic" (see Anderson 2014). Even though "hard-work and obedience" are qualities that Nepali migrants develop in the context of precarious work conditions and the high stakes associated with any form of dissent, there is a tendency to view Nepali workers as naturally hardworking and obedient by both employers and recruitment agencies (albeit often purely for strategic marketing purposes). At the same time, migrants also contribute to this discourse by associating hard work and obedience with their masculine filial abilities. The misplaced valorization of Nepalis by foreigners as loyal and hardworking is, however, not new. As Caplan (1995) describes in the opening of this chapter, Nepali ex-Gurkha soldiers' famed "bravery, loyalty and obedience" can also be understood not merely as colonial marketing of foreign bodies but also within the larger context of male obligations towards their families, where being able to provide were "paramount values for which they are willing, albeit reluctantly, to sacrifice everything" (182). Here, it is also important to note that men draw empowerment from naturalized heteronormative practices of marriage, providership, and fatherhood where heterosexuality is a key index of mature male masculinity and its associated privileges. Finally, the narratives that emerged during my interactions with migrants also reveal the complex ways in which

gendered re-interpretations of work interact with notions of modernity and nationality to produce particular male migrant subjectivities that constantly reaffirm the very structures that produce their marginality.

4 Becoming Modern Men

As suggested in the previous chapter, migrant men are constantly negotiating competing masculinities as a central resource through which to make sense of their working lives abroad. Notions of *male providership* and *being a modern man* are central to their sense of self as successful migrant men. The salience of these notions, however, cannot just be explained by deterministic "models" of pre-existing masculinities. Rather, such masculinities emerge and are reproduced through a dynamic configuration of various material, social, institutional and discursive practices. While the previous chapter focused on how ideas of male providership are produced, this chapter focuses on the construction of modern masculine selves through migrants' consumption practices.

Here, it is important to understand how diverse modes of belonging emerge not just through the consumption of commodities but also through the consumption of images, ideas and sounds in spaces that evoke a sense of being "modern." This is similar to the Vora's (2013) observation of the Indian diaspora in Dubai who "consume[d] the consumer culture of Dubai and form[ed] belonging through this culture, even more than through the actual consumption of material goods" (138). By providing the example of how "seemingly exclusive malls" become used by migrants as "public" spaces to claim middle-class belonging, she describes how "their belonging to Dubai was to a site of consumption rather than to the commodities themselves" (138-139). Similarly, this chapter discusses Nepali male migrants' diverse modes of participation in "sites of consumption" that mark Malaysia as a space of modernity and how such practices are consonant with societal norms that sanction male travel for employment and worldliness.[16]

[16] It is important to add here that while there is still a deeply rooted stigma associated with female migration, women are also negotiating their way into pursuing foreign employment without necessarily being stigmatized. However, such negotiations often rely on " 'doing' rather than 'undoing' gender" as Paul (2015) suggests in her

Equally important here, is to destabilize singular logics of modernity that locates its origins in the West. As Roy and Ong (2011) have deftly argued in their articulation of Asian neoliberal urbanism, ideas of modernity that shape Asian cities and subject-formations is "as much "Asian" as it is "Western," as much "homegrown" as it is borrowed" (310-311). Just like Malaysia's own world-class aspirations that emerge from a growing "inter-city consciousness" of its regional neighbors such as Singapore, migrants' aspirations are also shaped by ideas of modernity that are "at once heterogeneously particular and yet irreducibly global" (Ong 2011, 18).

In this context, this chapter focuses on the centrality of consumption practices in constructing male subjectivities in which notions of modernity and masculinity are deeply intertwined. The mutually co-constituting process of consumption practices and constructions of idealized modern masculinities can be better understood if consumption is seen through its ideological valuation facilitating upward social mobility rather than as the mere buying of goods (Rao 2013, 873). A foregrounding of migrants' consumerist participation can thus allow for a re-imagining of Nepali male migrants as cosmopolitan consumer-citizens and not just (dis-empowered) workers.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, migrant men are continually negotiating their marginality abroad while attempting to fulfill filial duties and desires that are deeply intertwined with gendered logics. In this context, the two emergent masculinities that migrants draw upon are often "competing" but not necessarily at odds. Rather, migrant men constantly seek to accommodate both to suit their own positions, priorities and aspirations. Through this chapter, I argue that despite migrants' marginal status abroad and challenges in

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recent study among Filipino female migrant workers where she finds women often reframing their migratory aspirations by relying on narratives of the caring daughter/wife/sister/mother.

successfully fulfilling filial duties, their consumption practices are central to their self-representation as both modern men and respectable providers.

4.1 Imaginaries of *bidesh*

> *"When one returns back home, the community will, perhaps, see you as someone who's returned from* bidesh*...as a* lahure*...they wouldn't look down on you."*

Nepali men's conscription in foreign military and police forces has long been an important source of material well-being and social status for young men and their families in Nepal. Consequently, for many Nepalis, the words - *bidesh* and *lahure* have long-standing associations with what is considered foreign, modern and hence, more desirable. While *bidesh* literally translates to "foreign country" and *lahure* to a soldier who has served in foreign armies, the breadth of their usage has expanded to places and people beyond its original usage. While the word *lahure* was previously reserved for those serving in foreign armies, it is now used generally to describe young men who emigrate for work. Similarly, while the frontier between *bidesh* and home was previously between India and Nepal,[17] today's multiple frontiers separate Nepal from a shifting hierarchy of *bideshi* sites, where countries such as Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Gulf countries are seen as accessible sites to actualize both family duties and aspirations to become modern men.

Thus, while the old vocabulary has come to accommodate wider and more contemporary forms of mobility, it has retained the old glamor of *bidesh*, where to be a *lahure* at home signaled wealth, worldliness and modernity regardless of the specific content of his activity abroad. In this context, much like the old *lahures* serving in the East India Company who returned home and gained societal respectability through their conspicuous display of

[17] The trend of labor migration to India has gradually declined over the years. There is also a hierarchy of destinations based on migrants' ability to pay hefty recruitment fees. Since Nepal and India share and open border, relatively poorer Nepalis still go in large numbers to India for work. For more, see Sijapati and Limbu 2013.

material wealth and foreign commodities, today's Nepali male migrants, despite working in arduous conditions in Malaysia's many multi-national companies, are also driven by both filial duties and desires for modernity through participation in global consumer cultures.

In today's context, the seduction of life abroad despite migrants' marginality and subordinate status abroad can be better understood if one looks at how aspirations are built around the consumption of images and ideas related to globality, particularly those that are disseminated through mass media. As Appadurai (1996) has stated, one can observe the twin influence of the media and migration on the "work of the imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity" (3). Similarly, the absorption of images associated with particular ideas, lifestyles and values associated with *bidesh* is a practice that is central to construction of "modern men". While migrants may be motivated by wealth accumulation, these motivations are often driven by various priorities depending on their social positions in terms of age, gender, class, and ethnicity. Nevertheless, be it a father who is driven by a sense of duty for his family or a son who hopes to get married upon return, there is an underlying common denominator, where all migrants aspire for self-betterment through migration - a self-enterprising undertaking in itself. As such, aspirations for traveling and working in *bidesh* and imaginaries of the self-made "modern man" can be understood through Ong's conception of the neoliberal subject – a "self-enterprising citizen-subject who is obligated to become an "entrepreneur of himself or herself" (2006: 14). Here, Ong's concept becomes useful in understanding how the market ethos of discipline, competition and efficiency is reflected in migrants' endeavors for self-betterment through self-management.

Given the increasing disillusion among Nepali youth with the state to provide any gainful employment in the country and the opening of global labor markets, labor migration is providing young men with possibilities of becoming not just self-made providers but also

cosmopolitan consumer-citizens of global urban sophistication. The extent to which male migration has become a household phenomenon and an important marker of successful manhood is encapsulated in the two quotes below, one by Dhan Shrestha, who has been working as a pastor in Klang for the past 11 years and the other by Milan Sindhuli, another migrant who has been in Malaysia for 10 years:

> Dhan: In the past, we had to ask which houses have gone abroad, today we need to ask which houses have not gone abroad.
>
> Milan: In Nepal, you even know what the son of someone seven villages away does.

Dhan's comment is a widely discussed issue in media and policy circles – the vacating of villages and towns of young men with the wives and in-laws staying behind. However, Milan's comment is more typically heard in everyday conversations, where a house is marked by the son's status of either being in the process of going abroad, being abroad, or having returned (and perhaps, in the process of going abroad again). Besides the name of the destination country, not much else is known or discussed. Even though Milan's statement refers to what someone "does," the activity that is "done" usually refers to the destination that the son has gone to work at. In this sense, the individual act of having "gone" alone is a marker of the son's status. The foregrounding of place or *bidesh* over the work abroad in defining male subjectivities at home is also telling of the extent to which "making it" to *bidesh* alone is important for perceptions of self as individually responsible men. Milan's association of the individual act of going abroad with the person's "house" speaks to the long-standing association of individual migration with familial prestige.

The quote at the beginning of this section by 19-year old Aman from Makwanpur district echoes a common sentiment expressed by many young male migrants, for whom the sojourn to *bidesh* itself is an important symbol of successful manhood. The imperative for many men to go to *bidesh* in order to "not be looked down upon" is indicative of the

gendering of notions of "home" and *bidesh*, whereby men who stay behind become devalorized. Here, the perceived conspicuous consumption of migrant returnees can be seen as contributing to those staying behind feeling inadequately masculine and modern. As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) have argued, experiences of displacement are not limited to migrating bodies but also those who stay put. The relegation of such men to the "position" of women who stay behind is another way in which the moralizing masculine imperative to migrate can be activated. This is illustrated in the quote below where Amrit describes the humiliation of staying in Nepal without a stable job. In addition, since Amrit had returned to Nepal within a few months of having gone to Malaysia, his return was seen as an additional source of shame:

> You know how it is in the villages. They talk. They say, "So and so person from so and so village returned from *bidesh* with nothing." My family also would keep nagging me. They would say, "The sons and daughters of all other families are sending money. What happened to you?" That is why I thought I'd give Malaysia another try.

The growing sense of material deprivation and the consequent disempowerment among men who stay behind is also illustrated by the quote below. Ambar describes how the conspicuous spending of returnees became a key motivation for him to also go abroad:

> You see all your childhood friends returning with money…they ride on Pulsar bikes…when you see them, you also feel…you know…oh, this is someone who you played with together….went to school together…while he's already gone abroad and returned, I am where I was before…I am just the same.

Here, Ambar's friends' spending on bikes can be seen as particularly humiliating for him. Not only do bikes signify greater mobility and independence, they are also seen as essential for many young men to display their masculine capital. Similarly, when I asked another 20-year old man why so many young men go abroad, he replied saying, "Well, some have *rahar* (desire), some can't find work in Nepal and have to earn for their families." In addition to fulfilling his duties as a son to provide for his sick parents, he also expressed his desire to buy a Pulsar bike upon returning to Nepal just like his other friends who had gone

abroad to work. While I was talking to another young man about the trend of taking flat screen televisions home upon return, he said, “They are Nepalis… so they would obviously bring TVs, Decks, and Korean Blankets.”

Besides the construction of *bidesh* itself as a space of material accumulation, the journey by plane to Malaysia or the Gulf is seen as something to be desired. 19-year old Suman, who works illegally in the Samsung plant in Northport remarked, “Sister, I came here because of *rahar*. Now I only have regrets.” We were in a Nepali restaurant with an older friend of his. I asked his older friend, “Why do so many young men come to Malaysia despite everything we hear about Malaysia?” He smiled and kept quiet. Suman then broke the few seconds of silence and almost embarrassedly said, “Pee-lane!” Young men’s desires for *bidesh* are constructed through the media and stories of experiences abroad through friends who have already ventured abroad. Suman’s self-ridicule while expressing his fascination for planes as his key motivation to go abroad signals a certain loss of innocence. Here, Suman’s experience of facing and surviving the realities of *bidesh* also relates to many young men’s experiences abroad, where migration, as Sharma (2014) has argued, becomes a “rite of passage” for young boys transitioning to adulthood.

Flying on airplanes is perhaps the first dramatic encounter with modernity for many young men. Anyone who has ever boarded a plane from Kathmandu to Kuala Lumpur, Doha or Dubai, will testify to the homosociality of the planes filled with Nepali migrant men. Sometimes you will see a group of men, all wearing blue or white caps that were given to them by their “manpower” companies for easy identification. As they board their first ever flights of their lives in groups, there is an almost carnivalesque atmosphere in the plane. As one Nepal Airline in-flight supervisor remarked, “The young men already come with expectations of getting *masubhat* (meat and rice) to go with their hard drinks. We never put a

limit on their liquor intake and provided them however much they requested. But things got out of hand so we had to stop serving alcohol in our flights. Till today, they ask us, 'Where's the alcohol?'"

The plane thus becomes a site where men attempt to assert a particular form of modern masculinity through the subordination of other men and women. Dressed in new clothes and foreheads blessed with vermillion, the young men enter one by one into the plane. While some are more lost than others and need assistance finding their seats, there are always others who are more confident and instruct others. The confident men are mostly those who have already been, as the inflight supervisor described, "exposed" to life abroad. Those who engage in repeat migration are thus in a more authoritative position in comparison to the first-timers who have not yet experienced planes. Not only do they ask for more alcohol, they are also the ones to ridicule the Nepal Airlines plane by asking the female crew members, "Where are the televisions?"

The homosocial setting of the plane can also be seen as facilitating a mode of masculine behavior that has been described in other contexts as "lad culture." Allison Phipps (2014) broadly describes *laddism* as being characterized by seemingly "harmless" but sexualized and sexist banter. Such behavior can include "having a laugh" while engaging in a "defense of banter" such that sexism, racism, homophobia can be "couched in the language of irony" or humor. A female in-flight supervisor who has been working in Nepal Airlines for almost thirty years described an instance of such behavior. She said, "I'm not sure if you are aware but there are many words in the Malay language that translate to offensive things in Nepali." She then went on to describe an incident when a young man shaking a packet of sugar asked her, "Where should I put this *gulla*?" (the word *gulla* means sugar in Malay but is slang for testicles in Nepali). The young man's sexist banter not only asserts a certain kind of

masculine dominance but also enables him to gain worldly credentials as someone who is already familiar with the Malay language.

Most young migrants I spoke to expressed how they were motivated by *rahar*, while expressing their duties to earn for the family. While psychosocial and economic motivations are intertwined and cannot be divorced from each other, most migrants who initially express being driven by *rahar* immediately, as though out of guilt, mention other factors such as the lack of alternatives in Nepal and family duties or *jimma*. While young men seem to be driven by youthful desires for travel and adventure and the masculine imperative to migrate as "modern men," they also cite filial responsibilities associated with being "good men." Negotiating the tension between desires (*rahar*) and duties (*jimma*) is a constant challenge for many men.

That the everyday consumption of ideas about *bidesh* contributes significantly to migrants' self-image as "modern men" is reflected in a conversation with a group of eight men working at PKT logistics, a storage company in Port Klang that also prides itself as stated in some of their t-shirts as being a "Facebook compulsory" company. While four of them were between 21 to 23 years of age, the other four were between 25 to 30 years of age, most of whom had been abroad in the Gulf and were married with children. While we were talking about what motivates young men to go abroad, one of the younger men replied, "*Rahar bhitrako baadyata*" or the "compulsion within desire" which he elaborated as being "a desire to see the world and also a compulsion." When I asked how it was a compulsion, he said, "You know…you want to earn money…you have dreams. You want to do this...do that…want to marry." As soon as he said this, all the other men started giving their own opinions. In this conversation, the young men can be seen as consumers of ideas of *bidesh* associated with foreign incomes and spending. At the same time, the need for men to

constantly refer to their "compulsion" while talking about their desires also signals the greater societal importance and economic imperative of providership over the pursuit of individual desires. As the older migrant who had already been to the Gulf countries twice states, "The lure of *bidesh* has become like a "wind" that is sweeping all the young men away from the country and the habit of spending (*kharcha garney baani)* has become like an addiction (*nasha*)."

Central to the imaginary of Malaysia as *bidesh* is the image of the hyper-modern metropolis, crystallized in the form of the Petronas Towers (also known as KLCC) in Kuala Lumpur. The centrality of the image of the twin towers in migrants' imaginaries of Malaysia can be explained by the ubiquity of the image in Nepal itself. One can observe such images in advertisements by recruitment agencies and money transfer companies in airports, banks and the media. From Bollywood films shot at the Petronas Towers to folk *dohori* songs that tell tales of lone young men lost in the glamour of KLCC, Nepali image culture is filled with images of the twin towers, epitomizing the imagined globality that migrants aspire to participate in.

Many migrants who learnt that I had been in Malaysia for only a few weeks were quick to ask the question, "Have you been to KLCC yet?" Ironically, when I asked them the same question, they replied saying that even though they have been able to visit the KLCC area they were not allowed to go up the tower because they did not have their passports with them. In a city that boasts a sprawling mall culture, the shopping complex at KLCC is much sought after within the retail landscape of Kuala Lumpur for its concentration of high-end shops that are inaccessible to most migrants. While the image of the modern metropolis is central to migrant's imaginaries of Malaysia, upon arrival they soon realize their marginal positions within the country through their limited access to these spaces.

Bidesh becomes represented as a site where young men can overcome the shame of staying behind and also realize aspirations of belonging to a world that was previously accessible only through films and music videos or stories and the conspicuous consumption of other migrants who "make it." This is where capitalist interests for the commodification of labor and opening up of labor markets can coincide with the interests of young men from low-income families, for whom migration itself has become commodified. The exorbitant amount of fees that migrants and their families pay through loans or selling of assets to finance migration is not just an investment for future economic gains but also represents the earning of social status and cultural capital associated with being "modern men." As Ahmad (2008) has claimed, while migration was previously a means to an end, today, in many cases, it has become an end to itself as an important marker of successful manhood, and a first and necessary step towards becoming a self-responsible man.

4.2 Constraining Realities of *bidesh*

The lives of Nepali migrants in the Port Klang area can be characterized by what Ong (2006) has described as "exceptions to neoliberalism" where certain populations and places are excluded from the benefits and living standards produced by market-driven policies. While "exceptions to neoliberalism" can be "modes for protecting social safety nets" amidst capitalist development, they can also be seen as modes "for stripping away all forms of political protection" (4-5).

Migrants are excluded from spaces they have initially associated with *bidesh* in various ways. The young men I spoke to describe how the initial confrontation occurs when they discover the reality of having jobs and/or working terms and conditions that are far from what they expected. Low-wages, heavy deductions, penalties, and non-payment severely limit

their capacity to spend. While some work long hours or night shifts, others such as dockworkers often have to remain on standby for incoming ships.

Westport is located on Pulau Indah, an island off the coast of Port Klang. It is separated from the mainland by a channel and only accessible through the highway. Spatially isolated sites such as Westport that have poor public transport facilities and roads designed solely for vehicles can heavily circumscribe mobility and severely limit migrants' interaction with mainstream Malaysian society. My conversation with 24-year old Dharam at Westport, was periodically interrupted by other Nepali men who were curious to know who I was. He said, "In this area, there are only men, no women at all! If you go to other places, females are like insects…everywhere…here, there isn't even a single Nepali girl…There aren't any other girls either…Sometimes, when our Nepali sisters come to visit their brothers, the guys here look at you negatively." The homosociality within migrants' living spaces (see figure 12) was in contrast to what he had hoped for in a "free country" such as Malaysia where unlike Qatar and Saudi Arabia, he was told he could "look at girls."

Besides the lack of opportunities to socialize with the larger community, migrants in Westport also have limited access to the closest urban center, Port Klang, which has bigger markets and Nepali shops and restaurants frequented by Nepali men and women in the area. Dharam stated having either to rely on irregular buses or expensive taxis just to get to the nearest money transfer. He also described the sense of insecurity that many migrants face while going to deposit or send money back home: "If we go to Port Klang to send money, we always travel in groups. Since there's a jungle on the way, it's not safe to travel alone. Many of our friends have been robbed."

When I visited Westport, I saw only a few restaurants and shops with basic supplies. The space surrounding the workers' housing was visibly neglected with trash everywhere, a

stark contrast to manicured lawns, fountains, and glass façades of the main offices of Westports Malaysia, the private company that operates the port. As Dharam stated, "I came here thinking I would work at an international airport…but today I am working in this kind of place. Our Dharan is so much better than this place!" The landscape of Westport is dominated by the "control tower" of the transshipment port, a constant stream of lorries and large trucks, and the equally striking presence of migrant workers in yellow hard-hats, waiting to cross the eight-lane expressway that separates the port offices and docks from their housing units (See figures 9 and 10). In their free time, migrants often "hang out" and "timepass" within the air-conditioned lobby and boutique parking lot on the ground floor of the Westports tower to escape the heat. Like the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, the Westports tower is simultaneously exclusive and accommodating of migrants' aspirations. Dharam and Manish, who live in a cramped housing unit nearby, spoke highly of the way Westports treats their core staff,[18] compared to other private operators in Port Klang. Their Facebook profiles also feature pictures of them posing in front of the statues of dolphins (Westports' logo) at the main gate (see figure 11 and 14).

Besides socio-spatial exclusions that serve to render migrants invisible, illegality and aggressive police surveillance are other commonly cited factors that regulate migrants' movement in public space. Migrants I spoke with repeatedly spoke about everyday police harassment. This routinized scare entailed being asked for their IDs and then being robbed. While none of the migrants had their passports, some stated that even having the official Jalan cards (mobility card) was not a guarantee of safety. Worse off were the conditions of migrants without Jalan Cards who walked around with laminated photocopies of their visas (see figure 5). For instance, 29-year old Dipen in a Nepali restaurant showed me his laminated card and told me that he either hangs out near his company area in the industrial estate of Sungai Rasau

[18]Almost all Nepali migrants work in the "periphery" rather than the "core" of the port operating companies, which translates to lower pay and heightened precarity.

in Klang or takes a taxi to visit Nepali restaurants in Klang. He stated that since his company area is like a village, the local police know his company and lets him go. Similarly while 24-year old Kul Raj described not being able to go to the Kuala Lumpur area because he did not have a work permit card and was thus considered "illegal," others such as 22-year old Suman described not being too intimidated by police interrogation, saying he only hung out in his friends' apartments when he went to either the town of Klang or Kuala Lumpur. Another group of undocumented men living in shipping containers inside the premises of a company could not meet me despite living a 10-minute drive away from where I was. As with many undocumented migrants, the fear of detention and deportability can severely limit their mobility in everyday public spaces and confine them to private and often increasingly exploitative spaces (Coutin 2010). As such, for undocumented workers such as Suman and Dharam, borders can appear or exist anywhere; and even though they are able to move around strategically, the need for recourse to any "strategy" at all is indicative of their marginality and precarity.

Migrant socializing is also limited to Nepali migrant enclaves in Klang and Kotaraya in Kuala Lumpur. As soon as one enters the bus station in Klang, one is bombarded with announcements of buses going to various destinations in the region, one of which is Kotaraya in Kuala Lumpur. These buses are popular among migrant communities not only because the bus station serves as an important hub but also because it is surrounded by Nepali restaurants and shops and is a major meeting point for Nepalis in the region. Even though trains are available, buses are the preferred mode of transport since they take migrants directly from one Nepali enclave in Klang to another in Kuala Lumpur.

While migration may entail traveling a great distance and crossing borders – from Nepal to Malaysia, boyhood to manhood, *gaau* to *bidesh*, etc – such mobility is in great

contrast to the circumscribed life in Malaysia. This is an instance of the paradox of mobility in global labor migration, wherein workers are mobilized from the source country only to be immobilized at the destination (Amrith 2013). The divergence between migrants' imaginaries of Malaysia as *bidesh* and their lived experiences does not, however, preclude the possibility of being able to accommodate their everyday realities within ideas of modernity and masculine respectability.

4.3 Confronting Contrasts and Working through Constraints

Looking at non-work subjectivities through everyday consumption practices can provide useful insights into the dialectic relationship between ideas of manhood and modernity and consumption. Migrants' consumption practices can be seen as being influenced by particular ideas of manhood and modernity, which in turn reproduces the existing social environment that sanctions and normalizes this behavior. Despite unfavorable and harsh working conditions, the time off from work provides relative freedom from the confinement of work, its rigid time-schedule and monotony and constant supervision. It also provides migrants opportunities to participate in global trends, however rarely, such as going to malls and department stores, buying smartphones, enjoying 24 hour wi-fi and opening Facebook accounts.

In this context, looking at migrants' urban consumption practices allows for an understanding of how they work through the dissonance produced by contrasting hopes and realities. In the context of Nepali male migrants, then, it becomes more urgent to understand how power operates in more circuitous ways than what we can articulate through the oppositional language of oppression/oppressed in mainstream discussions on "globalization" and "neo-liberalism." It is thus crucial to understand the more subtle and complex ways in

which strength drawn from non-work subjectivities allow for the maintenance of power relations.

While today's global economy relies on "flexible accumulation" and profits from the vulnerabilities of many young migrants, it is also important to realize how the migration infrastructure consisting of corporations, governments, brokers and private recruitment agencies also facilitates the realization of the same "disposable" laborer's aspirations for modernity. Contemporary globalization has reproduced greater inequalities while also facilitating the growth of a more affordable consumer culture, either through the consumption of images, spaces, ideas or commodities. The following sections discuss ways in which Nepali male migrants' ideas of belonging to a global consumer community intersect with ideas of being a "modern man" - a subject position that is not necessarily incompatible with being a "good man" and a provider.

22-year old Kamal, who had successfully run a chicken farm for many years until the outbreak of bird flu, paid NPR 200,000[19] to his recruitment agency. He stated that "*bidesh* is a place that everybody should come at least once" reflecting the importance of gaining knowledge and experience about the world yourself instead of hearing it second-hand. He described how he had not received a renewal of his work permit from the company and had become "temporarily" illegal. Despite the fear of detention and deportability and the limitation to his mobility in everyday public space, he stated not having any regrets. When I asked him what he did during his time off from work, he casually replied, "I play video games all day. We have 24 hours wi-fi. I can download any game I want on my phone, which is something I could not do in Nepal." He had described having come to Malaysia primarily to pay off his debts but he also boasted of having bought an IPhone for 1600 RM a few months

[19]Approximately USD 2,000

after reaching Malaysia. Kamal and I had been sitting in a Tamil restaurant for the past two hours about 15 minutes walk from his dormitory room. When I asked him why he was carrying a Nokia phone instead he stated that it was safer and better to remain low-key. Just like Kamal, many migrants I met had bought new smartphones upon reaching Malaysia. For some it was the first and only big investment abroad. As Kamal's life depicts, migrants' lives in Malaysia are marked by everyday paradoxes of being simultaneously "included" in consumer culture of a world-class city while being "excluded" through self-managing techniques to maintain invisibility.

While the importance of spending on consumer goods can be understood in terms of its material and ideological valuation, it also important to situate migrants' particular consumption practices within their larger context of marginality that contributes to the lack of an active social life. For men like Dharam and Manish who work and live at the Westport area of the Port Klang Free Zone, permanently on standby, there is hardly any other social activity besides occasional football. In this context, using Facebook on either their own phones or friends' phones becomes a favorite "timepass." Here, the structural marginality or exclusion that contributes to the lack of a social life is also what facilitates habits of individualized consumption. While the use of Facebook is not so much a conscious strategy "to make life bearable" (Brusle 2012, 63), this "timepass" allows migrants to cope with their marginalization while enabling the very reproduction of that marginalization. In other words, consumption practices allow for the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivities, materially and ideologically. As Tinajero (2014) states, "despite being exceptions to neoliberalism, migrants are also enabled by neoliberal restructuring to cope with such exceptions." Similar to the self-regulating neoliberal logic of market principles, migrants themselves adopt a self-managing orientation as "entrepreneurs of the self" in order to deal with conditions of "bare life." An exploration of consumption practices such as the use of Facebook can thus provide a better

understanding of how ideas of manhood are deployed and circulated by migrants to negotiate constraints abroad.

4.4 Negotiations and Consumption Practices

Besides dramatic accounts of work-related exploitation, the overall everyday loss of autonomy and "dispossession of time" at work (Bruslé 2012a) can also be disempowering for many migrant workers. This can particularly be true for many migrant men who come from farming backgrounds where despite the routinized life in the village, there is a certain level of expectedness of seasons and control over one's usage of time. In this context, the hostels or rented rooms of migrants can turn into spaces of relative freedom and primary sites that facilitate and normalize particular consumption habits.

As I entered an all-male hostel of Nepali men working at Tamco Switchgear, I was struck by the deafening silence in the room, with only the constant sound of fans blowing hot air in the room (see figure 8). A large open space was partitioned into two spaces – the living space and the dining/cooking/washing/bathing space. The living space consisted of bunk beds and single beds, each with a table fan and a large plastic bucket to store one's belongings. The walls and windows were plastered with Nepali newspapers illegally printed in Kuala Lumpur. There was also a space on the plywood partition where different notices were stuck such as public holidays and cleaning routines. While my first impression of the space was that of communal shared living, I slowly noticed how migrants were withdrawn and limited to their own corners of their beds. With neither tables and chairs nor carpets to sit on the floor, the bare furnishing in the room also seemed to engender a form of individualized sociality, where each person was confined to each other's private space of the bed almost entirely consumed by the mobile phones in front of them. Some of them had also personalized the walls next to

their bed. While one of them had newspaper cut-outs of actresses and models stuck on the walls, another had a cut-out of a big bed covered with a cheerful brightly colored duvet.

Walking around the room, I saw another door that led to a more congested space of more bunk-beds, clothes hanging on hangers from the ceiling, and windows without curtains that were plastered with newspapers. In this small room, I noticed a refrigerator with a huge chain and padlock, which the men referred to as *pasal* or shop. It was the only refrigerator in the entire hostel and belonged to one of my interlocutors. Along with other friends, he ran this "refrigerator shop" to sell food and alcohol to others.

Even though migrants might stay in crowded, stuffy and minimally furnished rooms, their living spaces allow for the re-centering of consumerist and masculine subjectivities be it through micro-entrepreneurship or through forms of mediated sociality on their smartphones. While the spending on or usage of smartphones is not specific to migrant men, such activities reinforce existing notions of manhood associated with technology, worldliness and material accumulation. In this context, the availability of relatively affordable Chinese-made smartphones in the rapidly growing mobile market has enabled migrants' participation in global trends. While class and education may affect the type of smartphone usage, they do not necessarily inhibit usage. As the migrants I spoke to describe, their smartphone usage was mostly limited to the usage of Facebook, communication applications such as Viber, Skype and other audio-visual services such as cameras, music and video players, and buying ringtones.

One of the first investments most migrants make through their incomes is on smartphones. Some claimed to own two mobile phones and SIM cards – one to use the internet and the other to only make and receive calls. The overcrowded mobile phone shops on public holidays and Sundays in Klang bus station are testament to the popularity of

smartphones among Nepali migrant men. A salesman near the Klang bus station described how the relatively large and cheap Chinese Lenovo phones were the most popular. When I asked for a smaller phone for myself, he referred me to the white Sony Xperia mini saying, "We have had this for a few years. This is not very popular but it is still a very good 'ladies phone'". This mini phone with its tiny keyboard and limited applications was sitting in a corner amongst the big black large-screen more up-to-date smart phones. Here, the salesman's equation of "mini" with femininity and "bigness" with masculinity reflects an infantilizing reasoning that views women's gadgets as toys suited for "nimble fingers" and men's gadgets as more technically sophisticated. As such, big smartphones can carry great social significance and can be seen as important masculine accessories necessary to augment migrant men's self-perceptions as modern masculine men. That the salesman called the Sony Xperia a "ladies phone" also suggests that it is a popular choice of phone that migrants choose to send back to their wives, sisters, or other female kin.

This also relates to Doron's study (2012) on mobile-phone usage and personhood in Northern India, where she uses Foucault's (1994) concept of "technology of the self" to refer to "mobile literacy" as an influential technology that has enabled new forms of "self-expression" and allowed for the reshaping of ideas of ethical and moral self (415). She refers to Miller's (1987) concept of "objectification" to define "technologies of self" as material goods that engender constructions of self. Similarly, one can also view the usage of smartphones by Nepali migrants in Klang as a key component in the construction of their subjectivities, both through discursive constructions of modernity and manhood, and through the non-discursive consequences on everyday life and temporality. While smartphones cannot be seen as just the prerogative of men, the pressure for Nepali migrant men to own and display them cannot be denied.

For many young male migrants who may not have been used to the amount or regularity of their bi-monthly income, the steady flow of individualized income can be a source of great temptation. Despite family obligations, migrants' time away from parental authority and monitoring can influence them to participate in "commodified patterns of sociality" that may be associated with *bideshi* living (Mills 1997, 46). Older migrants who are sometimes ridiculed for not possessing smart-phones can also feel the pressure to buy such phones. The acquisition of smartphones has thus become a normalized imperative for self-representation as "modern" among peers and fellow Nepalis in Malaysia.

Similarly, the usage of Facebook can also be seen as an equally powerful "technology of the self" that reinforces Nepali migrants' ideological construction of respectable modern selves. As a platform that allows for unbridled self-disclosure and self-representation and the anticipation of others' endorsement of the represented self, Facebook provides migrants the medium to selectively project themselves as successful migrants. The projection of material well-being can be particularly relevant for an "appreciative audience" consisting of friends and family in Nepal and other countries (Mills 1997, 54).

As other studies on Facebook usage among South Asian migrants in the Gulf states (Bruslé 2012 and Gardner 2012) have discussed, Nepali male migrants' habitual usage of Facebook reveals the extent to which it could serve as an important source of validation of themselves as self-realized modern masculine subjects. Almost all the Nepali male migrants I spoke to had Facebook accounts. Besides browsing the videos and photos that appeared on their feeds, the most popular activities involved posting photographs and commenting and liking them. Such ritualized interactions on virtual space can be seen as performative acts that have powerful regulatory potential in constructing and normalizing certain ideas related to masculinity, migrancy, and cosmopolitanism. Facebook images of the migrants I spoke to

consist mostly of themselves at sites that they associate with modernity such as the Petronas towers, airports, gyms, ships, malls and other big buildings, and water fountains. Such images are in stark contrast to their routinized everyday lives, as well as their lives back home. Another one of migrants' major "timepass" on public holidays and days-off is to go out and take photos of each other on their phones, which has become a familiar sight in the malls of Kuala Lumpur.

Migrants are also almost always dressed in their best clothes, carrying new bags, suitcases and phones and wearing new sunglasses. Some of them are also seen wearing three-piece suits. Through this depiction of life abroad as leisurely, exciting and conspicuously consumerist, migrants can be seen as employing "technologies of self" to articulate self-images and also be perceived as self-responsible, independent and mobile men who have "made it" abroad (Gauntlett 2008).

That migrants rarely disclose details of their employment is another issue that has been discussed by Osella and Osella (2006) and Ye (2014). The great separation between "home" and "abroad" in international labor migration, coupled with specific types of communication platforms, also gives migrants greater ability to "edit" their lives abroad (McKay 2011, 620). The temporary loss of dignity through potentially "emasculating" or exploitative labor conditions abroad thus may not necessarily taint their masculine respectability at home or abroad (Margold 1995). As such, migrants' production of well-selected images on Facebook contributes to the reproduction of singular and seductive narratives of *bidesh* that then, in turn, perpetuate the glamor and cycle of migration. This is reflected in the quote below by the pastor, Dhan Shrestha:

> This is also one of the reasons why Nepalis are facing many problems today. Regardless of what has happened to them, they keep quiet. We experience many hardships but in front of others, we show our lives as being blissful. Sometimes, you

> meet people who work as cleaners in the market for 12 hours a day or in jungles, but when they tell you or when they write on Facebook, they give names of all these good companies…they say they are supervisors or security guards in so and so company.

Similarly, the usage of Facebook also reflects everyday acts of cosmopolitan consumer-citizenship. Cohen's (2006) concept of everyday cosmopolitanism that refers to "subtle forms of transnationalism" by non-elite actors is particularly relevant here. Specifically, he discusses how migrant workers engage in "functional" cosmopolitanism through the acquisition of foreign language skills and knowledge about exchange rates or migration policies in general, among others. In this sense, besides their photos that convey a sense of worldliness, the language that they use on Facebook is also reflective of this type of cosmopolitanism. Migrants commonly use English words on Facebook despite having very limited English writing or oratory skills. Some standard phrases that are used are "Very Nice, my frn" (my friend); "So miss you"; "So nice pic", "tq" (thank you); "super poz bro" (super pose brother); "qt pic" (cute picture); and "mstwc" (most welcome). Those working at the dock also post images of ships arriving from various countries.

The imperative to participate in a global Facebook and smartphone culture is central to the construction of migrants' subjectivities abroad. Tapping onto this increasing popularity of Facebook, Nepali shops in Klang have also begun listing "Facebook Account" as one of their services in addition to providing airline tickets and other services. When I asked a salesman how much it cost, he said, "15 RM" and when I asked how men were able to use Facebook accounts without knowing how to sign up for Facebook, he replied, "They only use it to chat and post photos…When they open their accounts, they usually bring photos for their profiles on their phones. Sometimes they want to decorate their photos with flowers and other decorative frames."

While sites of associated modernity such as malls and fancy restaurants might not always be accessible to migrants, migrants engage in alternative spaces of direct consumption such as the local supermarkets or the many restaurants and shops in the migrant hubs of Pelabuhan (Port) Klang, Klang bus station and Pangsapuri, Bandar Sultan Suleiman in Northport. Such consumption can be seen as marginal compared to the modern Malay consumerist lifestyle epitomized by the middle-classes frequenting the malls, bars and restaurants in places like Bukit Bintang and KLCC. Nevertheless, such partial access to modernity can still be seen as having a dramatic effect when acted out in front of an "appreciative audience" of peers and family back home against whom you compare your relative wealth and privilege (Mills 1997, 54).

While consumption practices can be central to migrants' understanding of self as modern and masculine, such practices can also be seen as incompatible with being a "good man" who does not engage in unnecessary spending but saves and sends money home. This dilemma, that has also been highlighted in other studies (Osella and Osella 2000, McKay 2014, and Sharma 2014), can be resolved through "wise spending." By spending wisely, the routes to becoming both "good" and "modern" men can often converge.

One particular consumption practice that allows for migrants to also be seen as good providers is through gifts sent back home, be it through friends or self. The visible exchange or transfer of consumer durables bought abroad is not only a matter of pride for the families but is also an indication of migrants' display of "mature masculinity" (Osella and Osella 2000). Similarly, such products also symbolically replace the absence of the man in the house by serving as a constant reminder of his sacrifice and contribution. As Osella and Osella (2000) have argued, such gifts "metonymically replace the man's presence and act as extensions of his masculine (earning) power, ensuring that even at a distance, he continues to

reach into the house" (138). Nepali stores in Klang therefore provide all the necessary items that one might want to take or send back home including blenders, Korean blankets, watches, jewelry and mobile phones. As others have pointed out, sending such gifts is not only a marker of success and generosity but also an expected fulfillment of filial responsibilities.

The increasing valuation and valorization of the neoliberal self-made subject, coinciding with masculine ideas freedom and autonomy, is remoulding traditional ideas of what it is to be a "good man." While traditional definitions relied greatly on men's abilities to provide for the family, today, the emphasis is both on providing and being seen as a self-enterprising individual.

In Klang, for instance, migrants saw themselves as being able to fulfill masculine responsibility for the family and simultaneously earn masculine respectability through particular consumer-citizenship practices. To illustrate this, the following section analyzes the curious case of Nepali migrants' involvement in a company named DXN.[20]

4.5 The New Good and Modern Man

"Our DXN has power. It is not medicine. It's organic. With DXN, I am 70% better. I am healthy now."

Prior to meeting migrants involved in DXN, I had only heard about DXN through other migrants. While scheduling meetings with migrants on the phone, they would often tell me they were unable to meet me because they were preoccupied with DXN work. Wanting to know more about DXN, I was finally able to meet one of the main Nepali leaders of DXN after two weeks of trying to get in touch with him. Having added him on Facebook and gone

[20]DXN is a "multilevel marketing" company focused on the cultivation, manufacturing, and marketing of health food supplements, usually containing Ganoderma, a type of red fungus traditionally used in Asian medicines. DXN was founded in 1993 by Dr. Lim Siow Jin with a business model based on "direct selling" of products.

through his posts and images, I could see that he commanded a lot of respect among the Nepali migrants in Klang, with many referring to him as “sir” and leaving comments such as “thank u sir accepted for me.” Most of his photos are of him donning three-piece suits and giving speeches in DXN events across the region. There are also collages of himself posing next to elaborately decorated DXN products. Status updates such as “now I'm going johor to klang”; “now I'm going K.L to johorbaru” and “In KLIA airport” also project an image of him as constantly and doubly mobile – always depicting his mobility through his mobile phone. His more intimate photos or “selfies taken in his room or office are also related to the promotion of DXN products. His involvement in this company seemed to be central to his entire being and a major source of self-esteem.

I spent two days talking to migrants and attending seminars at the Klang DXN office (see figure 13). I was told to visit in the weekend so that I would be able to attend the “motivational seminars” that they had every Sundays, the day most migrants had their days off. By observing these events in a stuffy crowded room of prospective and current DXN members all wearing three-piece suits decorated with mushroom-shaped badges, I was able to get a better a sense of its appeal to the Nepali male migrants in Klang.

Talking to a group of Nepali migrants comprising of the Nepali leader, Milan Sindhuli and other part-time Nepalis at DXN, I discovered that DXN’s distribution system and market strategy is based on “direct selling,” whereby members of the company’s distribution team compete to both consume and distribute products. The salespeople are expected to sell directly to customers and receive compensation not only for the sales they generate, but also for the sales of other salespeople that they recruit. This enables the company to expand its reach quickly through individualized recruitment and sales. What makes the system even more profitable for the company is the fact that the distributors are also consumers. In

addition to the immediate retail profit from customers, members are awarded commissions from the company based on the volume of their own sales and network.

DXN provides migrant workers with a compelling, potentially profitable activity to occupy their time during days-off and public holidays, with added "health benefits." Through their own unique code numbers, they become part of a system of acquiring "personal point value", getting discounts and commissions, for consuming and distributing mostly basic necessities such as soap, toothpaste, shampoo and coffee, all enhanced with the mysterious Ganoderma fungus. The consumption of DXN products was seen by members as part of a larger project of drastic self-improvement, the distribution of which was seen almost as a moral imperative to provide, as their motto suggested, "Health, Wealth and Happiness" to as many Nepalis as possible.

As consumer-distributors, many migrants believed that DXN not only provided a side-income but also showed them the "right path" unlike other Nepali men who spent their free time gambling and drinking alcohol. As such, DXN allows migrants to elevate their status by othering non-DXN migrants as immature or unwise in their spending. As one proud DXN member stated, "I always carry my products with me. I don't eat *khaini* or alcohol and have become a better human being through DXN."

Beside the economic incentive, being a member also provided a sense of being better providers and husbands. I met many migrants buying bags full of DXN products such as face-wash for women, baby oil, coffee and juice to send home through other migrants. When I asked what their families thought of DXN, most migrants responded by proudly stating how their families have all become DXN consumers. Many also described how DXN also provides opportunities to bring one's spouse to Malaysia for a visit. One of them shared a story of the recent death of a veteran DXN member and his wife who has been receiving about NPR

30,000 – 40,000 every month from DXN. The trope of family and providership allows DXN members to also set them apart as exemplary husbands. As such, the heteronormative imperative to marry with children and successfully provide for the family as a *man* is central to DXN's campaign. As "healthy, wealthy and happy" DXN members, they viewed themselves as more happily married and better husbands than non-DXN migrants who were either depressed, left-behind by their wives for other men, or committed suicide.

The strong values of self-responsibility and improvement promoted by DXN, then, also serve to compliment capitalist interests of non-unionization, placating workers' woes by providing an acceptable channel to sublimate grievances into a "positive" activity. DXN members negotiate exploitative conditions at work by individualizing their problems, blaming themselves and drawing strength from opportunities within DXN to (potentially) gain individual upward mobility.

Narratives of the self-made man through the individual accumulation of material wealth were frequently evoked to offset work-place disempowerment. Similar to what other studies on working-class masculinities (Johnston and Mclvor's2007) and migrant workers (McKay 2011 and Herbert 2008) have pointed out, narratives of suffering, struggle and survival are often associated with the heroism of having coming out of it better than before.

In the motivational seminar I attended, Milan proudly claimed to earn an improbable salary of NPR. 300,000 every month, an amount that is 12 times more than the monthly minimum salary for migrant workers. Milan stated that his views do not match at all with trade union groups like GEFONT-Nepal. He described his own story of a now abandoned legal battle against his company and how that process also contributed to a sense of disillusionment with practices of labor-rights seeking:

> I stopped pursuing my case. I was supposed to get 12.5 lakh RM but I had already spent so much just paying the lawyer. I respect the brother in GEFONT and he helped me a lot but our views don't match. Their way is to pick one or two and send them back to Nepal. What's going to happen to that person? He's only going to be in deeper debt. Our way is much better because we provide people a way out of poverty and debt. We help people "make it" while in Malaysia.

He told me that there are probably about 115,000 Nepali migrant workers who are DXN members and the numbers are growing. As such, DXN schemes cleverly capitalize on the vulnerabilities of indebted migrant workers who do not have secure recourse to justice without the risk of deportation or messy legal battles and who hope for financial autonomy. Additionally, it also serves as a "feel-good" company where migrants can engage in competitive behavior and an apparently lucrative enterprise while simultaneously engaging in ritualistic practices of shared "brotherhood" amongst co-nationals. In turn, migrants draw on DXN membership not just in the hope of realizing their aspirations to become wealthier and healthier but in the process be seen as global cosmopolitan citizens. Milan and other DXN members embody a "post-political" entrepreneurial attitude that is common among Nepalis today.

While exhibiting a devotion to his own company, Milan Sindhuli expressed strong opposition to other forms of collectivity, such as religious or political organizations. Unlike religious groups, which are seen as exclusive, and unions, which are seen as both risky and somehow tainted by politics, a multi-level marketing company like DXN is seen as clean, modern, and aspirational. To be part of a successful, global company is seen as an achievement in itself, especially when it promises the hope of incremental financial rewards as well as prestige. It does not matter that the DXN game is both extremely competitive and that very few members "make it." This is seen as "natural" and the "way things should be." The entire DXN system is set up such that the more one consumes and distributes, the more benefits and recognition one attains. This reinforces a certain kind of post-political

individualism on the part of many migrant men. Multi-level marketing enables some members to make a considerable amount of money, but the system is designed such that the vast majority must fail.

There was considerable variation in the views of Nepali migrant workers who are members of DXN. Many first-timers expressed a degree of pragmatism mixed with a heightened expectation of "easy money," while others were more skeptical. Experienced members, all of whom claimed to have made huge profits as salespersons, displayed an unerring enthusiasm for their product and a resolute confidence in the "DXN system." Those who spoke on stage displayed a cult-like devotion to the company, going so far as to compare it to their "mother" for having provided them a "second life."

Since DXN works through recruitment of new members, it also capitalizes on existing networks of care and social service, while potentially threatening such collective networks through the introduction of individualistic competitive behavior. As such, DXN allows migrants to develop a consumerist entrepreneurial spirit that provides them with the hope of gaining masculine respectability through both the fulfillment of family duties and desires for modernity. Being a good consumer translates to being a good entrepreneur, provider and a successful modern man.

4.6 Conclusion

What emerges through this chapter is how migrant men's consumption practices respond to and sustain normative ideas of masculine respectability and modernity. While aspirations for modernity expressed through various modes of consumption are not uniquely particular to men, they exist and interact with local gender norms that bear on the specific ways in which male migrants frame their migration experience as "modern men."

As such, the chapter also calls for a rethinking of discussions surrounding contemporary globalization that portray subaltern subjects as either passive recipients of or dissenting agents against global capitalism. It is a call for, as Puar et al. (2003) have put it, to go beyond the "local/global binary in which both the local (cultural and passive or the site of resistance) and the global (economic and active) are taken as given" (385). Moreover, by illustrating the complex ways in which male migrants become embedded within neoliberal logics, the chapter aims to destabilize mainstream definitions of neoliberalism described as a combination of market-driven prescriptions and liberal democratic principles with pre-determined and uniform results (Ong 2006). It thus becomes more productive and urgent to understand how "local" subjects negotiate with "global" forces to articulate their own dignified places within cities of world-class aspirations. In this context, this chapter draws attention to the highly gendered ways in which Nepali male migrants articulate consumerist aspirations and belonging to claim membership within a larger global and regional modernity symbolized by Malaysia.

By looking at migration as both a material and "cultural event" (McHugh 2000), the chapter attempts to illustrate ways in which migrant men become participants in the very project that threatens to disempower them. Viewing male migrant workers not just as mere laborers or producers but also as consumers and gendered beings brings forth new ways of understanding gender, migration and neoliberal rationalities that intimately govern our lives today.

5 Conclusions

In 1991, Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's then Prime Minister, introduced the idea of "Wawasan 2020" (Vision 2020) by announcing an ambitious New Development Policy that was set to transform Malaysia into a "fully developed nation" by the year 2020. Following the adage, "if you build, they will come," the Malaysian government invested generously on urban development projects (Ong 2011, 211), which transformed Kuala Lumpur from a tin mining node to a vibrant metropolis. The spectacular skyline of Kuala Lumpur today, which is dominated by the Petronas Towers, to a large extent, is given credit for placing "the city and nation on world maps as a modern and 'investible' metropolis" (Bunnell 2004, 67). Malaysia's world-class city-making projects also included a more "accelerated Industrialization Drive" and the initiation of many megaprojects such as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) (ibid 52).

However, these visions of world-class grandiosity have constantly been ruptured. The Petronas Towers are no longer the tallest buildings in the world and its now obsolete telecommunications features have waned much of its old glory; the structure is increasingly seen by the public as a reminder of their "leaders' profligacy and desire for hollow symbols of national advancement" (Ong 2011, 211). Similarly, the MSC that was meant to become an "Asian Silicon Valley" is currently a hub for second-tier circuit cyber companies, a reality that has only "reaffirmed Malaysia's global peripherality" (Bunnell 2004, 3).

Similarly, the industrial zones of Klang valley and the Port Klang Free Zone also face steep competition from more influential cities in the region – Singapore, Hong Kong, Beijing, and Shanghai – due to which, according to a report published by the Malaysian government (2010), the Greater Kuala Lumpur/ Klang Valley is "not the first-choice location for multinational companies and professionals looking for a base in Asia or even Southeast Asia"

(Economic Transformation Programme 128). Similarly, Malaysia's self-conscious race to the year 2020 is marked by constant declarations of how the country is well on its way to reaching its per capita target of $15,000 by the year 2018, two years before its scheduled time (Lee, 2015)[21]. As such, there is a thorough sense of regional competition that accompanies the constant need to assert the value of Malaysia through the "comparison and contrast" of Kuala Lumpur to other cities in the region and the world (see figure 15) (Ong 2011, 18).

At the same time, however, as Ananya Roy (2011) has rightly pointed out, such "worlding practices" are not just an "elite project" but also a "mass dream" (ibid 18). Similarly, as mentioned in the beginning of my thesis, Nepali migrant workers are not mere passive recipients of what is imposed by capitalist or nation-building agendas. Instead, as the second chapter discusses more specifically, migrants, too, imbibe "worlding practices" by working through the constraints of being "exceptions to neoliberalism" largely through the gendered agency afforded by their male and modern status. Thus, migrant realities resist easy recourse to singular logics of "planetary capitalism" that pits a "set of agents (subaltern, working-class subjects, multitudes)" against its "target (global capitalism)" (Ong 2011, 11). At the same time, while migrants are able to selectively participate in such regimes of globality, they also constantly negotiate with the precarity and socio-spatial exclusions that mark their everyday lives.

Similar to the invisibility of the containers that remain confined to the margins of port cities and stay afloat on ships in the distant and vast expanse of the oceans, Nepali migrant workers in Port Klang are rendered largely invisible beyond their economically productive role within the Zone. However, the "bareness" surrounding migrants' lives in these spaces of "extra-state governance" (Easterling 2014) does not necessarily translate to an absolute

[21] See the Westports poster (figure 16) in appendix.

submission to their conditions of "bare life." Nepali migrant workers constantly negotiate their condition of "bare life" through various practices of "belonging." Such practices rooted in everyday gendered agency, however, are not necessarily driven by an oppositional politics to subvert or resist conditions of "bare life." Recognition of migrants' negotiation of their conditions abroad is neither a celebration of neither "resistance" nor "resilience."

In this context, the thesis aligns itself with others (Roy and Ong 2011; Abu-Lughod 1990; and Rankin 2010) who caution against romanticizing subaltern agency or "resistance", and view subaltern practices beyond the "verticality of power" (Roy 2011, 316) and subversive intent. As such, the fragile and "negotiated" participation of Nepali male migrant workers cannot be articulated through the limited vocabulary of either consent or dissent. Such negotiations may ultimately reproduce, rather than counteract, "bare life" conditions.

Moreover, migrant men's attempts at mediating between masculine privilege and discrimination as low-wage male migrant workers allow them to put up with exploitation and growing precarity. For instance, while male migrants may reclaim a respectable masculine position as hard working, obedient and selfless providers, employers may also play along as "benevolent" employers fulfilling the "desires" of migrant workers who "*wan*t to work overtime and on weekends" (Lee 2015, my emphasis).

Nepali migrants' "dedication" to work is, however, driven largely by pervasive systemic failures to regulate fraudulent private recruitment practices and precarious working conditions in Malaysia – outcomes of Malaysia's own capital-serving global aspirations. Migrants' negotiations through various gendered practices may thus sublimate and depoliticize their genuine collective grievances while further legitimizing hierarchical gender relations. As such, Nepali male migrant workers represent the quintessential neoliberal subaltern subject of today who neither completely consents to nor dissents against conditions

of "bare life" but rather self-organizes and "makes do" with existing conditions.

In this context, it becomes important that migrant workers are seen as much more than what mainstream media or reports might have us believe, albeit for sometimes strategic reasons, as complete victims of labor exploitation. Only after considering the diversity and contingency of subject-making can we let go of presumptive notions of migrant workers' lives as singularly disempowered. Taking this as a starting point, the thesis explores how particular male migrant subjectivities get constructed around ideas of successful manhood generated through narratives of becoming "good male providers" and "modern men." Migrants thus create their own sense of belonging within "spaces of exception."

Among the many revisions of Connell's pioneering concept of "hegemonic masculinity," Coles (2009) "field of masculinity" provides a useful framework to understand the lives of Nepali male migrant workers caught within the often-contradictory neoliberal logics of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. Coles' (2009) concept is applicable to this thesis since Nepali male migrants' everyday gendered practices and narratives reveal how multiple dominant masculinities can co-exist despite their subordinate status as workers in precarious labor regimes. Migrant men may meaningfully exhibit and attain, albeit in precarious and unsettled ways, dominant masculinities within their own unique "subfields" despite their inability to meet hegemonic ideals within the larger "field of masculinity." The production of particular male migrant subjectivities as coherent and self-realized is, at the same time, a constant work in progress that is co-constituted in response to their marginal conditions. As Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) have stated, hegemonic forms of masculinity are neither ever "totally comprehensive" nor do they ever "completely control subordinates" (15). Similarly, the Nepali male migrants in Port Klang neither completely negotiate nor submit to their disempowered status.

Such negotiations also have political implications since they risk the continued normalization and silencing of male vulnerabilities and exploitation. While the endurance of exploitation that constructs silence can perpetuate silence; speech, on the other hand, can threaten men's carefully cultivated masculine respectability. Here, speech relates both to seeking legal recourse and to being able to talk freely with family and friends without being stigmatized. At the same time, it is also important to look beyond speech/silence dichotomies, given the threat of detention and deportation associated with "speech." Many migrants I spoke with repeatedly stated how those at forefront of dissent against employers are usually the ones to be quietly deported back home.[22] Dissent also becomes a costly act that many indebted migrants cannot possibly afford to engage in. For these reasons, many migrants' lives are marked by selective silences rooted in economic and social vulnerabilities. Ultimately, they contribute to the same endearing glamor of migration that influenced them in the first place and the masculine imperative to migrate and work despite all odds.

Silence can intensify dichotomies of female vulnerability and male invulnerability, maintaining existing social stigmas as well as the state's protectionist attitudes towards female mobility. State acknowledgment of female victimhood has only hurt female migrant workers whose right to mobility has been, time and again, suspended through periodic bans against female migrant workers. Despite criticisms from human rights groups, the media and scholars, among others, the "logic of masculinist protection" still holds strong (Young 2003, 4) where women are expected to be "appreciative subjects" of the masculinist state's "benevolent protection" (Babül 2015:117). Here, it is useful to refer to scholars who question

[22]At the same time, as a Nepali migration scholar stated in an interview, "Most migrants who engage in such protests are rich fathers' sons who don't have much to lose and want to re-assert their masculine status in front of everybody. This is also what our conflict has already taught those young men." His comment alludes to the possible classed and gendered nature of such protests in the sense that those who protest often have the cultural resources and economic safety nets to do so. For many others who choose to remain in the background, the potential loss of masculine dignity in front of local male employers and peers may not be as humiliating as in front of one's family and community.

the need to resort to victimhood as a necessary prerequisite to legitimize rights that should exist independently. In this context, the overemphasis on the sexual vulnerability of female migrants runs the risk of reducing "women's rights to a matter of need rather than entitlement" (Babül 2015, 125). Moreover, as more women migrate through unofficial channels, their vulnerabilities have only heightened. The masculinist state thus appears passively "protective" and actively uncaring at the same time.

The self-responsibility assumed by male migrants abroad can be seen in the context of Nepali state and society today, which has been extremely conducive for the emergence of a growing neoliberal politics of self-reliance. The most visible and recent instance of this was apparent in the immediate aftermath of the recent earthquake that saw ordinary citizens collectively organizing with their own resources much quicker than the state apparatus. Years of political deadlock and instability coupled with state ineptitude and lack of accountability have created a citizenry that is largely distrustful of the state and its public systems to provide any real service. This has created a pervasive post-political attitude exemplified in practices of taking out loans and fending for oneself through labor migration to countries such as Malaysia. The continued reliance of the state on neoliberal citizen-subjects to provide for themselves and their communities has removed the impetus for greater state responsibility and action. In this context, neoliberal subjectivities within Nepal have become yoked with masculine notions of male providership, travel, and modernity, to reproduce neoliberal migrant subjectivities in equally conducive contexts abroad such as the free zones of Malaysia.

The uninterrupted flow, unrestrained state promotion, and lack of regulation of male labor migration from Nepal is ultimately reflective of a masculinist and negligent Nepali state that valorizes remittances sent by male migrants as rightful providers while negating the

economic contribution of female migrants. The inflow of remittances through international labor migration has expanded the scale of male providership to the family, home or community to the nation itself. This is evident not only in foreign employment policies that favor male migrants but also in the ubiquitous talk among policy makers about the need to fully "harness" the economically productive potential of remittances for national economic development, thus transferring state-building responsibilities to individual migrants. Such "migration management" policies reveal the paradox of the simultaneously and selectively negligent and caring state. In this context, the increasing distrust of the public towards the "negligent state" has fueled neo-liberal ideas of self-sufficiency (Snellinger 2014). The context of labor migration within both Malaysia and Nepal reflects the working of the neoliberal state where migrant workers as simultaneously included as agents in the economy and excluded through state negligence and/or surveillance.

What emerges at a broad level is the salience of the pervasive influence of global neoliberal logics that disassemble and reassemble everyday life in various ways. It is also important, however, to not exceptionalize migrant workers such as my interlocutors as being uniquely affected by this process. Rather, in the thesis, I attempt to highlight how migrant workers in the specific context of Port Klang, Malaysia, respond to and negotiate with global structures that shape their everyday lives in particular ways. A gendered analysis thus becomes crucial to inform the ways in which social inequalities and relations of power interact with global processes to produce fluid, adaptive and emergent subjectivities. This thesis is but a modest attempt to insert new lines of inquiry in existing discussions on gender and migration.

In the context of Nepali male migrants in Port Klang, other aspects of migrants' lives such as the influence of church-based groups such as Migrant Ministry Klang need to be

further explored. Similarly, an extended study may entail talking to other Malaysian men, including workers and employers, to explore how local Malaysian men articulate their own definitions of masculinity in relation to Nepali male migrants and vice versa. This is particularly important given how migrants' lives are characterized by processes of simultaneous rupture and closure that continuously de-stabilize and re-stabilize their masculine respectability. In this context, exploring various competing masculinities at various sites such as the workplace or state institutions may allow us to more fully grasp the extent to which migrant men's everyday gendered negotiations require constant re-working. Future research may also analyze narratives of migrants' families and communities and migrant returnees, including female migrants, to get a more expansive understanding of the gender regimes surrounding migration.

Furthermore, while studies on masculinities in the context of male migration are gradually receiving more attention, it is important to consider how we as researchers can best responsibly talk about gender and migration in the context of low-wage male migrant workers from the global South. Here, critical studies on men and masculinities, gender studies and post-colonial feminist epistemologies are extremely crucial to draw from. The relational aspect of gender and masculinities allow us to go beyond discussions that point to the lack of "positive masculinities" or the pre-occupation with "negative masculinities" in existing studies on male masculinities.

Looking at masculinities in a relational context allows us to interrogate structures that produce and maintain hierarchical gender relations. While such studies do not foreclose possibilities of more positive epistemologies and praxis on masculinities, they also do not allow for easy, defensive, feel-good and non-relational men-only studies that make broad

claims based on small-scale empirical studies (such as Anderson 2009).[23] O'Neill's (2015) incisive article on Anderson's widely circulated theory of "inclusive masculinity" is thus a timely critique. In the article, she describes how and why the appeal of this (very media-friendly) concept reflects a worrisome and "distinctive postfeminist sensibility" (100).

Similarly, post-colonial feminist epistemologies are crucial to draw upon, particularly given the increasing pre-occupation of western media and scholarship on issues related to male labor migration and/or male masculinities in the global South. In this context, it is necessary to be wary of the easy slip towards foregrounding the "third world difference" of "monolithic indigenous patriarchy" where male violence against oppressed and powerless women becomes exceptionalized as a distinct feature of the "culture" of third world countries (Mohanty 1986, 352 and Singh 2008, 175). It thus becomes crucial to highlight masculinities in terms of hierarchical gender relations and as emerging through a constellation of situational, structural and agential realities rather than being a fixed attribute of particular men in particular cultural contexts. Ultimately, a responsible analysis of masculinities in the global South needs to be informed by postcolonial and feminist epistemologies and praxis.

As such, the thesis has attempted to responsibly and cautiously trace the processes through which Nepali migrant men leverage their status as men in the particular context of Port Klang, Malaysia. In doing so, I hope to have provided a persuasive account of how various material-social conditions produce particular male migrant subjectivities that, both negotiate and maintain existing gender norms and conditions of precarity.

[23] Through an ethnographic study on mostly white, middle-to upper-middle-class young men (mostly athletes) in the United States and United Kingdom, Anderson (2009) argues that young men in "Anglo-American" societies are increasingly exhibiting "inclusive" forms of masculinity largely because of diminishing "homohysteria." For Anderson, the "almost entirely lost" homophobic discourse in Anglo-American culture has translated into a proliferation of multiple masculinities with "less hierarchy or hegemony" (Anderson 2009, 9). In response, O'Neill (2015) points to the troubling potential of this thesis to depoliticize feminist claims and struggles, not least due to its de-centering of gendered power relations and primacy of homophobia in defining masculinity.

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Appendix

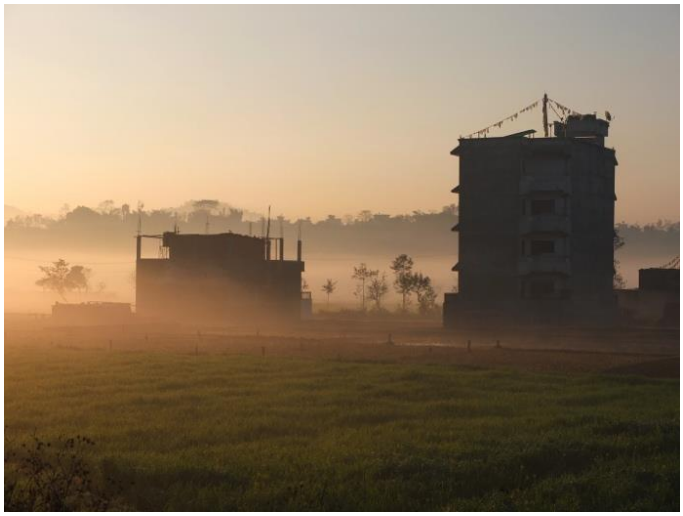

Figure 1

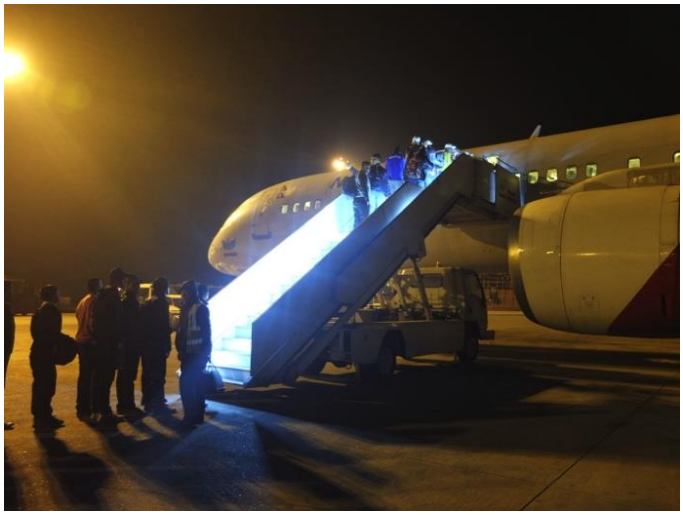

Figure 2 Boarding the Nepal Airlines Flight 415 to Kuala Lumpur

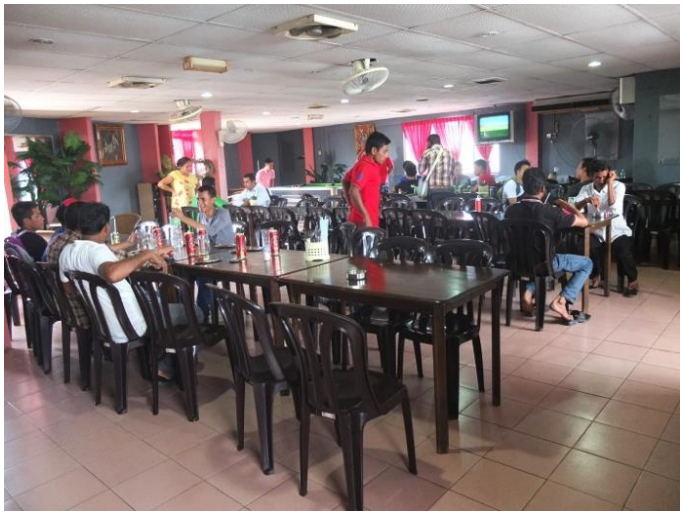

Figure 3 A Nepali restaurant in Klang

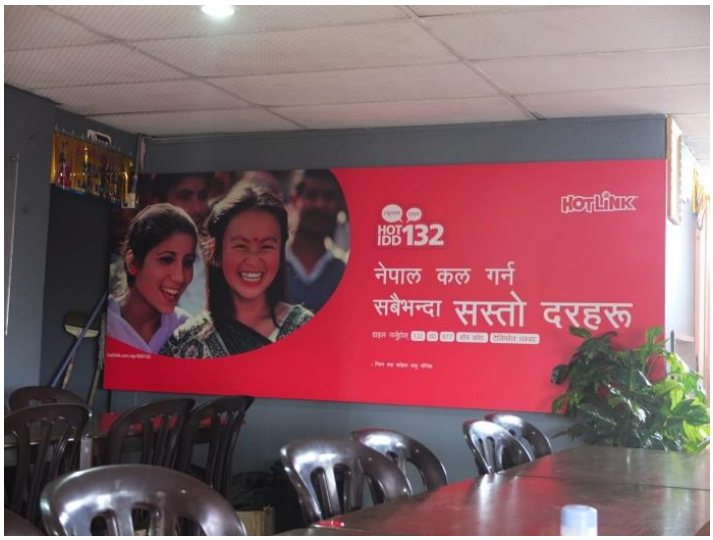

Figure 4 Malaysian Telecom Advertisement in a Nepali restaurant in Klang

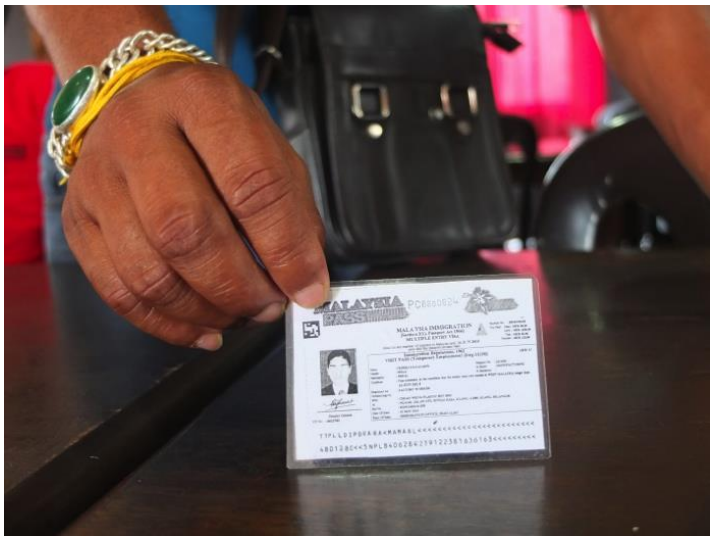

Figure 5 A laminated copy of the Malaysian Visa

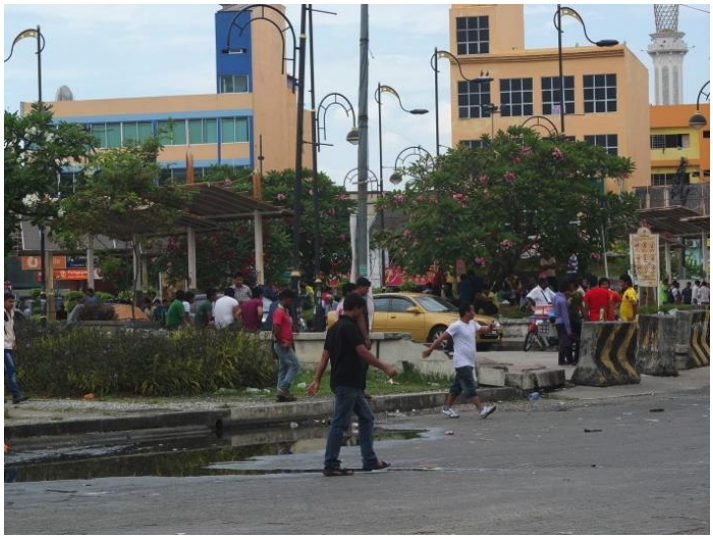

Figure 6 Klang Bus Terminal Area

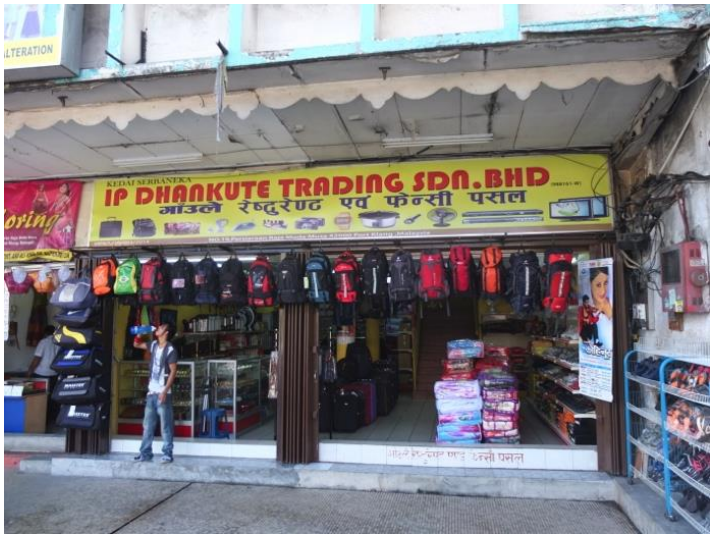

Figure 7 A Nepali shop in Port Klang

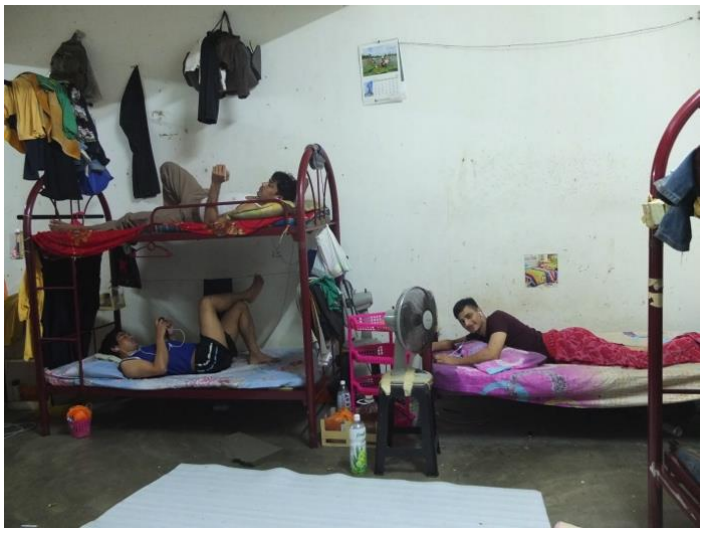

Figure 8 A dormitory room in Bukit Raja, Klang

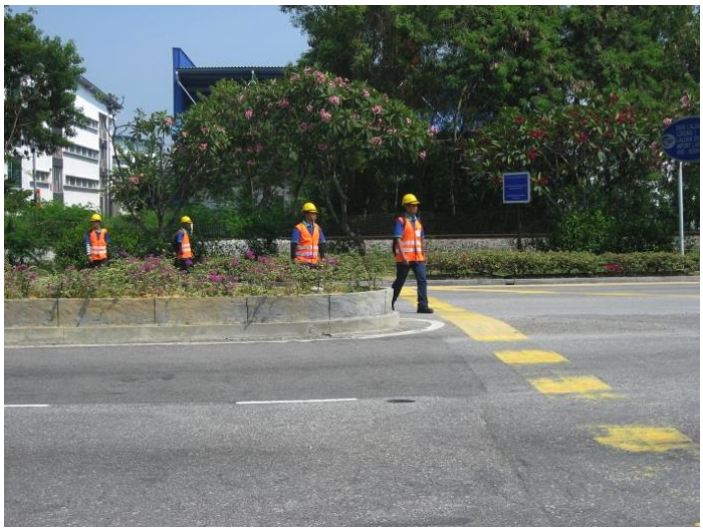

Figure 9 Migrants at Westport walking to work from their residential units

Figure 10 Without pedestrian friendly roads, migrants make their own routes in Westport

Figure 11 Dolphins: Westports Logo

Figure 12 Migrant Enclave in Bandar Sultan Suleiman near Northport

Figure 13 A "motivational seminar" by DXN

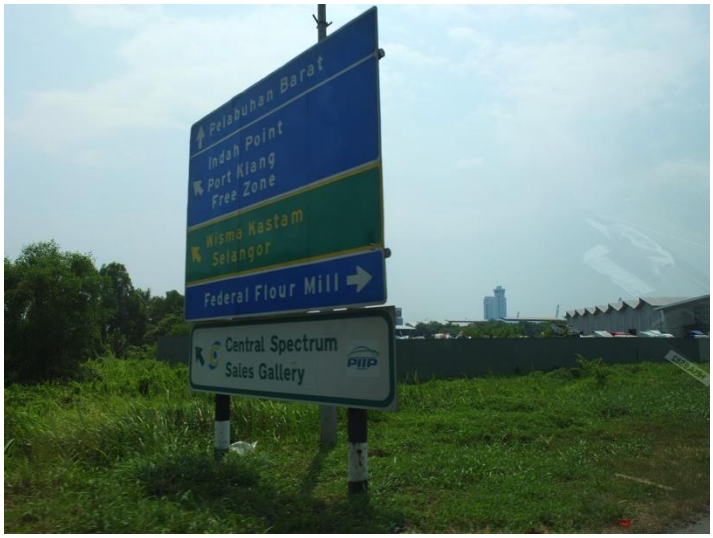

Figure 14 Warehousing facilities in Westport, Port Klang Free Zone, with the Westports Tower in the background

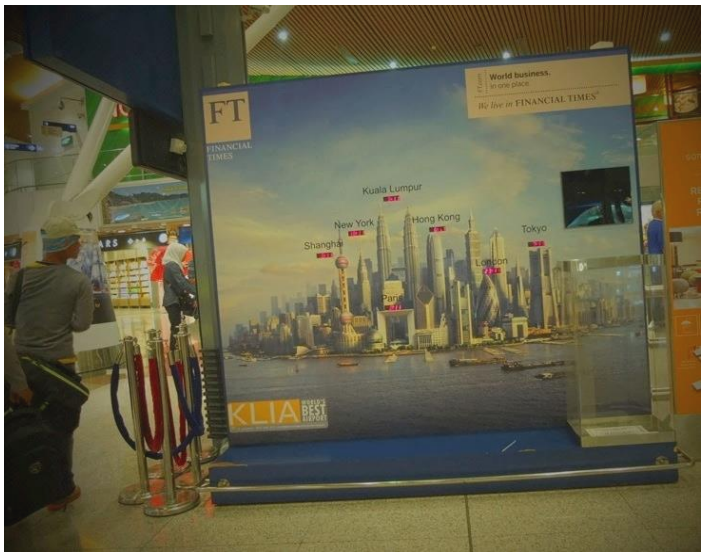

Figure 15 A young Nepali man looks at the poster displaying the Petrona Towers in Kuala Lumpur International Airport

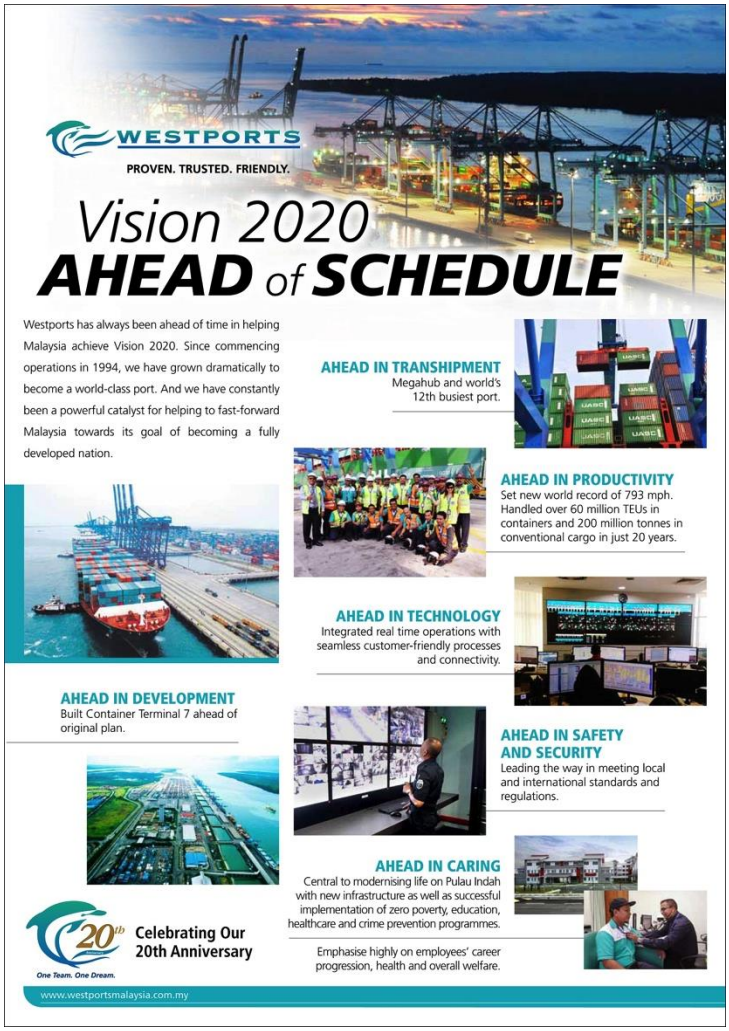

Figure 16 A poster published by the Westports company on their website