

"HE COULD NOT ATTEND THE FUNERAL OF HIS MOTHER. SO, WHAT IS LIFE?": THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF THE FAMILIES OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS LIVING BEHIND IN DISTRICT GUJRAT, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The current study uses a constructivist epistemological stance and a qualitative research design. This research aims to explore the emotional experiences of the family members of irregular emigrants left behind in the rural areas of district Gujrat, Pakistan. This study is a part of a larger research project. The present research's target population comprises the male family members of the irregular emigrants in the rural areas of district Gujrat. For the present study, a snowball sampling technique has been used to select the respondents because it was complicated to identify irregular emigrants due to their hidden nature. In the first phase of the data collection, some male family members of the emigrants were contacted working in a public sector organization in district Gujrat with the principal researcher. Later on, these initial contacts facilitated the chief researcher to approach various family members of the irregular emigrants in the peripheral villages of Gujrat city. The fieldwork comprised in-depth interviews that were started with a broader discussion on the issue of irregular migration. The initial four in-depth interviews were analyzed parallel, and it led to the emergence of new themes for further interviews. A total of thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted until saturation. Three major themes emerged at the time of border crossing, family gatherings on social events and advice for the aspirants' migrants.

Keywords: Irregular Migration, Emotions, Family Left Behind, Border Crossing, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Migration affects the person who migrates and the family members left behind (Silver, 2014, p. 194). Globally, there are some figures related to the total number of immigrants; for example, the latest global estimate depicts that there will be 272 million international immigrants in the world by the year 2019, which is 3.5 per cent of the worldwide population (International Organization for Migration, IOM, 2019a, p. 19). However, it is challenging to estimate the total number of left-behind family members because we do not have enough information on how many immigrants are accompanied by their families and how many are not (Ullah, 2017). The migration of a person can influence the lives of the other family members left behind in various dimensions. For example, it can be financially benefiting the family in terms of remittances sent by the migrants that can be used in different aspects of their development, such as homebuilding, land purchase, education, family maintenance, and loan repayment (Rahman, 2012, p. 171; Ullah, 2017). However, splitting up families may also have a social cost and adversely affects the lives of the family

members left behind, for instance, health, education, and social status (Démurger, 2015. p. 1; Haider et al., 2017).

In the Asian context, Pakistan is among the top twenty countries in immigration and emigration (Shah, 2020, p. 17). According to IOM (2019b, p. 9), Pakistan is one of the top ten emigration countries globally, with around six million emigrants. The major receiving countries for a majority of the Pakistanis emigrants are the Gulf States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Northern Ireland (IOM, 2019b). Likewise, in general, most Pakistani migrating to Europe and North America tend to stay long and are accompanied by their families (IOM, 2019b). However, most Pakistani emigrants who travel to the Gulf States are, on average low-skilled or semi-skilled seasonal workers. They plan for short-term migration and usually return to Pakistan after four or five years (IOM, 2019b, p. 10). Moreover, a significant number of Pakistani emigrants comprised people who migrated to Europe through illegal means. As a result, it is tough to estimate the total number of Pakistani emigrants (Hasan, 2010). Due to the complexities of various legal aspects of emigration record keeping, we do not have enough information about the Pakistani emigrants accompanying their families.

In the context of the text mentioned above, the present research aims to explore the emotional experiences of the family members of irregular emigrants left behind in the rural areas of district Gujrat. A significant majority of the Pakistani emigrants belong to the rural areas and are part of the joint family system. In the absence of these emigrants, we assume that their family members are facing many social and emotional issues. In the present study, a qualitative research method is used to collect data from the family members of irregular emigrants who were left behind in the rural areas of district Gujrat of the Punjab province.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section takes stock of the state-of-the-art available in how emigration of a family member affects other family members who left behind. Silver (2014) researched the emotional impact of international migration on the families living in the country of origin. The primary focus of the study was to assess the consequences of the migration of a family member. She used a nationally representative data set of the Mexican Family Life Survey, a household survey representing urban-rural and regional levels. This survey used established research methodologies already utilized in Family Life Surveys in Indonesia and Malaysia and implemented in the Mexican perspective for the first time. The data was collected in two phases. The first was between April and July 2002, and the second, between 2005 and 2006, employed a multi-stage cluster design of 8,440 households within 150 communities from all over Mexico. The study's findings indicated that the migration of a family member has adverse consequences on the psychological and emotional well-being of the other family members living behind. It further explained that such results were more severe for wives and mothers of the migrants. Moreover, the familial relationship with the migrants is also an essential factor associated with depression and the feeling of loneliness among the family members living behind. The study stressed the need for support programs, especially for women in migrant-sending towns (Silver, 2014, p. 214).

Farooq and Javed (2009) examined the impact of international migration on left-behind families in the rural areas of Pakistan. The study was carried out in eight villages of the four tehsils of district Faisalabad, Punjab province and consisted of three hundred respondents selected by simple random technique. The results show that after the migration of the husbands, the women reported feelings of loneliness and psychological strains. Women are also burdened with assuming new duties and responsibilities in household-related matters, especially concerning the male children (Farooq & Javed, 2009, p. 234). The findings of the study further explained that though, after receiving remittances, there was an increase in the school enrollment of migrants' children, both male and female, however, the result of the male children were not according to the expectations as they felt loneliness and were not adequately supervised in the absence of their fathers. The study recommended a need for education and information dissemination regarding changing gender roles in the families of Overseas Pakistanis through mass media.

Zhao et al. (2018) explored how parental migration affected the psychological well-being of children left behind in China. They used a qualitative research design and conducted in-depth interviews

with 25 children (aged 7-14), 17 parents, and 13 grandparents from 30 families. They also included 24 key informants from the communities of migrants' origin in the rural area of Eastern China. They used a grounded theory approach for data analysis. The results depict that although the purpose of the parental migration was to support their children financially, it negatively affects children's psychological well-being. A prolonged absence of parents led to mounting challenges for children, including a lack of care and social support. Moreover, at the reunion, the children were delighted, but they were unfortunate and upset at their parents' departure. In contrast, the prolonged absence of a parent also resulted in children's indifference towards the parent, and it weakened their emotional attachment and relationship. This situation forced some migrants to return to their families permanently to restore their emotional integrity.

Kousar et al. (2014) explored how the migration of a family member affects the social, economic, and psychological well-being of the family left behind. They used a qualitative research design and conducted in-depth interviews in Tehsil Daska of the Sialkot district. Their study's findings reflect that the immigrants' children living behind are enrolled in private schools that charge a high fee compared to the government schools. Moreover, due to remittances, their nutritional level is also improved, and, as a result, the health of immigrants' children is better compared to the children of non-immigrants. Similarly, they have access to a better health care system. However, despite this material achievement, the children of migrants, especially the elder sons, could not achieve better grades after completion of matric level. They also reported feelings of sadness and insecurity due to the absence of their fathers. Furthermore, due to this lack of supervision from fathers, they indulged in bad company. The wives of the immigrants living behind also enjoyed better socio-economic status after getting remittances, especially those living in nuclear families who have more autonomy to manage finance. However, they also reported mental stress, a breakdown of social support mechanisms, and nervousness due to having more responsibilities in the absence of their husbands.

Gul et al. (2018) explored how the migration of the head of the family gives rise to various familial problems. They conducted qualitative research in Quetta city, Pakistan, employing semi-structured interviews with 16 left behind women. The research findings depict that left behind women faced multi-dimensional problems in the absence of their male family members, for example, a feeling of sadness and stress. In the absence of their husbands, they also reported that they feel burdened with various household responsibilities and often unable to manage these situations. They also said frustration and a sense of insecurity in terms of marriage. In some cases, it is observed that, after earning handsome money, husbands did not come back to the family but lived with their new spouses. The results also explain that such relations affect the psychological well-being of their children because they are the most vulnerable in such situations. They have emotional distress on their fathers because their mothers start badmouthing their fathers. Furthermore, children lose respect for their fathers in such relations.

Ikuomola (2015) conducted exploratory research on the life experiences of left-behind women in Edo, Nigeria. He used a qualitative research design by employing participant observation and conducted 21 in-depth interviews with left-behind wives in Benin, Edo state, in his ethnographic research. The husbands of these respondents were international migrants working in various European countries. The study's findings revealed some cultural constraints regarding domestic surveillance on the wives left behind. However, it varied by age group of wives. For example, the older wives enjoyed a more cordial relationship with their in-laws and had decision-making power related to their household matters. In contrast, the younger wives often experienced surveillance and interference from in-laws. The main motive behind such restrictions was the fear of adultery in the absence of the husbands and a male relative around. Likewise, the left behind wives also reported some psychological effects, for instance, feeling of loneliness. Moreover, they also said a sense of insecurity, lack of guidance and father's affection among their children.

In sum, from the review mentioned above of literature, we can conclude that person's emigration can affect the lives of the left-behind family members in various dimensions. It has adverse consequences on the psychological and emotional well-being of left-behind mothers, wives, and children. The left-behind family members reported depression, stress, and feeling of loneliness. The absence of fathers also affected their children's school results; especially, sons' school progress was not satisfactory. It was also difficult for left-behind wives to mend their children's attitudes because male children joined the bad company due to

the lack of the father's surveillance. The prolonged absence of fathers also weakened their emotional attachment and relationship with children. The left-behind wives faced challenging relationships with in-laws and had a threat of the second marriage of their husbands. We assume that the present study respondents also faced some emotional problems in the absence of their family members.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is based on a qualitative research design by employing a constructivist epistemological standpoint. The male family members of the irregular migrants from the rural areas of district Gujrat, Pakistan, are the present research's target population. Due to the hidden nature of the study, a snowball sampling technique was employed to contact the respondents. Likewise, no sampling frame was available to pursue the families of irregular migrants in district Gujrat. In the first phase of the data collection, some male family members of the emigrants were contacted working in a public sector organization in district Gujrat with the principal researcher. Later on, these initial contacts facilitated the main researcher to approach various family members of the irregular emigrants in the peripheral villages of Gujrat city. All research ethics were followed as informed by renowned academic bodies regarding informed consent, prior permission, recording of interviews, and place of interview (American Sociological Association, 2018). The fieldwork comprised in-depth interviews that were started with a broader discussion on the issue of irregular migration. The initial four in-depth interviews were analyzed parallel, leading to the emergence of new themes for further interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Jerolmack, 2007). A total of thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted until saturation (Charmaz, 2006). These in-depth interviews were conducted in the Punjabi language and, later on, transcribed and translated into English. The data analysis of the present study is based on various stages as informed by Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2006), for example, data preparation, data exploration, data reduction, and data interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reflects on the significant findings of the present study and is divided into major themes that emerged during data analysis. The main research question of the present study is to explore how the family members of the irregular migrants living behind in district Gujrat, Pakistan interpret their feelings and emotional experiences regarding the migration of their family members.

The Time of Border Crossing

The present study's data highlights that the majority of the respondents replied that, in general, they were worried about their family members (son or brother) regarding their conditions while illegally living abroad. They realized that it was perilous to migrate through illegal means because it was a matter of life and death. However, during probing, they further specified that the critical moments during irregular migration were when their family members were crossing the Turkey-Greece border. At that phase, there was no contact with them, for example, telephonic or any other source. In some cases, the respondents explained that their family members got visit visas to Iran. However, from Iran onward, they crossed the borders of Turkey and Greece by illegal means. This situation is narrated by one of the respondents as follows:

When he crossed Iran's border and entered Turkey, it was excruciating for the whole family here in Pakistan. He had no contact because no telephone facilities were there. Those fifteen to twenty days were very hard for us. We had no tension when he was in Iran because he had a legal visa for Iran, but we were very tense while crossing the Iran-Turkey border.

The respondents mentioned above further explained the conditions of the family members living behind in Pakistan:

It was unfortunate in our home; especially, my mother was very tense and wept. She was apprehensive about him. We recited the Holy Quran for his successful mission. At the same time, we were hopeful about his future and the prosperity of the whole family because he was unemployed in Pakistan, although he had some skills.

In the above-quoted passage, the notion of "recitation of the Holy Quran" reflects that people offer prayers or follow religious practices in times of distress or difficulties to get some relief. It is interesting to explore that they are offering prayers to justify their illegal activity, for example, illegal border crossing.

MacGeorge et al. (2007) confirmed this finding, who stated that prayers play a pivotal role in mitigating personal difficulties. Likewise, the word "mission" also reflects how the families left behind interpret the migration of their family members. The notion of the mission also reflects on the pre-planned decision of irregular migration because it was linked with the socio-economic well-being of the whole family.

Furthermore, the present study results also found that direct negotiation with God or seeking guidance from God is the ultimate source of relief because "God is the readily accessible source for answers in any situation" (Steckler & Bartkowski, 2018, p. 596). For example, one of the respondents expressed his experience with how they arranged some spiritual gatherings for prayers and emotional comfort for the safe border-crossing of his brother:

My brother went to Greece through Iran and Turkey by using illegal means. There were many hurdles [during transition], and we were worried. All time we recited Holly's Quran and offered alms for his safety. We prayed for his successful arrival in Greece. We prayed that "*O Almighty Allah, please help us; we are poor and hardly managed the finance for the migration of our child; please help him*". We remained worried until his triumphant arrival in Greece. Our family members were concerned, but our parents were much more concerned.

The present study's data also depicts that though the family members were worried at the border crossing, they showed their satisfaction that their family members successfully escaped from border security forces. In this context, another respondent said that:

First ten days, we were happy after his departure to Greece, and he remained in contact with us by telephone, but after that, we were worried because there was no contact with him. But when he successfully reached Greece, we were satisfied that he was safe by the grace of Almighty Allah.

Another respondent expressed the same feelings as under:

We were worried significantly those ten to fifteen days when he crossed the border because there was no contact with him. We did not know his status, and we were very tense. But now, he is settled over there, and we are relaxed. Now, he has legal documents, and the government is responsible for taking care of his basic needs.

The present study's data also reflects on how the family members living behind in Pakistan missed their loved ones living abroad on the special occasions of social and religious events. This point is discussed in the following section.

Family Gatherings on Social Events

The scientific literature depicts that international migrants often face several hardships in adjusting to the culture of the host societies and such difficulties range from homesickness, loneliness, and discrimination (Barrett & Mosca, 2012, p. 2). The present study reflects that these migrants are also being missed by their family members living behind in the home country, as some of the respondents talked about the painful and emotional conditions of the family members of the irregular migrants. At one point, they realized that it was a mistake to facilitate the process of migration of their beloved ones through illegal means. In some cases, they thought they could have invested the money in some business in Pakistan rather than spend it on the irregular migration arrangement through the human smugglers. As one respondent explained:

We were unfortunate after his departure, and we spent a tremendous amount of money to make arrangements for the expenses of his migration. Now, I think that if we had invested that money in some business here in Pakistan or some Arab country, it would be far better than illegal migration to Greece because one cannot come back until he gets the legal documents of that country.

In the context of district Gujrat's rural areas, participating in various social or religious events of the family like marriage, funerals, and religious festivals is an admired social value. However, irregular migrants cannot attend such events due to the restrictions on their mobility and the unavailability of legal documents. Despite this, some migrants send money to their families in their native country, but they cannot participate in the family functions. One respondent describes this situation as following:

He cannot participate in social events like marriage or the death of a family member back in Pakistan. Life becomes very hard in such a situation. There is an example of a person in our village who spent eleven years abroad, and he could not attend the funerals of his mother and wife. So, what is life? But even then, people urge to go overseas. But I think we should avoid such irregular migration and invest all money in some business in our own country.

Likewise, some of the respondents preferred emotional comfort over the material comfort as one respondent expressed his views in this regard:

If you live with your family and earn up to forty thousand [in Pakistan], then it is better than one hundred thousand abroad. You can participate in social events of your family in Pakistan. But it is impossible while living illegally abroad. One must take care of his parents and other family members, and it is only possible when you are living with your family in Pakistan.

Another respondent explained it as under:

The way people go to Greece is extremely risky, and it is a threat to human life. Life is not as easy as it seems. We consider that life would be very luxurious in Greece, but the reality is different in Greece. I will recommend that if a person is educated, he must start some work here in Pakistan because there are so many opportunities for committed people in Pakistan. I will never recommend going abroad by using illegal means. If you want to migrate, then you must adopt the legal process.

In contrast, some respondents argued that they always prefer to go abroad instead of starting any business or investment in Pakistan. In some cases, despite continuous failure to cross the border, they continued their efforts to go overseas. As one respondent told the story of his family member as follows:

At the start, we were worried. He was deported back to Pakistan two times and went to jail.

In his third attempt, he successfully crossed the border and entered Europe.

It is also observed that the family members of the migrants have a false impression of the European society in terms of economic opportunities for irregular migrants. They assumed that they would become rich once their family member reached any European Union member state, and they did not realize that it would become challenging to get a job without having legal status. In this context, one respondent narrated his experience as follows:

At the start, my mother was happy that her son went abroad and now we would become wealthier. But after some period, now she is worried and misses him a lot. Although we all brothers and sisters ignore him, parents are a parent. I often requested my mother to pray for the issuance of the documents to my brother. Now we wish that we do not need money, but we need the presence of our brother back in the family.

The above-mentioned false impression of Europe regarding economic opportunities has led to disappointment as the family members living behind in Pakistan could not receive remittances. It is reflected in the data that some respondents were worried about repayment of the loans they spent to arrange the irregular migration of their family members. Due to the lack of work opportunities and economic recession, the government of Greece had banned the work permit for illegal emigrants as one respondent replied as follows:

We are worried because he did not send any amount yet. We have to repay all loans we got from relatives to arrange the migration process.

Another respondent expressed the same feeling as under:

Still, we are worried because he did not find any job or work in Greece. We took a considerable amount as a loan to manage the expenses of his migration process, and we have to repay all that money.

The present study's data shows variation as some respondents said that they missed their loved ones who went to Europe but gradually lost this affection due to extended absence as often these irregular migrants visit back to Pakistan after long intervals. Moreover, at that time, due to the lack of opportunities

for connections through social media, they were unable to have frequent contact or talk with these migrants. One respondent explained this situation as follows:

When we sent him abroad then, at the start, we were worried because it is challenging when you are missing one of your family members. We took this risk because we wanted to earn money to upgrade our family conditions. Although he was sending handsome money to us in Pakistan, we felt that he had lost the love and affection of his family members and friends. One can earn money in Pakistan as well, but when you are abroad, you cannot participate in the social events of your family. It is a high cost that he had to pay.

During interviews, the respondents also expressed their views regarding irregular migration among the younger generation, discussed in the following section.

Advice for the Aspired Migrants

During fieldwork of the present study, when the respondents were asked to narrate their views regarding the desire for irregular migration among the youth, they unanimously agreed that they never go abroad using illegal means. It is precarious and a matter of life and death because there are so many hurdles in this process. This process is unlawful because human smugglers facilitate it. Moreover, there is no guarantee for the successful arrival of the aspired migrants to the desired destination. Often, aspired migrants lost their lives in an encounter with the border security forces, and, in some cases, they were deported back to Pakistan. So, all their money is wasted, and there is no fruitful outcome as one respondent replied as follows:

Never, it is my advice even to my next generations that never go for illegal migration. It is very risky and a matter of life and death. Life is a gift from Almighty Allah [God], and one must pay regard to it. Human beings indulge in worldly issues and forget the importance of life. We must create awareness among people regarding illegal migration. It is very risky; one can get all luxuries of life anytime in life but cannot get a life again and again.

Interestingly, almost all respondents were not favouring irregular migration because their experience was not good after the migration of their family members. However, in some cases, though the family was not willing to the irregular migration, the aspired migrants pressurized the family in this regard, as one respondent explained this situation:

I will never recommend such a type of migration because it is very risky and a matter of life and death. My younger brother insisted on going abroad and threatened us to commit suicide. So, we sent him abroad, but it is not the proper way.

The results also show that the family members living behind also get information regarding economic opportunities in Greece after the migration of their family members. Moreover, they also observed those migrants who came back to Pakistan as one of the respondents replied as follows:

After the economic recession, now Greece is not a dreamland. My brother told me that now the economic conditions of Greece are not very strong. Now it is tough to find a good job over there. There is a decrease in the trend of illegal migration to Greece, and people are leaving Greece. I know a person from a nearby village who was settled in Greece and shared residence with my brother. Recently, he came back to Pakistan due to the economic recession in Greece.

In sum, the respondents of the present study showed their unwillingness to irregular migration of the younger generation and declared it as risky and a matter of life and death. In some cases, they were threatened by youngsters to arrange irregular migration.

CONCLUSION

The present study explores the emotional experiences of the left-behind family members of irregular emigrants from rural areas of district Gujrat, Punjab province of Pakistan. The findings showed that the emigration of the family members affected left-behind family members in various spheres of their lives. The transitory time was challenging for the left-behind family members as they had no contact with or information regarding their family members who emigrated. All left-behind family members were worried; especially mothers were more tensed and arranged special prayers for the successful entry of their sons into the European territory. Likewise, the left-behind family members also reported missing their family members at social events and family gatherings. It was very sad and emotional when the emigrants were

unable to attend the funerals of some family members back in Pakistan. The results also show that emotional comfort is more important than material comfort, and one should invest in Pakistan. In contrast, some of the respondents argued that they should invest abroad. It is also surprising that the long absence of the emigrants weakened their emotional ties with the family members left behind. It is also found that people advise the aspired migrants to stay in Pakistan and do not initiate irregular migration as it is perilous and a matter of life and death.

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