

IRIS Research Award for Incoming Graduate Student

Thanks to the support from the IRIS Incoming Graduate Student Research Award, I was able to undertake two research trips to Nepal that laid the groundwork for multiple components of my dissertation. My research explores how governance, identity, and state institutions shape economic and administrative outcomes in developing countries, with a focus on Nepal. The award-funded fieldwork supported two chapters of my dissertation: one examines how gendered migration restrictions affect labor market participation and intergenerational educational mobility; the other investigates how the election of women and indigenous leaders in Nepal's decentralized local governments affects bureaucratic representation, particularly of women and historically underrepresented communities, as well as other broader household level socio-economic outcomes.

The fieldwork proved especially valuable for feasibility assessment. My original proposal included a study on financial incentives for engineers in Nepal's Bridge Management System (BMS), under the Bridges Improvement and Maintenance Program. However, early-stage scoping through interviews with officials at the Department of Roads and the World Bank Nepal Office revealed significant barriers to implementing an experimental design. These conversations helped me determine that the project was not viable, allowing me to responsibly pivot toward more feasible and promising topics.

Focusing on the two other projects, I was able to collect key secondary datasets. I met with officials at the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) to obtain multi-year labor force survey microdata and census data, which are not publicly available and required in-person requests and formal approvals. These datasets were crucial for analyzing female migration trends and labor market outcomes before and after policy changes. I also obtained electoral data from the Election Commission of Nepal, including outcomes from the last two rounds of local elections, which allowed me to link leadership identity to subsequent changes in governance outcomes and household-level indicators.

In parallel, I conducted exploratory interviews and met with key stakeholders in Nepal's development sector—NGO professionals, international organizations staff, and researchers—who

provided insight into the implementation of both migration policies and decentralization reforms. These conversations enriched my understanding of how gendered restrictions are enforced or circumvented in practice, and how the 2017 local elections, which mandated female and indigenous representation, have shifted political incentives, administrative structures as well as economic outcomes on the ground.

The field visits also allowed me to scope out future data collection activities, and potential qualitative interviews with bureaucrats and local leaders. I met with researchers at institutions like The Asia Foundation, International Labor Organization and Nepal Economic Forum, who shared expertise on administrative data availability and expressed interest in collaboration. In fact, I am currently contributing to a forthcoming publication on 'Migration Policies in Nepal' at Nepal Economic Forum.

Overall, the IRIS Incoming Graduate Award enabled me to gather critical data, refine my empirical strategies, and root my research in local institutional realities. These field visits helped shape the scope, structure, and relevance of two major dissertation projects, and I am deeply grateful for IRIS's support in this crucial early stage of my research.