

ELDERLY PARENTS AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION OF SONS: EVIDENCE FROM PAKISTAN AND AZAD JAMMU & KASHMIR

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Abstract: *This paper aims to explore the relation between international migration of male children and the the parents left behind. The premise was to investigate how the international migration of male children affects the family and social life, financial security and health of the parents left behind. For this purpose, using qualitative research design In-Depth Interviews (IDI) were conducted with four parents selected purposively whose male children had migrated abroad. Moreover, interview guide was used as research instrument for collecting the data and narrative analysis has been done to make sense of the data. Two cities namely Gujrat (Pakistan) and Mirpur (Azad Jammu & Kashmir) were selected on the basis of existing higher trend of international migration in these regions. The findings reveal that the respondents' children were living abroad for more than 15 years and their children were involved in skilled labour work. The parents reported to have feelings of sadness, isolation, depression and loneliness in the absence of their children. The findings also unleashed the coping strategies used by left behind parents for lessening their suffering.*

Keywords: *Overseas migration, Well-being, Left behind Parents, Pakistan, Azad Jammu & Kashmir*

Introduction & Background

Human migration is the movement of people from one place to another (usually across a political boundary). It is movement of persons who leave their country of origin, either for permanent or temporary residence in another country (IOM, 2004). The escalating prodigies of globalization, urbanization, employment opportunities and settlement in foreign countries have accelerated both local and international migration of people from less developed to developing and developed countries. This has changed the living patterns of the society including family relations (Kahanec & Zimmermann, 2008).

International migration is a socio-political and economic prodigy which affects individuals who move, who stay behind and the places where they go. It is considered as a global phenomenon. It is a well accepted notion that overseas migration along with different causes has certain consequences on both sending as well as receiving countries. However, the magnitude and direction of the effects of

this prodigy may differ and it needs to be further investigated and understood (Antman, 2010).

Moreover, those who migrate not only experience social and economic impact on their lives but the phenomenon of out migration also affect them psychologically (Adhikari, Jampaklay & Chamrathirong, 2011). Among social and economic effects, migration involves finding the new ties while losing the old ones and finding the new jobs with higher pay respectively. Besides, people who migrate also pay the psychological costs of losing their homeland (Kahanec & Zimmermann, 2008) as people (generally male member of the family) move and get settled over there. After settlement they call their families and sometimes other relatives while parents are generally left behind.

Overseas migration is a socio-economic and political prodigy which affects those who move (migrants), those who live behind at native places (wife, children & parents) and the area of destination they leave for. People migrate with the hope of getting their living conditions improved but alongside it adversely affects the lives of those who stay behind (Farooq & Javed, 2009).

Those who migrate may call their families to lessen the loneliness of their families while parents who are generally left behind; suffer and their agonic life starts here. Parents who at this age of life need care, love, support and time from their children but due to this trend of migration, live without their children and suffer with a number of social, psychological and health problems (Adhikari *et al.*, 2011).

The increasing trends of adult children migration is raising the issue of sufferings of those who left behind (parents stay behind particularly) and their reliance on the migrant for support (Antman, 2010). The similar trend has been observed in Pakistan where people have migrated towards European countries. Accordingly, the phenomenon of international migration (where adult children migrate with their families and parents are left behind at their native places) exists largely in developing countries and Pakistan is ranked number 7th among those countries (GOP, 2013-14).

The history of migration of Pakistan dates back to 1940 when it emerged clear as an independent state on the map of the world. The partition in the Indian subcontinent in 1947 led to the displacement of large numbers (six million) of people from Pakistan to India, stationed at all times from political and religious associations (Addleton 1992; Arif, Irfan & Cohen, 1997). The era of 1950's and 1970's, also witnessed the large flow of economically motivated immigrants to Europe and the Middle East, in particular From Mirpur and gradually towards neighboring areas such as Gujrat & Jhelum (Khan, 2007).

After getting settled over there, they send remittances to their country of origin and invest a larger amount in property (houses, lands and business) which is looked after by their left behind parents. Instead of getting care from their own children, they are taking care of their chattels. Hence, overseas migrants think that they have provided them all the facilities but in reality ignore the sufferings which parents may face in the absence of their children such as loneliness, missing their children on different social and religious events, neglect and so on (Knodel & Saengtienchai, 2007).

Till date this issue of migration of adult children and sufferings of left behind parents in developing nations is under researched. In addition, there is rarely any research done that considered the health of people of old age; a factor determining the return of migrants. A notable example of a list of study literature is: Zhao in China (2002) and Piotrowski research in Thailand (2008), which focused on the economic determinants of return migration while Giles and Mu (2007) examined the consequences of adult children migration on the health of older parents. Silverstein (1995) had examined the effects of change of the distance on the health between parents and children. He took into account that which one is affecting and his analysis was not specifically done on the developing societies. Another line of research has been done particularly on the effects of health of older persons in the adult patterns of migration (Al-Hamad, Flowerdew, & Hayes, 1997; Coles, 2001; Silverstein & Angelelli, 1998). Longino, Jackson, Zimmerman & Bradsher (1991) described the developmental perspective of the migration.

Consequently, apart from economic outcomes, migration is affecting the social fabric, and family is one of the social institutions which is being affected by international migration. These effects may be of different forms either a nuclear family living separated from extended family in the country of destination or children migrating alone while their dependents left behind. A plethora of research is available on effects of international migration on left behind families particularly wives (Farooq & Javed, 2009) and children (Battistella & Cecilia, 1998) but very little scholarship explores the phenomenon where only parent are left behind when their adult children migrate.

Unfortunately, this aspect is under-research and if any research has been done, it is under published. A greater number of Pakistanis from different cities have migrated to European countries and their migration has affected their left behind families in terms of their social status positively while psychological state negatively. The present research is an attempt to highlight this prodigy on which rare efforts have been made.

The existing literature witnesses that the majority of studies on international migration particularly with respect to left behind parents have been conducted in the context of developed countries. From the scholarship available it is evident that there is an impact of international migration on left behind parents who are living without their children especially all male children living in other countries. The existing literature focuses on health of the parents while other aspects as mobility problems, feeling of loneliness and isolation, emotional instability, attitude of people around them and so on are given little attention in research. Parents traditionally rely on their children for personal care and financial support in every culture as in Asian countries (Adhikari, *et al.*, 2011) and similar situation is found in Pakistan (One of the Asian countries) where parents generally rely on their male children for whole life but when they migrate to other countries and parents start living alone; it creates different problems for the left behind parents.

Pakistan, being the 10th in ranking in the world and 2nd in South Asia, is amongst the largest recipient of remittances. A huge research gap exists regarding socio-cultural impacts of overseas migration on the left behind family particularly

on the left behind parents. The present research strived to unleash the impact of out-migration of adult male children on well-being of left behind parents who live without their children in terms of their health, economic security, family life and emotional satisfaction. It is a general perception that aging demands time from children but when their children migrate to other countries and they live without them; what happens to them and how they suffer? This was the key feature of this research. More exclusively, this research focused on effects of overseas migration of all male children on the well-being of non-migrant parents who stay behind.

Theoretical Framework

Family Systems Theory is a theory of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit. It is the nature of a family that its members are intensely connected emotionally. The theory was developed by Dr. Murray Bowen in 1950. Often people feel distant or disconnected from their families, but this is more feeling than fact. Family members so profoundly affect each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions that it often seems as if people are living under the same "emotional skin." People solicit each other's attention, approval, and support and react to each other's needs, expectations, and distress. The connectedness and reactivity make the functioning of family members interdependent. A change in one person's functioning is predictably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of others. Families differ somewhat in the degree of interdependence, but it is always present to some degree (Constantine, 1986).

The emotional interdependence presumably evolved to promote the cohesiveness and cooperation families require protecting shelter, and feed their members. Heightened tension, however, can intensify these processes that promote unity and teamwork, and this can lead to problems. When family members get anxious, the anxiety can escalate by spreading infectiously among them. As anxiety goes up, the emotional connectedness of family members becomes more stressful than comforting. Eventually, one or more members feel overwhelmed, isolated, or out of control. All the members in a family live together and they are dependent on one another for fulfilling the needs of others members. All the members have their own roles and responsibilities and none can live in isolation. If their roles are performed properly, it will strengthen the relationships among all family members and there will be a balanced family otherwise dysfunctional.

This theory has a good relevance for the present study conducted on problems of left behind parents where problems occur when members of family are not living together and they have made their own living arrangements. Parents are the ones to make this unit and they have emotional intimacy with their children. They suffer from emotional distance after the migration of their children to foreign countries. This situation causes family projection process which actually leads the members towards differences with the parents. It further directs multigenerational transmission process among the members where three generations at a time suffer. Grandchildren have less intimacy with their grandparents as they do not live with

them. This isolation among all the family members leads to emotional distance among them that additionally hampers the balanced relationship of the family.

Methodology

The present study is based on qualitative methodology for the purpose of getting deep insight and subjectivity of the issue (Creswell, 2003). The target population of the present study comprised those elderly parents who were living without their male adult children. Purposive sampling technique was used and the respondents were chosen in the light of a set of criteria including: (a) Demographic profile of left behind parents (b) Their all working age male children must be living in other country. Furthermore, Gujrat and Mirpur were selected as the universe for the present research and the areas were selected on the basis of higher trends of international migration in the specified regions. For meeting the objectives, four in-depth interviews were conducted by using interview guide as research instrument and the sample size was chosen on the basis of saturation and further the small sample size was taken due to limitations of time and resources (Patton, 2002). As Walter (2010) illustrated that a large sample does not guarantee the newness and accuracy of the data. Researcher's decision about the best sample size also depends on the degree of accuracy along with the degree of variability in population and the number of variables for data analysis. Moreover, the major motivation behind this research was to explore the issue only and not to generalize the results on whole population. Informed consent of all the respondents was sought prior to conducting the interviews. Narrative analysis has been done to make sense of the data. The data was transcribed and coded rigorously. The emerging themes will be discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

Background Information of the respondents

Characteristics	IDI 1	IDI 2	IDI 3	IDI 4
Age (In years)	102	91	82	76
Marital status	Widowed	Widowed	Separated	Married
Duration (In years)	32	2	29	---
Duration (with family)	20	14	11	9
Duration (without family)	35	17	24	16
Country of residence of children	UK & Spain	Spain & UK	UK & USA	Spain
Number of children	2 Sons & 4 daughters	1 Son & 2 daughters	3 Sons & 1 daughter	3 Sons
Number of children living abroad	2 Sons & 3 daughters	1 Son & 1 daughter	3 Sons & 1 daughter	3 Sons
With whom respondent was living	1 daughter			With spouse

A Brief Introduction of the Respondents

Ghulam Bibi is a 102 years old lady living in a village of Jhelum. She lives in a three Canal house along with her unmarried daughter who takes care of her. She has been widowed for 32 years and has a quite agonic condition even while living with her daughter. She is economically sound and has all the facilities at her home but due to the absence of her male children at home, she has created a sadistic environment at home. This sometime becomes problematic for her daughter as well. The major reason behind her negative psychological state is her physical health. She is getting good treatment but she is emotionally depressed because her five children are away. Her physical health prevents her from visiting her sons abroad.

Kulsoom is a 91 years widow woman who is living in her own house with her married daughter. She has been widowed for two years. She has only one male child who lives in Spain with his family. Her son was running a small scale shop in her local area when his brother-in-law called him abroad. She is spending a very good and happy life but misses her children. The daughter with whom she lives is a school teacher and widowed. She has to live alone at home as her daughter and grandchildren go to school in the morning. She has a good health status and does not suffer from any severe disease.

Saif Ullah is 82 years old man who is living alone in his 4 Canal house with two servants. He belongs to Gujrat. His children have migrated to UK and USA. He had been separated for 29 years due to some family issues and his spouse is living with the daughter abroad in USA. His economic condition is very good as he is getting money from all his sons but due to loneliness and living far away from his family, he is living an anguished life. He is physically healthy and does not have any physiological disease but often visits psychiatrist for therapy since he is the patient of depression (Medical Examination Reports witnessed). He is getting good treatment from a reputable Psychiatrist but he is still emotionally disturbed. He has visited thrice to his sons settled in Spain but he does not want to live there permanently as he feels alien in that environment.

Nusrat is a 76 years old lady living with her husband in a nuclear family system. She has three sons who have been settled in Spain for 16 years. Prior to his sons going abroad her husband was working in a factory and the family was not financially well off. Her sons could not continue their education beyond secondary level due to poor economic conditions of the family. She sent her first son to Spain through illegal channel by selling a piece of land they owned. The son lived there for 7 years and finally got legal status there and she started receiving remittances from her son that improved the family's living condition. Finally her other two male children also migrated to Spain and now they are running a combine business. Her financial position is strong now and her husband has also left the work. Despite having all the facilities she was emotionally disturbed and depressed. She was also suffering with physical illness (Hepatitis C).

Narratives of Parents Left Behind

In this part of the paper the experiences of the parents who had been left behind after the international migration of their children will be discussed under various themes.

Motivation for Children's Migration

There are different pull and push factors that compel and appeal the individuals to migrate to different regions of the world for spending their livelihood and subsistence. The respondents reported that the major leading factors behind the migration of their sons were the desire to earn more and to seek employment. Ghulam Bibi and her husband for example reported that they had compelled their male children to migrate to UK because their relatives resided there and they enjoy luxurious life. Hence they too were motivated. The following excerpt clarifies this.

As my other relatives and their families were living abroad so I also wanted my children to go and get settled over there. Thus, I and my husband compelled our first son to go to UK as our relatives were earning so high and they had made big properties in Pakistan. Then my son settled and gradually called his other siblings as well. (Ghulam Bibi, 17 March, 2015)

Likewise, Kulsoom too gave the major reason behind her son's migration to

Spain as the desire to upgrade the family's economic status.

My son was running a shop here and it was very difficult to run the household in this inflation where needs were at peak and income was very less. Then after the marriage of younger daughter, my son suddenly got the chance to go abroad.... This completely changed the circumstances of the family. (Kulsoom, 29 March, 2015)

Saif- Ullah shared the reason behind their children's migration;

The majority of my relatives live abroad (in Spain, UK, USA and France). I also wanted my sons to get settled over there, so they migrated there for earning purpose while my daughter migrated with her spouse. (Saif Ullah, 21 March, 2015)

For Nusrat the major motivation for the migration of her children was to improve the financial condition of her family.

My sons could not get education properly, so it was hard to find a good job in Pakistan. I did not want them to work in factories like their father was doing. Thus, we (my husband & I) decided to send our first son abroad for making his future better. (Nusrat, 25 March, 2015).

The data provides a glimpse on different reasons behind this prodigy of international migration of male children and depicts that better socio-economic condition is one of the leading factors behind this. A number of scholarships have suggested that economic contribution is the one of the many reasons that compels the parents to live without their male children as they become incapable of earnings

at this stage of life and are economically dependent upon their migrant male children and also revealed three major reasons i.e. work, education and marriage for leaving the parental household and moving abroad (Knodel & Saengtienchai, 2007).

Major Change due to Migration

The process of migration along with different reasons has diverse effects on those who move, the places where they go and those who stay behind. Our concern in the present study is on the experiences of those who stay behind (left behind parents). The process of migration affects them both positively (financially) as well as negatively (social life and emotions). The data clearly illustrates that parents in their old ages need the emotional support of children besides the financial gains. According to the data, the major change due to the migration of the male children was reported to be better economic status. The migration of children abroad had given the families a luxurious lifestyle which they could not afford earlier. As one of the respondents explained;

I couldn't even imagine living in this type of house where I would be having all the facilities. My sons also send us money every month regularly. Because of this economic status, everyone gives me more respect and people want to develop relationships with those who are economically sound (Ghulam bibi, 17 March, 2015)

Similar comments on improved economic status were shared by Saif Ullah and Nusrat. This indicates that economic contribution of male children in household expenditures has a positive impact on facilities availed by the parents at their older age.

Similar findings have been reported in previous researches where it has been highlighted that along with adverse effects of outmigration on left behind parents, there are some advantages of international migration as well where children contribute financially to their parents and assist them in living a comfortable life. Knodel and Saengtienchai (2007) have argued that besides psychological health, out migration of adult children has positive impact on socio-economic well-being of parents as they are provided with a number of household facilities as well.

Nevertheless, besides the comforts the pains of the parents were also stated. The parents reported to feel the absence of their children especially on occasions like Eid, birthdays Ramazan and so on. In addition they often had to bear the rude, humiliating and taunting behaviour of the relatives. Sarcastic comments were made by relatives and the old parents were repeatedly told that their children had abandoned them. These comments made the parents feel restless and sad. As a result the majority of the participants reported that the emotional support from children at later stage of life was more important rather than the financial gains. As the respondent explained;

If my children get late in sending the money, I do not get disturbed or get tense. But if they do not call me after two or three days and particularly when I become more ill, this makes me unhappy. Life is difficult without money, but it is hopeless and helpless without children as said by the respondent. (Ghulam Bibi, 17 March, 2015)



Hence, for parents, true satisfaction was reported to be the idea of living with their children. They reported that it creates the feelings of being worthy and important in children's lives.

There is no moment of the day when I do not miss my children. My day starts and ends with them. There is hardly a single day when my sons and daughter-in-laws do not call me but even then I feel their absence badly. (Nusrat, 25 March, 2015)

Thus, the data highlights that children are missed each and every moment. There isn't a single moment in the whole day when parents forget their children and there is hardly any day when they do not recall them. The parents reported that they waited for their children to call them all day long and they abandoned all their activities at the expected time of the call. Once the call ended they felt sad and looked forward to the next call. In case the children are not able to call the parents reported to feel restless. For example Kulsoom reported, *"If my children do not call me even one day, I could not sleep for the whole night."* (Kulsoom, 29 March, 2015).

Thus, left behind parents feel loneliness and sadness in the absence of their male children and their entire lives revolved around the desire to be able to hear the voices of their loved ones even if it was for a few minutes.

On one hand, parents miss their children while on the other hand the relatives behave so badly sometimes which makes the left parents depressed and compel them to think that they have no importance in their children's life that's why they have left them here and settled with their families.

Along with emotional and economic impacts, migration has also affected the living arrangement. Due to the sons' migration, parents are living alone at home and it is very thorny life to live without them. In our society, it is generally thought that these children (more specifically sons) whom parents are bringing up and spending their lives for them, are their future caretakers particularly in older age. But due to several constraints, parents are compelled to live without them. The respondents reported that as a result their social life had become limited without having a male member at home. According to one of the respondents,

It is difficult to move around as I am older and mobility is not easy for me. I try to contact on call rather than visiting the relatives in case of any event. (Kulsoom, 29 March, 2015)

The findings illustrate that apart from economic arrangements, migration affects the living arrangement and the attitude of people towards life. The above data clearly highlighted that the international migration of male children had brought immense changes in the parents' lives. On one hand their economic conditions had been improved yet at the same time they were living unhappy life without the children being at home.

Coping Strategy to Overcome Loneliness

The parents reported multiple strategies in order to be able to overcome the state of loneliness in the absence of their children. Some of these strategies were reported to be such as frequent communication, visit of children to parents and involving themselves into different social activities. Emotional support is very much important at later stage of one's life and especially for parents who become dependent upon their children. As our results indicate that parents suffer with negative feelings generally if their children do not contact them in case of illness. The following excerpt explains this well:

I want my children to live over there as they have settled and are happy in their lives. I never wish them to be back just because of my emotions. But I always ask them to call me timely so this loneliness can be overcome through frequent contact and interaction. I understand it is not possible for them but they should make their possible efforts to come on events (Ghulam bibi, 17 March, 2015)

Likewise Kulsoom reported;

Frequent communication and visit of children to parents are the best ways to cope up with their sad or lonely feelings. I wish that all my children celebrate eid with me in Pakistan. (Kulsoom, 29 March, 2015)

Saif Ullah explained that instead of disturbing his children who are busy with their own families and challenging life abroad he preferred to deal with his condition in a different way. He stated;

“Rather than disturbing or giving tension to the children, I spend my time with friends and in different social activities.” Nusrat on the other hand reported to feel at ease by asking her children to do video call on skype.

A number of studies suggested different ways to overcome these feelings of sadness and being less worthy in children's life through frequent contact via phone or mail as well as by visiting the parents (Giles & Mu, 2007; Knodel&Saengtienchai, 2007; Knodel, 2005). The quantity and quality of communication and social interaction has been identified as the predictors of well being (Fiorillo& Sabatini, 2011). It has been seen that regular contact of children with parents and parents with children is beneficial for health, social support and behaviour of parents in older age. They also revealed in the finding that regular contact of children with parents combat the feeling of loneliness, isolation, depression and anxiety among parents.

Re-union with Children

Parent child relationship can be strengthened through frequent communication and interaction of parents with children and vice versa. It was reported by all the four respondents that they had visited their children at least once after they had migrated abroad. This they reported had a positive impact on their lives. Yet they acknowledged that it was not possible for them to permanently settle abroad along with their children due to many reasons. Most important of all they did not want to leave their own land and they did not have feelings of inclusion in



foreign societies. It was also reported that they preferred not to be burden on their children. Language and poor health conditions were also some of the reasons for not being able to settle abroad with their children. One respondent stated;

I couldn't settle over there because I could not go outside anytime by myself as I was dependent on my children and mostly they got time to go outside at weekends. Second was the language barrier as I couldn't understand and speak their language so I didn't move freely. More exclusively, my unmarried daughter was living with me and cannot live alone at home. (Ghulam Bibi, 17 March, 2015).

Previous research has also demonstrated that an increasing number of older individuals in poor health are restricted to their homes; they may be bed-bound or must rely on other person to transport them. Yet evidence suggested that they do not want to be a burden on others and are reluctant to move freely (Pekmezariset *al.*, 2013). To sum up the discussion, it can be concluded that parent children interaction and time from children for parents at the later stage of lives are necessary for their better emotional and physical health.

Conclusion

A number of scholarships have found the problem and effects of out-migration on the left behind families (Battistella& Cecilia, 1998) but rare efforts have been made on the standpoint of left behind parents in our country (whose all male children have been migrated internationally and they live alone). This study attempted to fill this gap by focusing on the experiences of left behind parents. Clearly migration of children had brought many changes in the parents' lives both positively and negatively. On the positive side their economic circumstances had improved which in turn had changed their social status as well. Yet the parents also had feelings of loneliness, and isolation in the absence of the male children. This is especially true because of the cultural context of the country. Male is considered the strength of the family and the primary care taker of parents in old ages. Those who do not fulfill this responsibility are looked down upon by the society. The parents did not have any complain from their sons since they understood that they had migrated in the larger benefit of the family and they were still fulfilling their responsibility by supporting the parents financially. Yet they had no control over their emotions and the strong desire to be able to close to their children. To overcome this condition the parents adopted multiple strategies.

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