



RESEARCH PAPER

Mobility and Middle-Class Aspirations: Transnational Family Life in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolving dynamics of transnational parenting within middle-class families in Pakistan, highlighting the challenges and opportunities arising from transnational living arrangements. With ease in migration policies and the emergence of a global middle class, many parents decide to adopt transnational parenting arrangements for a better future for their families. Thus, transnational parenting has evolved as a significant phenomenon among middle-class families, driven by globalization and transnationalism. This demographic is particularly growing in Pakistan. Keeping in view the research questions, a qualitative case study method was used. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with members of transnational families. After the data analysis, four major themes emerged. These themes highlighted the primary motivators behind the decision to adopt transnational living arrangements and how global forces impact new family dynamics. This study calls for further research into how shifting socio-economic conditions shape the aspirations of middle-class families in Pakistan and beyond. Integrating migration more centrally into development frameworks is essential, given its critical role in financial stability and social well-being.

KEYWORDS

Transnational families, Middle-class, Migration, Labor, Mobility, Remittances and Family Support, Globalization

Introduction

A significant characteristic of globalization is a rapid increase in cross-border movements, which promotes the movement of people from one area to another with the least limitations (Czaika & De, 2014). The most significant and dramatic trend of the past two decades has been the global restructuring of labour forces. Transnational migration has led to a new global social geography in which migration of both highly-skilled workers and low-skilled workers is possible (Castles, 2010). Different family forms occur when a migrant labour worker adapts to the shifting circumstances of the global division of labour and the labour market. Transnational families could be defined as “families that live separately for some time or in the long term, despite the distance, they create a bond or feeling of collective welfare and unity, such as ‘familyhood’; this bond persists even across national borders” (Carling *et al.*, 2012). Transnational families consist of both nuclear and extended families, with members actively involved in family upkeep and care. Families are regulated by the various negotiated family obligations that define life as a family, and the members are frequently closely observing the interactions (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002). The idea of familyhood also recognizes the active role that family members play in fostering and upholding a sense of well-being and solidarity among people living in different countries (Baldassar, 2007).

Social class is, without a doubt, central to the migration experience. The transnational framework on social class focuses on social class within a global hierarchy consisting of the capitalist class at the top and urban migrants working in manufacturing and service sectors at the lower levels worldwide. This has led to the emergence of a new global middle class. In this class, shared conceptions of family life, consumption, and intensive parenting are dynamic characteristics (Barglowski, 2023). Being middle class may refer to a variety of characteristics in addition to wealth, such as job security, schooling, economic stability, owning a home, and political as well as social beliefs. Class may also be a way for someone to identify with themselves and express their mental condition (Kochhar, 2020). Between 1990 and 2008, the top five Asia Pacific nations with the fastest-growing middle class also included Pakistan (Chun, 2010). Pakistan has cheaper pricing due to its lower per-capita GDP, which lowers the middle-class criterion. In 2015, Credit Suisse estimated that for an adult Pakistani to be considered middle class, their wealth has to reach at least \$14,413 (*Pakistan Has 18th Largest 'Middle Class' in the World: Report*, 2015). Over 50% of Pakistanis were living in towns with 5,000 or more residents in 2008. This growing urbanization suggests that the majority of the middle class is concentrated in urban regions (En *et al.*, 2022). The average annual growth rate for the middle-class population between 1999 and 2018 was 16.2%, significantly higher than the population growth rate of 2.4% for the same time. The percentage of the labour force that may be classed as middle-class earnings increased as well, reaching a peak of 20.6% in 2018 from only 2.4% in 1999 (Tirmizi, 2020).

Postmodernism has given the importance of diversity in family life the much-needed attention and acknowledgement it deserves. Characterizing and explaining the inherent complexity of a family system is the aim of this study. By examining family dynamics, researchers would be able to appreciate the intricate, sensitive, and personal nature of the family. In addition, the majority of research on international migration in Pakistan focuses on two areas: (1) the consequences of migration for parents whose children migrate overseas, and (2) how remittances influence children's behaviour and education in their home countries. Even though family dynamics have gotten a lot of attention, there are still significant gaps in the research. It is astonishing to consider that, at the time of the literature evaluation, there weren't enough study investigations that exclusively focused on transnational parenting and family dynamics in the context of middle-class Pakistani families; this served as the impetus for the current research.

Literature Review

The most significant and dramatic trend of the past two decades has been the global restructuring of labour forces. We have observed that the rich and developed countries have seen an influx of labour force due to greater adoption of employment practices, including subcontracting, working for yourself, part-time employment, and informal work, all of which are closely linked to the growth of the informal economy worldwide (Castles, 2010). The ILO estimates that between 185 and 192 million migrants were residing outside of their place of birth in 2005 (Pyle, 2006). Asia's rural inhabitants are becoming more mobile, which is changing their socioeconomic landscape. Over the past ten years, transnational movement has been observed even in isolated rural villages (Sunam *et al.*, 2021). Transnational migration has led to a new global social geography in which migration of both highly-skilled workers and low-skilled workers is possible (Castles, 2010). In the majority of the developing nations, when a person migrates to another country for the sake of a better future or earnings, mothers are most likely to stay in their home countries and continue their socially inscribed role in that particular cultural environment (Hoang *et al.*, 2012). Transnational migration has grown to be a

feature of several Asian children's early experiences in the context of increasing economic globalization. The change has a multifaceted impact on their lives, potentially altering the normative structure of their homes and influencing the connections between parents and children across generations (Alipio *et al.*, 2015).

Class realities determine and influence the parental expectations regarding their own lives and what they want for their children. In the context of migration and transnationalism, the relationship between class and parenting is complex, and their outcomes are not always as expected. Pakistan is currently at a turning moment where a sizable portion of households are moving into the middle class (Ghani, 2014). The percentage of the labour force in Pakistan that may be classed as middle-class has increased, reaching a peak of 20.6% in 2018 from only 2.4% in 1999 (Tirmizi, 2020). This has contributed to a rise in transnational family structures as the immigrants' long-term goal is to attain specific endeavours targeted at improving the family's overall welfare or position as they adjust to the changing socio-economic and political circumstances of a globalizing world.

In a report published by World Population Review, in the top ten countries concerning emigration, Pakistan is placed second among them in the South Asian region. More than 11.49 million Pakistanis are reportedly residing overseas, according to the country's Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE). They are either temporary or permanent residents of foreign nations where they work (Pakistan, B.o.E.O.E.G.o, 2021). According to the Gallup emigration report (Gallup, 2023), published in September 2023, the top destination for Pakistani emigrants was the Gulf; 96% of the Pakistani emigrants in 2020 were headed for countries in the Gulf region, which include Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. Furthermore, in terms of skills, classification could be drawn from the data obtained by the Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment. In 2022, 10,580 highly qualified Individuals, 14,302 highly skilled, 216,385 skilled, 56,276 semi-skilled, and 246,516 unskilled workers left the country to seek work abroad. Most of them are workers from middle-class to upper-class backgrounds.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) introduced by the UN specifically address people's movement, acknowledging that rights should follow people everywhere. This is achieved by preventing forced labour and human trafficking, facilitating secure cross-border travel, and safeguarding migrant workers. Many goals and ambitions make direct reference to different facets or types of migration. SDG 17 particularly mentions migration status as a consideration for disaggregation throughout the subsequent assessment and review. SDG 8 on economic growth and decent employment, for example, highlights the status of migrant workers, while numerous SDGs, such as SDG 16 on peaceful societies, mention the problem of trafficking (Piper, 2017). With an emphasis on the degree to which the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) consider the changing nature of migration, it is contended that planning for sustainable development needs to take migration more seriously since it is a major factor in both planetary and social well-being (Adger *et al.*, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's theory of social class provided us with crucial hints in our investigation. A major analytical category in a large portion of Bourdieu's study is social class. According to Bourdieu, the full occupational division of labour is included in the concept of a class structure. Class placement, according to Bourdieu, depends on where

one stands on this axis. Bourdieu's data shows that certain occupational categories, such as businessmen, corporate executives, and instructors at colleges, occupy overlapping positions at the higher end of the axis and fall into the same class location. He equates these categories as the "dominant class". In a similar vein, labourers in manual occupations and agricultural labourers hold overlapping places on the other side of the axis, suggesting that their jobs have a class location distinct from those of the dominant class; these groups are commonly referred to as the "working class". The study of class has been influenced by Bourdieu, and ideas like habitus, cultural capital, and social capital have been used to examine the many strategies and tools employed by members of various social classes to gain an advantage or try to overcome an obstacle in transnational family settings. (Weininger, 2005).

Material and Methods

The unit of analysis in this research was families involved in transnational living arrangements, so the case study approach was regarded as appropriate to lead the establishment of tools and processes to proceed with this research. The study targeted specifically middle-class Pakistani families, making the population of interest difficult to identify and access. Snowball sampling technique was employed in this study, which is a non-probability sampling technique. Initial participants (often referred to as seeds) were identified through convenience sampling, and then, these participants were asked to refer other potential participants who met the study's criteria. Thus, it created a "snowball" effect, helping us to tap into the networks of transnational communities involved in transnational parenting within middle-class Pakistani families. To gather data for our study, we employed semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were designed with the qualitative method in mind, allowing the participant to give a detailed narrative account of their experience. Each interview was conducted using open-ended questions. The interview questions were designed with the qualitative method in mind, allowing the participant to give a detailed narrative account of their experience. To elicit further details and clarify the interview material, certain follow-up questions were also employed. The audio recordings of the replies were made and stored for transcription.

Results and Discussion

For selecting the sample for our study, two conditions were made necessary: 1) at least one parent must be living abroad while actively participating in the life of the family left in the home countries; 2) the years of post-spousal migration should be two or more years at the time of the interviews. All participants of this study were from rural, urban, or suburban areas of Sargodha. This suggests that the phenomenon of transnational parenting is not limited to a specific area or urban residents but is spread across different socio-economic backgrounds. The participants were between the ages of 29 to 52. Educational levels of the participants ranged from illiterate to postgraduate levels, suggesting that the phenomenon of transnational parenting is not restricted to a specific stratum of education. The years of post-spousal migration ranged between 2 to 17 years.

Table 1
Demographic information

Sr#	Age	Level of Education	No. of Children	Years post-spousal migration	Occupation	Background	Family Structure
1	38	BS	Two	8 years	Housewife	Urban	Extended

2	29	BS	One	2 years	Pharmacist	Urban	Extended
3	40	Master or above	Two	9 years	Teacher	Urban	Nuclear
4	43	BA	Three	5 years	Housewife	Urban	Nuclear
5	37	Intermediate	Three	6 years	Housewife	Sub-urban	Extended
6	27	Master or above	One	5 years	Doctor	Urban	Extended
7	51	BA	Four	15 years	Housewife	Urban	Nuclear
8	49	BA	Three	11 years	Housewife	Rural	Extended
9	39	BSC	Three	9 years	Housewife	Rural	Extended
10	42	Illiterate	Two	10 years	Housewife	Rural	Extended
11	50	BS	Five	17 years	Housewife	Sub-urban	Nuclear
12	40	BSC	Three	8 years	Housewife	Urban	Extended
13	38	Master or above	One	6 years	Teacher	Urban	Nuclear
14	42	BSC	Two	2 years	Housewife	Rural	Extended
15	52	Master or above	Four	9 years	Housewife	Urban	Extended
16	35	Master or above	One	3 years	Manager	Urban	Nuclear
17	33	BA	Three	2 years	Housewife	Urban	Extended
18	46	Matriculation	Four	8 years	Housewife	Rural	Extended

Thematic Analysis

The findings were extracted from the transcription of the audio recordings and analysis of the written responses of the participants. During the data analysis, five main themes emerged regarding the experiences of transnational families involved in transnational parenting. The emerging themes highlighted the factors leading to transnational parenting and how emerging family dynamics are shaped by global forces. After multiple cycles of coding and reviewing the emergent themes, four major themes were finalized. A summary of the thematic findings of this study is outlined in table below:

Table 2
Themes and Sub-themes

Sr#	THEMES	SUB-THEMES
1	Primary Factors Leading to the Creation of Transnational Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transnational marriages Discontentment with the socio-political situation in Pakistan
2	Aspirational Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remittance-driven upward mobility Children joining fathers abroad
3	Negotiating Gender Roles Across Distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power dynamics and decision making Dual role of mother
4	Social Cost of Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constraints to family reunion Emotional labour and conflicts

Theme 1: Primary Factors Leading to the Creation of Transnational Families

Most of the participants reported that the ultimate motivation behind this decision was to improve the living standard of their family. Participants reported that higher wages abroad are preferred over the low-paying jobs in Pakistan. Thus, migrating abroad for the sake of better-paying jobs is seen as a 'livelihood strategy' among the middle-class Pakistani families. One of the participants reported that they decided to adopt a transnational parenting arrangement after they received a job offer from abroad.

"15 years back, we mutually took this decision. My husband got a good job offer, and my husband's brother was also living abroad at the same time. So, he moved to Saudi Arabia with his brother in the year 2008 or maybe it was 2009 if I remember correctly" (Participant 7).

Cultural influences also play a role in international migration and transnational parenting, in addition to economic ones. It has been noted that many participants adopted transnational parenting practices as a result of marrying someone who resides overseas. A large number of Pakistanis residing overseas would rather marry into families with comparable cultural norms and ethnic backgrounds. Many middle-class families consent to transnational parenting arrangements for a variety of reasons, including visa limitations or insufficient funds to move the spouse abroad.

"My husband lived abroad when we got married in 2018. Initially, we decided to move to Europe and settle there, but due to COVID-19, everything was halted. He visits Pakistan every year, but we cannot afford to move with him at the moment" (Participant 2).

Theme 2: Aspirational Planning

Remittances have a tremendous impact on the middle-class families in Pakistan as it ensures access to quality of life. According to the testimonies of the participants, despite the rising cost of living, living standards of these families have improved significantly.

"We lived in a rent house in Bhulwal before moving to Sargodha. Now we own a five marla house. I currently live with my four children. There is no doubt it was very difficult in the start for me and my children and even my husband. But it is also our responsibility as parents to give our children a good life" (Participant 7).

The opportunities created by transnational parenting arrangements, as well as parents' long-term goals, greatly influence their motives to pursue financial security in their home countries. One of the aspirations parents have is to invest in Pakistan as overseas Pakistani, they aim to not only secure their future financially but also leave a legacy for their upcoming generation.

"We are planning to invest in a business so that my husband can come back home. It is difficult for him to move us abroad with him in Dubai. My children are now earning, and they want their father to come back home and live with them" (Participant 8).

One of the participants revealed how multiple sources of income helped them survive during tough times.

"Years back we purchased a few shops and gave them on rent. During COVID-19 when my husband was struggling to send money back home, we survived on the rent we received from shops" (Participant 4).

Many participants stated that they intend to send their children abroad to join their fathers or pursue higher education. One of the participants stated that her eldest son had already joined his father in Saudi Arabia. Participants explained that their decision to send their children abroad is motivated by a desire to provide a better future for them. Our participants' comments suggested that the majority of their boys are sent abroad for higher study or work.

“Even though we talked about us moving abroad with the father of my children, the economic conditions are not letting us do so. That is why we decided that our son should go abroad to work there. Once he settles there, he can move us with him. We do not want to become a burden on my husband because he does not own a house there. Once the financial position becomes better, we can settle abroad together” (Participant 4).

Theme 3: Negotiating Gender Roles across Distance

Participants' responses indicated that their husbands play the key role in major life decisions. Their experiences in host countries have a significant impact on their decision-making processes at home. The fathers make the majority of money-related decisions, including earning, spending, and saving. In one example, the mother and son stayed overseas, while the father remained in Pakistan. She explained that they divide expenditures and participate equally in decision-making.

“My husband is actively in the decision-making process. Before marriage, my parents made all the decisions. But now my husband and I mutually decide and plan for our future. Initially, I decided to settle in Pakistan with my husband, but later we had a change of heart. Thanks to Allah, my family is very supportive and they backed my decision to settle abroad in the future” (Participant 6).

In the absence of fathers, mothers are forced to adopt a dual role in the family. In addition to taking care of children's emotional needs, participants stated that they made important decisions when the fathers were away. Mothers from extended families reported that they have to take care of husband's family too, such as their husband's parents. Thus, responses of our participants show that mother's role has evolved into a dual function that fulfils both parent's roles.

“Yes, I think our family has changed a lot after my husband went to Dubai. My duties as a mother have definitely increased. I never experienced this amount of stress when my husband was here. Now I have to take care of my children and my in-laws. It seems an easy task to an outsider, but the person who is experiencing this knows how painful it gets” (Participant 16).

Not only mothers are responsible for taking care of the needs of children and husband's family, they are also responsible to take care of their husbands even from afar. Participants reported that they have to make sure they keep their husbands updated and stay available for emotional support for their husbands. One of the participants reported that it becomes difficult sometimes to manage the role as a mother as well as a wife.

“It is very hard to take care of your children's needs. Their education, their health, and their daily needs. I know that in the absence of their father, they will rely on me for everything. On the other hand, as a wife, I must take care of my husband and make sure the bond between my children and their father remains strong. I am grateful that my children are very mature for their age, and they understand everything” (Participant 11).

Theme 4: Social Cost of Separation

The main challenges reported by the participants included adjusting to a new normal after emigration of husband, dealing with loneliness and anxiety, overcoming misunderstandings, dealing with extended family, navigating the impact of COVID-19 on remittances. Despite these challenges, participants reported that their families stayed firm and it created many prospects for improved living conditions and upward social mobility.

"Because we are both job holders, we often do not get to talk because we are tired from a long day. There were times when this led to misunderstandings between us. So, I think living in separate countries and taking care of children is a bittersweet experience. Problems come and go, but at least we can give a good life to our children" (Participant 16).

One of the most significant problems that wives living in their home nations experience is intrusion from extended family members. One of the participants stated that they shared a house with the husband's family, and there were times when there was disagreement within the house.

"Whenever there is an instance of conflict or argument in the family, I am totally left alone. My in-laws think I am given more freedom than I should have. Everyone in the family would be on one side, and I would be on the other side. When your husband is not around, people see you with eyes of doubt. That is why we are planning to buy a separate house in the future" (Participant 10).

Another participant reported how she faced negative remarks and competition among family members.

"Life is the name of suffering. I faced negative remarks and reactions when we bought a new house in the city. Some of the relatives even questioned how we were getting enough money to afford it and accused us of earning money illegally. It is very disheartening and difficult for me, my children, and even my husband" (Participant 15).

One of the most significant challenges faced by transnational families was the lack of opportunities for family reunion. There were several reasons quoted by the participants for this delay in reunion. Participants reported that it is difficult for them to manage the impact of long-term separation. The majority of the participants reported that financial issues were the major cause of the delay in reunion. One participant reported that her husband's job is very tough, and he only gets leave once a year. According to the responses of the participants. The reunion has become particularly difficult after COVID-19. Those planning on reuniting permanently in host countries are also facing many difficulties.

"My husband used to visit Pakistan every year. Now he tried to visit every two years. The situation that is going on all over the world and the inflation has made it very difficult to arrange a trip back home every year" (Participant 9).

One of the participants who lived in Romania with her son revealed that they intend to reunite and settle in Germany but it is taking too long to get visa for her husband who is back home in Pakistan. She was also worried about how things will unfold once they moved to Germany.

"It has been 5 years since I got married. My husband still did not get his visa. He has visited the relevant offices in Sargodha, Lahore and even Karachi. I do not know what the problem is and why they are delaying. I hope he gets his visa and we reunite soon. But again, I do not know what problems are awaiting us in Germany. Sometimes I do think I should settle in Pakistan with my in-laws but then I think of my son's future. The struggle today will give my son a good life in future" (Participant 6).

Discussion

The middle class falls somewhere between the top and lower classes in terms of socio-economic status. This class has a special status as it acts as a bridging class between two opposite classes. This class holds a desire for upward social mobility, which ultimately ensures economic stability and consumer demand in this class and so it drives them to economic progress. It could be argued that class realities have a massive impact on the parental expectations of those involved in transnational parenting. While they make decisions to improve the living standards and provide a better future to their children, they continuously navigate through class realities and cope with change. Furthermore, class realities shape the parents' expectations towards their children and also themselves. Our findings are consistent with a study that found that middle-class family migration is frequently viewed as an individual endeavour to improve the family's situation. Middle-class status frequently impacts people's experiences in a variety of sectors (Pant, 2021).

It is imperative to understand the distinction between international migration and transnational migration. Scholars suggest that transnational migration occurs within fluid social spaces that are constantly remade due to migrants' incorporation into more than one culture and society (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Thus, it could be argued that migrants do not just send money back home, but also send ideas and values. These could also be seen as "social remittances" influencing family dynamics and future aspirations. Much of the theory focuses on either working-class migrants or high-skilled migrants. By studying transnational migration through a middle-class lens, one could see the unique and complex position that sets them apart from working-class and elite-class families.

One could argue that the middle class is the most emotionally burdened group, as they are continuously trying to maintain family harmony and upward social mobility. This class is most prone to "status insecurity", which becomes a leading cause for transnational living arrangements. Migrants may not qualify for permanent residency or face visa precarity in the host country. Thus, middle-class transnational families are not securely privileged as they continuously navigate both the realities of the origin and destination countries.

Conclusion

Globalization has resulted in the rise of the global middle class, and developing countries, particularly those in Asia, are experiencing rapid growth in this demographic. Pakistan is currently at a tipping point at which a substantial proportion of households are entering the middle class. Middle-class families tend to prioritize opportunities that promote upward social mobility. They are not rich enough to outsource their problems, and not poor enough to evoke policy support. The current study emphasizes that each country has unique family behaviour patterns and transitions. Every one of them is worthy of attention. A thorough understanding of family transitions and emerging dynamics within a certain nation's environment may assist scholars in better understanding current family and demographic developments in that country. Future planning for sustainable development needs to take migration more seriously since it is a major financial and social well-being factor. Future policy must protect the rights of the migrants and their families along with challenging the "glorified remittance" narrative.

Recommendations

The findings of this study guide future policies by shedding light on the harsh reality of Pakistan's labour market and the estrangement of Pakistanis from the socio-economic condition of Pakistan. Future planning for sustainable development needs to take migration more seriously since it is a major financial and social well-being factor. Policies must protect the rights of the migrants and their families along with addressing the additional issues of inclusivity and equity. Future research should focus more on women-led migration from South Asia to other parts of the world. Finally, this study adds to the corpus of knowledge regarding family well-being in the context of transnational migration and calls for further research on how changing socioeconomic conditions are continuously shaping the aspirations of middle-class families in Pakistan and other parts of the world.

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