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Internal Deportation

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of *internal deportation* as a form of intra-state expulsion of citizens to their 'spaces of origin'. Drawing on nine years of multi-sited, participatory, ethnographic, and feminist research in Nepal, I examine how multiple state and non-state organisations forcibly return women migrating for sex and domestic work to their spaces of origin, which are often structured by the hierarchies of gender, class, caste, and indigeneity. I demonstrate how internal deportation seeks to immobilise Nepali citizens within the existing hierarchies that they have sought to escape through their migration projects. The article contributes to deportation studies by demonstrating that deportability is a condition which operates within the spaces of origin for some citizens, continues in the host countries where they become 'immigrants', and persists upon their return to their spaces of origin after deportation.

1 | Introduction

On 24 July 2025, 47 Nepali women were 'rescued' from the Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi (Karki 2025), on the presumption that they were being trafficked into sex or domestic work. This interception was enabled by an agreement between the Nepali and Indian governments, which requires Nepali citizens to present a Nepali embassy authorised No Objection Certificate (NOC) to transit through Indian airports to select gulf countries. Following their 'rescue', they were brought to Bhairahawa (Nepal), housed in a shelter and provided with counselling. The NOC requirement is a response to increased evasion of anti-trafficking transit monitoring by Nepali women at open Indo–Nepal borders, such as Bhairahawa, which connects Belahiya (Nepal) and Sonauli (India). At nearly all official open Indo–Nepal borders, Nepali anti-trafficking NGOs have set up check posts to intercept mobility of potential 'trafficking victims'. Once intercepted, they are taken to shelters for counselling and encouraged to identify and pursue a trafficking case against their 'agents'. From there, women are sent to

rehabilitation centres in Kathmandu or returned to their 'spaces of origin', often marked by intersecting hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and indigeneity they had tried to escape in the first place. One anti-trafficking actor revealed that none of the 'rescued' women were willing to file cases against their agents, and the actor wondered whether these women might attempt to re-migrate via other clandestine routes.

This account highlights the internal expulsion of Nepali women to their spaces of origin, where they are forced to re-enter spaces marked by the hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and indigeneity. It also highlights the agency these women exercise in not only escaping the oppressive hierarchies into which they are born but also the multiple sites of internal expulsion they must evade. Once successful, the government of Nepal denies these Nepali citizens recognition as legitimate migrant workers, as they have not used formal labour channels, thereby reinforcing what De Genova (2002) calls 'deportability', a condition that disciplines migrants through the ever-present possibility of deportation in the host countries.

The information, practices and views in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

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In this article, I draw on nine years of multi-sited, participatory, ethnographic, and feminist research in Nepal to contribute to deportation studies attentive to the spectrum of agency among those living under conditions of deportability or after deportation (De Genova and Peutz 2010; Coutin 2015; Khosravi 2018; Majidi and Schuster 2018; Maa 2023) in two interconnected ways. First, I conceptualise internal deportation as the intra-state expulsion of citizens to their spaces of origin, which seeks to immobilise them within the oppressive hierarchies of gender, caste, class and indigeneity. This form of spatial violence reinforces these hierarchies by immobilising citizens in their spaces of origin, which they seek to escape through migration. Second, I contribute to Khosravi's (2018, 2) definition of deportation as the 'spatial and temporal stretching of expulsion, from the condition of deportability in the host country to the "estranged citizenship" in the country of origin' by demonstrating that 'deportability' is also produced within the home state of citizenship for many Nepalis. For certain populations, deportability, therefore, precedes movement and functions not as a consequence of border crossing but rather as a prefigured condition of being born in certain spaces.

For many Nepali women, deportability begins at the spaces of origin, often marked by intersecting hierarchies that deny them full citizenship despite formal state membership (Tamang 2002; Grossman-Thompson and Dennis 2017; Pudasaini 2017). This internal deportation compels them to reinscribe the very positions of subordination they seek to resist through their migration projects. By highlighting how prescription begins at their spaces of origin, this article attempts to reorient deportation studies towards the preconditions of expulsion that structure the very possibility of migration itself, highlighting the internal dynamics of exclusion within which 'deportability' is first produced.

2 | Conceptualising Internal Deportation

In his genealogy of deportation, Walters (2002) traces how diverse forms of expulsion, such as exile, the banishment of the poor, corporate expulsion, transportation and population transfer, were historically embedded within Europe's internal governance. Such practices reveal that spatial expulsion long predated modern statecraft and was not always transboundary (De Genova and Peutz 2010). With decolonisation and the emergence of nation-states, international readmission treaties and the conflation of immigration and criminal law (Stumpf 2006) institutionalised deportation as a sovereign technology of expulsion that was grounded in notions of state membership.

Since the 2000s, scholars of deportation studies have interrogated deportation not merely as a spectacular act of sovereign power (Ellermann 2009), but also as a diffuse regime of governance involving multiple state and non-state organisations who both enable and resist deportation (Dobson and Turnbull 2022). Scholars have questioned the role of non-state organisations such as the United Nations' International Organization for Migration (UN-IOM) in managing deportation (Fine and Walters 2022), and have critiqued humanitarian organisations, whose selective resistance to deportation on exceptional grounds is often used to justify mass deportations (Ticktin 2011; Williams 2015), which

are often racialised and gendered, and generate profit for corporations (Golash-Boza 2016).

Scholars have also demonstrated that deportation reproduces racial, legal and neoliberal hierarchies (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010; de Noronha 2022), producing what De Genova (2002) conceptualises as *deportability*—the condition through which migrant 'illegality' is lived and experienced (Birnie 2020; Borrelli and Walters 2024). More recently, there has been a surge of literature that critically examines what happens after deportation (Schuster and Majidi 2013; Khosravi 2018; Hiemstra 2019; Kuschminder et al. 2021), which includes isolation, job insecurity, the breakdown of family ties (Golash-Boza and Ceciliano-Navarro 2019), mental health issues (Caldwell 2019), stigma (Schuster and Majidi 2017) and debt (Johnson and Woodhouse 2018). However, to avoid framing the study of post-deportation lives solely as one of endless suffering, De Genova (2017) encourages us to move towards the 'autonomy of deportation' which recognises migrants' autonomy both during their deportability in the host countries (Fischer and Jørgensen 2022; Maa 2023) and after their deportation in their spaces of origins (Majidi and Schuster 2018).

The case of Nepal, highlighted in the introduction, suggests that deportation experienced by Nepali citizens is not always an external expulsion; sometimes it is an internal expulsion of citizens. In both cases, they are returned to the internal hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and indigeneity, which they initially sought to escape. Whilst the external deportation of Nepali immigrants is performed by actors who might not fully, or choose not to, grasp the violence embedded in the internal hierarchies, the internal expulsion of Nepali citizens is facilitated by anti-trafficking, anti-migration and state authorities, which often receive funding from international donors to perform such expulsions in Nepal, and who are fully aware of, if not the prime beneficiaries of, such hierarchies to which they send citizens.

I conceptualise internal deportation as the intra-state expulsion of citizens to their spaces of origin, where they encounter the very hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and indigeneity that have long excluded them and from which they sought to escape. It is a form of spatial violence enacted within the state's territory, which seeks to immobilise already marginalised citizens by forcibly sending them back to their spaces of origin under the guise of protection, rehabilitation and reintegration. It is enacted by state and non-state organisations, often funded by international donors, which collaboratively produce borders through practices of interception, detention, rescue, counselling and forced return. It is operationalised wherever these actors engage in bordering along citizens' trajectories, including but not limited to villages, highways, bus stops, the Nepal–India border, transit homes and rehabilitation shelters, to govern their unauthorised mobility and to pre-empt border crossings, thereby immobilising their movement.

Many Nepali citizens are born deportable—their intersectional positions make them already available candidates of expulsion. Internal deportation therefore allows us to theorise how citizenship is a site of exclusion, thereby making deportability a lived reality for many citizens. Despite this, citizens continue to evade internal deportation, revealing their capacity to

move despite immobilising regimes, thereby highlighting the autonomy of migration (see: Boutang 1998; Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias 2024; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Scheel 2019). Internal deportation further emphasises how the spectrum of agency used by people on the move to address, negotiate and escape their deportability becomes the preconditions for both internal and external deportation.

3 | Methodology

This article draws on nine years (2016–2025) of multi-sited, participatory, ethnographic, and feminist research in key regions of out-migration in Nepal where women often migrate through illicit channels and frequently encounter, and at times escape, various state and non-state organisations who restrict their mobility and return them to their villages. I conducted multiple rounds of participant observation and interviews at Nepali citizens' homes and villages, at open Indo–Nepal borders, at domestic and international airports (in Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and Kuwait), and on national highways.

Over this period, I have documented 81 stories of mobility. These reveal whether, how, and where Nepali citizens encounter, negotiate, and escape the infrastructures of control that regulate, intercept, and discipline their mobility. Many of my participants, especially Dalit and Indigenous women, described anti-trafficking and 'safe migration' interventions not as protective but as constraining. They characterised training sessions, awareness campaigns and NGO-run transit monitoring centres along borders, highways and airports as borders designed to restrict their movement and send them back to their spaces of origin.

I have also conducted multiple rounds of semi-structured and unstructured interviews with government officials, NGO and INGO representatives, UN personnel, and trade union organisers involved in the pre-emptive protection of women from human trafficking and exploitation. However, many participants' stories of mobility reveal the ways in which they navigate this so-called 'protection', evading surveillance, concealing migration plans or taking clandestine routes to pursue their migration projects. However, not all are able to resist. Many are intercepted, detained or forcibly returned to their villages from airports, bus stations and border checkpoints in the name of 'rescue'. These lived experiences form the empirical foundation for this article's core claim that deportation is not confined to the cross-border expulsion of foreigners; it also occurs within the territorial edges of the state, targeting its own citizens under the guise of protection.

4 | Internal Deportation of Women Emigrating for Sex Work and Domestic Work in Nepal

Nepal's sex work or domestic work emigration policies take a protectionist stance which frames transnational labour migrants as in need of protection. Whilst sex work is not explicitly criminalised, anti-trafficking legislation conflates sex work with trafficking, rendering women migrating for sex work as potential victims of trafficking (Caviglia 2018). For the past

25 years, the government has used emigration bans as a dominant policy to regulate domestic work migration, driven by the sensationalisation of Nepali women's exploitation in Gulf countries (Shivakoti 2020). This protectionist regime is maintained by a broad network of state and non-state organisations that attempt to immobilise and rehabilitate women within Nepal through various anti-migration measures, including awareness campaigns, community surveillance and transit monitoring at national highways, open Indo-Nepal borders and international airports (Bhagat and Yea 2025). I argue that the interception of women's 'illicit' mobility, followed by their detention in shelter homes, 'civilisation' in rehabilitation centres and eventual return to their communities, collectively constitutes internal deportation.

Thousands of Nepali women are intercepted, detained and deported internally from the open Indo-Nepal border and airports in Nepal, and even bus stops and checkpoints within the country. Hudlow (2015) highlights that every year more than 3000 Nepali citizens (predominantly women and girls) are intercepted and deported to their spaces of origin by only one organisation, Maiti Nepal, whose website boasts that they have intercepted over 50,000 women to date. Yet, Bhagat (2022) highlights that there are up to 2–8 such anti-trafficking NGOs working at major open Indo-Nepal borders, conducting transit monitoring across various sites including, but not limited to, national highways, airports, government offices and community spaces.

During fieldwork, I observed and documented how interception was often based on perceived identity, shaped by gender, class, caste, indigeneity, appearance, clothing, travelling alone and even behavioural cues such as nervousness, thereby expanding the scope of who is considered deportable. The rationale of deportation is often paternalistic and patriarchal: these women are supposedly 'better off' in their birthplace. This logic becomes particularly visible in the release protocols of anti-trafficking NGOs, where intercepted women are only released once a 'male guardian' comes to collect them. If no guardian appears, they are often remanded to transit centres or rehabilitation centres, both of which function as detention centres. From these centres, many women are returned to their spaces of origin.

However, many Nepali women attempt to evade such internal deportation, which has triggered a rescaling of protectionist measures as the state and NGOs expand surveillance networks to intercept them. Women adopt a variety of escape practices to avoid interception, such as not disclosing their intended destination or employment sector, wearing modern clothing, travelling with false kinship cover stories or travelling without a passport. After evading internal deportation at highways and Indo-Nepal borders, they migrate to countries such as India and Sri Lanka, where they obtain legally issued labour permits before entering Gulf countries lawfully. However, under increased pressure from NGOs and the media, the Nepali and Indian governments reached an agreement requiring Nepali women to present a Nepali embassy-authorised NOC to transit through Indian airports (Namboodiri 2023). This NOC requirement prompted an increase in the deportation of Nepali citizens transiting through Indian airports, which subsequently shifted their migration strategies. Many women now attempt to travel directly from Nepal's Tribhuvan international airport of Kathmandu using

visit visas. At the Kathmandu airport, immigration officials carry out similar practices, sometimes refusing departure on official grounds and at other times questioning motives of migration. If explanation fails to satisfy these bordering agents, they are intercepted, detained and deported internally either to the detention centres or to their spaces of origin. The recent visit visa extortion scandal that rocked Nepal (see: Dahal 2025) has further tightened controls, leading to increased visit visa denials and more frequent interrogations to determine whether a woman is migrating 'safely'. Yet, despite these tightening controls and escalating threats of internal deportation, women continue to emigrate in large numbers. Despite tightening controls and mounting pressures, Nepali women continue to emigrate, evading internal deportation.

5 | Internal Deportation: Spatial Violence Reinscribing Hierarchies of Oppression

Whilst many Nepali women evade internal deportation, many are unsuccessful and are deported to their spaces of origin, which forces them to subscribe to the hierarchies of gender, caste, class, and indigeneity that they attempt to escape. I argue that the very criterion of internal deportation exposes the caste-based oppression and gender-based violence embedded in their spaces of origin.

5.1 | Reinforcing Caste-Based Oppression

Interviews with anti-trafficking NGO workers patrolling along the Indo-Nepal borders revealed that caste and indigeneity, often inferred from racialised physiological features, names or geographical origins, are routinely used as criteria for internal deportation. These women are perceived as 'at risk' and thus deemed legitimate subjects for interception and forced return. Whilst these actors justify internal deportation as a pre-emptive measure to protect vulnerable women from trafficking, I argue that it instead forces them to endure the enduring legacies of historical oppression rooted in caste and indigeneity in Nepal.

Nepal's caste hierarchy was first codified in the Muluki Ain of 1854, Nepal's first legal code (Khatiwoda et al. 2021). The Ain established a Hindu hierarchical social stratification whereby certain castes could be enslaved, considered 'alcohol drinkers' or rendered untouchable. Whilst the constitution of Nepal prohibits all forms of caste-based discrimination and untouchability, the legacy of this codification persists in contemporary Nepal (Aahuti 2010). It manifests differentially in land ownership, undervalued labour, social ostracism, access to education and health, marriage practices, and in some cases, untouchability. Furthermore, these caste groups remain underrepresented not only in government jobs but also within anti-trafficking NGOs, some of which are involved in internal deportation.

Against this backdrop of historical subjugation, migration emerges as a key strategy of refusal. Interviews with so-called lower-caste, indigenous and Dalit women highlighted that they do not see themselves as victims or as vulnerable people in need of protection. Rather, they view migration, whether for domestic work or sex work, as a strategic act of refusal of historical

oppression in Nepal that pervades their communities. For some participants, the decision to migrate is not solely a response to poverty but a deliberate act of refusal against the legacies of caste-based oppression that confine them and their family members to a life of indignity in Nepal. Their migration also becomes a pursuit of opportunities, dignity, income, education, health, welfare, historically denied to them due to their caste. Migration is thus seen as a way for them to break free from the legacies of caste-based oppression that render their bodies and labour disposable.

Internal deportation forecloses these possibilities. It forces women striving to escape caste-based oppression back into the very hierarchically structured spaces they have long sought to refuse. For many, this means returning to spaces where their labour is considered derogatory. For example, untouchability is still practiced in many sites (Nepal et al. 2021; Kafle 2023), including within anti-trafficking rehabilitation centres (see: Poudel 2009). In such spaces, their voices are silenced and their bodies rendered disposable, subject to control and exclusion by dominant caste and patriarchal norms. Internal deportation, hence, reinforces caste-based hierarchies and their structural violences through spatial relocation by denying the emancipatory possibilities of migration for such women.

5.2 | Reinscribing Gendered Based Violence

Internal deportation operates at the intersection of caste, class and gender. Whilst Abji (2016) argues that deportation is violence against women, I show how internal deportation forces Nepali women back into spaces marked by gender-based violence. Interviews with some lower-class women, especially from so-called upper-caste backgrounds, noted that working within their spaces of origin was often more exploitative than the labour they anticipated abroad. Most of the participants were aware of the risks associated with migration. Yet, they felt these risks were far outweighed by the persistent forms of violence they encountered at home. Some reflected that, despite undertaking cooking, cleaning, agricultural work and caring for the elderly, livestock and children, they continued to endure abuse from drunken husbands who seldom contributed economically to the household's well-being. For most of them, immobility only guaranteed continued subjugation, and migrating, even if it meant facing similar hardships abroad, was preferred, as it offered the possibility of earning remittances for a better future. For many, migration was thus a strategy to refuse patriarchal norms that underpin the gendered labour exploitation and violence they face in their spaces of origin.

Internal deportation therefore forces women to return to precisely those unsafe, exploitative and violent spaces they attempt to escape. Once back, they often face renewed physical abuse, social control, economic precarity and stigma. The stigma of deportation by anti-trafficking NGOs is particularly harmful for women from families adhering to puritanical norms. This is perhaps because historically, anti-trafficking NGOs in Nepal have been linked to sex work 'rescues' along the Indo-Nepal border, and encounters with them often carry the stigma of engaging in and returning from sex work abroad (Laurie and Richardson 2020). Despite migrating for different reasons,

detention by anti-trafficking organisations almost always leads to the assumption that they were involved in, or were migrating for, sex work. For those routed through anti-trafficking run rehabilitation centres, reintegration into community life is often impossible. Women who return after such detention are persistently seen as morally compromised. Such labelling, in turn, compromises their ability to form friendships, seek marriage or regain trust within their community members. In some cases, women reported being ostracised even by their families, whilst others were looked down upon by their community members (Dahal and Kumar Joshi 2015). These forms of exclusion enact a form of displacement which renders women out of place within their spaces of origin. For example, one participant highlighted that during her first attempt to cross the Indo-Nepal border, her husband alerted anti-trafficking NGOs stationed nearby. As a result, she was deported back and subjected to abuse and beatings from her husband. She eventually migrated again, as remaining in that space was no longer an option.

For women who had taken out loans to finance their migration, returning to their spaces of origin empty-handed was experienced as both a financial and social failure. Upon return, many faced pressure or threats from moneylenders, and some reported domestic violence and community humiliation. For some, deportation is therefore experienced not merely as failure, but as a forced return to violent spaces where surveillance intensifies and dignity is denied. For others, this spatial dislocation is compounded by the involvement of religious actors. During border ethnography, one anti-trafficking NGO member described how, following interception, they screen Christian missionary videos to 'rescued' women as part of 'moral rehabilitation'. These interventions did not stop at the detention centres at Indo-Nepal borders. NGOs often followed women into their communities, continuing to impose 'civilising' interventions under the banner of rehabilitation and reintegration.

Hence, internal deportation extends the reach of these (often western funded) NGOs with a civilising mission into the private and spiritual domains of women's lives. Whilst these interventions do nothing to address the structures that produce gender-based violence, by deporting women to their spaces of origin, they attempt to immobilise them to spaces where they feel they never belonged.

6 | Conclusion

Whilst deportation is usually understood as the inter-state expulsion of non-citizens, I conceptualise internal deportation as the intra-state expulsion of Nepali women to their 'spaces of origin', where their deportability, the ever present possibility of expulsion which disciplines people (De Genova 2002), is first produced. Internal deportation does not merely return women to their spaces of origin; it functions as a state-sanctioned, non-state actor-facilitated re-subjugation, forcing them back into the very spaces of violence, shaped by intersecting hierarchies of class, caste, gender, and indigeneity that render them deportable from every space they move through.

Yet, many Nepali women often attempt to evade these internal deportations and continue to pursue their migration projects. Even when successful, their own states abandon them, refusing to recognise them as legitimate migrant workers in the

immigration regimes. For example, some participants reported being threatened by employers who constantly reminded them that their state does not recognise them as legitimate workers, to exploit their labour. Still, many persist. Some, often burdened with debt, find support from the Nepali diaspora (often casteist, see: Pariyar 2018, 2019) to navigate these regimes, whilst others either await voluntary return or expose themselves to immigration raids. As a result, many of them often spend extended periods in detention or imprisonment before being deported back to their countries, villages and homes, the very spaces in which their deportability was first produced. Hence, internal deportation precedes and sustains external deportation. It is the precondition that makes transnational deportation possible.

The conceptualisation of internal deportation contributes to deportation studies by demonstrating that deportability is a condition which operates within the spaces of origin for some citizens, continues in the host countries where they become 'immigrants' (Fischer and Jørgensen 2022), and persists upon their return to their spaces of origin after deportation where they become 'estranged citizens' (Khosravi 2018). Internal deportation becomes a site that renders multiple mobility struggles visible within state territories, as citizens are compelled to resubscribe to the oppressive structures of gender, class, caste, and indigeneity from which they seek to escape. Nepali citizens' multiple attempts to migrate, despite the threat of internal deportation, highlight their autonomy of migration (see: Bhagat 2025). When they succeed in evading internal deportation, the state, of which they are still members, often withdraws protection as a form of punishment by refusing to acknowledge their presence in the immigration states, thereby intensifying their deportability.

This article demonstrates how internal deportation enacts spatial violence against women by displacing them not only from their aspirations and futures but also from any sense of belonging within the nation-state, their communities and their homes. It reveals that deportability is not produced solely in the immigration regimes; rather, some women are born into it, structured by intersecting oppressions which they are forced to navigate, resist and escape. Internal deportation is not return, and it is certainly not reintegration, as these women were never integrated into their societies in the first place. Yet, these women must re-migrate, evade surveillance and anti-trafficking NGOs' transit monitoring and escape internal deportation to build a future for themselves and their families. They are 'incorrigible'. Their mobility becomes 'imperceptible'. And they 'reappropriate' what is being denied to them—income, opportunity, respect, dignity and humanity.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive and confidential nature of the qualitative materials.

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