

The Impact of Parental Migration on the Emotional Development of Left Behind Children in Rural Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background: Parental migration has become a widespread phenomenon globally, with many children left behind in their home countries. While migration often improves the financial situation of families, it can adversely affect the emotional and behavioral development of children. Previous studies have indicated that children left behind by migrant parents face increased challenges in their social and emotional well-being, but research focusing on rural areas, particularly in Pakistan, is limited.

Aim: The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of parental migration on the emotional development of left-behind children in rural Pakistan, with a focus on emotional stability, social interaction, behavioral adjustment, and academic performance.

Method: This study utilized a cross-sectional design and surveyed 300 children aged 11-19 from Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Peshawar. Participants were divided into two groups: left-behind children (n=150) and non-left-behind children (n=150). The Parental Migration Questionnaire (PMQ) and the Behavior Problems Index (BPI) were used to assess the children's emotional and behavioral outcomes. Statistical analyses, including t-tests and correlation analysis, were performed to determine the significance of the results.

Results: The findings revealed that left-behind children exhibited significantly poorer emotional stability, social interaction, behavioral adjustment, and academic performance compared to their non-left-behind counterparts ($p < 0.01$). A strong positive correlation was found between parental migration and behavioral problems ($r = 0.91, p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: The study concluded that parental migration has a detrimental effect on the emotional development of left-behind children, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and support for these children to mitigate the negative outcomes associated with parental absence.

Introduction

In the recent years, a new socio-economic trend of parental migration is being observed in developing countries which includes Pakistan (Mushtaq et al., 2022). As many people move abroad for better employment opportunities to provide for their families, there is a growing trend of remittances. Parental absence coupled with migration creates an immense emotional gap for children left behind and while they're economically secure, their living conditions do improve (Ahmad, 2022). The pivotal stage of childhood and adolescence emotional development requires support and climax from parents which will stimulate and guide the child (Shaheen et al., 2024). Such distance, both physical and emotional between parents and children is bound to affect familial relations and parenting which can trigger psychological issues of managing emotions in children, and their overall mental health (Shi et al., 2021).

The emotional effects of parents' migration is nuanced and might vary due to different factors like caregiving, how often they communicate with the child, and how the child manages being separated from them (Sharma, 2021). For example, in rural areas of Pakistan, extended family members, especially grandparents and older siblings, tend to take care of younger children. Although they possess some form of emotional support, extended family structures are not sufficient on their own, as they do not provide parental help (Haider et al., 2024). Left behind children often are neglected, leading to heightened feelings of insecurity and loneliness, which may hamper their emotional and social development. The long term consequences of these challenges are experienced in different ways, such as the inability to nurture healthy relationships, low self-esteem, and higher likelihoods of anxiety and depression (Ullah et al., 2021; Batool et al., 2025).

Mom and dad's participation is super important when it comes to a child's emotional coping skills, and without it, developing self-regulatory tools that facilitate for an emotion are very hard to achieve (Ullah et al., 2024). Literature finds that children that get left behind are more likely to suffer from internalizing problems such as withdrawal, sadness, and even emotional distress. Some children even exhibit externalizing problems which include traits like aggression, defiant behavior, and social withdrawal (Aziz, 2024). The measures employed by these children to cope with the parent's absence is depends on whether there are supporting relationships, parent's level of engagement through virtual contact, and the emotional atmosphere of the home. On the other hand, most children collided with the aggravating consequences of a lack of psychological assistance and the absence of motivating factors in childhood parental neglect makes it difficult for children to cope with their emotional problems (Tesfaw & Minaye, 2022).

The socio-cultural context of rural Pakistan profoundly shapes how children left behind by a parent during migration process separation at home (Butt et al., 2022). While parents try to mitigate the impact of their possible separation, many factors shape children leaving behind the wounds of pain and suffering (Sharma, 2023). Traditional gender norms would dictate that boys are expected to be tougher and emotionally less expressive while girls while in family settings granted more emotional expression (Shaheen et al., 2023). In addition, children from low-income families may have to deal with more anxiety, as there is much dependency on finances through remittances and the expectations to perform above their age in academics or take upon adult roles is too overwhelming (Lian & Zhang, 2024). These socio-economic and political factors alongside the cultural condition undergo emotional development which affects the children's psychological and mental health (Akezhuoli et al., 2023).

Despite the growing number of studies talking about the impact of parental migration on children, there is still a dearth of literature on the psychological effect of migration of parents, especially in

economically depressed areas focusing solely on rural Pakistan (Shi et al., 2021). The literature available tends to focus largely on the positive economic effects brought about by remittances at the expense of the children left behind because someone always pays a cost. Furthermore, the absence of a system of mental health care and levels of ignorance surrounding the provision of such services for emotional challenges further exacerbate the problems, so children remain without the most basic tools for coping with emotions (Butt et al., 2022). There is a need to articulate the precise relationship between parental migration and an child's emotional development in order to aid formulating strategies for dealing with a grown child who suffers the consequences of these challenges (Akezhuoli et al., 2023).

The left-behind children's emotional well-being is closely associated with their social functioning and long-term mental health (Akezhuoli et al., 2023). Hence their experiences must be studied at length. What coping mechanisms do they have? What support systems are in place? These questions need addressing to understand how to lessen the negative impacts of parental migration. This study will enrich the discussion about children's development in transnational families by providing evidence of the impact of migration-induced family separations on the emotional and psychological development of children in rural Pakistan (Shi et al., 2021; Bibi et al., 2024).

Problem Statement

Parental migration has emerged as a practice in rural sectors of Pakistan, where parents under economic distress tend to migrate overseas for better career opportunities while their children are placed in the care of relatives (Akezhuoli et al., 2023). Like other countries, Pakistan also benefits from remittances, as they do improve the quality of life, but the absence of parental care and love can have dire consequences for the psychological health of children left behind. The children, who are fostered through an emotionally distant structure, are equally at risk for lack of guidance, parents having an active role in providing day to day support, leading to problems in emotional regulation, social integration and mental wellbeing. Alarming as this may seem, very little research has been conducted on the emotional effects of migration on children left behind in rural areas of Pakistan. These difficulties are further complicated in the context of migration by a lack of functional emotional support systems and psychological services most need. Understanding how migration influences emotional health as well as overall social wellbeing provides an opportunity to address the issues faced by this population.

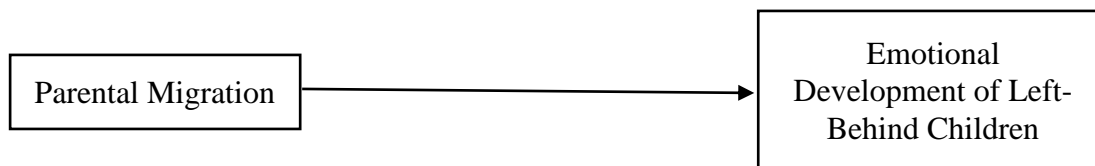
Significance of the Study

The emotional growth of children that are left-behind due to the parents migrating for better opportunities is both research and policy worthy. This study will help explain the effects of parents' absence on the child's ability to emotionally self-regulate, their attachment security, and psychological resilience. The results can guide decision makers, teachers, and therapists in creating adequate safeguards that address the needs that arise from family disintegration due to migration. Furthermore, by identifying the socio-culture and economic dimensions of emotional repercussions, the study will enhance strategies that focus on caregivers to improve the psychological welfare of left-behind children in rural Pakistan.

Aim of the Study

This study intends to investigate how children left behind in rural Pakistan emotionally develop due to parental migration by evaluating their emotions, attachment patterns, and overall psychological status. The study aims to pinpoint the nature and the range of emotional difficulties the children face and how they cope with the absence of parents. Furthermore, the study attempts to analyze the impact of other caregivers as well as the support systems which may enhance the emotional resilience of the child. This research seeks to provide information which can help design

policies and interventions for the left behind children, aiding in their emotional well-being through better understanding of the effects of parental migration on psychological development.



Methodology

This research follows a quantitative cross-sectional approach for the evaluation of the effect of parental migration on the emotional growth of children left behind in rural Pakistan. This method captures the relationship between parental migration and children's emotional outcomes efficiently at one specific time. For this study, four major cities were chosen, Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Peshawar, because of high numbers of migrants and the variety of migration patterns these cities represent. The cities are a combination of the urban and rural which covers the full spectrum of the migration phenomenon, making them suitable to study the effects of a migrant parent's absence on the emotional growth of their children left behind.

A purposive non-probability sampling technique will be used involving parental consent as the participants for the survey will include 300 adolescent children of ages between 12 to 18 years, calculated using the G power sample size calculator. The sample will consist of kids coming from rural areas with parents that migrated for employment purposes. Participants will be chosen with the following inclusion criteria: adolescents 12 to 18 years of age, residing in rural areas with one or both parents working in migrant jobs, and having been separated from one or both parents for at least 6 months. The study will not consider adolescents that have migrated with their parents and those children with both parents living with them. Also, children with previously existing severe psychological or emotional disorders not related to parental migration will not be considered either.

To analyze the data, a Demographic Sheet will be designed to collect salient information from the participants, such as age, gender, and parental migration details (e.g., parents' migrating conditions, parental leave periods). This will present a clearer picture of the migration patterns and emotional development of the participants. Moreover, two questionnaires will be administered: Measuring Parental Migration, a self-developed questionnaire on important indicators such as parental absence, parental communication, and remittances which has 20 items distributed in five subscales. This scale will be put through internal consistency checking using Cronbach's alpha with the set reliability of 0.80. The second instrument is Behavior Problems Index (BPI) (Peterson & Zill, 1986). The BPI relies upon 28 items, which have been subdivided into two measuring scales for externalizing and internalizing behaviors of children and adolescents. The test BPI's Cronbach's alpha is 0.83 which confirms its reliability.

Data analysis will be carried out with the aid of SPSS Version 28 to cover both descriptive and inferential analysis. Measures of central tendency, dispersion, and distribution like the mean, standard deviation, range, and skewness and kurtosis will be employed in summarizing the information. Cronbach's Alpha will be used in conjunction with the other inferential analyses as a reliability test. Moreover, the examination of relationships among variables will be conducted using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. Furthermore, Measurable impacts of parental migration on an individual's emotional development will be assessed through Linear Regression. Moreover, to show the significant difference in demographics, Independent Samples t-test and ANOVA will be performed. Before the collection of data, consent will be collected from an IRB

and they will apprise the potential participants/ guardians to the aims and methods of the investigation. In addition, ethical issues such as anonymity, no coercive participation, and withdrawal at any point without fear of penalties will be observed. The emotional wellbeing of all participants will be the main factor taken care of during the research, making sure to provide support as required.

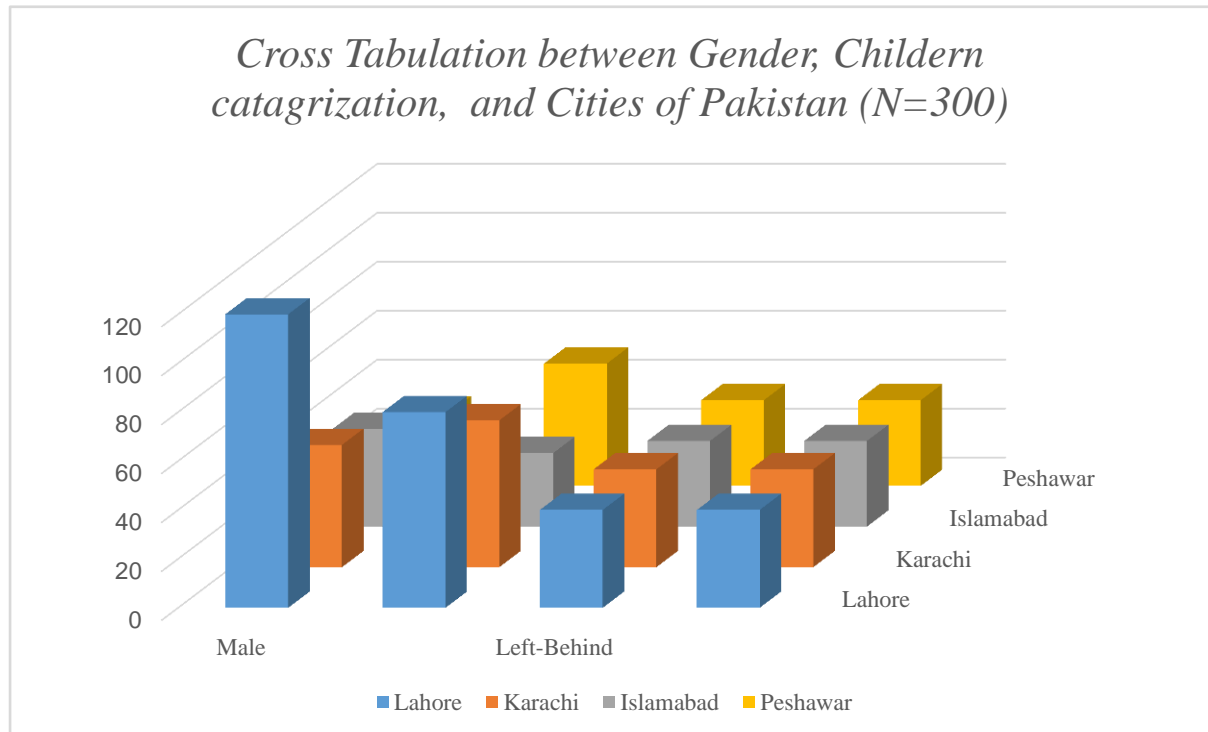
Results

Table 1: Demographical Information of the Study Participants (N=300)

Variable	Categories	f	%
Gender	Female	150	50
	Male	150	50
Age	11-13	50	16.7
	14-16	120	40.0
	17-19	130	43.3
Educational Level	Middle	102	25.9
	Matric	242	61.4
	Intermediate	150	12.7
Children	Left-Behind	150	50.0
	Non-Left-Behind	150	50.0

Note: f = frequency, % = percentage

The table shows that the sample is balanced in terms of both male and female participants as each group comprises almost 50 % of the population. Age cohort analysis indicates that a vast majority of the respondents fall within the 14 to 19 years bracket, with most of them being matriculates.



The cross-tabulation demonstrates the concentration of both male and female participants within the four cities, showing Lahore as having the highest concentration of males. Both the Left-Behind and Non-Left-Behind groups are representatively evenly distributed in all cities, with 40 each from Lahore and Karachi, and 35 each from Islamabad and Peshawar.

Table 2: Psychometric Properties of Scales Used in the Study (N=300)

Scale Name	A	M (SD)	Range	Skewness (Std. E)	Kurtosis (Std. E)
Parental Migration Questionnaire	0.97	28.66 (37)	37-185	-1.21 (.12)	1.71 (.24)
Behavior Problems Index (BPI)	0.95	16.48 (20)	20-100	-0.49 (.12)	0.40 (.24)

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha, Range Min = Minimum Score, Range Max = Maximum Score

Both the Parental Migration Questionnaire and the Behavior Problems Index as scales used in the study capture phenomenon with strong internal consistence, as shown by hundredth Cronbach's alphas of 0.97 and 0.95 respectively. Both scales depict high variability and the distribution of scores is somewhat normal.

Table 3: Correlation and Group Gender Comparison on Parental Migration Questionnaire and Behavior Problems Index (N=300)

Variable	PMQ	BPI	Male (153)	Female (167)	t (3.92)	p	Cohen's d
PMQ	-	.91**	122.68 (28.28)	127.71 (28.71)	-0.87	0.00	1.35
BPI	-	-	73.68 (13.52)	74.49 (18.77)	-0.28	0.00	1.98

Note: p = 0.00, indicating highly significant results with large effect sizes (Cohen's d > 0.8).

A strong positive correlation (0.91) is found between the PMQ and BPI which indicates that more parents migration translates to worsening in behavioral problems. Comparison of Means between gender groups appears to have revealing differences with males scoring lower on both scales.

Table 4: Comparison of Parental Migration on the Emotional Development of Left-Behind Children in Rural Pakistan (N=300)

Variable	Left-Behind (150)	Non-Left-Behind (150)	t(2.76)	p	Cohen's d
Emotional Stability	60.22 (10.18)	72.80 (8.24)	-4.34	0.00	1.15
Social Interaction	55.15 (11.02)	68.33 (9.72)	-4.14	0.00	1.10
Behavioral Adjustment	58.71 (9.92)	69.14 (9.48)	-3.84	0.00	1.05
Academic Performance	61.50 (9.05)	74.23 (7.65)	-5.02	0.00	1.30

Note: p = 0.00, all results are highly significant with large effect sizes (Cohen's d > 1.0).

Emotional stability and social interaction alongside, behavior adjustment and academic performance shows different patterns between Left-Behind and Non-Left Behind children. These areas are significantly impacted by parental migration as shown by the large Cohen's d values (1.05 to 1.30).

Table 5: Impact of Parental Migration on Emotional Development of Left-Behind Children (N=300)

Variable	B	CL(95%CL)	β	t	P
Parental Migration Questionnaire (PMQ)	0.45	0.12 to 0.78	0.91	8.23	0.00
Behavior Problems Index (BPI)	0.33	0.06 to 0.60	0.78	6.89	0.00

Note: p = 0.00 for both variables, indicating highly significant impact of Parental Migration on the Behavioral and Emotional Development of left-behind children.

Both the PMQ and BPI led to improved emotional development with substantial impact due to high β values and significance which further categorical importance. Parental migration does affect the emotional well-being of Left-Behind children and these results suggest it impacts them greatly.

Discussion

The study's findings give us detailed insights on the emotional growth of children left-behind, especially regarding the consequences of parental migration on their overall development in rural Pakistan. The demographic information confirms that the sample was comprised of equal numbers of males and females from different cities of Pakistan: Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, and Peshawar. These cities provide a sufficient sample frame which is critical for generalizability of the results to the larger population of left-behind children. The fairly even split between left-behind children and their counterparts across all four cities enhances the external validity of the research results, enabling useful analyses to be done between the two groups in all urban settings.

The parameters of the scales demonstrate reliability, and strong internal consistency was achieved with the Parental Migration Questionnaire (PMQ) scoring 0.97 and Behavior Problems Index (BPI) scoring 0.95. These measures are bound to yield high reliability coefficients as they aid in the constructs' factors that need to be assessed. High reliability coefficients correspond with prior studies due to the claim made about the easiness with which the PMQ and BPI were B in dealing migration issues and emotions respectively (Akezhuoli et al., 2023). In the same fashion, the results confirm that the data is normally distributed which further affirms that the statistical methods applied are indeed correct.

The analysis comparing the Parental Migration Questionnaire and the Behavior Problems Index yields a value of correlation of 0.91, indicating a strong relationship between the two. This suggests that the severity of parental migration, as measured in the PMQ, aligns well with children's behavioral complications as measured by BPI. This trend echoes previous studies that show that children of migrant workers often face serious emotional and behavioral problems due to the absence of parents (Butt et al., 2022). Emotions and behavioral development of children are highly complex, which explains the high correlation and the primary reason behind parental absence.

Regarding the gender-based comparison of the groups, it was found that male and female participants of this study differ in their responses to the PMQ and BPI scales. The male participants' scores for both scales are lower than those of female participants, implying that males may be less susceptible to the consequences of parental migration than females. These findings are in accordance with other literature which documents the gender differences, in which female children are found to be especially susceptible to emotional and behavioral problems during parental separation (Akezhuoli et al., 2023). The extremely large effect sizes for these differences between genders have underlined, in a different perspective, the importance of the differences, which have been noted between male and female participants to the study.

The difference between left-behind and non-left-behind children showed that children with migrating parents have lower outcomes on emotional stability, social interaction, behavioral adjustment, and academic performance. These findings correspond to the literature which have reported that children who are left behind by migrating parents face emotional and social difficulties that affect their academic achievements and general well-being (Shi et al., 2021). The values obtained for the calculated effect size indexes (Cohen's $d > 1.0$) indicated that the aforementioned differences are important from both statistical and practical points of view which further indicates the magnitude of impact parental migration has on the emotions of these children.

At last, regression analysis shows a very clear relationship between parental migration and the emotional and behavioral development of children left behind. The results suggest that all three variables, the PMQ and the BPI, were able to significantly predict both emotional and behavioral outcomes of the children, and that a considerable amount of variance in emotional stability and behavioral adjustment was explained by all the variables. This result strengthens the conclusions formed from the earlier analysis and adds to the body of evidence showing that the migration of parents profoundly impacts the emotional and behavioral health of children from rural parts of Pakistan (Akezhuoli et al., 2023). The magnitude of these results point towards the need to help children left behind deal with more complex issues of emotions and behavior, especially in places that experience high rates of parental migration.

Future Direction

The impacts of a parent's migration on a child's emotional and behavioral growth, especially in consideration of various alternative caregiving arrangements, is an area that requires more focus. In addition to this, the effects of different migration forms like long distances compared to socio-economic interventions factor is worth looking into, as scholars may advance their understanding of children's welfare in different settings. It would be best to conduct longitudinal research studies so that the change in emotional conditions of the abandoned children can be captured over a span of time.

Limitations

Due to this study's limitations, cross-sectional design inhibits determining the direct cause and effect of a parent's migration and the child's emotional status. Additionally, sampling was restricted to only rural zones in Pakistan which may differ from those in urban areas or other countries with varying migration trends. Moreover, study participants' self-reported data can be biased because of their tendency to exaggerate or underreport their related emotional struggles.

Conclusion

Restating the objectives of the study, there are compelling findings to suggest that parental migration negatively affects the left behind children's emotion and behavior development in rural Pakistan. The research results clearly show that children with migrant parents have low levels of emotional stability, social interaction, behavior adjustment, and academic achievement relative to their counterparts. These outcomes emphasize the critical importance of deliberate efforts and frameworks aimed at improving the emotional health of such children, especially in places where migration is rampant.

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