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The Price of a Dream: Migration, Trafficking Vulnerability and Local Brokerage Networks in Gujrat, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Research explored the nexus between irregular migration and human trafficking in Gujrat District, Pakistan, and how families follow the socio-economic aspiration and cultural traditions, as well as chase social prestige, which leads to high-risk migration. Irregular migration from Pakistan is often understood primarily as a response to economic hardship, yet the social aspirations and household strategies underlying migration decisions may also shape migrants' vulnerability to exploitation. The study examines the relationship between migration aspirations, irregular migration, and vulnerability to exploitation in Gujrat District, Pakistan. The findings from the study on overseas migration in Gujrat suggest that the decision to migrate is influenced not only by economic factors but also by social aspects, including family expectations and aspirations for improved living conditions. Households often make significant financial investments through loans, land sales, and mortgages to facilitate this migration. The reliance on local intermediaries and irregular routes raises the risk of deception and exploitation for migrants. Additionally, unsuccessful or exploitative migrations can lead to serious repercussions such as debt, financial loss, psychological distress, stigma and family disruption. Institutional shortcomings and a lack of safe, affordable migration options exacerbate these vulnerabilities. The study offers insights into the complex interactions between migration aspirations, financial investments, broker reliance, and limited institutional support, emphasizing the need for accessible legal migration pathways, stricter regulation of intermediaries, community awareness initiatives, financial protection strategies, and robust institutional support for victims.

Introduction

Migration has always been a significant livelihood option that people and families have used to gain better prospects for their economic development, education, security and quality of life. Overseas migration is also strongly linked to hopes for economic success and social promotion in Pakistan. However, the culture of overseas migration is particularly longstanding in the case of Gujrat District of Punjab, where Europe, the Middle East and North America are perceived as areas providing better economic opportunities and better living conditions (Shah, 2020). The area has continued to contribute significant numbers of international migrants over the last 20 years and the rise in the use of irregular migration channels has heightened vulnerability for migrants and their families. However, it is crucial to recognize that irregular migration is differentiated from trafficking in persons.

Irregular migration, in general, is migration without the proper legal documentation, while human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of a specified procedure, for the purpose of exploitation (Jordan, & Düvell, 2002). While conceptually separate, irregular migration can lead to situations of heightened vulnerability to exploitation. Migrants who rely on informal intermediaries, cross through non-authorized routes, or are not protected by law could be subjected to victimization including deception, extortion, forced labour, physical abuse, detention, among other forms of victimization.

In the region of Gujrat, the difference between migration and exploitation takes on new meanings as migration aspirations are deeply rooted in local social and cultural expectations. Often migration to other countries is seen as a means of not only economic opportunity but also opportunities for family improvement, social advancement and individual achievement (Portes, 2007). Even when families know about the dangers of irregular migration, such expectations may spur on their desire to migrate. However, these dreams can be misguided, with local intermediaries and brokers taking advantage of them with false assurances of safe or legal ways to migrate, and with trust built on community, family, and social networks.

This vulnerability is therefore not just a consequence of individual decision making but arises from a combination of migration aspirations and the conditions of the household, informal brokerage and limited institutional protection (Czaika, Bijak, & Prike, 2021). This vulnerability is exacerbated by the financial arrangements of migration. Families can finance their migration by selling land, mortgaging property or taking out loans based on their future income and remittances (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2014). If the migration effort is unsuccessful, migrants may be detained, deported, abandoned, exploited or killed, leading to financial burdens for entire households (Noll, 2010). The effects then ripple outwards, impacting family members and communities and creating debt, stigma, trauma, social disruption, and continued economic insecurity. In order to combat the issue of human trafficking, Pakistan has taken various legal and institutional steps, such as Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018. However, there are issues that still need to be addressed, such as enforcement, institutional capacity, victim protection and coordination.

Formal mechanisms designed to prevent trafficking and protect victims may be less effective because of limited resources, lack of specialized capacity, and lack of support for victims. There is a lack of sufficient resources and institutional issues to limit the impact of community organizations and civil society initiatives on awareness and support (Hussain & Bashir, 2025). With this backdrop, this study compares the relationship between aspiration to move to other countries and involvement in irregular migration with that of vulnerability to exploitation in Gujrat District, Pakistan. It examines the impact of socio-economic aspiration and family expectations on migration choices, the risk of being vulnerable due to debt and the need for local brokers, and the social, psychological and economic consequences of migrant failure and exploitation (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). The study provides new insights into the complex ways in which the processes of desire for migration and vulnerability to trafficking intersect and underscores the importance of safer migration channels, better institutional protection, and community-based interventions.

Objectives

The study aims to:

1. To examine how socio-economic aspirations and family expectations influence decisions to pursue irregular migration from Gujrat District.
2. To explore how household debt and reliance on local migration brokers increase migrants' vulnerability to exploitation during irregular migration.
3. To examine the social, psychological, and economic consequences of failed or exploitative migration for migrants and their families.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses three complementary theories: Push–Pull Theory, the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), and Routine Activity Theory. These simultaneously help to account for why people and families choose to migrate irregularly, how migration comes to be a family investment, and how migrants can fall victim to exploitation.

Push-Pull Theory

Push Pull theory can be used to help get a sense of the reasons behind migration at a structural and individual level. Push and pull factors can include economic problems, unemployment, few opportunities in the country of origin, and worries about future living conditions, compared to the pull factors which are perceived employment opportunities, higher wages, social mobility, and better living conditions in the countries of interest (Van Hear, Bakewell, & Long, 2018). In Gujrat, Migration aspirations are supported by established narrative of success in the destination lands of migration and their perception that migration is a way to economic advancement. But the pull–push theory is not sufficient to account for the willingness of families to take a significant financial and personal risk on irregular migration. Therefore, the study is based on the New Economics of Labour Migration.

New Economics of Labour Migration

In the New Economics of Labour Migration, the approach to migration is more of a family or household enterprise than a personal choice. Families can choose to migrate as a group to diversify, improve and secure their family's future earnings and risk reduction (Fasani, Llull, & Tealdi, 2020). This post is especially relevant to Gujrat as household financing of migration could include borrowing, selling land, mortgaging property or other sources of household investment. Migration debt, from this angle, is not only an economic implication of irregular migration, but it can also be a factor in the decision-making process leading to migration. With significant investments already made, families might feel obliged to keep on the migration journey despite the growing threats. This is a good reason why dreams of economic advancement can turn into vulnerability with migration attempts that go wrong or when they take advantage of people.

Routine Activity Theory

The criminological perspective of routine activity theory explains the shift from migration aspiration to vulnerability and exploitation. The theory is that when a motivated offender, a suitable or vulnerable target, and inadequate guardianship come together, bad things are more likely to happen (Murphy, 2019). Local brokers and other exploitative intermediaries can be considered 'motivated offenders' in the round of irregular migration from Gujrat, and migrants who rely on informal networks and lack legal protection can be seen as 'vulnerable targets. Poor regulatory oversight, institutional protection and access to safe migration pathways can be considered as inadequate guardianship (Khan, 2026). The theory, therefore, can help explain how the circumstances of irregular migration can facilitate opportunities for deception, exploitation and abuse.

Integrated Theoretical Perspective The three viewpoints do not contradict but rather supplement each other in terms of explaining the situation. Push–Pull Theory is used to explain the motivation to migrate, NELM is used to explain the household decision and the financial investment in migration and Routine Activity Theory is used to explain why vulnerability to exploitation may emerge. The integrated framework may thus be represented by: How Migration and Structural Push Factors Interact with Household Migration Decision and Financial Investment, Debt and Dependence on Migration Brokers, Vulnerability to Exploitation and Social, Psychological and Economic Consequences of Migration in the context of Irregular Migration.

Throughout this process, weak institutional guardianship can make people more vulnerable and available legal migration channels and effective institutional protection can make people less vulnerable. This integrated framework underlies the analysis of the interplay of socio-economic aspirations, decision-making within the household, socio-economic relations among local brokers and vulnerability to exploitation in Gujrat District.

Literature Review

Irregular migration and vulnerability to exploitation Irregular migration is a multifaceted phenomenon, which is influenced by economic inequality, lack of decent jobs, migration policies and hopes of better life. Studies have revealed that migrants using

irregular channels of migration may be at higher risk of being deceived, abused, detained, extorted and exploited, especially if they are relying on informal intermediaries. Irregular migration and human trafficking should not be confused, however. Irregular migration refers to the legal situation of migration, while trafficking is the situation of exploitation, and could be in both regular and irregular migration situations.

The connection between the two is mainly in terms of vulnerabilities that irregular migration conditions can expose to migrants. International studies have established that irregular migration routes are important environments where migrants can be vulnerable to exploitation. Multiple transit countries may leave migrants vulnerable to smugglers, brokers and other intermediaries that have a monopoly over transport, houses and onward travel (Triandafyllidou, & Maroukis, 2012). Migrants may have very limited or no means of protesting abuse or of leaving situations of exploitation where they lack legal status and/or effective protection. The desire to migrate and social expectations of the migrants. The desire to migrate and social expectations of migrants. While economic factors play a role in migration decisions, social and cultural expectations also factor into migration aspirations.

Research on Pakistan has highlighted the importance of aspirations for improved living standards, overseas employment and remittances (Salik, 2023). For successful migrants in migration producing communities, their success with migration can serve as a measure of economic achievement, thereby setting a standard for other families to aspire to migration as a means of economic advancement. The expectations are especially relevant in the context of Gujrat, where overseas migration is a very much entrenched element of the local social and economic life.

Migration can thus be understood as a family or community approach, driven by family aspirations, social benchmarking and stories of success (Butt, H., Shah, & Tahir, 2022). Such social normalization can influence the risk taking behavior of individuals and families to pursue migration opportunities. Household Debt, Brokers and Migration Risk The cost of the migration can be a significant cost to the household, increasing its vulnerability. Some of the migration financing mechanisms that families use are savings, loans, land sales and remortgages of property, which they expect to use for remittance income in the future (Ilahi, & Jafarey, 1999). Failure of migration or exploitation of migrants can result in serious economic disadvantages and indebtedness for migrants and their families (Lefebvre, 1999). It plays an important role with the help of local brokers and intermediaries.

They have a reputation and connections within their community that can foster trust among prospective migrants and their families, based upon their knowledge of migration routes (Fernandez, 2013). Concurrently, this reliance can lead to possibilities of deception, overcharges and exploitation. The informal intermediaries have been highlighted by studies on Pakistan as a significant element of irregular migration that is especially significant when legal migration opportunities are considered as unattainable or costlier (Shah, 2020). Institutional Responses, and the Research Gap. Pakistan has put in place legal and institutional framework for combating trafficking in persons (TIP) such as the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (PTP) 2018. Yet prior research has recognized ongoing issues related to enforcement capacity, institutional coordination, victim protection and victim awareness.

The institutional responses could be weak, leaving migrants vulnerable to the informal migration system and possibly lessening the deterrent effect of anti-trafficking measures (Hupp Williamson, 2022). While migration, trafficking and socio-economic vulnerabilities have been discussed in the context of Pakistan, there is less work that has explored the interaction between these factors at the micro level, in specific migration producing communities. The impact of migration aspirations and family expectations, alongside household financial investment, reliance on local brokers, and the institutional weaknesses, on the vulnerability of migrants to exploitation is not understood in particular in Gujrat District (Shah, 2020). This study aims to fill this gap, by looking at these interdependent processes, and the impacts felt by migrants and families.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to understand the link between migration aspirations, irregular migration and vulnerability to exploitation in Gujrat District of Pakistan. A qualitative approach was seen as being suitable as the study aimed to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, motivations and the social and economic impacts of irregular migration. The

methodology allowed for a deeper understanding of the individual circumstances of households, social expectations, financial pressures, and relations with migration intermediaries that influence the decisions of migration (Kamal, 2019).

Study Population and Participants

The study population included people who have direct or professional experience on irregular migration and its impact on Gujrat District. The participants comprised former migrants, people who had been exploited in the migration process, family members of migrants, migration brokers/intermediates, and law-enforcement and justice-sector officials such as officers of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), police officials and public prosecutors. Twenty participants were selected for the study. The participants were purposefully selected based on their experience or professional knowledge to the research objectives.

Sampling Technique

Participants were selected by purposive sampling to get them to provide relevant and detailed information on irregular migration, migration decision-making, brokerage practices, exploitation and its implications. The participants were identified through purposive sampling, which is suitable for the study as it involved collecting individuals with certain experiences or knowledge that is not typical of the population (Campbell et al., 2020).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, and they were carried out in participants' language. The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences, and while it was necessary to have consistency across the major areas covered by the research questions, the interviewees' experiences were also captured in other ways. The semi-structured interviews were flexible enough to explore participants' experiences, but they also contained consistency over the major areas covered by the research questions (Horton, Macve, & Struyven, 2004). Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis only with the consent of the participants. Interviews were undertaken in suitable institutional and judicial settings and confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured in the FIA facilities and judicial premises. They were briefed on the study and participation was voluntary and based on informed consent.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data, based on the principles of thematic analysis laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis conducted consisted of familiarization with the data from the interviews, identification of initial codes, development of themes, review and revision of themes, definition and naming of themes, and final analysis of the data emerging in the form of an account. The analysis was particularly interested in participants accounts around migration aspirations, family aspirations, financial investment and debt, dependency on migration brokers, experiences of exploitation, institutional responses and the impacts of irregular migration.

Trustworthiness

Participants accounts were complemented with relevant documentary and academic accounts and information to reinforce the credibility of the findings. This analysis also contrasted the views of a number of migrant and family respondents, migration intermediaries, and law-enforcement and justice-sector staff. This helped to create some triangulation and to outline points of agreement and disagreement among participants' accounts.

Result and Discussion

The results suggest that the socio-economic aspirations, family expectations, financial investments, reliance on the local migration facilitators, and vulnerabilities in institutional protection all contribute to the influence on the irregular migration from Gujrat. The international migration was more socially embedded as a household strategy, as it became linked with financial advancement, family status and better living conditions, rather than being a pure individual economic choice. Meanwhile, the male and female migrants and their families might face substantial financial, social, and psychological dangers in the process of striving for those goals.

Migration Aspirations and the Normalization of Irregular Migration

The research delves into how much migration to Europe and other overseas destinations is linked to economic success, social mobility and better family situation. Expectations and socially constructed stories of success, as well as the lack of employment and opportunities, influence migration aspirations. The reasons for migration seem to exceed the understanding of what hazards are involved in irregular migration, according to the perceptions of participants. Migration can thus be considered a family as well as an individual investment in the future. It confirms that migration desires can be normalized in some communities where migration has become an accepted route to upward mobility. The unemployment, economic insecurity and limited opportunities are important push factors, while perceived opportunities for employment and better life abroad are pull factors from a Push-Pull point of view. But the results reveal that these structural factors are not sufficient to explain irregular migration. Social norms, and the success of past migrants, are also factors in the normalization of migration decisions.

Economic Vulnerability, Debt and Household Risk

There are also important financial investment aspects of migration, for example, as a way to finance migration, families had to sell land, borrow from the property and take out a large loan, all with the hope that they will find employment and be able to send remittances back home. This metamorphosis makes migration an important investment decision of the households. But if migration does not take off, or if migrants get caught up in systems of detention, abandonment, exploitation, or other obstacles that block their pathways, the financial consequences can be severe. In such cases, families can end up with significant debt but with little or no economic returns. The results can be explained by the "New Economics of Labour Migration" framework which presents migration as a coping mechanism adopted by the household to enhance their income and livelihood security. However, in the context of Gujarat, significant household investment can also generate vulnerabilities as a consequence of debt. After making substantial investments in migration, migrants may be reluctant to stop even if there is a growing risk of failure since failure would mean that the family would be left with debts and no expected return.

Migration Brokers and Vulnerability to Exploitation

Local migration brokers and intermediaries play an important role in facilitating migrants to irregular migration routes and also their trust in potential migrants and their families, which is achieved by community bond and perceived knowledge. This trust is especially important in the absence of formal migration pathways or when they are perceived as difficult or expensive. They reveal that migrants often rely on these intermediaries to transport them, for documentation and information on informal pathways. This dependency, however, may raise the risk of being deceived, being exploited financially, being extorted and other abuses. It is important to highlight that not all migrants who use the services of migration brokers are trafficking victims and not all migration brokers are traffickers; alternatively, migrants may be more vulnerable to exploitation when they rely on informal intermediaries in situations where there are no formal protection and exit channels.

Social, Psychological and Economic Consequences

The impact of unsuccessful and unethical migration is not just a personal one. The results show that families could face significant financial loss, household debt, emotional strain, stigma and disruption of relationships within the family. The impacts of migrants' detention, deportation, abandonment, injuries and deaths can persist beyond the migration event. The cost of irregular migration can be calculated in many ways other than by the money paid to intermediaries, as these consequences show. Psychological trauma, family disruption, social stigma, lost assets, debt and uncertainty about the future are all part of the "price of a dream." The results, therefore, indicate that irregular migration can create a vicious circle of initial aspirations for betterment leading to greater vulnerability of households. This is especially impressive when families have been putting in a lot of money to make the migration.

Institutional Weakness and Limited Guardianship

The results further indicate gaps in institutions' responses to irregular migration and exploitation. Issues raised by participants included problems of lack of resources, enforcement challenges, insufficient coordination, and lack of protection and support for vulnerable migrants. The results are of special importance for Routine Activity Theory. There may be more opportunities for

exploitation when potential offenders or intermediaries exploit migrants who are highly dependent on informal networks and there are few effective guardians.

In this context, institutional guardianship encompasses strong control of migration intermediaries, available legal migration routes, law enforcement, victim protection, and community level awareness. The findings consequently indicate that the reduction of exploitation should go beyond enforcement following victimization. Strategies to lessen reliance on unsafe intermediaries and enhance access to safe migration channels can also help limit opportunities for exploitation.

Integrated Discussion

The findings together are an indicator that the irregular migration of Gujrat is most likely to be understood as a process instead of a decision. Migration is motivated by socio-economic hopes and dreams, the financial obligation placed on the individual by household investment, the reliance on local middlemen for access to "illegitimate" routes and the vulnerability to exploitation due to weak institutional protection. The study therefore argues that migration intentions per se should not be seen as the issue. Instead, vulnerability is set in motion when aspirations overlap with limited legal opportunities, household debtors, reliance upon brokers, pathways to migration are irregular, and institutional guardianship is weak. So the main conclusion is as follows: Migration aspiration leads to household investment and debt, and reliance on intermediaries, which then leads to irregular migration, and vulnerability to exploitation, and finally financial, psychological and social consequences.

This interaction offers a more complex understanding of the connection between migration and exploitation in Gujrat and the need for migration governance, crime prevention and victim protection to be seen side by side.

The "Price of a Dream": Synthesis and Implications

Compared to it, Gujrat is an indicator of the overall migration trend in the South Asian region, but the unique migration culture, where irregular migration is socially accepted, increases the risk and normalizes exploitation. The study concludes that with the absence of legal migration channels, robust institutional measures and community-based measures will continue to impose high human, social, and economic "price of a dream" on Gujrat families.

Policy Implications

The results of the study have several implications for migration governance and preventing migration exploitation in the migration producing communities of Gujrat, Pakistan.

Strengthening Safe and Accessible Migration Pathways

The results indicate that lack of legal migration routes and their inaccessibility may lead to reliance on unofficial channels and intermediaries. More information on the legal options for migration, coupled with increased access, can help diminish migrants' need to resort to unsafe arrangements.

Regulation of Migration Intermediaries

The fact that prospective migrants depended on local migration agents confirms the importance of developing more effective oversight of migration agents. Authorized migration agents' registration and public disclosure of information regarding agents authorizations may help to curb deception and promises of false prospects. There should also be effective mechanisms in place for prospective migrants and their families to check any offers in regard to migration before they put a lot of money into it.

Community-Based Awareness and Financial Protection

Awareness campaigns should go beyond migrants to the family and community, as migration aspirations are rooted in family and community expectations. Risks of irregular migration, fraudulent migration facilitators, over-indebtedness, and the fallout from unsuccessful migration should be covered by community-based programmers. Families should also be advised to consider the financial consequences of selling property or taking on large debts to finance migration.

Strengthening Institutional Guardianship and Victim Protection

There is a need for sufficient resources and coordination between law enforcement and relevant government institutions to combat exploitation of migrants and to ensure their protection. In addition to the mechanisms of prevention, support for victims and families of exploitation should be made available, using both legal and psychological tools, and provide social support. In general, the results indicate that a preventive approach should be implemented to reduce the exploitation of migrants by integrating safe migration opportunities, controlling intermediaries, community awareness, financial-risk protection and increased institutional guardianship. This can help minimise the circumstances that can turn people's migration desires into vulnerability and exploitation.

Limitations and Future Research

A number of restrictions are highlighted in this study which may affect the interpretation of its results. The study aimed to provide insights on individual experiences of migration in Gujrat District, and not to make any statistical generalizations for all migrants in Pakistan, as it was conducted with a small sample of 20 migrants. In addition, irregular migration is a sensitive process and participants may have been reluctant to report some experiences due to stigma or fear. Access to persons who are directly involved in trafficking was also limited, which further limited the understanding of the problem. In order to comprehend the long-term effects of exploitative migration on households, future research could extend to other districts that produce migration, investigate other migration cultures and strategies, and use longitudinal approaches.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that in Gujrat District, migration is deeply tied to socio-economic aspirations, family honor, and social prestige, making irregular migration a socially endorsed yet high-risk endeavor. Families, driven by unemployment, limited legal pathways, and cultural pressures, often incur large debts to pay local brokers, who exploit trust and channel migrants into dangerous routes, resulting in severe physical, psychological, and financial harms. Weak institutional enforcement, corruption, and fragmented civil society responses allow trafficking networks to operate with impunity. Interpreted through Push-Pull, Strain, and Routine Activity theories, the findings reveal that the "price of a dream" encompasses not only economic cost but enduring human and social consequences. Without affordable legal migration options, stronger enforcement, and community-level interventions, Gujrat's families will continue to bear the high cost of irregular migration and trafficking.

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