

Feminization of Migration: Experiences of Left-Behind Women in Pakistan

Tooba Kareem, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan

Farah Hashmi, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan

Keywords	Abstract
Feminization of Migration, Gender Roles, Left-Behind Women, Social Role Theory, Transnational Feminist Theory.	<i>The existing literature in migration discourse predominantly focuses on the victimization of left-behind women. This study challenges the narrative by highlighting their autonomy, self-confidence, and resilience. Thus, the study investigates the experiences of the women left behind in Pakistan's urban regions after the migration of their spouses by utilizing the amalgamated theoretical framework of Transnational Feminist Theory and Social Role Theory. Relying on structured interviews of seven women aged 23-45 residing in Capital territory, Islamabad, Pakistan, this social and behavioral qualitative research interrogates how globalization and local patriarchal customs converge to redefine gender roles, responsibilities, and identities. The study indicates that the left-behind women are not passive victims. Despite the emotional burden and social pressure, they prove to be highly capable individuals with extraordinary skills. Education is a contributing factor in boosting women's confidence and giving them agency and decision-making power. This study provides an extension to the transnational feminist framework suggested by Grewal and Kaplan, as well as by Parreñas, and the addition of Social Role Theory facilitates the elaboration of behavioral adaptations in the left-behind women. Therefore, the study offers a nuanced comprehension of the feminization of migration. This research challenges the universalist notions generated by Western society that focus on the victimhood of women in the global South, especially Pakistani women, thereby advocating for an intersectional and context-dependent approach in migration studies. The findings demand policy interventions, educational support, and community awareness to ease the burden of left-behind women. Thus, to empower these women, governmental action and community engagement are required.</i>

INTRODUCTION

Migration has emerged as a significant phenomenon during recent decades. It has modified economic, social, and cultural perspectives. Due to the surge in labor migration, new dynamics have emerged, and researchers are now keen to explore the experiences of the left-behind people, especially of those who migrated. The term “feminization of migration” primarily refers to the women who have migrated to other countries for labor. The term has been central in migration studies. Castles and Miller (1993) are widely recognized for coining the concept “feminization of migration”, which has been employed for referring to the rising participation of

women in labor migration. Castles et al. (2020) assert that the term “feminization of migration” specifically indicates the frequent involvement of women in labor migration. Currently, women constitute the majority of labor flows. Since female migrant workers are mostly involved in menial jobs, their contribution to the workforce remains blurred in comparison with men. However, the term can now be expanded to incorporate the gendered consequences of migration. This article discusses the “feminization of migration” in the Pakistani context and probes into the economic, social, cultural, and personal experiences of left-behind women whose husbands have migrated for better economic opportunities. Pakistan is a prominent labor-exporting South Asian country. Every year, thousands of men migrate to the Middle East, Europe, and Gulf countries in search of work. Approximately 6.3 million immigrants from Pakistan are residing abroad for labor (Ahmed, 2024). The existing scholarly research focuses primarily on remittances and labor markets. The remittances from these countries play a significant role in boosting the national economy. Despite sending migrants in abundance, Pakistan continues to remain under-represented in the global migration literature, particularly in terms of gendered analysis. The emotional challenges experienced by the left-behind families are often overlooked. The departure of the male members not only alters the family structure but also transfers new burdens to the left-behind women and reshapes conventional gender roles. The women, often situated in patriarchal settings, face unique challenges. Though researchers have explored these challenges, a gap is still left. Deeper exploration is required to figure out how the women navigate, negotiate, and resist these challenges posed by male migration.

The existing research focuses on the oppression of women and portrays women as victims. We need to move beyond the victimhood of the left-behind women and view this from a new perspective. This study offers a nuanced perspective by shifting the focus towards the agency and resilience of women. It discusses not only the vulnerability of women but also their independence, coping strategies, adaptation mechanisms, and empowerment. Drawing on feminist transnational perspectives, this research examines how women can become independent decision-makers and defy conventional norms. This research, therefore, bridges the gap by highlighting the gender-specific consequences of labor migration on the left-behind population.

The study is significant at two levels. At the international level, migration discourses have emphasized the role of gender and family dynamics. However, indifferent responses have been made towards the voices of left-behind women in countries like Pakistan. This study aligns with the aims of international bodies by promoting a gender-sensitive approach towards migration discourses. By offering an insight into women’s experiences and adaptive strategies, it supplements global debates about caregiving and women being unpaid laborers at home. At the academic level, this study challenges the existing narratives focused on the economic dependence of women and their distress. It emphasizes women’s agency, their decision-making capability, aversion to conventional gender norms, and innovative coping strategies in patriarchal frameworks. Furthermore, the use of qualitative, narrative-based fieldwork enhances the depth of predominantly policy-oriented research on migration in Pakistan. Moreover, it encourages scholars to investigate the intersectionality of factors like class, education, and locality that determine women’s experiences. Additionally, by combining theoretical insights from Parreñas (2009), and Grewal (1994) studies, it offers novel perspectives on the feminization of migration. From a social point of view, this research plays a vital role in amending the popular migration discourses. Besides highlighting the emotional toll on women, it underscores women’s strength and resilience in the face of adversity and how they oppose the patriarchal norms. The study has

great potential to shape future policies and public discourse. It has disrupted the victimhood tropes about women and has shifted the paradigm by highlighting the agency-focused aspect. It brings to light new pathways for gender and migration studies in the Global South. Additionally, it raises awareness among the community and society by offering a portrayal of women not as victims, but as empowered social beings. This has the power to alter media discourses and public attitudes towards the left-behind women.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within developing countries, the migration rate has significantly increased, which has brought to light the aspect of the feminization of migration in the academic field. It has caught the attention of scholars, who have tried to highlight the psychological, social, and financial changes brought by the phenomenon of male labor migration. This literature review explores the restructuring of the prescribed gender roles and women's experiences.

Kulczycka (2015) conducted a study on the lives of left-behind women in Nepal. She has used Kabeer's (1999) framework of empowerment for exploring the social and economic impacts of male migration. Her study reveals contradictory results; while some women gain influence in their households, others come under emotional strain. She contends that after male migration, women either become the de facto head of the household or live with their parents-in-law. The left-behind women are often dictated by the male members of the family, be it the father-in-law or the brother-in-law. Thus, the deeply rooted patriarchy in the culture remains intact despite the absence of the husband. Despite the possibility of becoming autonomous after male labor migration, the left-behind women often do not take any action to become empowered and remain under the influence of patriarchy.

Similarly, Galván (2015) asserts that the left-behind women not only face economic and social challenges but also develop new identities and create spaces of empowerment for themselves. The response of these women is different towards the phenomenon of migration and coping strategies. The narratives of the left-behind women reveal how they adjust, confront, and defy their circumstances. The women who survive without any male members of the family learn to adapt to the change in the prescribed gender roles. They have to come forward and fulfill the extra responsibilities instead of just staying behind passively. Though family offers great emotional support, it can obstruct women's transformation. Men exercise control in transmigrant communities and stay updated about the occurrences within families. Within such communities, women are often in favor of male migration; however, they are sometimes against it too. Surprisingly, some women have an ambivalent attitude towards this phenomenon.

Another study conducted by Miskinzoda (2015) sheds light on the repercussions of male migration on the reproductive health of their left-behind wives. According to her, fertility can be minimally affected if migration happens later in marriage. However, in case the couple gets separated earlier in marriage, it can have adverse consequences. Furthermore, it is significant to note that the improvement in their financial status results in easy access to basic health care facilities and reproductive health care. Surprisingly, the left-behind wives of migrants face severe complications during pregnancy, and the ratio of miscarriages is also higher among them. Moreover, their newborns are likely to suffer from health issues, which enhances their emotional strain.

A survey was carried out by Khan et al. (2017) in the district of Buner in the province of KP to determine the social and psychological impacts of immigration on the women who are left behind. The researchers discovered that 51.5% of the emigrants' spouses are the victims of loneliness, and 76.8% face increased tension within their families. Furthermore, their emotional needs are not catered to, which leads to clashes among couples. Due to the absence of husbands, the wives have to manage outdoor chores too, including fetching groceries and other goods needed in daily life. Furthermore, they also have to face the intervention of their in-laws in their lives upon stepping outside the house. However, the divorce rate has not increased despite increased male immigration. Thus, it is suggested that the male immigrants should keep visiting the homes to avoid these challenges.

Moreover, Ullah (2017) provided a detailed analysis of how the lives and agency of the left-behind women are reshaped in various Middle Eastern and North African countries after male migration. He contends that male migration not only inflicts burdens on women but also creates room for the increase in autonomy, control, and decision-making. Thus, the left-behind women prove themselves great leaders in the absence of men. Furthermore, he claims that the distant husbands exert control over their left-behind wives. He highlights the different struggles of those living with their in-laws and the ones who live on their own. The ones living with their in-laws often face disagreements over certain matters. On the contrary, those living alone have their reservations regarding their security. He contends that when the husbands return home after spending several years abroad, they are often not ready to accept the autonomy and decision-making power of their wives. Thus, couples fall victim to personality clashes, due to which their marital life is adversely affected.

Moreover, Ahmed (2020) has meticulously explored how migration impacts the lives of the women who are left behind in Southern Punjab. According to her, patriarchal norms persist in Southern Punjab, despite the physical absence of men, and thus restrict the autonomy of women. Power is divided among the other men of the family in the absence of the women's husbands. Women are subject to the surveillance of their in-laws, especially the mother-in-law. So, the extended family structure maintains the patriarchal hierarchies and restricts the agency of the left-behind women. Also, the social ties of "biradari" hold great significance within the rural system. The left-behind women are not allowed to work outside the house because of safety concerns. However, the left-behind women still try to influence the decisions of their husbands and in-laws by working "backstage" to improve the living conditions of themselves and their children.

In addition to this, Ullah et al. (2021) carried out research in Lower Dir in the province of KP to assess the psychological well-being of the left-behind women. The findings reveal that due to the scarcity of job opportunities in Pakistan, a massive number of people from Dir are migrating abroad because they want to improve their financial conditions. However, migration negatively influences the emotional health of the migrants' families, who stay behind. The upbringing of children becomes a monumental task for women in the absence of their husbands. The study has pointed out that apart from mental strain and loneliness, women also face anger issues and insecurity. Owing to the extreme mental agony, women often start shouting and weeping. Thus, a surge in the ratio of psychiatrist visits has been noticed. Besides, married couples, and especially left-behind women, face problems with their personality due to their unmet physical needs. An extended delay in intimacy causes adverse repercussions on the fertility of women.

Furthermore, Hussain et al. (2023) carried out qualitative research to explore the psychological and social impacts of the migration of males on the women who are left behind in Quetta, Pakistan. The economic situation has worsened due to COVID-19, thereby increasing the ratio of international migration. The researchers have identified numerous challenges faced by these women through conducting open-ended interviews. Besides enduring emotional turmoil, women also feel threatened by their in-laws and society. Furthermore, they are given a tough time by their children because they are deprived of the care and affection of their fathers. Some of the women receive help from their in-laws with outdoor chores. However, others denied agency due to the over-interference of the in-laws.

Recently, Aziz et al. (2024) examined the effects of male migration on the well-being of the Punjabi women who are left behind. Their research reflects that the left-behind women gain financial advantage from the migration of their male counterparts. Thus, the quality of life of the left-behind women can be improved owing to the migration of males. The women receiving high remittances have higher levels of contentment, indicating that the financial gains from migration can improve their well-being.

Additionally, Pokharel (2024) also conducted similar research in the Chandragiri Municipality of Nepal to explore the effects of male international migration on the empowerment of left-behind women. He asserted that to take care of the family, women opt to stay behind and let the males migrate. Although social, political, and economic factors are crucial in fostering women's empowerment, they are not always sufficient. It is essential to consider this; if women are unable to recognize and utilize the resources for the fulfillment of their needs, the availability of the resources alone cannot lead to their empowerment. When husbands migrate, women are allowed to handle both indoor and outdoor chores independently. Most of the left-behind women are not required to seek suggestions from others and are allowed to make decisions on their own. Thus, their wide experiences enable them to develop their personality and improve their status.

All of these studies indicate that women have been predominantly presented as passive victims of abandonment and absence, despite the focus on social, political, economic, and emotional impacts of male migration. The majority of these studies are globally oriented and focus on the South Asian trends, thereby ignoring the culturally specific and localized experiences of left-behind women. They have not emphasized how the women respond, resist, or redefine their roles in the face of disturbance and distortion. Furthermore, the Pakistani context stands uninvestigated regarding localized, gender-sensitive narratives that foreground women's perspectives and lived experiences. This study seeks to fill the gaps by adopting a complex lens, recognizing women's vulnerability yet simultaneously highlighting their capability of resilience and decision-making. The present study is crucial in the sense that it investigates the life experiences of females living in urban areas. The objective of the study is to underscore the capability of women to become the leaders and decision-makers of the house, breaking the shackles of patriarchy. Thus, the women become the embodiment of strength and resilience and face the challenges with remarkable fortitude.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is grounded in Grewal and Kaplan's Transnational Feminist Theory as propounded in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist*

Practices (1994). In their seminal work, they have pointed out the limitations of the traditional feminist approaches by criticizing their tendency to emphasize the universality of women's experiences (p. 17). As per the framework provided by Grewal and Kaplan, global forces such as capitalism, nationalism, migration, race, gender, and class intersect in diverse ways to shape women's experiences across different contexts. They argue that the life experiences of the women of first-world countries and third-world countries vary, owing to the differences in cultural, socio-political, and geographical factors. Thus, they criticize the categorization of "woman" as a universal notion and examine how global feminism tends to neutralize the categories of "First World Women" and "Third World Women" (p. 137). The notion of "scattered hegemonies" is central to their framework, which refers to the numerous, overlapping systems of power - social, cultural, economic, and political - which influence the lives of women.

Building upon the foundations provided by Grewal and Kaplan (1994), Parreñas (2009) have broadened the scope of transnational feminism to include migration studies. In her work *Inserting Feminism in Transnational Migration Studies* (2009), she critiques the present approaches in the field of migration studies. She argues that these approaches do not efficiently address gender inequalities and their impact on migrant women. Thus, she advocates for a feminist approach towards transnational migration (p. 1). To highlight gender inequalities within migration studies, she has given the concept of "care chain" or "international division of reproductive labor" (p. 6). It highlights how females belonging to economically deprived nations are recruited for domestic work in wealthier countries. In turn, these migrant women depend on the help of their female relatives or helpers in their home country for taking care of their household and children. This highlights the inequality faced by the women of the global south compared to the women of the global north. Women have become the victims of "double burden", owing to the rise of neoliberalism (p. 7). They have to manage paid and unpaid labor, i.e., household work, along with their outside jobs. In this way, globalization has exploited women. She argues that in feminist migration studies, we need to probe into the structural inequalities (patriarchy, racism, capitalism, class system) that outline migration experiences. She advocates an intersectional perspective, highlighting how race, sexuality, and class intersect to frame the migratory experiences. Although Parreñas has highlighted the experiences of the migrant women, she has overlooked the experiences of left-behind women - those who do not migrate themselves but are adversely affected by the migration of their male family members.

To further enrich the framework, Eagly, Woo, and Diekmann's Social Role Theory (2012) has been incorporated. According to the theory, sex differentiated behavior arises due to the division of social roles within a society. Men are considered to be the breadwinners of the house, and women are deemed to be the homemakers. Thus, both genders engage in learning the skills as per the prescribed gender roles. The roles ascribed to men are regarded as high-status roles, while the ones ascribed to women are low status. Women are supposed to be humble, obedient, and responsible; on the contrary, boys are encouraged to be hostile, courageous, and self-made (pp. 125-145). This theoretical framework is essential for understanding how the double burden is placed on the left-behind women and how they come forward to fulfill the roles traditionally reserved for men. Consequently, the conventional gender roles are transformed.

With this adapted theoretical lens, this study investigates how the lives of the left-behind women in Pakistani urban areas such as the capital territory are transformed by the global migratory phenomenon and regionally constructed gender roles. Despite not moving out themselves, the

roles and responsibilities of the left-behind women are altered by male labor migration. Apart from taking care of the family and raising children, they have to maintain social relationships, safeguard the family honor, and manage finances due to the absence of their male counterparts. Thus, they become the victims of social judgment as well as severe emotional strain. This highlights the interplay between global power structures and traditional patriarchal customs.

The research aims to highlight the struggles of Pakistani women, profoundly affected by the migration of their men. They remain geographically stationary yet are affected by the global migratory processes. The notion of “scattered hegemonies” presented by Grewal and Kaplan (1994) gives insight into the numerous sources of pressure, including societal expectations, domestic responsibilities, emotional strain, and financial management. All these contribute to the understanding of the experiences of the women who are left behind. Meanwhile, the social role theory underscores how the transformation in the traditional division of labor between genders is worked out in our society.

Through this integrated framework, a multifold investigation of migration is possible, i.e., how it interrupts, recreates, and restructures the conventional gender norms, thereby offering a nuanced perspective on the feminization of migration. The significance of this integrated framework lies in its emphasis on the fact that gender roles are not only altered by migration but also debunked and opposed by the left-behind women. Moreover, it lays the groundwork for a critical feminist inquiry that is fluid and sensitive to the global systems and localized experiences of women.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative research design to unfold the above-mentioned features. In order to explore the experiences of the left-behind women in Pakistani urban areas, seven women have been selected to conduct structured interviews, comprising 10-12 open-ended subjective questions. The data has been collected through convenience sampling from the social circle. Most of the interviews have been conducted online, at the convenience of the participants. Each interview has lasted between 12-15 minutes. These women, aged between 23-45 and have varied educational backgrounds ranging from graduation to post-graduation. The criteria for sample selection have been the migration of the husband, urban residency, and diverse social and economic conditions. The interviews have been recorded with the participants’ consent. The participants have been given the choice to use Urdu or English as per their preference during the interviews, which have later been transcribed into English using intelligent transcription. The clarity and readability of their expressions have been ensured. Subjective data has been collected through the use of a structured questionnaire.

Data Analysis

This qualitative research endeavors to investigate the experiences of left-behind women in Pakistani urban areas by using an integrated framework combining Transnational Feminist Theory and Social Role Theory. The subjective data collected from the participants have been analyzed carefully. The study reveals a drastic shift in their personalities, identities, social roles, and emotional well-being owing to the migration of their husbands, as discussed below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The critical analysis of the gathered data reveals numerous recurrent thematic patterns that highlight the interrelation of globalization, prevalent patriarchal norms in our society, and individual autonomy.

Unfolding of Strength, Resilience, and Autonomy: All the participants have been found to be the epitome of strength and resilience. Despite the challenges posed by the unavailability of their husbands, the women demonstrate the capability to adapt to the changing circumstances. The roles of both men and women are assumed by most of the participants. When the social structures change, the division of labor also changes, and hence the behavior of men and women. Thus, the left-behind women transcend the boundaries of the expected gender roles. 71% of the participants have revealed that they manage both the domestic and outside tasks on their own, from buying groceries to paying bills, taking care of the electricity and water supply, bringing up their children, and taking care of their well-being, etc. Participant 1, aged 35, has reported that she performs certain tasks which are considered taboo in our society and are associated with men, such as taking the kids to the barber shop and going to the markets alone. She does all these things alone, without anybody's help. So, after her husband's migration, she feels more confident; she asserts, "We (the women) can also do the same things as males can do, and also we can do better than them." The use of the plural pronoun "we" indicates a sense of unity among the women. The assertion of the capability to "perform better than men" indicates self-confidence and elevated morale.

Multitasking and Role Expansion: The participants have disclosed that they have to perform multiple tasks concurrently, "double burden" (Parreñas, 2009). The left-behind women are the decision-makers, leaders, managers, and heads of the house, besides being the caretakers of the house. The augmentation of responsibilities proves to be both empowering and burdensome for the women. However, the participants have revealed that they feel a "sense of satisfaction" and "pride" in themselves and their "capability to manage everything on their own" during their husbands' absence, which reflects the theme of multitasking and role expansion. So, they move beyond the conventional "gender roles" (Eagly et al., 2012). Multitasking is not only a dire need but also a coping mechanism used by women as a way to assert their strength and capabilities. This represents a shift in the traditional gender roles ascribed to women in the urban areas of Pakistan. The data manifests that, nonetheless, the physical departure of men does not dismantle patriarchal norms completely; it paves the way for women to assert their autonomy and challenge the socially constructed gender roles.

Influence of Education on Women's Empowerment: One of the significant findings is the association of educational achievement and empowerment. 71% of the participants holding university degrees and higher qualifications have manifested greater confidence, better skills to manage finances, wider social interactions, and more emotional resilience than the less educated women. Furthermore, the women with higher qualifications have used expressions such as "strength", "confidence", "change", and "transformation" in contrast with the less educated women who have not asserted self-confidence. So, the more educated women demonstrate a greater ability to handle the challenges more efficiently because education plays a vital role in enhancing women's ability to cope with the challenges, adapt to the circumstances, and reshape the difficulties arising from male migration, "intersectionality" (Parreñas, 2009). Furthermore,

the left-behind women demonstrate how the expected behaviors emanate from the social roles and how they adapt to the newly attributed roles as the circumstances change. Therefore, social class and educational level greatly influence the experiences of the left-behind women after men's migration. Education enables women to encounter the restrictions posed by patriarchy and hence undertake wider social roles.

Personality Development: A significant observation in almost every interview is the personality development of every participant. All of the participants have mentioned enhanced self-esteem, confidence, better managerial skills, and a sense of self-satisfaction. 57% of the participants confessed that they were shy and hesitant decision makers. However, they have become more confident after assuming the leadership roles. This underscores role-driven behavioral adaptation, "social roles" (Eagly et al., 2012). Participant 2, aged 42, has remarked:

I had never imagined I would become this much stronger, this much compromising, and that my way of looking at life would be entirely changed, and that I would keep up a positive attitude towards life... The resilience I have found within myself and the compromising nature I have developed over time, I believe have become my strengths.

The respondent has presented herself as "stronger", showing "resilience" in the face of adversity. She has become an active agent rather than a passive victim during her husband's absence. Over the period of time, she has undergone a drastic transformation in terms of personality and attitude. Thus, the patriarchal notion of women as meek individuals has been defied.

Persisting Emotional and Social Challenges: Though the left-behind women manifest great resilience and empowerment, it is crucial to acknowledge their emotional and psychological toll. 85% of the participants have confessed to their struggle with anxiety and emotional strain due to their husband's migration. They have to assume double responsibilities, as per their altered role. However, they have revealed that the emotional support from their family and close friends enables them to sustain their lives. Some of the participants have revealed that "raising the children alone" is the toughest challenge for them. However, others find it challenging to keep up with their in-laws. Thus, they continuously face emotional and social challenges and bear social pressure, "scattered hegemonies" (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). Another striking observation is that though the left-behind women face challenges, their husbands provide them with emotional support. Participant 3, aged 24, whose husband migrated right after their marriage, states:

For me, the biggest challenge has been moving in with my in-laws and spending this time while sitting among them. I never got the opportunity to spend time with my in-laws along with my husband. If we had gotten this opportunity, things would have been easier for me to handle after my husband's absence. So, my first experience with my in-laws was alone, without my husband.

Emotional Support and Coping Strategies: All of the participants have declared that they are blessed to have the unwavering support of their close relationships, which proves to be helpful while facing challenges. Participant 4, aged 23, has remarked, "In my husband's absence, I mostly rely on my parents for emotional support, my close friends, and my siblings."

Furthermore, participant 5, aged 23, has revealed, “My support is my family, my husband, or my close friends.” Moreover, a significant majority of the participants have revealed that they turn towards Allah Almighty to seek help, and it proves helpful. Participant 6, aged 42, has mentioned:

Connecting with Allah is the habit I have developed over time. I pray to Him, and after that, I am relaxed and motivated, and I then believe that the problem will be solved now... My transition from an introvert to an extrovert has helped me in this difficult time. This is the new habit I have developed, not only to cope with this difficult time, but also to survive.

The coping strategies adopted by the participants reflect the behavioral adaptations to perform the gender roles. Women tend to use these strategies due to the transnational forces at work; thus, they resist the “scattered hegemonies” (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994).

The significance of the findings lies in the fact that they can enhance our comprehension of the localized gendered impacts of transnational migration, especially for women who experience substantial changes in their lives despite remaining behind. The migrants’ perspective has been the focus of existing migration discourses. Though the left-behind women are discussed, the focus has only been on their victimization. These findings redirect attention towards the urban women who challenge their underrepresentation in the migration discourse and the prescribed gender roles in our society. Furthermore, the adaptability, agency, and perseverance of these women are pivotal in developing the feminist migration discourse. The data can be deemed a significant contributor to driving policy discussions and further discussions regarding gender and migration.

CONCLUSION

The study has investigated the nuanced experiences of left-behind women in the urban areas of Pakistan by using an integrated theoretical lens combining Transnational Feminist Theory and Social Role Theory. Despite being physically static, the lives of the left-behind women are deeply intertwined with the global migratory processes. The findings highlight how male labor migration alters their socially ascribed roles, responsibilities, and personalities. The data elucidates that Pakistani left-behind women of the urban areas not only demonstrate profound resilience, confidence, empowerment, and courage, but also exceptional abilities as managers of the house. Furthermore, the study underscores that the experiences of women are neither wholly emancipatory nor repressive; instead, they are multidimensional accounts of adjustment, steadfastness, and reformation. The study reveals that the arduous experiences of the left-behind women become a source of empowerment for them, thereby presenting a nuanced understanding of the left-behind women in Pakistan. As a result of these challenges, the women transcend the traditional depictions of vulnerability. Thus, these women emerge as individuals with strengthened capabilities. These findings challenge the dominant discourse that women lack leadership qualities and the ability to make wise decisions.

Implications and Recommendations

The study persuades scholars and policymakers to pay heed to the experiences of the

women who remain hidden yet bear the emotional strain by presenting the narratives of the left-behind women. To address the emotional challenges, it is important to strengthen support systems. Community-based counselling programs should be initiated. The whole society must empathize with these women, instead of passing judgments and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Till now, the left-behind women have not been incorporated into the migration policies. However, the government should ensure inclusive policymaking, recognizing the changed social roles of the left-behind women. They should be recognized as the temporary guardians of the property during their husbands' absence. The documentation processes should be simplified so that they can have access to education, bank transactions, and healthcare without the authorization of males. There should be special health insurance schemes and other relief packages for the left-behind women. The present study brings to the spotlight the experience of the wives of migrants who are doing white collar jobs. In the future, research can be conducted on the experiences of the left-behind wives of overseas laborers because a significant majority of the migrants are employed as laborers. Their experiences will vary due to economic challenges. Hence, more areas can be explored within the feminization of migration.

Acknowledgment: I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to the successful completion of this study. I express my sincere appreciation to all the participants who generously shared their insights and experiences, providing invaluable data for this research.

Author's Contributions: Both authors equally contributed to the theoretical development, analysis, interpretation and writing of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, J. (2024). Pakistan's Emigration: Trends & Insights (Knowledge Brief No. 2024:112). Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. <https://file.pide.org.pk/pdfpideresearch/kb-112-pakistans-emigration-trends-and-insights.pdf>
- Ahmed, S. (2020). Women Left Behind: Migration, Agency, and the Pakistani Woman. *Gender & Society*, 34(4), 597–619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243220934263>
- Aziz, N., Raza, A., Yang, S., & Zhou, J. (2024). Assessing the Impact of Migration on the Happiness of Household Women Left Behind: Evidence from Punjab, Pakistan. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12(1), 48. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-024-00471-0>
- Castles, S., de Haas, H., & Miller, M. J. (2020). *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (6th ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Castles, S. & Miller, M. J. (1993). *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. New York: Guilford Press.

- Eagly, A. H., Woo, W., & Diekman, A. B. (2012). Social Role Theory of Sex Differences and Similarities: A Current Appraisal. In the Developmental Social Psychology of Gender (pp. 123-174). Psychology Press.
- Galván, R. T. (2015). Transmigration, Transborder Realities, and the Transformation of Women Who Stay Behind. In *Women Who Stay Behind: Pedagogies of Survival in Rural Transmigrant Mexico* (pp. 40–57). University of Arizona Press.
- Grewal, I., & Kaplan, C. (Eds.). (1994). *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://archive.org/details/scattered-hegemon0000unse>
- Hussain, E., Alam, J., & Aziz, T. (2023). Husbands' Migration and the Left-Behind Wives: The Psychosocial Impacts on Life Experiences of the Women of District Quetta, Pakistan. *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(4), 203–210.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment (Vol. 108, pp. 1-58). Geneva: Unrisd.
- Khan, A., Alam, I., & Rehman, U. (2017). Socio-Psychological Effects of Emigration on Left Behind Women in Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Peshawar Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, 3(1), 95–104.
- Kulczycka, K. (2015). *Left Behind Women and Empowerment: Consequences of Male Labour Migration on the Economic and Social Position of Left Behind Women in Nepal* [Bachelor's Thesis, Lund University]. Lund University Publications.
- Miskinzoda, D. (2015). *The Impact of Men's Labour Migration on the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Their Left-Behind Wives in Tajikistan* [Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University]. Arizona State University.
- Parreñas, R. S. (2009, February). Inserting Feminism in Transnational Migration Studies. in *Feminist Research Methods Conference*, Centre for Gender Studies, Stockholm University Sweden (pp. 46). http://aa.ecn.cz/img_upload/6334c0c7298d6b396d213ccd19be5999/RParrenas_InsertingFeminisminTransnationalMigrationStudies.pdf
- Pokharel, R. R. (2024). Impact of Male Migration on Women Empowerment. *International Journal of Original Recent Advanced Research*, 1(1), 15–22.
- Ullah, A. A. (2017). Male Migration and 'Left-Behind' Women: Bane or Boon?. *Environment and Urbanization ASIA*, 8(1), 59-73.
- Ullah, M., Saeed, S., & Khan, S. (2021). The Impact of Husband's Out-Migration on the Psychological Wellbeing of Left Behind Wives in Dir (Lower), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Psychology and Education*, 58(5), 6126–6130.