

Transnational Migration Aspirations, Educational Capabilities, Marriage Preferences, and Health Outcomes: A Mixed-Methods Study Among Pakistani youth

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Abstract

Background: Pakistani youths desire for international migration due to the more favourable socioeconomic circumstances in the country of destination. This may lead to migration marriages among partners of mismatching socio-economic statuses. This study aims to analyse the migration aspirations in relation with educational capabilities, marriage preferences, and health outcomes in the context of an anticipated transnational migration.

Methods: A sequential mixed-methods study has been conducted. Nine case studies and a self-administered questionnaire survey among 496 students enrolled at University of Lahore, Pakistan, have been conducted. Qualitative data was analysed through thematic content analysis. Descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate analyses were performed for the quantitative data. The inductive themes in qualitative analysis, in addition to a literature review, were used to develop the structured questionnaire for the quantitative survey.

Results: Significant associations of socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, and education), migration aspirations, educational capabilities, marriage preferences, and health outcomes with the anticipated immigration status were observed. The potential migrants acquire skills and education that may support their migration plans.

Conclusion: This study shows high intentions for transnational migration. Cautious policies need to be implemented for avoiding a brain drain, but also for allowing a high level of education and freedom to migrate.

Background

A great segment of skilled youth desires for attaining immigration status in wealthier countries because of the worse socio-economic circumstances in their country of origin. This migration can either be a permanent or a semi-permanent change of residence [1]. Population movements are a fundamental human endeavour that has been happening since the beginning of mankind. However, this far off displacement had been difficult in each historical era. In pre-industrial times, particularly the voyage itself was difficult, whereas in today's society, documentation and border crossing permissions are challenging. Furthermore, the process of transnational migration involves problems of cultural integration, language barriers, and financial and physical adjustment [2].

The International Organization of Migration defines a migrant as a person who has moved across the international borders away from his country of birth with the intent of settlement [3]. Migration marriage has been the dominant form of migration from Pakistan to European countries [4]. Several studies have demonstrated a continuous growth in migration marriages of south-Asian women in western countries [5]. In South Asia, marriages with immigrants have been sparked by cultural pressures and a wish for better life opportunities [1]. Frequently, young women from developing countries marry older men to offer beauty, youth and domesticity with traditional gender roles and companionship [6]. For example, the rural

communities in Vietnam raise and send their women as brides to wealthier East Asian countries [7]. In Pakistan, parents are willing to give their daughters to a man in any profession possessing permanent residence of wealthier countries, even aged or health-deprived ones. These marriages are arranged and do not involve consent of bride and groom in the majority of cases. The people of South Asian region dream for the life in developed countries, mostly in terms of financial prosperity. They uphold and love imitations of prosperous countries, however, have dual standards of judgements based on which they like some aspects and disapprove the others. There is gross approval of western personality grooming and English language, particularly in Pakistan. However, women's choice of dressing and appearing modern is disapproved. This is also a reason for perceived marginalisation among south Asians [8].

Sexual abstinence and virginity of girls are the cultural ideal tied to family respect in eastern cultures. Women in South Asian territory marry back in their home country primarily because of the family involvement and concern for ethnic prestige [9]. Such practices have complex contextual roots in cultural traditions of immigrant's identity, perceived cultural deviance, and quality of integration in country of settlement. Despite these cultural factors, the socio-economic conditions in Pakistan's society are pushing youth to seek immigration. Previously, the migration of Pakistani's to United Kingdom (UK) was characterised as for the family reunion [10]. However, in the last two decades, the social circumstances have changed largely.

The increased level of contact among nationals and non-nationals, internationalisation in education and employment, and the use of information technology and social media have contributed to migration marriages between South Asian possessing UK citizenship and immigrants from Pakistan. Empirical studies demonstrated that the Indian youth are more likely to adopt integration strategies as opposed to Pakistani Muslims who adopt a separation strategy while interacting with their host culture. This perceived discrimination among Muslim communities in diaspora was found to be linked with acculturation strategies [11]. This may be due to the low cultural hybridity and cultural deviance. Cultural hybridity is characterised by a person from a different background who comes to another culture and can become more acceptant of other beliefs, races, languages, and religions [1]. Chiang [13] described the phenomenon very accurately:

"Globalization de-territorializes, the borders of countries and the bounds of cultures become blurred, contested, open-ended, unstable, and frequently modified. On one hand, the mobility and re-placement of our bodies destabilize our traditional sense of identity that was usually deeply rooted in a sense of nation-state. On the other hand, "localism," or "nativism," simultaneously increases as reaction and resistance to the global forces from the locals." (page 29)

Pakistanis in UK seem to have frozen identities. Some studies highlighted the assumption of wives' passivity in arranged migration marriages or in joining husbands overseas [14, 15], while others have demonstrated the dearth of studies on experiences of men who migrate to join wives working abroad [1, 10]. According to Sheffer [16] "modern diasporas are actually mirror representations of culture of origin in the host countries because of maintaining strong emotional and material bonding with their homelands'.

About the forces and frictions of transnational migration, scholars have identified certain push and pull factors. According to these theories, migration occurs because of pressures and counter-pressures from the origin and host countries [2]. Studies on South Asian diaspora demonstrate that the parents who have migrated from South Asia have less happy, poor performing, and less flexible children [17]. A lot of research has been done on postmigration physical and mental health, and social adjustment of immigrants. Lesser empirical evidence is available on premigration struggles, aspirations and attempts of failure. Despite the importance of the topic, no recent study has been published on the migration aspirations, educational capabilities, marriage preferences, and health outcomes in association with anticipated migration status.

Aims and objectives

The present study is an interdisciplinary research related to the family studies and marriage, sociology of immigration, and social anthropology. It focuses on the desire-based decision making by individuals regarding voluntary migration. Micro-theories of migration that are based on rational choice theory focus on the factors influencing individual decisions to migrate, which means that how potential migrants calculate the various costs and benefits of migration. The immigrants from developing countries face the challenges of dual cultural scripts and contradicting lifestyles with respect to sexual relationships, socio-religious practices, and even daily routines [18]. This study is based on the planned behaviour theory as theoretical framework [19, 20]. This theory of Ajzen [21] has been used as theoretical framework for researches on fertility and immigration intentions. It is the purpose of this study to analyse the migration aspiration in association with educational capabilities, marriage preferences and health outcomes as the forces and frictions of transnational migration. A secondary objective is to assess the prevalence of migration desires among the skilled youth in Pakistan.

Methods

Study design

A sequential mixed-methods study was conducted in the duration of five months from June to October 2019 among students at University of Lahore, Pakistan. Convenience sampling method has been used to identify the respondents for nine case studies (five males and four females). The data was collected in multiple sittings in the counselling room of School of Integrated Social Sciences, University of Lahore. The students were asked about deductive themes: presence of transnational migration aspiration, how the youth seeks opportunities of migration, importance of seeking nationality of wealthier countries, educational attainment and work experience, English language certification, and immigration advisory service utilisation (see questionnaire in Supplementary Appendix). The case studies data was transcribed and translated into English language. Qualitative data was analysed manually using thematic content analysis.

Following these nine case studies in the initial phase, a quantitative survey has been conducted among 496 students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at University of Lahore. Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire comprising 21 items, which was developed based on the qualitative data collected in the first phase of the study and deduced themes from migration literature.

Participants and data collection

The students who were enrolled in various undergraduate programs and wanted to participate in this study were included in this study. Focussing on students, we assume to recruit participants who are either in a pre-actional or actional stage – according to Ajzen [21] – while acquiring capabilities and finding means of a potential migration intention.

The sample size has been calculated using the prevalence formula [22]:

$$N = P (100-P) / (SE)^2$$

In the absence of previous studies, the prevalence (P) of migration aspirations is expected to be 50%, with an expected degree of precision (margin for random error [MRE]) of 4.5%, meaning that the true prevalence is between 45.5 to 54.5%. We decided on a 95% confidence interval (CI), meaning a p-value < 0.05 being significant (Z = 1.96) These assumptions allowed to calculate the standard error (SE) using the following formula: $SE = MRE / Z = 4.5 / 1.96 = 2.29$

This led to the following calculation of the sample size:

$$N = P (100-P) / (SE)^2$$

$$N = 50 (100 - 50) / (2.29)^2$$

$$N = 2500 / 5.24$$

$$N = 477$$

We expected a low non-response rate (less than 5%). For that reason, the aim was to close the recruitment when about 500 students have been reached. We recruited 497 respondents, out of which 479 provided almost completed questionnaires (with only one or two missings) used for the analyses.

The data was collected in classes that were scheduled in the morning (from 8:00 to 12:00 a.m.). Data were collected by the researchers in cooperation with the concerned administration office of various departments of the University of Lahore, including English Language and Literature, School of Integrated Social Sciences, Computer Science and Information Technology, Electrical Engineering, Mass Communication, Film and TV, Business Studies, Health and Medical Sciences, Sciences and Mathematics. The course instructors announced the study in the class and called for participation in this

research project. Furthermore, they introduced principal investigator to the students in the last few minutes of the class. The interested students remained seated in the class and filled the self-administered questionnaires in the presence of the principal investigator.

Data analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 22. Descriptive and bivariate analysis (including chi-squared tests) have been conducted. Binary logistic regression analysis was performed to analyse the data. We tested beforehand for multicollinearity and further requirements for a regression model. Migration aspiration was the dependent variable and we tested its association with baseline characteristics (age, gender, and marital status), work capabilities, and marriage preferences in the multivariate analyses, as these were the themes derived from the case studies. We used the R^2 for testing how much of the variance in the dependent variable is predictable from the independent variables included in the model.

Results

Qualitative case studies

The thematic content analysis revealed the following categories: development of subjective capabilities, migration marriage, spouse characteristics linked with permanent resident status (such as social status and financial support), domestic chores, family preferences, as well as social exchange and compromise on match and compatibility. Lack of finances needed for realising immigration was demonstrated in all nine cases. Seven cases reported mental and physical health problems that resulted from overthinking and working towards immigration.

In short, migration marriage was found to have been perceived by most of the case studies as an easy method of getting permanent residence of a high-income country. The people are migrating for economic prosperity while few cases reported dissatisfaction with life chances and environmental threats in developing countries. The data demonstrated that the family preference for searching a spouse of their eligible son or daughter, was mainly determined by the spouse characteristics, which might be same religion and superior socio-economic status with permanent national status. The desires of immigration were depicted strongly by all nine cases. There was a statement quoted three times: "Anything for permanent residence status...".

Socio-demographic characteristics

The students were aged between 17 and 25 years. Most of them studied health and medical sciences (20.5%) or Computer Science and Information Technology (20.3%). Slightly more students were male, although 7% did not provide information about their gender. However, the majority of male as well as female students agreed to have been possessing migration aspirations. Further socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1, along with the proportion having migration aspirations.

Significant differences in migration aspirations were found for marital status, education, and study discipline.

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (n = 479)

Variable	n (%)	Migration aspiration n (%)	p-value
Gender	198 (41.3)	169 (85.4)	0.783
Female	247 (51.6)	214 (86.6)	
Male			
Age	288 (60.1)	240 (83.3)	0.020
≤20	188 (39.2)	171 (91.0)	
≥21			
Marital status	88 (18.4)	33 (37.5)	< 0.001
Married	391 (81.3)	381 (97.4)	
Unmarried			
Education completed (in years)	452 (94.4)	387 (85.6)	0.106
12	25 (5.2)	25 (100.0)	
14	2 (0.4)	2 (100.0)	
16			

^a The class strength and daily attendance of the students varies between the departments. Furthermore, the number of consenting students from various classes was different.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>Migration aspiration n (%)</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Study discipline ^a	82 (17.1)	63 (76.8)	< 0.001
English	89 (18.6)	59 (66.3)	
International Relations	97 (20.3)	82 (84.5)	
Computer Science & IT	22 (4.6)	22 (100.0)	
Engineering	43 (9.0)	43 (100.0)	
Mass Communication	9 (1.9)	9 (100.0)	
Film and TV	98 (20.5)	97 (99.0)	
Health & Medical Sciences	7 (1.5)	7 (100.0)	
Mathematics & Statistics	13 (2.7)	13 (100.0)	
Business Studies	6 (1.3)	6 (100.0)	
Aviation Management	9 (1.9)	9 (100.0)	
Others			

^a The class strength and daily attendance of the students varies between the departments. Furthermore, the number of consenting students from various classes was different.

Migration aspirations

The prevalence of migration aspirations among the 479 respondents was very high (86.4%). However, the majority did not apply for immigration till the time of interview. About three quarter of the respondents think that migration to wealthier countries is a desirable goal in life. 61.2% of the youth wanted immigration for issues related to work and business. Results indicate that 33.6% were unsure whereas more than half were hopeful to realise their migration aspirations (Table 2).

Table 2
Migration aspirations (n = 479)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>n (%)</i>
Aspiration to migrate to a wealthier country	414 (86.4)
Applied for immigration to a wealthier country	125 (26.1)
Migration as a desirable goal in life	350 (73.1)
Main reason for migration	293 (61.2)
Work and business opportunities	78 (16.3)
Nationality status / Stay with foreign national spouse	82 (17.1)
Family reconciliation	23 (4.8)
Temporary status (visit only for education / recreational tour)	
Confidence about migration	30 (6.3)
Definitely, I will not get immigration	25 (5.2)
Most probably, I will not get immigration	7 (1.5)
Somewhat, I will not get immigration	161 (33.6)
Can't say	48 (10.0)
Somewhat, I will get immigration	122 (25.5)
Most probably, I will get immigration	81 (16.8)
Definitely, I will get immigration	

About the education and work capabilities, 82.3% reported to have been acquiring degree and language expertise for immigration. Around 65% believed that the study program that they have chosen is in demand in host country. The marriage preference indicators were also associated with migration aspirations. The majority of the respondents thought that marrying a foreign nationality holder is an easy method of attaining permanent residence status (68.3%). Parents mostly emphasise the importance of migration (68.1%), and a large proportion even emphasises to marry a foreign nationality holder (24.8%). Interestingly, 30.7% of respondents confirmed that their family prefers finding a spouse who should be Pakistani by origin and has a similar social background but settled abroad. The respondents were ready to compromise on social status, attractiveness, love, and trustworthiness to marry a person who can serve as means of migration (Table 3).

Table 3
Educational and professional capabilities and marriage preference (n = 479)

Variable	n (%)
Currently acquiring education and work experience that would helpful for migration	394 (82.3)
Chose study program that is in demand at host country	315 (65.8)
Marrying a foreign national is an easy way to migrate	327 (68.3)
Finding a spouse with a foreign nationality with whom one can migrate	215 (44.9)
Difficult to migrate without marriage	250 (52.2)
Parents emphasise the importance of migration	326 (68.1)
Parents emphasise marrying a foreign national holder	119 (24.8)
Family preferences to find a spouse who is Pakistani and settled abroad	147 (30.7)
Convinced to compromise on age gap, education and profession in marrying a nationality holder	173 (36.1)
Which quality can be compromised in marrying a foreign national spouse?	188 (39.2)
Social status	151 (31.5)
Attractiveness	63 (13.2)
Love	73 (15.2)
Trustworthiness	4 (0.8)
Most or all of these	

The prevalence of mental illness – indicated by visiting a psychiatrist – as a result of overthinking about immigration was 31.3%. About one quarter of study participants were diagnosed with depression, whereas 15.9% of respondents reported physical health problems (Table 4).

Table 4
Mental and physical health issues caused by migration aspiration (n = 479)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n (%)</i>
Seen a psychiatrist because of overthinking about immigration	150 (31.3)
Diagnosed with mental illness due to strong migration desires	116 (24.2)
Depression	45 (9.4)
Anxiety	21 (4.4)
Other	297 (62.0)
None	
Migration aspirations affected physical health	76 (15.9)
Yes	138 (28.8)
Unsure	261 (54.5)
No	

Binary Logistic Regression

Table 5 presents the results of the binary logistic regression model. Age and gender were not significantly associated with migration aspirations. Not being married is – despite a very large CI – one of the strongest predictors, as unmarried students are more than 30 times (OR = 30.77, 95% CI: 8.56-111.09) as likely to have migrations aspirations compared to married students. Neither parental emphasis of the importance of migration nor their emphasis to marry a foreign national holder is significantly associated with migration aspirations. However, family preferences to find a spouse who is Pakistani and settled abroad are strongly significantly associated with migration aspirations (OR = 28.27, 95% CI: 2.49-320.86, $p = 0.007$).

Table 5

Association of migration aspirations with baseline characteristics, education and work capabilities, and marriage preferences (n = 479)

Variables	OR (95% CI)^a	P-value
Gender	0.91 (0.26–3.16)	0.884
Female	1	
Male		
Age	1.80 (0.50–6.54)	0.370
≤20	1	
≥21		
Marital status	30.77 (8.56–111.09)	< 0.001
Unmarried	1	
Married		
Currently acquiring education and work experience that would helpful for migration	6.07 (1.49–24.73)	0.012
Yes	1	
No		
Chose study program that is in demand at host country	4.94 (1.33–18.30)	0.017
Yes	1	
No		
Marrying a foreign national is an easy way to migrate	0.13 (0.03–0.55)	0.005
Yes	1	
No		
Finding a spouse with a foreign nationality with whom one can migrate	8.35 (1.07–65.46)	0.043
Yes	1	
No		
Parents emphasise the importance of migration	0.39 (0.10–1.55)	0.179
Yes	1	
No		

^a Reference category: No migration aspirations

<i>Variables</i>	<i>OR (95% CI)^a</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Parents emphasise marrying a foreign national holder	0.57 (0.07–4.52)	0.596
Yes	1	
No		
Family preferences to find a spouse who is Pakistani and settled abroad	28.27 (2.49–320.86)	0.007
Yes	1	
No		
^a Reference category: No migration aspirations		

Students currently acquiring education and work experience that would be helpful for migration (OR = 6.07, 95% CI: 1.49–24.73, p = 0.012) and students who chose a study program that is in demand at host country (OR = 4.94, 95% CI: 1.33–18.30, p = 0.017) are more likely to have migration aspirations. Judging marriage as an easy way for migration is reversely associated with migration aspirations (OR = 0.13, 95% CI: 0.03–0.55, p = 0.005). The variables included in the model explained a very high proportion of the total variance (80.2%), even when excluding marital status (72.9%), family preferences on spouses being Pakistani but settled abroad (77.4%), or both of these variables (68.6%) from the model.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the association of migration aspirations with educational and professional capabilities, marriage preferences, and health outcomes. Our study population of skilled youth in Pakistan has high aspirations about migrating to a wealthier country, which even drives them to compromise on their ideal spouse characteristics. This is consistent with previous studies indicating that they are likely to marry a person with high age difference as well as with missing emotional and intellectual compatibility [4]. In such cases, the immigrants are unable to contribute into the labour force and, therefore, become an indirect burden for the destination country.

Interventions should target counselling youth living in diaspora in the long run for avoiding social problems. Potential migrants acquire skills and education that might be helpful for migration and integration into the host country. However, one needs to avoid a brain drain, where highly skilled youths migrate to another country. This has already been visible among Pakistanis migrating for example to the United States to study abroad and to stay in that destination country afterwards [23]. The results of our study even show that students aim to acquire a high level of education in Pakistan itself, because it supports their migration plans.

Compromise on spouse characteristics like trustworthiness and social status was linked with assumption of getting help in achieving migration goals. The qualitative data highlights that migration marriages are

preferred in seven out of nine youth cases. This trend of migration marriage is linked with readiness to compromise on spouse characteristics and exchange youth and beauty for permanent residency status. There are further studies, indicating that contemporary immigration from Pakistan to the United Kingdom, which frequently takes place in form of a marriage migration, reveals a complex of social and economic pressures in the early months and years after migration. In men, this kind of migration may result in contradictory implications for masculinity [24]. Research also indicates that migration marriages may offer socioeconomic benefits in the destination country, if the opportunity of migration attracts a more highly educated spouse. However, the translation of educational capital into socioeconomic benefits is mediated by the labour market position of migrant spouses [25].

The global trends of skilled outward migration demonstrate that the brain drain is a universal phenomenon for developing countries. In times of a demand of high-quality skilled labour workers, industrialized countries accommodate migrants from developing countries compensate for this demand. However, according to the International Labour Organization [26], high-income countries have lowered this intake to protect the economic rights of local citizens. Despite these revisions in migration as well as social policies, there is still a large proportion of Pakistani youths having migration aspirations. Irrespective of potential inconsistencies in individual migration behaviour [20], which may occur because of missing opportunities or incentives for migration, one needs to consider the large impact on health. This study emphasises that a large proportion of youths with migration aspirations are affected by psychological distress. Therefore, there is a need to solve this area of conflict by implementing local, national, and global initiatives.

Limitations

This study presents a limited scenario of one private sector university located in Lahore, Pakistan. Moreover, due to shortage of resources and time, the scope of this study was kept limited to undergraduate students. However, mixing of research methods and generation of similar findings from quantitative and qualitative studies allowed careful external validity. The findings of this study are not comparable to any pre-existing literature, because of the absence of any such study among Pakistani skilled youth and their aspirations related to transnational migration.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the association of migration aspirations with socio-demographic characteristics, educational capabilities, marriage preferences, and health outcomes. Results clearly show that youths acquire skills and education that would be helpful for migration. The opportunity of migration may attract potential spouses (Pakistani raised) with higher levels of education, unequal status of beauty, and with higher age difference. This highlights the reasons behind resistance to acculturation and double standards about host culture. The migration marriages are a depiction of this gross mentality, which requires attention within Pakistani and host countries of migrants.

Abbreviations

CI Confidence interval

P Prevalence

MRE Margin of random error

OR Odds ratio

SE Standard error

UK United Kingdom

DECLARATIONS

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

The Advanced Studies and Review Board, University of the Punjab Lahore (Pakistan), provided ethical approval for this study. Written informed consent was obtained from respondents before starting the interviews. Respondents were informed about their rights for volunteer participation. Moreover, the researcher also ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, and their responses.

Declarations

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Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Data is available from authors upon reasonable request.

Competing Interest

The authors declare that no competing interest exist. FF serves on the Editorial Board of BMC Public Health as Associate Editor.

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Authors Contributions

The study was conceptualized by AJ. AJ conducted data collection and analysis, FF supervised this process. AJ drafted the manuscript, FF revised it critically for important intellectual content. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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27. **Additional files.**
28. Additional. file 1, Supplementary Appendix, Questionnaire.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [SupplementaryAppendixQuestionnaire.docx](#)