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## **Gendered Structures of Overseas Mobility: A Sociological Study of Female Migration from Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

*Female migration from Pakistan was one of the most under-theorized aspects of South Asian migration. This study adopted a qualitative research design. This research applied three frameworks: the feminization of migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Cranford, 2006; Silvey, 2004), the concept of mobility regimes (Martin & Dragojlovic, 2019) and intersectionality (Docquier et al., 2009; Khattab et al., 2020). This study analyzed the sociological perspective of female overseas migration in Pakistan by focusing on the structural, cultural and institutional processes that either hinder or facilitate women's overseas mobility from Pakistan. Women accounted for a mere 0.94 percent of all registered emigrants in 2023 (8126 out of 862625), their skill profile was far from being of the same magnitude as male emigrants. About 45 percent of the females were in highly qualified and skilled occupations compared to about five percent of the males. The United Kingdom is consistently the largest share of all female Pakistani emigrants (5.6–11.6 per cent) compared to its share of the BEOE emigration (0.1–1.9 per cent) in 2019–2022. There were four governance system gaps in Pakistani emigration, the invisibility of female professional migrants who do not register with BEOE under the employer-sponsored visa pathway; a lack of bilateral ethical recruitment agreement between Pakistan and NHS England despite an increase of nurse emigration between 2019 and 2022; absence of gender-responsive return support services; and inadequate protection mechanisms for domestic worker emigrants in the Gulf destination countries. This research argued for the intersection of three structuring forces; patriarchy, which in Pakistan limits women's movement within the country, the conditions on which their migration to the overseas countries is socially acceptable, and women's agency, through negotiation and*

*strategic use of educational qualifications, as well as transnational identity formation, in the face of these constraints. This study contributes to the feminization of the migration by describing the case of Pakistan, and to the mobility regimes by detailing the interaction between macro-level structures and micro-level agency in a patriarchal.*

**Keywords:** *female migration, gendered mobility, Pakistan, patriarchy, feminization of migration, skilled women migrants, agency, mobility regimes, transnationalism*

## 1. Introduction

Female migration is not only occurring all over the world, but also increasing in its scope and complexity. As of 2015, over 48% of the 232 million international migrants in the world were female (Khan, 2020). The share of female migrants heading for work (not for family reuniting) has been increasing steadily (Khan, 2020). However, the contribution of Pakistan to this global trend is still very small. In 2023, women made up only 0.94 percent of the total registered emigrants in Pakistan (Shah et al., 2024). In the absence of these data, however, there is a complex sociological phenomenon that needs to be understood: indeed, women do migrate to Pakistan, they do migrate in more skilled professions than men, and their migration is governed by a unique set of structural and cultural influences that have not been sufficiently theorized by the broader migration literature.

The case of Pakistan is of significant importance when it comes to the study of gendered migration. The participation of women in the workforce is very low and is just 22 per cent (Khan, 2020). In ILO-Gallup surveys, 12 per cent of Pakistani women said they would prefer working outside the home to stay at home versus 51 per cent, who said they would prefer to stay at home (Khan, 2020). Such a love of staying put isn't just an individual preference. It is a product of gendered sociocultural environment that limits women's movement; concerns about family honour, patriarchal surveillance, and institutional barriers that limit mobility both domestic and international of women (Adeel & Yeh, 2018).

Nonetheless, Pakistani women do move, be it within cities, between regions or internationally. If they move abroad for employment they do so in 'skilled' occupations at much higher rates than males. Around 45% of the Pakistani immigrants to Canada in the highly qualified and skilled categories are female, while around 5% are male (Shah et al., 2024). Female emigrants are most likely to be in doctor, nurse, and management occupations. In 2022, female Pakistani emigrants were most likely to settle in the United Kingdom (10.3 per cent), the only Western countries such that a significant proportion of female Pakistani emigrants were recruited there (specifically through the NHS).

While Pakistan is considered one of the world's leading countries for sending labour abroad, the established migration narrative has been masculine and disproportionately centered around grandiose statements about "brain drain", rarely accounting for the gendered aspects of migration and labour stratification in Pakistan. However, the empirical evidence from recent studies contradicts these assumptions and shows that post-COVID remigration from Pakistan involved low and semi-skilled labour migration mainly in a cyclical manner as opposed to a significant professional migration (Ashraf, 2022a).

Meanwhile, the export of highly qualified workers to the United States and the United Kingdom which, although small in numbers, represent a significant amount of remittance funds, shows that Pakistani workers are devalued globally. Pakistani workers, however, are devalued globally as highly qualified workers migrate to the United States and the United

Kingdom with low percentages, but high remittance costs (Ashraf, 2022b). However, despite its importance, the female migration is structurally marginalized, statistically invisible and sociologically under-explored within this larger migration framework, revealing some of the most sinister crossovers of labour market, state governance, and transnational mobility with patriarchy. While migration from Pakistan is selective, limited, and gendered, as the opportunities available are limited to highly educated women such as healthcare professionals and managers or low-skilled domestic workers who work under the auspices of highly exploitative labor systems in the economies of the Gulf countries, argues Ashraf (2022c). This duality is an expression of the fact that women's mobility is not only shaped by their economic goals, but by patriarchal gatekeeping, cultural surveillance, class privilege, occupational segregation, and gendered policies on the movement of women.

Moreover, the continuity of these trends before, during, and after the onset of the COVID-19 crisis implies that temporary economic shifts are not enough to drive female migration, but rather a deeply rooted social and cultural and migration disadvantage is. Thus, the sociological research on the mobility of women is not only crucial to comprehend the mobility of labor but also to critically analyze the role of gendered power relations in creating differential access to global opportunities, vulnerabilities across transnational space and reshaping the meaning of work, agency and identity of Pakistani women in a globalized world.

The paper is a contribution of three presentations. First, it provides a theoretically ground-based explanation of female Pakistani migration, beyond mere description. Second, it translates the empirical data and findings from Pakistan to the international literature on gendered mobility, feminization of migration and mobility regimes. Third, it pinpoints certain governance and policy gaps that the data highlight in relation to women's migration from Pakistan.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

1. What structures enable a small minority of Pakistani women to achieve international professional migration while the overwhelming majority face severe mobility constraints domestically?
2. How do patriarchal norms, gendered labour markets, and women's agency interact to produce the specific pattern of female emigration from Pakistan that BEOE data reveal?
3. How do state migration governance systems, including BEOE registration practices and destination-country recruitment policies such as NHS hiring frameworks, contribute to the invisibility, selectivity, and regulation of female migration from Pakistan?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Feminization of Migration and Gendered Mobility Regimes**

The feminization of migration is the increase in numbers and the changing nature of women's migration. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford (2006) identified the trend of writing about migration over most of the last century, which often featured a male-centered perspective and assumed that women followed the men – or were absent altogether as dependents. The shift to women's migration in the 1970s and 1980s, was initially resisted, as there were deeper presumptions that women were not economic players in structural processes. These assumptions were tackled systematically by feminist migration scholars who showed that women migrate for economic reasons, that migration brings about certain types of labour market integration and exploitation in the destination countries, and that women's and men's

migration is shaped by gender-based power relations that make women's and men's migration fundamentally distinct.

According to Silvey (2004) migration geography has become feminist oriented, the politics of scale have been foregrounded, migration has been conceptualized as a political process, and subjectivity and identity have been given greater attention in the study of migration. As a frame that actively highlights the gendered, contested and political nature of mobility itself, it sets the scene for the analysis of women's migration from Pakistan. It is an approach and a framework that looks at mobility itself as gendered, contested and politically important and, therefore, provides a starting point for the analysis of women's migration from Pakistan. Not all people have the same ability to move about. Adeel and Yeh (2018) stated that the immobility rate of women is 55 percent while the immobility rate of men is 4 percent, which means that the immobility rate of women is not an individual choice but a structural constraint. Women's mobility, both within Pakistan and across international borders, are regulated by what Martin and Dragojlovic (2019) refer to as mobility regimes: regimes of governance that regulate, enable or limit the mobility of specific populations.

Gender, mobility, migration and transnationalism are intertwined, as demonstrated by Yeoh and Ramdas (2014) who argue that gender relations help to shape mobility patterns and that mobility patterns re-configure gender relations. Such a relationship is very pertinent to Pakistani women's migration, since migrating women internationally are not just practicing pre-existing gender identity but changing it. In the case of Pakistani women who have studied abroad and then returned to Pakistan, Khaliq (2025) noted their acquisition of a new identity and the exercise of relational agency in navigating mobility and identity in a context where the majority of people are Muslim and the power dynamics are male-dominated.

## **2.2 Agency, Patriarchy, and Negotiation**

One of the main dilemmas that gendered migration scholarship has is the one between the structural constraint and the individual agency. According to Ahmad (2016) the gender research in migration has been mostly limited to women and women only, and it has neglected the relational power structures between men and women and among men and women – that create gendered patterns of migration. Gender isn't just a matter for women. It is related to the systems of power that shape the legible, permissible, and possible ways of moving for differently positioned people.

In a study, Ahmed (2020) recorded how Pakistani women who migrate alone leave behind their patriarchy and are still under masculine norms and in-laws' surveillance, even though they are alone. Women's positionality is negotiated in nuanced but no disruptive ways even in the absence of their husbands that can compromise their social reputation and physical safety of the society. The negotiation-within-constraint is a crucial element of gendered mobility: women have agency but they are operating in a power structure that they do not produce and cannot act on, unilaterally.

In Lahore, Pakistan, doctors and women activists take the strategies of 'car use' and 'driving' as their methods to recover spaces of transit in the city and connect their spatial mobility with education and occupation (Masood 2018). The location-based practices are directly linked to the location-based emerging gendered identities and changing gendered material boundaries. The ability to move professionally that is, move to become a doctor – is distinct from the ability to migrate internationally. They both have to overcome the same patriarchy,

and the means by which women cope at home are the means by which international migration is realized.

### **2.3 Skilled Female Migration and Intersectionality**

It is found that women make up a growing proportion of immigration stock in OECD countries and have higher skilled emigration rates than men (Docquier et al. 2009). This finding is directly applicable to Pakistan as female emigrants are nine times more likely than male emigrants to be coming from highly skilled and qualified categories, on average, from the same origin countries.

Khattab et al. (2020) explored the experiences of highly skilled female migrants in Qatar, revealing how they are influenced by marital and family status, the kafala labour sponsorship system and the interaction of social, cultural, national and geographical categories. To understand who can and cannot migrate professionally, intersectionality has to be a part of that effort, seeing that gender works in conjunction with and in relation to class, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. In the study, the women who returned to Pakistan from abroad were defined as privileged women by Khaliq (2025) as they were all from the urban areas. Their mobility to go to other countries was facilitated by class position and educational capital along with gender navigation strategies.

Kofman and Raghuram (2015) viewed gendered migration in relation to global social reproduction – the networks of care, household work, and social maintenance that allow for the production of the economy at a global scale. Migrancy of Pakistani female nurses and doctors to NHS offer is a form of social reproduction on a global scale: their labour is also contributing to the functioning of the health care and their money is helping to raise children in Pakistan. The dual involvement in reproduction work (abroad and at home) is a gender-specific characteristic of skilled female migration, which is not observed in the case of male migration.

## **3. Research Design and Methodology**

### **3.1 Qualitative Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative strategies are used for research questions that explore and explain processes, meanings, and mechanisms, which are questions other than quantity and distribution (Lazzarino, Kofman, & Kapadia, 2024). It was the interpretive, theory based analysis which was applied rather than the statistical description.

This is a combined research design of three qualitative analytical strategies. First, a secondary textual analysis of Pakistan Migration Reports 2020 and 2024 (Shah et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2024) was conducted focusing on the female migration data from Chapter 1 of Shah et al. (2024). Second, secondary thematic analysis of the current literature on migration of women from Pakistan and South Asia was carried out, around the three theoretical themes, mobility regimes, agency and patriarchy, and skilled migration of women that emerged in Section 2. Third, conceptual mapping of the gendered mobility patterns revealed by the data explored quantitative BEOE data and the qualitative sociological explanations offered in the literature.

### **3.2 Positionality and Research Ethics**

There is no primary data collected in this paper. It scrutinizes the available secondary sources such as BEOE emigration registers consolidated in the Pakistan Migration Reports, and scholarly literature on gendered migration from Pakistan and the region. Ethical issues in

qualitative secondary analysis include being faithful to the original sources representing the data and arguments accurately, recognizing the contextual specificity of the findings, and avoiding over-generalization from studies based on specific times and places.

This positionality of the researcher is that of a scholar who is situated in the feminist migration tradition as discussed by Silvey (2004), Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford (2006), Yeoh and Ramdas (2014), Kofman and Raghuram (2015). This tradition not only regards mobility as a political issue but also considers gender as a structural element or phenomenon instead of a demographic one or a choice.

### **3.3 Analytical Framework: Three-Level Structure**

The analysis is done at three levels. The macro level looks at the role of structural forces in Pakistan such as the patriarchal mobility regime, the gendered structure of the country's labour market and the destination country recruitment policies that determine who can leave Pakistan. The meso level focuses on institutional factors, including the BEOE governance, bilateral recruitment, NHS international recruitment and the family and household as a place of migration decision making. The micro level looks at agency – how individual Pakistani women overcome macro and meso structures by leveraging their educational qualifications, transnational identity and negotiating mobility within their patriarchal households. The three-level approach comes from Gardners (2009) who suggested that both micro-level biographical analysis and macro-level structural factors should be taken into consideration for migration analysis.

## **4. Analysis of Structural Constraints on Women's Mobility in Pakistan**

### **4.1 The Patriarchal Mobility Regime**

The mobility system is highly gendered in Pakistan. According to Adeel and Yeh (2018), analysis of data from the Pakistan Time Use Survey (PTUS) 2007 showed that 55 percent of women did not travel at all during the day that they were surveyed, while 4 percent of men did not travel at all. It is not just a statistic; it is a sociological reality: the situation of the woman's everyday life. Women aged 20-34 years, married, with children, with a higher level of education and in higher income households were more likely to be immobile, which Adeel and Yeh (2018) explain is a result of the gendered sociocultural environment that limits the mobility of females due to family honour concerns.

Ahmed (2020) demonstrated the working of these honour concerns. Women who are left behind by male migrants in the rural areas of Southern Punjab, are not only under the surveillance of male in-laws but also other women in the house. They play with the gender norms that patriarchy has imposed on them at the surface level, but cleverly manoeuvre themselves around without breaking the mould or compromising their safety and social standing. The double bind, the internalization and enactment of male's norms, and the silent negotiation in those norms is the basic structure of women agency in Pakistan.

Harriss and Shaw (2009) demonstrated how kinship obligations, gender and life course are interlinked in the migration of Pakistanis to Britain. Migration decisions are not decisions made by individuals, but decisions made by households and households are regulated by gendered norms regarding who can migrate, when and how. The family and the social network constitute the two main intermediary structures regarding migration: the family and the social network they are also inscribed in a patriarchal norm that is favorable to the migration of men and unfavorable and/or limiting for women.

#### 4.1.1 Female Labour Force Participation and Migration Opportunity

The female labour force participation rate in Pakistan is 22 per cent, which is one of the lowest rates in South Asia and Muslim world (Khan, 2020). The low participation is not only a product of the economy: it is also the same mobility regime of the patriarchy that limits women's mobility in space. Only 12 per cent of Pakistani women preferred paid employment, and 51 per cent preferred to stay at home, Khan reported in her book, and the data of the ILO survey further indicated that this preference was created by the social environment, rather than being the autonomous choice of the women.

This context influences the choice of Pakistani women for the international migration. The process of international migration involves having or securing jobs in other countries, thus presupposing the participation in paid work as a legitimate life course. This assumption is not necessarily shared socially in Pakistan, as it is true for only a subset of women: educated women, women from urban families, women with family networks or social capital that allows or enables paid work, and women with a family culture of migration, like that of men, that extends to women (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016).

Cook and Butz (2018) demonstrated a shift in mobility patterns of gender in Shimshal, Pakistan through the changes in the road infrastructure. Vehicular mobility increased the opportunities for men and youth to travel out of the village to work and to attend schools and colleges, but made it more difficult for women to do so. Where income started to rely on moving away, the ability of women's mobility as a social resource resulted in other hierarchies of mobility and gendered exclusions. This double-edged sword effect of modernization and infrastructure development both increasing men's mobility and limiting women's – is particularly significant in light of the current low emigration rates for women despite the general rise in emigration.

#### 4.2 Findings of Female Migration Patterns: What the Data Reveal

##### 5.1 Invisibility and Its Significance

The BEOE data is marginal in terms of female emigrants in the situation of Pakistan.

**Table 1: Female Pakistani Labour Emigrants, 2019–2023**

Indicator	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>Total BEOE emigrants (N)</b>	625,876	225,213	288,280	832,339	862,625
<b>Female emigrants (N, est.)</b>	3,900	1,727	2,598	7,123	8,126
<b>Female % of total</b>	0.6%	0.8%	0.9%	0.86%	0.94%
<b>Female: highly qual. + skilled (%)</b>	40%	47%	59%	45%	45%
<b>Male: highly qual. + skilled (%)</b>	4%	3.7%	4.5%	4.5%	7.6%
<b>UK share of female emigrants (%)</b>	5.6%	11.6%	11.2%	10.3%	N/A
<b>Saudi Arabia share of female emig. (%)</b>	29.9%	29.5%	34.3%	35.1%	N/A
<b>UAE share of female emigrants (%)</b>	35.3%	21.0%	10.5%	24.3%	N/A

Source: Shah et al. (2024, Figures 1.5–1.7, Tables 1.5–1.7). Female absolute figures for 2019–2022 estimated from skill-level data (Figures 1.6, 1.7). Female % of total in 2023 =  $8,126 / 862,625 = 0.94\%$ .

Table 1 has a number of analytical points. First, the numbers of female emigrants are extremely small, less than 1 per cent of total numbers of emigrants over the entire period. This is a numerical marginalization, which is linked with low female labour force participation and mobility regime of Pakistan, which is a patriarchy. However, this does not imply that migration of females isn't significant. That's why, as can be seen in the second feature of Table 1, the skill profile of female emigrants is significantly higher than male emigrants. Of the female emigrants in 2021, 59 per cent were highly qualified and skilled. This was 45 per cent compared to around 4.5 per cent for males in 2022. In terms of skill, female emigrants have, on average, 9 times more skills than the male emigrants from Pakistan.

Third, the characteristics of the female emigrants differ. The UAE remained the leading destination for female emigrants in 2019 (35.3%) but then Saudi Arabia became the leading destination from 2020 onwards (29.5%–35.1%). More important, UK is consistently the third or fourth destination for female Pakistani emigrants at 5.6%–11.6% which is much higher than the 0.1%–1.9% share of total BEOE emigrants for the UK. The country's disproportionate recruitment of female Pakistani nationals is a reflection of the recruitment of nurses and doctors by NHS, which is a gendered pull mechanism.

#### 4.2.1 Occupational Structure of Female Emigration

Based on Shah et al. (2024), the five top female occupations of Pakistani emigrants highlight the gender, skill, and international labour demand nexus. This distribution of occupation is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Leading Occupations of Female Pakistani Labour Emigrants, 2019–2022**

Occupation	2019	2020	2021	2022
Housemaid	17.3%	15.7%	10.1%	18.1%
Doctor	9.7%	19.6%	17.7%	9.7%
Nurse	N/A	6.8%	19.2%	10.9%
Manager	11.5%	9.0%	9.4%	13.3%
General Worker	10.3%	12.4%	10.8%	13.4%
Clerk/Typist	8.3%	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Shah et al. (2024, Table 1.5). Nurse data not separately listed for 2019 but appears in highly skilled category totals. Occupations in descending order of 2022 share.

The occupational information shows a dual pattern of emigration of women from Pakistan. On the other hand, general workers and housemaids, the lower skill domestic service occupations make up 20–31 percent of female outflows. These workers are structurally similar to the low-skilled male workers and drivers who dominate male emigration, and face more than just exploitation, they are also less protected by the law. This vulnerability has been reported in a multi-country study by Lazzarino, Kofman, and Kapadia (2024) which highlighted that the kafala system and employer dependency are specific vulnerabilities of women migrant workers in domestic and informal sectors.

Doctors, nurses and managers, on the other hand, make up a significant minority of female Pakistani emigrants in each year (from about 27 percent in 2019 to about 47 percent in 2021).

This professional segment is the analytical unique of the Pakistani women emigrants. This is the part which the UK's NHS recruitment policy focuses on and it is this part whose loss has the most direct impact on the state capacity of the health system in Pakistan.

### **4.3 Analysis of Women's Agency Within Structural Constraints**

#### **4.3.1 Educational Capital as Mobility Strategy**

Education has been the most frequently cited medium of women's agency for negotiating greater freedom of movement and occupation in the literature on women's mobility in Pakistan. Bagguley and Hussain (2016) demonstrated that by the 1970s it was already exceptional for South Asian women to attend university and by the 2000s, it was a routine occurrence, as young women's reflexivity with education became a vehicle to class mobility and greater career autonomy. They argued that a rhetorical approach to reflexivity, through intersecting identities of ethnicity, class, gender and religion, is more useful in understanding South Asian educational pathways than the social capital approach.

In Lahore, Masood (2018) has reported how female physicians assert themselves in public in the city by contesting gendered boundaries and reclaiming space via their professional status and their spatial behaviours, such as the right to drive. They have educational and occupational qualifications that they can use to assert mobility rights that less-educated women cannot assert in the same patriarchal system. This is a credentialing process that is international as well: If a Pakistani woman holds an MBBS or a nursing credential and shows it to an NHS Trust recruiter, the patriarchal system cannot refuse her the credential without refusing her as well.

For women who studied abroad and came back to Pakistan, Khaliq (2025) followed up the process. They were women who created a new sense of self when they lived overseas, and they exercised agency in their relations when they came home; they challenged, extended and challenged again the limits of mobility and dress and also re-created respectability for the upper middle classes, a respectability that was already gendered. Their foreign experience in education turns into not only a tool for getting a job but a means to additional social freedom. The migration itself was a process of transformation, transforming these women from a lack of resources to a new set of resources to deal with the patriarchy within patriarchy.

#### **4.3.2 Household Negotiation and Collective Decision Making**

Harriss and Shaw (2009) demonstrated that migration decisions are not made at an individual level, but at the household-level, and that households are where negotiations can take place over what is being gained by migration. In Pakistan, the negotiation within a household is the key process by which women's agency is exercised in the process of migration. A woman desiring to migrate overseas for work needs to discuss this desire with the household's decision making process, which is patriarchalized, usually by male heads of household and in-laws.

Ahmed (2020) has also recorded the ways in which women who have been left by male migrants navigate their positionality in a subtle manner, without upsetting the balance. The rationale for female migration is the same for the negotiation of female migration; those who migrate internationally usually do so with permission from the household and the "rules" for getting permission involve using certain arguments (economic benefit to the family, religious permissibility, the safety of the destination) and accepting certain conditions (planned return, remittance obligations, regular contact). Kim (2010) demonstrated that international

marriage migration is also an arena of similar household-level negotiations, which are at the same time enabling and constraining for women.

The research of Mohammad (2015) showed how British-Pakistani Muslim women manipulates intensely gendered norms regarding patrilineality through transnational marriage. When transcultural marriages are arranged (migrants who marry men from abroad are brought to their places of marriage in Pakistan, but migrants who marry men from abroad are given places of marriage in Pakistan), these women are avoiding the displacement of home associated with South Asian patrilineal marriage and set the stage for more egalitarian conjugal relationships. The transnational connection, used creatively to remake the patriarchy in the household, is one of the ways in which women can exercise agency in the interrelationship between migration and marriage, two of the most gendered spaces of their lives.

#### **4.4 Destination-Side Factors: NHS Recruitment and the UK Gender Corridor**

It is interesting that the UK consistently accounts for 5.6% – 11.6% of the total BEOE emigration going to the UK, compared to 0.1% – 1.9% of the overall BEOE emigration going to the UK. The UK's larger than proportionate share of female Pakistani emigration (at 5.6% – 11.6% of the overall share of BEOE emigrants going to the UK compared to the UK's overall share of 0.1% – 1.9%) needs a destination side explanation. Kofman and Raghuram (2015) placed this in the context of global social reproduction - these care workers and health workers are imported from poorer countries by wealthy countries to maintain their systems of social reproduction. In the case of Pakistan this is most evident in the NHS.

Nursing recruitment by the NHS from the South Asian nursing markets, including Pakistan, is a live, government-led recruitment process, which involves NHS Trusts, the International Recruitment Passport and the Health and Care Worker visa. It establishes a gendered attractiveness mechanism as in most parts of the world nursing is a profession which is done mainly by women. Women are recruited whenever the NHS Trusts bring nurses from Pakistan. This increase was directly reflective of the increased activation of the NHS in recruitment from Pakistan and was linked to a policy shift in the destination country, namely the Brexit, which specifically targeted female Pakistani health workers (Shah et al., 2024).

Khattab, Babar, Ewers, and Shaath (2020) demonstrated that highly-skilled female migrants in the context of the Gulf have a very distinct professional and personal migration trajectory compared to their male counterparts, and that marital and family status as well as the kafala system and intersections between nationality and gender are factors that shape their migration experiences. In the UK, the structuring forces that correspond to the Pakistani culture are NHS employment, visa requirements, the regulatory body of the profession (Professional Nursing Council), and the social network of Pakistani communities in British cities. These forces allow for professional integration, but also establish certain vulnerabilities such as nurses getting to Pakistan on dependent visas dependent on a particular employer, and having visas for recognition of their credentials in Pakistan dependent on bridging requirements.

Since the 1970s, Asia has emerged as a key region for labour export, and women's export in domestic and care jobs has been a key and increasing part of regional trafficking flows, documented by Asis (2003). The pattern is also replicated in Pakistan: women are more likely to shift to care work (nursing, domestic employment) than to production or construction

work, and both the gender specificity of the receiving labour markets and the social acceptability of care work as a legitimate field of women's paid work in a patriarchy play a role in this.

#### **4.5 Transnational Dynamics and Identity Transformation**

Yeoh and Ramdas (2014) pointed to three important contributions of gender and migration scholarship to transnationalism scholarship: 1) sophisticated engagement with gender politics in various forms of migration and mobility, 2) insights into social reproduction in a globalizing world, and 3) analysis of the mutually constitutive relationship between masculinities and migration. Transnationalism, for women migrants from Pakistan, is not only about sustaining links across the borders, but also it is about redefinition of their identities through the process of migration.

While talking about mobility and dress, Khaliq (2025) recorded the relational agency of foreign educated Pakistani women who return home, challenging boundaries and simultaneously creating gendered and upper middle class respectability. They evolved a new self-awareness in the process of migration and a new self-awareness after return, which allowed for subtle but significant renegotiations of gender restrictions. This is the brain circulation dynamic at the individual level; women come out of Pakistan with a set of gendered constraints and possibilities; they acquire new resources for self-definition during migration; they come back with new identities that offer new possibilities under the constraints.

Similarly, Islam, Afrin, Yeasmin, Kanok and Ullah (2026) reported that the reverse is true of Bangladeshi female returnees from the Middle East, as reintegration is a much gendered process that depends upon patriarchy and the lack of institutional support. Returnee women face social stigma, economic marginalization and restricted employment opportunities and access to the state services. A great many are deemed to be ethically questionable and denied chances to rebuild their livelihoods. This is far from what Khaliq (2025) found for professional returnees, who found that class position and occupational status were key mediating factors in the reintegration experience of female returning migrants.

The dynamics of Pakistani nurses returning from the UK are not as well researched as the above. However, the picture is mixed as per structural conditions, as the experience of the NHS and the qualifications of nursing in the UK are economically valuable credentials in Pakistan's private health sector. Meanwhile, women who've lived alone overseas for years come back to the standards of community and home that involve patriarchal behavior, standards that may have been thrown out the window during their time overseas. Syahrul and Ayuwat (2026) demonstrated that the challenges faced by women migrants affect traditional gender roles, both in the host countries and in the migrant's home countries as it is altered by the remittance relationship.

#### **5. Discussion: Governance Implications for Female Migration from Pakistan**

The BEOE data and literature suggest that four types of governance gaps exist in the qualitative sociological study of female migration from Pakistan.

First, the migration of women is virtually a blind spot for the Pakistan's migration governance system. As the data demonstrate, many women professional migrants take routes to travel to work that do not involve BEOE registration: via the Health and Care Worker visa (HCSW), the professional visa (PV), and to work after leaving school. Although women make up 0.94 percent of BEOE registered emigrants, as the data illustrate, many women professional

migrants will travel through non-BEOE registered routes: NHS-sponsored Health and Care Worker visas, employer-sponsored professional visas, and professional work after leaving school. As a result of this invisibility, there are no data on who is migrating, where they are headed and what they go through during migration, which prevents Pakistan from designing, implementing and assessing migration policies in a gender-sensitive way.

Second, the number of nurse emigration has risen significantly from 337 in the year 2019 to 1768 in 2022 and 4880 in 2023 (Shah et al., 2024) which is happening without a bilateral governance mechanism between Pakistan and the NHS. This is the most extreme governance failure in female migration, namely an active and state-sponsored recruiting exercise in the destination country removing Pakistani female health workers from Pakistan's already under-resourced health system, without any bilateral safeguards, no flow management and no investment of training from the NHS for the recruitment.

Third, the migration governance system in Pakistan does not provide any systematic support to third wave migrants, either in the form of professional returnees as studied by Khaliq (2025) or labour migrants who are not given recognition for their migration. Third, Pakistan's migration governance system neither supports the professional returnees as studied by Khaliq (2025) nor the labour migrants who are not recognized for their migration. As Shah et al. (2024) have pointed out, information about return migration to Pakistan is still limited and there are no systems in place to routinely collect it. This governance shortfall is exacerbated by the gendered reintegration issues that Islam et al. (2026) have reported in the context of Bangladesh, and are likely to be relevant to Pakistan as well, given their structural similarities. Fourth, low-skilled women are most likely composed of domestic workers and housemaids and represent 13–18 percent of female emigrants, and as a result of this type of work, women are most likely to be in the most precarious jobs in destination countries. Khan, Zongyou, Dewei, Khan, and Pavlova (2024) reported on the obstacles faced by Afghan women refugees in Pakistan, both in the access to education and employment, and the obstacles faced by Pakistani women who migrate as domestic workers to the Gulf States, and how these challenges were structurally similar when compared to foreign workers in countries with weak protection systems for workers. This vulnerability needs to be taken into account in gender-sensitive migration governance.

**Table 3:** *Governance Gaps in Female Migration from Pakistan — Evidence and Reform Directions*

Governance Gap	Evidence	Reform Direction
<b>Invisibility in BEOE data</b>	0.94% of registered emigrants in 2023; NHS and employer visa pathways bypass registration (Shah et al., 2024)	Gender-disaggregated data collection through foreign missions; professional diaspora registry
<b>Unmanaged NHS recruitment</b>	UK receives 10.3% of female emigrants; nurse emigration 425% increase 2019–2022 (Shah et al., 2024)	Bilateral ethical recruitment agreement with NHS England; managed flow provisions; training investment

<b>No return migration support</b>	Return migration unmeasured; reintegration gendered and under-supported (Shah et al., 2024; Khaliq, 2025)	Return migration tracking; gender-responsive reintegration services; career placement support
<b>Domestic worker vulnerability</b>	Housemaids = 13–18% of female outflows; kafala system exposure (Shah et al., 2024; Khattab et al., 2020)	Destination-specific worker protection agreements; awareness raising; pre-departure training

Source: Authors' analysis from Shah et al. (2024); Shah et al. (2020); Khaliq (2025); Khattab et al. (2020); Islam et al. (2026).

## 6. Conclusion

Using qualitative sociological approach, this paper analyzed the invisibility of women in BEOE data, which shows that the women were 0.94 per cent of total emigrants in 2023, and that this paper presented a complex and theoretically interesting migration phenomenon. Generally, internationally migrating Pakistani women are more likely to be highly qualified and skilled (HQSK) versus male migrants: around 45 percent of Pakistani women are in highly qualified and skilled occupations compared to about 5 percent of Pakistani men. This is no coincidence. It is an expression of the selection process created by the conjunction of Pakistan's male-segregated mobility system and the credentials of international migration. The paper proposed three structuring forces which give rise to this pattern. First, the immobility rates of women in Pakistan 55 per cent compared with four per cent for men (Adeel and Yeh 2018) show that domestic mobility is highly restricted, and that the overseas mobility of women is limited to socially acceptable channels such as employment in the family. Second, the structures of recruitment are active in the countries where the nurses are recruited and are specifically gendered in favour of recruiting Pakistani women to care and health work, such as NHS England's specific targeting of recruitment of South Asian nurses. Third, a sub-group of Pakistani women, through their own agency the agency of women educational credential attainment, negotiation in the household, and transnational identity building – are able to maneuver through structural constraints and attain international professional mobility.

The governance implications to this are clear. All the migration governance mechanism in Pakistan has been developed for male and low-skilled migration to the Gulf countries. It does not lend itself to the female gender and multi-directional, skilled migration undertaken by a big chunk of female population in Pakistan. The data systems need to be expanded to reflect female professional emigration using non-BEOE routes. An ethical recruitment agreement with NHS England is urgently required to be in place to address the issue of nurse emigration in the health system interest in Pakistan. Migration programmes should be gender-sensitive in providing return migration support services. Domestic worker protection agreements need to take account of the vulnerability of 13-18 per cent of women who work in domestic service. The results indicate that gender is not a factor that needs to be included in migration studies. It is a force that structures movement, its form and the conditions for movement. To grasp the phenomenon of female migration from Pakistan, it is important to comprehend the

female scripting of the patriarchy, the global labour market systems that are open to recruiting skilled Pakistani women and the creative agency that Pakistani women use to maneuver between both. This is the sociological analysis which no BEOE data can give, much less the Pakistan governance structure desperately needs.

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