



**Marital Challenges after Husbands' International Migration:
Lived Experiences of Wives in Punjab**

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Abstract:

International migration is generally defined as the settlement, employment or refuge of persons in one country from another country. The purpose of this study is to explore the social, psychological and family problems encountered by migrants' spouses and their coping mechanisms to deal with stress and societal pressures. Marital roles, communication and decisions of household members significantly change when men leave for foreign employment. In-depth interviews with 12 women from rural districts of Punjab, Pakistan with husbands working abroad were conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method. The results showed that the psychological issues for migrant spouses are depression, anxiety and fear of abandonment; physical issues are tiredness and the burden of additional responsibilities; and social issues are fear of harassment due to the lack of a male family member. Reliance on social media to stay in touch with migrant husbands and involvement in productive activities and extended family support were most common. The study is contributing to the scarce literature on marital adjustment after labor migration of men in Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, international migration, left-behind spouses, marital relationship, psychological well-being, coping strategies, gender roles

INTRODUCTION

International migration is a phenomenon that has social, psychological and emotional repercussions that extend beyond the individual migrant to the spouse(s) who have remained behind. For left-behind spouses, emotional distress, social isolation, and loneliness are common experiences, with existing research showing that international migration can have a significant impact on mental and physical health, social relations, and psychological well-being (Aziz, et.al., 2024).

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These issues open up numerous questions related to the effects of international migration on marriage, such as the emotional and psychological consequences of emotional distance and what coping strategies are used by those who remain in the home country. Emotional isolation and lack of intimacy after a husband's migration can create a sense of disconnection and dissatisfaction, causing psychological, emotional and social issues that need continuous attention, support and understanding (Hussain, et. al, 2023).

According to the global estimates there were approximately 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020, which has risen steadily over the last 50 years, and men were again the majority of people migrating internationally as compared to women and this gap has increased over the last 20 years (Newland, et. al., 2020). There are many factors that contribute to migration such as the search for higher education or specialized training in another country, political instability, conflict or persecution in a country, which makes people move to other places for safety reasons (The European Union, 2024). However, for many Pakistani households, the economic motivation remains strong seeking higher-paying jobs and more stable employment opportunities in the Gulf, European, and North American labor markets continues to attract a steady stream of men overseas, leaving many wives to run farms, businesses and households for long periods, without the support of their husbands.

Pakistan is one of the country's worst hits by this trend of out-migration of male labor and remittances from Pakistani nationals working abroad are an important source of income for many rural households. However, the social impacts of migration are relatively under-researched compared to the economic gains generally attributed to migration. Many left-behind wives face the burden of the parenting role, in addition to the burden of an intact marriage, and this can create a lot of tension between them even if the marriage is loving and stable. Knowing how this tension is handled by women, and what circumstances facilitate their successful coping, is thus directly relevant not only for family well-being, but also for the design of migration and social-support policies for labor-sending areas like Punjab.

Although significant strides have been made in the field of male migration studies, there is still a significant lack of research on the challenges faced by women in Pakistan, which impacts their daily lives. At the heart of this is the re-negotiation of the marital relationship between a woman and her migrated husband, and how women manage to keep in touch with their husbands in the face of time difference and busy schedules.

This study focuses on the following research questions: What are the Psychological and physical health challenges do face by migrants' spouses? What are the social and family-related challenges faced by migrants' spouses? What are the coping strategies used by migrants' spouses?

In this study, the role played by male international migration in marital relationships, the shifts and challenges of marital relationships, communication patterns and psychological processes among migrants' partners are examined. Migration may provide a psychological and physical burden for the partners remaining behind, yet it can also offer monetary benefits for the person/people migrating and their partners. Household roles and responsibilities can lead to physical health issues like high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart-related diseases in women who are doing this on their own. The study also takes into account the strategies couples employ to maintain connection and a

healthy dyadic relationship when separated by space, and is designed to guide better service systems for women left behind by migration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research into the role of international migration in marriage formation, as well as the impact on adaptation is scarcely available. A survey of Ethiopian immigrant couples in Toronto reported significant losses, such as no longer having extended family members to do the household chores, and economic problems, such as lower income and lower status. Amidst the changes in gender roles, couples faced new roles and cultural expectations, which created some tension but has also increased their need to rely on one another and sometimes led to greater intimacy; communication and intimacy changed, which could either strengthen or strain the relationship (Hyman, et. al., 2008).

In Pakistan, the study conducted in District Gujrat, Punjab, investigated the impact of migration on spouses left behind and revealed that male migration has a far effect on the spouse who stays behind, while all the studies carried out to date were focused on the migrating women rather than the ones left behind (Iqbal, et. al., 2014). A body of research has indicated a strong correlation between left-behind wives who reported aggressive and anxious behavior, workload-related stress, and decreased affection from their spouses as being associated with migrants who reported higher depression and anxiety than migrants who migrated with their families; left-behind wives were found to have a high level of stress, both physical and psychological, for relatively small economic gains (Roy & Nangia, 2005).

The study of psychological well-being of left-behind families in KP and the impact of male child rearing was conducted on which women frequently reported feelings of loneliness, stress and the burden of new roles when their partner was not there (Ullah, et. al., 2021). Labor migration can also have a negative impact on marital quality and on the risk of separation or divorce, and expectations of international wages and marriage norms are key aspects of culture that influence expectations of men's migration (Compernelle, 2017).

Male migration has also been associated with negative effects on children's educational outcomes, as during his absence women claim their children's performance to be weaker in studies, and in rural Pakistan women claim that they experience more psychological stress, loneliness and changes in gender roles as a result of their husbands' migration (Farooq & Javed, 2009). According to a study on Women Empowerment Index, wives of migrant workers are more likely to have autonomy in decision making on household affairs, increased physical mobility, and full participation in community life compared to households without a migrant worker (Koirala, 2023).

In other circumstances, migration has been linked with greater decision-making authority for women, while at the same time raising their workloads and emotional burden; suggesting that the empowerment which comes with migration is a double-edged sword (Demurge, 2015). Dysfunctional communication between husband and wife is also found to be associated with poor mental health for widows, and with society's demand to explain the husband's job migration to others (Rai et al., 2023).

Comparative work outside of Pakistan further reinforces these patterns. Research in migrant-sending communities in Nepal and India also reveals that the left-behind women have a constrained and culturally limited space to exercise their newly acquired authority; decisions regarding everyday consumption in the home, school or education of children, are left to the wife while larger decisions, such as the sale of property or a child's marriage, are typically taken by the husband or his extended family even when the man is away (Roy & Nangia, 2005). The selective transfer of authority implies that 'empowerment' often is only partial and conditional, and that it can coexist with the exercise of greater surveillance over a wife's conduct by her in-laws and the wider community who might regard her actions to be a reflection upon the migrant husband's honor. Combined, this literature illustrates that the effects of male international migration on marital relationships are far more complex than the mere reduction of a loss of partner, and that there is a renegotiation of roles, trust, and support that unfolds in a variety of ways depending on family structure, length of stay, and communication within the couple.

While the importance of international male migration to the lives of their wives and potentials for studying their lived experiences have been recognized, there has been a lack of research that captures the complexities of the experiences of spouses of migrants. Existing research tends to treat such spouses as passive recipients of remittance, while failing to address their agency and examining the emotional and psychological problems they suffer from loneliness, anxiety and depression. Lacking attention is also given to contextual factors such as cultural norms, social support systems and economic factors. To create effective policies and interventions that support the well-being of women who are left behind by international migration, it is necessary to address these gaps.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by Gender and Migration Theory which studies the gender and migration relationship and shows how gender relations impact upon and are impacted by migration. The theory is related to the concept of migration as a gendered process, where men and women have different experienced histories because of the roles they are expected to play, the power they have, and the resources they have at their disposal; and takes into account gender roles, power, and intersections of class, ethnicity, and nationality (Wright, 1995). It is especially valuable for capturing the emotional, social, economic, psychological, physical and family stress of left-behind spouses (particularly women) and their coping strategies such as social support, economic activity, and negotiation with left-behind husbands.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Philosophical Stance

The study employed a qualitative research approach and in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of spouses left behind following husbands' migration, and explore their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This is based on an interpretivist philosophical framework which focuses on the lived experiences of left-behind spouses (Smith & Osborn, 2015), an ontological perspective that sees reality as subjective and co-created by the experiences, perceptions, and meanings of individuals (Brister, 2017), and an epistemological perspective that views knowledge as created from individuals' experiences and meanings (Deane, 2018).

Research Design

Phenomenology offers a particularly apt methodological lens for examining post-male international migration challenges in marital relationships because it centers the subjective, embodied “lifeworld” of women who remain behind, privileging how they themselves make meaning of separation, shifting gender roles, and transnational intimacy (Archambault, 2010; Hendrickson et al., 2019; Kutor & Oklikah, 2025). Rather than treating these women merely as economic dependents or passive recipients of remittances, a phenomenological approach attends to their lived experiences of loneliness, anxiety, role overload, and renegotiated authority within the household, capturing the emotional and relational textures that quantitative indicators often miss (Archambault, 2010; Galam, 2011; Hussain et al., 2023; Kutor & Oklikah, 2025). By using in-depth interviews and narrative accounts to explore how women interpret their husbands' absence whether as a source of empowerment through increased decision-making or as a site of vulnerability, surveillance, and marital strain phenomenology reveals the ambivalent, context-specific ways migration reconfigures power, care, and belonging in the marital relationship (Archambault, 2010; Hendrickson et al., 2019; Underwood, 2011; Kutor & Oklikah, 2025). This focus on first-person meaning-making thus enables researchers and practitioners to design more responsive policies and support systems that address not only material needs but also the psychosocial and relational realities of women navigating life in transnational marriages (Hussain et al., 2023; Kutor & Oklikah, 2025).

Participants and Sampling

The overall number of women in a study is determined through purposive sampling (Minichiello, 1990) and is twelve in this study. The study was promoted to participants via social media, community groups, the purpose of the study was communicated and the confidentiality of the data they submitted was guaranteed.

Data Collection

Data was collected using in-depth interviews (Silverman, 2013) in a relaxed atmosphere with open-ended interview questions to elicit information about participants' experiences. An interview guide was drafted, which had psychological, physical, social, and family related problems associated with male international migration along with coping strategies to address these changes semi-structurally (Bhandari, 2024). Table 1 summarizes the results of the interviews, and they ranged between twenty and thirty-five minutes, giving the participants a good opportunity to communicate their experiences and opinions (Silverman, 2013).

Table 1. Details of interviews conducted with participants

Participant	Date	Location	Length
Participant 1	7 March	Sheikhupura	35 min
Participant 2	12 March	Sheikhupura	28 min
Participant 3	20 March	Narowal	32 min
Participant 4	22 March	Sheikhupura	25 min

Participant 5	25 March	Gujranwala	30 min
Participant 6	12 April	Kasur	25 min
Participant 7	14 April	Gujranwala	35 min
Participant 8	16 April	Narowal	30 min
Participant 9	17 April	Gujranwala	28 min
Participant 10	2 May	Kamoke	25 min
Participant 11	3 May	Kasur	30 min
Participant 12	5 May	Kamoke	30 min

Note. Table 1 shows the date, location, and length of the interview conducted with each participant.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were involved voluntarily, informed consent was obtained and confidentiality was maintained. Personal information was safeguarded and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time, without adverse repercussions (Bhandari, 2024).

Procedure

The interview guide was pilot-tested for refinement of the questions prior to use. The researcher then set up a rapport with the participants and conducted interviews in a comfortable and private setting (Bhandari, 2024).

Table 2. Demographic details of participants

Participant	Years Married	Children	Family Type	Husband's Migration (Years)	Spouse Working?	Country
Participant 1	15	4	Nuclear	11	No	Kuwait
Participant 2	9	3	Nuclear	4	Yes	Qatar
Participant 3	10	4	Extended	7	No	Saudi Arabia
Participant 4	5	2	Nuclear	2	No	United Kingdom
Participant 5	8	3	Extended	6	No	Spain
Participant 6	9	3	Extended	3	No	Dubai
Participant 7	4	2	Nuclear	2	No	Korea
Participant 8	13	3	Nuclear	10	No	Saudi Arabia
Participant 9	5	2	Extended	2	No	United Kingdom
Participant 10	7	3	Nuclear	3	Yes	America
Participant 11	13	4	Extended	6	No	Qatar

Participant 12	5	2	Extended	2	No	Canada
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Note. Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the twelve participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed qualitatively using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is well suited for psychology, sociology and healthcare research and is aimed at understanding the inner workings of an individual's thought processes (Groenewald, 2004). Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, repeated readings, margin notes, reflexivity in the analysis of the transcripts, the emerging themes from descriptive observations to conceptual and psychologically informed understandings, and the identification of connections between themes, followed by interpretation of the experiential statements to capture the essence of the participants' accounts and the final writing up of findings with illustrative quotations (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Superordinate themes and sub-themes were then arranged into a thematic structure (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021), which is included in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes emerging from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Theme	Sub-themes
1. Different experiences of migrants' spouses after male international migration	• Increased responsibilities • Children's upbringing • Communication challenges due to time difference • Change in gender roles • Marital conflicts due to distance and lack of communication
2. Psychological and physical health challenges faced by migrants' spouses	• Depression • Anxiety • Fear of abandonment • Pressure of alone parenting • Lack of emotional support • Health challenges (restlessness and insomnia)
3. Social and family-related challenges faced by migrants' spouses	• Social isolation • Social acceptance of husband's labor migration • Supportive or unsupportive behaviour of extended families
4. Coping strategies used by left-behind spouses	• Reliance on social media • Productive activities (education, employment, hobbies) • Connection with extended families

Note. Table 3 shows the themes and sub-themes generated through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the interview data.

Limitations of the Study

The main restriction was the challenge of covering a subject which was novel and out of the participants' comfort zone. Emotionally speaking, for many participants, talking about mental breakdowns and physical ill health caused by a husband's migration was challenging, as some were

reluctant to share experiences with loneliness, the responsibilities of childcare and altered treatment from society. Several commented that they hadn't talked to anyone about these life changes and it was hard to initially communicate.

FINDINGS

The aim of the research was to look at how the marital relationship has changed following male international migration, as well as the psychological, physical, social and family life challenges that may arise for the spouse/carer of the migrant, and the coping strategies adopted to deal with the added responsibilities and absence of their husband. The findings were organized in themes which were derived from an open-ended interview guide developed based on the study's goals and research questions. The analysis revealed four superordinate themes: changed every day experiences after migration, psychological and physical challenges, social and family related challenges, and coping mechanisms participants used to deal with these changes. The themes are followed by the sub-themes and some illustrative quotes from the participants.

Different Experiences of Migrants' Spouses

The research revealed that life after husband migration is completely different in the daily life of a wife. Prior to migration, husbands usually handled bill payment, school runs, house management tasks, etc. and after the migration, spouses had to manage these tasks on their own, leading to greater workload (Iqbal, et. al., 2014).

Increased Responsibilities

They all shared this, that they took on significantly more responsibilities, such as household work, childcare and money management etc., which depleted their physical and emotional resources. Migration was found to change the power relations, access to resources and expectations of the left-behind spouse, consistent with Gender and Migration Theory (Wright, 1995): "I felt a huge change in my life when my husband migrated. Doing my own work, and also handling the tasks that were previously performed entirely by him, made my life very difficult." Participant 2, married nine years, nuclear family, husband migrated to Qatar four years ago.

Children's Upbringing

The authors of this study found that spouses worried about the future of their children, out of concern that the absence of their husband would have an impact on their children's education and future, Shakya (2014) noted that left-behind spouses often try to become the best possible mother. "I am spending most of my time with them, making sure they do their school work properly and getting them involved in productive activities." Participant 10, married seven years, nuclear family, husband migrated to America three years ago.

Communication Challenges Due to Time Difference

Physical separation affected communication, mistrust and frequent blame, as well as the difficulty in finding a suitable time to communicate and feelings of disconnection and isolation. Couples' bond may grow less strong because of lack of emotional connection due to long period of separation and lack of communication (Demurge, 2015): "Distance can definitely be a challenging factor in any relationship, and for some couples it can be a significant contributor to the breakdown of their

marriage." Participant 6, married nine years, extended family, husband migrated to Dubai three years ago.

Change in Gender Roles

Gender roles were found to shift as a result of migration, with women becoming more autonomous and assertive, which corresponds to the changes in power and decision-making reported by Hyman et al. (2008). "I had to become stricter and more involved with my children, so that they would remain within my control in their father's absence." Participant 4, married five years, nuclear family, husband migrated to the United Kingdom two years ago.

Marital Conflicts Due to Distance and Lack of Communication

Marital conflict was related to the distance and less communication, some individuals were feeling insecure and mistrustful in their marriage, absence of partner was related with anxiety and depression and psychological problems (Roy & Nangia, 2005). "In any relationship it is important to stay in regular contact; otherwise, the attachment and the mutual feelings you have for each other fade away." Participant 12, married five years, living apart from extended family, husband migrated to Canada two years ago.

Psychological and Physical Health Challenges

There were a variety of psychological and physical problems reported such as anxiety, depression, stress and increased responsibility were linked with poor psychological health (Farooq & Javed, 2009). "I experienced severe depression soon after my husband's migration, as we were not able to make a proper schedule to talk with each other because of the time difference." Participant 4, married two years, nuclear family, husband migrated to the United Kingdom two years ago.

Participants blamed their psychological suffering on the breakdown in communication, including intrusive thoughts such as a husband being involved with someone else or not wanting to have his wife, and they felt vulnerable, mistrustful and psychologically upset.

Depression

Several of the participants reported sadness, loneliness and disconnection (Ullah, et. al., 2021). Many partners felt the lack of physical presence was a huge shift and were expected to appear strong in front of the community and children, yet they were often feeling vulnerable on the inside.

Anxiety

Participants described increased sensitivity and anxiety, being easily upset over minor issues, and that anxiety would be focused on their husbands' health while they were away, or on children's education: "In order to manage the domestic chores and everything outside the home, I changed a lot. I was not myself, as I was getting annoyed and anxious over very small and unimportant matters, because of the sense of being alone and at a distance from my husband." Participant 10, married seven years, nuclear family, husband migrated to America three years ago.

Fear of Abandonment

One of the biggest concerns was related to couples who were newlyweds and had not been together very long; they reported that they were not sure if their husbands were being sincere, but that they

felt they loved them nonetheless. "Every woman is possessive about her husband, and in a situation where your husband lives away from you, the distance and the long periods when you cannot meet make you feel insecure, and a fear of abandonment starts to develop deep inside you. Resolving that fear then depends entirely on the bond between the couple and the effort put into it." Participant 12, married five years, extended family, husband migrated to Canada two years ago.

Pressure of Alone Parenting

This was a particular concern for women in nuclear families, who are primarily parenting alone, as their children's educational performance was seen as a failing of the woman if the children did not perform well at school or if they engaged in inappropriate activity in school and beyond, as it was deemed to be their fault (Shakya, 2014).

Lack of Emotional Support

The most significant difference mentioned by participants was that they felt they had no one to discuss their issues with, particularly among women who were not living with extended family. Often left-behind wives withdrew from social interaction, and they did not go out without husbands: "The distance between us made it difficult to express everything to him, which made me feel very alone and weak. I felt unsupported in difficult situations, and when I was sick, it felt like no one would ever understand what was going on in my mind except him, and he was far away." Participant 9, married five years, extended family, husband migrated to the United Kingdom two years ago.

Participants also reported serious fluctuations in mood due to stress and due to no place to release their feelings, and an increase in anger, sometimes toward husbands for being unable to provide emotional support.

Health Challenges: Restlessness and Insomnia

The neglected aspects of the lives of wives reported by left-behind spouses were their own health, nutritional deficiency, insomnia, and poor appetite, the latter being the most frequently reported (Ullah, et. al., 2021). This has led to poor health outcomes in general due to delayed health check-ups (Rai et al., 2023). The burden of doing everything by themselves and living far away from their husbands was stressful, and would affect sleep patterns and cause tiredness and depression.

Social and Family-Related Challenges

Their responsibilities for household and childcare duties were typically the main burden left to the left-behind spouse, and extended family members were frequently vying to help, but doing as much as they could without the presence of a spouse.

Social Isolation

Participants often found it difficult to be present at social functions without their husbands, and were worried about their safety and the safety of their children. Such security issues added to the overall trend of isolationism.

Social Acceptance of Husband's Labor Migration

Left-behind spouses reported a unique type of stigma related to their husbands' absence, and expressed greater concerns about safeguarding their own and their husbands' reputations: "The society does not let a lone woman live peacefully; they ask numerous questions of me after my husband's migration. They even started doubting that my husband was really abroad, suggesting instead that he had left me and the children." Participant 7, married four years, nuclear family, husband migrated to Korea two years ago.

Participants pointed out that their husbands' absence was sometimes prolonged, in order to earn the family's means of livelihood, so that sometimes their family's community suspected them as if they were ill or absent, which was an additional emotional burden.

Behavior of Extended Families

The response of extended family varied with the closeness of existing ties. With the grandparents and other relatives available to assist, most extended families provided children and left-behind wives with support and unconditional love, lessening their responsibilities and worries about raising children.

Coping Strategies Used by Migrants' Spouses

Spouses used a variety of strategies to cope, mainly social media including online chatting, active involvement in work or productive activities, and help from extended family.

Reliance on Social Media

The burden experienced by left-behind spouses (Ali, et. al., 2021) can be helped by support from family and friends, especially social media, which was a major coping mechanism to stay connected with their husband who lived far away.

Productive Activities

Some of the left-behind spouses managed by keeping themselves busy, by finding jobs to distract themselves from negative thoughts and emotional overloading, by reading, baking or doing other hobbies. These kept the people occupied in their house, busy with household tasks, their duties and their forgetfulness of their husbands. The acquisition of new duties also provided many participants with a sense of autonomy, as in the change of power and decision-making that occurs in migration within the Gender and Migration Theory (Donato & Gabaccia, 2015). "I decided to spend my free time baking for the whole family. Cooking and baking are my favourite things to do; it keeps me busy and focused on my children's health." Participant 11, married thirteen years, extended family, husband migrated to Qatar six years ago.

Connection with Extended Families

Having extended family members living in or close to the home was an important resource for left-behind spouses, helping to manage the home, childcare and emotional burden: "My parents are very helpful and supportive in this regard; they are managing all the matters." Participant 9, married five years, extended family, husband migrated to the United Kingdom two years ago. "The support shown by our families and friends towards me is like therapy to me." Participant 5, married eight years, extended family, husband migrated to Spain six years ago.

Spouses in extended households felt more supported and guided by their spouse and less concerned about their children, and also encountered fewer of the problems of the nuclear household while experiencing more responsibility and greater strain on the marital relationship and well-being as a whole.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the impact of male international migration on left-behind spouse is complex and multifaceted with both positive and negative impacts. The main reasons given for husbands migrating were due to financial factors and concerns over children's education, but the lack of husbands caused loneliness, parenting responsibilities, health problems and trust issues related to communication. Lack of emotional support from partners led to women reporting abandonment, depression and anxiety, and the desire to be strong and not show signs of emotional distress in front of family and community. To cope with these stresses, participants resorted to engaging in productive activity like work or school, staying in touch with husbands via technology, and relying on extended family.

So left-behind spouses in extended families had lighter responsibilities, more support in doing things, and caring for children, whereas those in nuclear families had more responsibilities and were more isolated. This is an important reminder of the role of family and community support in lessening the psychological and practical burden of migration. Findings also indicate that migration can affect gender roles and power dynamics, providing more autonomy and responsibility for women while simultaneously inducing additional tensions, which align with previous studies on the double-edged sword of migration-related empowerment (Demurge, 2015; Koirala, 2023).

The data leads to two additional insights. First, early separation seemed to be related to the nature of the psychological distress: those who had married very recently prior to leaving were more acutely afraid of abandonment than those with more established marriages, indicating that pre-migration relationship strength may be protective. Second, the coping strategies that participants reported using were almost exclusively individual and informal (personal resilience, family goodwill, and having a smartphone) and not formal institutional coping, such as access to social services or other formal support. It indicates that there is a huge mismatch between the scale of the problems described in this report and the complete lack of formal services, counselling programs, community outreach, migrant-family support and other services specifically targeting left-behind spouses in the areas studied.

CONCLUSION

Left-behind spouse's experience of male international migration is complex, involving both opportunities and challenges. Migration can contribute to women's empowerment by increasing their autonomy and their capacity to make choices; it can also have psychological, physical, and social costs which are often ignored. For left-behind spouses in this study, productive activity, digital connectivity, and extended family support all played a role in managing these costs and the most common buffer against isolation and strain was extended family. These experiences must be better understood in order to be able to design support structures that lighten the burden of migration on the families left behind.

The study also provides a good example of the importance of a first-person, phenomenological approach to such a topic as is often boiled down to remittance statistics and economic indicators. The research highlights that the human impact of male labor migration is not a fleeting one; not an incidental, but a sustained part of family life, heard through the voices of twelve women interviewed. Policy approaches to labor migration that fail to consider this aspect largely miss the point and future research on migration and development in Pakistan would be more fruitful if left-behind spouses' wellbeing were recognized as an important outcome in its right.

Recommendations

Immigration and labor migration policies should be reviewed, to create more opportunities for family reunification and minimize the burden of long separations. Families of international migrants need to do their utmost to support left-behind spouses and children for migrants to pay attention to their work and welfare overseas. The study of migrants' spouses should be expanded using a variety of theoretical approaches to increase understanding of the experience of migrants' spouses and to establish effective strategies to help reduce the issues they face. Studies are needed to explore how social interaction and community support contributes to the alleviation of depression and associated challenges of marriage for migrants' spouses. This is where awareness-raising is needed to raise people's empathy and improve the support of the community for migrants' spouses.

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