Staying Back, Falling Behind? How Social Responsibilities Shape the Livelihood Choices of Sons in Rural Denchukha

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Abstract: This article explores the experiences of 'involuntarily immobile' rural men in Denchukha, southern Bhutan, focusing on how patrilineal inheritance and social responsibilities shape their livelihood choices. In Denchukha's patrilocal and patrilineal system, sons inherit land and assume primary caregiving and household management duties, anchoring them to their natal homes despite economic challenges. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and life-history interviews with five men aged 21 to 46, this article reveals how social norms can compel sons to sacrifice education, career aspirations, and migration opportunities to fulfill family obligations. This contrasts with Buddhist matrilineal communities in Bhutan, where women are tied to land, illustrating diverse inheritance and related mobility practices nationally. Declining agricultural returns and limited rural opportunities exacerbate men's constrained mobility, creating vulnerabilities largely overlooked in Gender Equality and Social Inclusion discourse. By foregrounding men's caregiving roles and immobility within patrilineal systems, this article broadens understanding of gendered constraints on migration and livelihood in rural Bhutan.

Keywords: involuntarily immobile, inheritance, Denchukha, migration, gender, social norms

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Introduction

This article examines the lived experiences of 'involuntarily immobile' rural men in Denchukha, a region in southern Bhutan predominantly inhabited by the Lhotshampa (Southern Bhutanese) community and characterized by patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence. In this system, land and natal homes have historically been inherited by sons, who become heads of households and assume primary responsibilities related to land management, decision-making, family authority, including the moral and financial responsibility to support and care for aging parents. Cultural norms dictate that daughters marry and move to their husbands' households, visiting their natal home occasionally. This arrangement places the responsibility and burden of household management and caregiving on sons, creating both social and economic constraints that limit their mobility.

While existing literature on gender, households, and land in Bhutan has largely focused on matrilineal inheritance in Buddhist communities (Pain and Pema 2004; Tashi 2022), these studies reveal only one dimension of a diverse social landscape. Pain and Pema's foundational work across various Buddhist villages in Bhutan documents that although women often inherit land, they have historically remained disadvantaged due to weak marriage institutions and the concentration of authority in monastic structures dominated by men. Tashi's (2022) ethnographic work shows, in turn, how elderly women in matrilineal households experience marginalization when they relinquish household leadership and transfer their land, often to their eldest daughters, when age or illness limits their ability to manage land and domestic responsibilities. Yet, as Tashi highlights, inheritance systems in Bhutan vary significantly: there are instances of polyandry and primogeniture among

northwestern pastoralists; patrilineal practices in certain villages in lower Zhemgang, among the former noble families: the Choje, descendants of Buddhist masters, and the Dungje, associated with pre-Buddhist Bon lineages, and strong patrilineal norms among the Hindu-majority population in southern Bhutan. Despite this diversity, most research has remained substantially centered on Buddhist, matrilineal contexts, leaving regions like Denchukha in Samtse, a predominantly Hindu community where sons inherit land and assume long-term responsibilities for household management and parental care, largely underexplored. However, these social differences have a bearing on migration decisions, as I seek to show in the context of the patrilineal Lhotshampa of Denchukha.

The patrilineal system in Denchukha persists despite the enactment of new land legislation in the 1980s, which, according to Tashi (2022), promotes gender-neutral inheritance. Yet, in practice, sons continue to inherit the natal home and the majority of family land, reflecting deeply rooted cultural expectations, which parallels the patterns Tashi observes for women in central, western, and eastern Bhutan. My field observations and interviews revealed that households with extensive landholdings are more likely to allocate an equal share of land to both sons and daughters. In families with limited land, daughters often claim only a small portion or forgo their inheritance entirely, relying instead on land acquired through their husbands, in order to avoid conflict with their brothers. These inheritance practices, reinforced by prevailing social norms, do more than determine property distribution; they shape the life trajectories of rural men by anchoring the son perceived as most capable for household responsibilities to the natal home. Drawing on broader gender, household, and land studies, land is understood not merely as a material asset but as socially embedded and relational, carrying symbolic and social significance that shapes people's life choices and gender relations (Rao 2017). Pain and Pema (2004) observed similar dynamics

from a matrilineal perspective, where women were tied to the land, and comparable patterns are evident for men in Denchukha as I will illustrate below.

The social pressure is particularly acute for sole sons, who cannot delegate household responsibilities, which are understood here as the moral and social obligation to ensure the household's functioning, economic stability, and social standing, while women in the family undertake reproductive work such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. In families with multiple sons, this responsibility typically falls on the sibling deemed most capable, often the eldest, though it may shift if the eldest is considered unsuitable. While many men from Denchukha migrate for education, careers, or better economic opportunities, this article focuses on men from villages in Denchukha who remain "involuntarily immobile," constrained by family obligations, social expectations, and household labour. Even if the son perceived as the most capable for household duties migrates to attain education or search for jobs, their migration is sometimes short-lived, since they are often compelled to return once their parents age, fall ill, or become unable to manage household affairs. Although these men may not represent the majority (a sizeable number of Denchukha men are enabled to migrate), their experiences provide important insights into the social pressures, household dynamics, and mobility constraints that shape their livelihood in these communities.

Denchukha's geographical remoteness makes these men's lives particularly vulnerable. Even when they remain in the village and wish to improve their livelihood situation, limited access to markets, services, and livelihood opportunities restricts their options. Pain and Pema (2004) note that in remote matrilineal regions, women are tied to subsistence farming, while men enjoy mobility due to weak marriage institutions and male-dominated monastic influence. In Denchukha, by contrast, men remain bound to land due to

household and structural roles that confine them to agricultural labour, **c**ompounded by declining agricultural yields from environmental vulnerabilities, pests and diseases and human-wildlife conflicts. Unlike the often grain-deficient matrilineal areas unable to produce or have access to enough staple grains (Pain and Pema 2004), the Denchukha community relies on paddy and cash crops such as cardamom and oranges, whose (climate change influenced) decline over the years has eroded economic incentives to stay. Yet, patrilineal duties compel some men to remain, producing a form of immobility that parallels women in matrilineal regions, as both are tied to household and structural roles. The difference lies in the source of constraint, men remain bound by social and family obligations under patrilineal norms, while women are tied to the management of land, livelihoods, and household authority.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative life-history interviews with five men aged between 21 and 46 in Denchukha Gewog, the study explores how their life trajectories reveal the tensions between duty and desire, mobility and obligation. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded to examine how being a son in a patriarchal and patrilineal context carries not only symbolic privilege but also heavy material and emotional responsibility.

This study contributes to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) discourse by highlighting men's often-overlooked vulnerabilities as important to understanding social inclusion and exclusion. The GESI framework encompasses approaches that address unequal power relations and structural barriers to ensure equal rights, opportunities, and access for all individuals, regardless of gender, age, caste/ethnicity, class, or other social identity or status (UNDP 2017). Migration studies in South Asia, particularly in rural contexts, have predominantly focused on women left behind when men

migrate, emphasizing the effects on their workload, decision-making, and vulnerability, while depicting men mainly as economic migrants (Gartaula et al. 2012; Singh 2018). While much GESI research nationally and globally has focused on women and marginalized groups (Kabeer 2015; Rao 2014), this article demonstrates that men, too, are constrained by gendered expectations

and caregiving responsibilities, which compel them to sacrifice education, career aspirations, and mobility to fulfill their perceived duty as "good sons." By making these hidden struggles visible, the study broadens GESI analysis to highlight men's challenges and constrained mobility, showing that their immobility is shaped not by personal choice but by deep-seated social norms, household dependencies, and intergenerational responsibilities within a patriarchal system.

Figures 1 & 2: Glimpses of Denchukha. Photo courtesy: Nima Tshering, 2024

Indra's Story: From Diploma to Farm Work

Indra, a 32-year-old man currently resides in Poongthra village under Denchukha gewog, where he supports his parents by managing the household, agricultural land, and caring for his father's deteriorating health. Although he had completed secondary education and secured a government scholarship to pursue a Diploma in Computer Networking from Jigme Namgyel Engineering College, and found a job in Phuentsholing town working with a cardamom exporting company, his career as a labour migrant was short-lived. Within two years, he returned home due to his father's illness and the absence of anyone else to manage both the family and their agricultural land. It was this family obligation that called him back to the village.

Indra recalled that during his school years, he worked tirelessly to pay for his education, carrying oranges on his back during winter breaks and using the money he earned to cover school expenses and, at times, contribute to household needs. Yet, despite these efforts and securing a scholarship for his higher education that promised better career prospects and livelihood diversification, he eventually returned to farming and agriculture, his mobility restrained because of familial obligations.

While Indra's younger brother also lives in the village, his responsibilities largely involve herding the family's 50 cows, which requires him to spend three to four months at a time in remote pasture lands. Indra explained:

> "This made it difficult for my younger brother to manage both cattle and household responsibilities, which is why I had to return. For about a year now, our family has relied solely on income from our cows, as cardamom production has sharply declined. We sell butter and cheese, and traders come to buy our products and take them to Phuentsholing to sell."

In earlier years, cardamom cultivation provided the household's primary source of income. They harvested around 400–500 kilograms annually, earning Nu. 300,000–400,000. However, yields have since declined sharply to about 100 kilograms, reducing their earnings to Nu. 150,000. Indra attributed this decline to rising heat and erratic rainfall, noting:

> "Back then the land would be muddy and had moisture, but now the land is dry and growing good cardamom is a challenge. The unpredictability of the climate and declining agricultural returns have left me demotivated to remain in the village."

These declining agrarian returns add further pressure on Indra and his household. It has been six years since his return and although his father has regained some of his health, he remains weak and can assist Indra only during the peak paddy farming seasons. Hence, the relentless work and responsibilities in the village have kept Indra there. Considering that he aspires to migrate but cannot do so, Indra may be called 'involuntarily immobile.'

Indra's eldest brother had gone to town at the age of 13 with friends, initially just to roam and take on temporary work. Over time, he found small jobs, eventually settled in town, and never returned, as the income-earning opportunities and living standards there were far better than strenuous agricultural work and the heavy responsibility of looking after the family in the village. His decision gradually shifted the burden of household duties and caregiving onto Indra, the second son, and their youngest brother. As Indra reflected:

> "One of the main reasons I returned to my village is because there was no one to help with our land and to take care of my parents. If someone else had taken on these responsibilities, I would have definitely stayed in the city and continued working there."

Indra continues to aspire to a career in his trained field and hopes to eventually migrate to an urban area for better employment opportunities. His plan entails selling all their cows while his younger brother remains in the village to manage household and agricultural responsibilities, enabling Indra to transfer his duties and pursue work elsewhere. However, the feasibility of this plan is uncertain, as selling the cattle would eliminate the family's primary source of income. Most importantly, he stressed the necessity of at

least one son remaining in the village to manage family responsibilities and oversee agricultural land.

Indra's story portrays how men's migration decisions can be shaped not only by economic opportunities or climatic conditions but also by deep cultural and familial responsibilities. For Indra, his education and professional experience created avenues for livelihood diversification, yet his role as a son obliged him to remain at home and look after his parents, and this ultimately outweighed his personal aspirations.

Chandra's story: Only Son and Family's Backbone

Chandra, a 21-year-old man from Denchukha, was only able to study until the 7th grade before leaving school due to pressing problems at home. The turning point came during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 when schools were closed for nearly three months. During this period, his family found that his youngest sister, who has a disability, was raped by a villager, which brought devastating shock and grief to the entire household.

Chandra's family had long been in a vulnerable socio-economic position. They owned only 30 decimals of wetland for paddy cultivation and a small plot for cardamom. The paddy they produced was insufficient for their sustenance, requiring them to purchase additional rice from the market. Although cardamom had once provided a modest income around Nu. 70,000–80,000 annually, rising temperatures, pests and diseases (locally called Phurkey) devastated the yield, leaving the family without income from this source in recent years. This combination of limited land, declining agricultural returns, his aging parents, and the condition of his sister compelled Chandra to remain at home, managing the household, overseeing the family's land, and

supplementing income by working as a day labourer in nearby fields.

In addition to these challenges, both of Chandra's parents have hearing impairments, which limit their ability to communicate effectively, causing some community members to overlook or look down on them. Chandra reflected on these challenges:

> "When going to shops, they are unable to communicate properly, which prevents them from doing household shopping independently. During fieldwork in the village, some community members mock them, saying they are 'dumb' and do not know anything."

With only his father trying to manage the household and no stable source of income, the burden of responsibility fell on Chandra as the only son among three sisters, two of whom had migrated to Phuentsholing for work in housekeeping and sales, while the youngest with disability and a child remained at home with their parents. Reflecting on his interrupted education, Chandra said:

> "If my youngest sister had a normal life without any disability and if my family's financial condition was good, then I would have continued my studies."

After his youngest sister gave birth, and because the biological father (perpetrator) was imprisoned, neither he nor his family provided financial support. As a result, Chandra and his family took on the responsibility of raising the child without pressing for help from the biological father's side. This situation illustrates that, in a patriarchal society, men often bear primary responsibility for sustaining the household and ensuring family survival

during emergencies. It also demonstrates how social norms prioritize maintaining family stability over pursuing legal or financial claims, particularly in vulnerable households with limited resources. Chandra recalled how difficult life was during those early years, working hard to purchase baby supplies, making frequent trips to the distant hospital in Samtse, and struggling with mounting expenses. Although his nephew is now five years old and the immediate pressure has eased somewhat, the weight of responsibility continues to persist.

Chandra began contributing to household finances as early as age 11 by assisting his father with day labour. As family conditions worsened, he gradually assumed greater responsibility, and by the time he left school, he was managing the household entirely. Currently, Chandra is the primary breadwinner of his household, supplemented occasionally by small remittances from his sisters. As family issues have stabilized compared to earlier years, he now combines farming with seasonal migration, working four to five months on contract jobs in construction while returning home during critical periods such as the paddy planting season. Even if he wished to pursue longer-term contracts in town, he cannot do so because of his family obligations. Chandra explained that if someone else could take responsibility at home, he would consider working in town for extended periods without having to return frequently. From each contract, he earns approximately Nu. 30,000–40,000, although he noted that the money "finishes anyhow." The financial strain is especially difficult during festive seasons when, like any family, they wish to celebrate but cannot always afford it. Still, Chandra notes some small improvements over the years:

> "Before there weren't many plates and spoons at home, but now we have some because I bought them after doing contract jobs. There wasn't a rice cooker or curry cooker, and now these things

are all bought."

Looking back, Chandra sometimes wonders what his life might have been had he continued his education. He had once aspired to migrate to the Middle East for better employment after completing Class 10 or 12. While he finds living in the village manageable under the circumstances, he acknowledges that, given the opportunity, he would have migrated, as earning prospects are better in town. Chandra now aspires to work diligently on contract jobs and save enough to purchase a Bolero, which he plans to use to transport goods such as vegetables and dairy products from his village to nearby markets like Samtse town, which he believes will be profitable. Regarding his marital life, he feels he is too young to marry immediately and is currently focused on working and improving his family's socio-economic condition; only after achieving these goals does he plan to consider marriage. Family obligations and economic necessity have kept him anchored to the village, leaving him with little real choice. His situation illustrates how social and familial pressures within patriarchal households can produce involuntary immobility among men.

Suman's Story: City Ambitions Paused for Family

Suman, a 45-year-old man from Shitakha village in Denchukha, returned home primarily because his aging parents, now in their late 60s, could no longer manage both the household and the care of his 28-year-old younger brother, who has lived with paralysis caused by polio since infancy. For 18 years, Suman worked in Thimphu as a supervisor at a private stone-crushing firm, which served as the main source of income for his family. However, as his parents grew old and could no longer manage both the fields and the constant care of his brother, the responsibility fell on Suman as the eldest son.

Although he has five younger brothers and a sister, cultural expectations place the primary duty on him, while his married sister manages her own household and his brothers contribute only in limited supporting roles, such as sending occasional money home. As he explained: "Now that my parents are aging, the responsibility to care for them will ultimately fall on the eldest son. That is why I had to return here."

Initially, Suman returned to the village with his wife and daughter, intending to settle matters and then resume his job in Thimphu after a year and a half. However, the work in the village proved unending, and with no reliable source of income, Suman and his wife decided that she should return to Thimphu, where she now works in housekeeping at the stone-crushing firm. Three years have passed, and Suman remains caught between conflicting pressures. His wife urges him to return to Thimphu to earn an income and support their daughter's future and education, while his father insists that he stay in the village, asking, 'Who will take care of the house here?' This conflict weighs heavily on Suman. He admitted:

> "I don't know whether to go to work or stay to care for my brother. Sometimes I feel extremely frustrated, but I cannot share these feelings with anyone. I overthink so much that I almost feel I might fall into depression. Yet, I don't blame my family, it's an inner struggle. I try to console and motivate myself and continue working with dedication."

Even in the village, he says there is no viable source of income. The cardamoms have died, the orange trees are infested with pests and disease causing fruit to drop, and the family's land is very limited, just 60 decimals for these plantations, with the remaining one acre of wetland used for paddy cultivation. Adjusting to village life has also been difficult for Suman after

nearly two decades of formal employment. He explained how even tasks such as cutting grass and working in the field felt physically demanding, and that he must constantly interrupt his fieldwork to care for his brother, helping him to the toilet, bathing him or brushing his teeth, as his father no longer has the strength to do so.

Despite these challenges, Suman and his family are in the process of constructing a new house in the village with support from his brothers and savings from his past employment. Unlike their old home, the new one will have an indoor toilet, which he believes will ease the burden of caregiving by making it more convenient to assist his brother. Looking ahead, Suman has received an offer to rejoin a stone-crushing firm as a supervisor once construction is complete. However, he remains uncertain about whether he will be able to leave, as his mother supports his decision to return to work, but his father continues to insist that he remain in the village. This tension leaves him feeling "trapped," torn between fulfilling his role as a son and pursuing the income opportunities he knows are necessary for his daughter's future.

Kiran's Story: Choosing Family Over Career

Kiran, a 35-year-old man from Demji village, studied up to Class 10 and secured a job as a Non-Formal Education (NFE) instructor in his village. He served in this role for ten years, but eventually resigned when he was transferred to another district. As the only child, he felt a strong responsibility to remain at home to care for his aging parents, who frequently fell ill, and to take on the management of the family's agricultural land and household responsibilities.

Today, Kiran lives with his parents and his wife, who manages the household

and helps in the paddy fields, while he takes on the heavier agricultural work. He notes that men's responsibilities are more demanding:

> "We shoulder greater responsibilities as we are seen as the primary breadwinners of the household. No matter if it's raining, late in the evening, or even at night, the work must be done."

Kiran's sense of obligation stems from both his role as the only son and the cultural expectations placed on men. He shared that he often feels pressure and tension because the workload falls entirely on him. At times, he wishes he had a brother to share the burden, noting that if he did, he would not have to work as much as he does now. He also believes that having a brother would have increased his prospects of migrating and seeking employment elsewhere. "If I had brothers, I would not have stayed here," he reflected.
Like many of his peers, Kiran once aspired to work in places such as Thimphu, Paro, or even abroad. But as the only son, he felt it was his responsibility to remain at home to care for his parents and manage the farm, planting paddy and raising cattle. Guided by this sense of duty and cultural expectations, he stayed in the village. This decision sometimes weighs heavily on him, particularly during the agricultural season:

> "During the heavy working season in summer, I often regret not going to work in town. My friends have only one job, while here we have to endure different kinds of labour, sometimes in the forest, sometimes in the river, and sometimes in the fields. It feels exhausting, and at such times, I wish I could leave the village to work somewhere else where I would only have to focus on one type of work."

The family's main income now comes from selling ginger, cattle such as pig

and goats, and more recently, betel nut, while orange and cardamom production has declined due to warming climate and diseases. Although these sources sustain them, they do not provide the same financial stability as salaried work.

Despite these regrets, Kiran remains deeply committed to his family. He is slowly adjusting to village life and reasons that migrating would mean leaving his land and parents behind to start from the beginning. Instead, he focuses on his children's education, determined that they will not face the same circumstances he did, leaving a job and sacrificing further education to remain in the village. He explained, "Even if it requires taking a loan from the government or selling my land, I will do it, because I do not want my children to end up in the same situation I faced."

Whenever he feels demotivated, he draws courage from observing other villagers striving for their children's education. For his own children, he is committed to working hard so they can pursue higher studies and secure better livelihoods. Kiran's story shows that, although he was unable to pursue his own ambitions and remains in the village, he now channels his efforts toward securing a better future for his children, so they do not experience the same sense of limitation and obligation that shaped his life.

Roshan's Story: Only Son and Endless Seasons of Work

Roshan, a 46-year-old man from Relukha village in Denchukha, was in the 7th grade when his father died of a stroke. This loss disrupted his education and compelled him, as the only son, to take on the family's responsibilities. With his eldest sister already married and his younger sister still studying, the care of his mother and sibling fell entirely upon him. Recalling that period, he said:

"When I was small, I dreamt of studying and getting a job. But after my father died, everything changed."

Following his mother's advice to leave school, Roshan turned to farming as the family's primary means of survival. He cultivated paddy and vegetables for subsistence and later began growing ginger, though fluctuating market prices offered little financial security. Today, his family earns some income from cattle and dairy products, yet economic pressures remain a constant challenge.

Previously, Roshan's family lived near the Toorsa River, but frequent landslides made their land unsuitable for farming and their living precarious. They later moved to Relukha, where local leaders provided temporary land until their permanent relocation could be arranged. Here, they built a new house with a loan of Nu. 70,000 from villagers, which Roshan is still repaying. Despite his efforts, the land remains unstable, and financial pressure is constant. He noted, "There is a very limited source to earn income; however, the money gets spent in multiple areas."

To manage household expenses and repay his loan, he wishes to pursue seasonal contract work, but the limited manpower at home prevents him from leaving. He explains:

> "I cannot even take seasonal work because in the village there is never-ending work every season. Even after paddy plantation, we have to manage the water supply in the fields and look after the cattle. After that, the millet plantation season starts. We only get rest during winter for a short duration."

Roshan often reflects on the life he might have had if he had completed his

education. Seeing his former classmates working as doctors, teachers, and engineers reminds him of what was lost. "When they see me, they say, 'You are the same as before," he shared, admitting that such encounters make him feel discouraged and wonder about the opportunities he missed. At times, the weight of work and responsibility makes him feel like 'running away', though he ultimately accepts his fate.

There is a road construction project in his village, and Roshan is considering applying to earn some additional income. While he contemplates this local opportunity, the idea of working in towns like Samtse, Phuentsholing, or Thimphu feels daunting, as he fears he lacks the knowledge and confidence to travel outside the village. Despite not having completed his own education, Roshan is determined to work hard to provide for his six-month-old daughter, hoping she will have a good future, access a proper education, and secure opportunities that allow her to avoid the hardships he has endured. Roshan's story illustrates how family obligations and limited resources can confine career mobility, yet he channels his labour and sacrifices toward ensuring a better future for his child.

Conclusion

This study highlights the often-overlooked vulnerabilities of rural men in Denchukha, whose mobility and life trajectories are constrained by patrilineal inheritance, household obligations, and social norms. Despite legal reforms promoting gender-neutral inheritance, sons continue to inherit land and household responsibilities, anchoring them to their natal homes and limiting their education, occupation, and migration opportunities. While this is often portrayed as a structural advantage Lhotsampa men enjoy, and which indeed also holds true, in the context of declining agrarian returns this inheritance system, and the social expectations that come with it, is also causing some men

to become 'involuntarily immobile.'

By foregrounding men's experiences, the article broadens GESI discourse beyond women-focused analyses, demonstrating that caregiving responsibilities and intergenerational obligations also restrict men. Drawing on the relational perspective in GESI literature (Rao 2017), which emphasizes the socially embedded nature of assets and the intersection of gender with structural and institutional dynamics, this study contributes empirically and theoretically by showing how men's constrained mobility is shaped not only by material obligations but also by social relationship, cultural expectations, and symbolic meanings attached to land. The findings point out the need for context-sensitive, relational approaches to gender equality and social inclusion as highlighted by Rao (2017), recognizing that social norms, kinship, and geography shape the agency of both men and women in rural Bhutan.

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