

Socio-Economic and Adjustment Challenges for Pakistani Migrant Workers in UAE

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<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.3.42>

Abstract

The study aims to explore Pakistani men's diaspora living in the UAE. Pakistan has a patriarchal society where men migrate to other countries to earn a living and to support immediate and extended families. Analyzing how Pakistani men cope with different pressures and challenges to accommodate and adapt becomes essential. In this research, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Pakistani men (living in Pakistan at the time of this study) who worked and lived in UAE and Saudi Arabia for at least three years. The survey results reveal that continuous visa processing and confirmation issues keep the migrants' minds occupied. Economics remained a constant challenge to the migrants. Lack of technical and vocational skills, including English language deficiency, creates more challenges. It is concluded that if the UAE government gives permanent residence status, migrants will have better opportunities, and uncertainties will be lessened. This will improve their well-being overall.

Keywords: Pakistani Men; Patriarchal Society; Migration; Technical and Vocational Skills.

Introduction

Throughout history, human beings have been constantly mobile. People relocate for better safety and quality of life because their home countries cannot provide the desired living standards or due to personal preferences. Moving to another country remains an individual decision influenced by various push and pull factors. However, many states are apprehensive about immigration, emphasizing concerns over borders, national identity, and cultural integrity. As globalization and communication expand, states increasingly impose stringent barriers to international migration (Jasso, 2011).

Since the 1970s, Pakistani nationals have been going to the gulf countries, including UAE (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al-Quwain, and Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah) for employment. As per the UAE government's residency policy, all non-citizens living and working in the UAE – 85% of the UAE population and over 90% of Dubai's population – possess three-year residence visas. Estimates show that many Pakistani nationals live in the UAE, for example, 1.2 million in Dubai alone. Despite continuous labor supply from different regions, UAE governments do not give chances to the laborers to get permanent residency to enjoy the lifestyle in Arab countries with peace of mind, relaxation and stress of getting visas again and again and a fear of going back and not settling in (Ali, 2011).

Pakistan, a developing country, has grappled with persistent challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and economic hardship since its inception. These factors have pushed Pakistani nationals to seek opportunities abroad to survive, earn a livelihood, and pursue a better life. However, achieving this dream is far from straightforward. Migration entails significant

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sacrifices, including adjustments in lifestyle, remittances, and the complexities of settling with families in host countries.

Problem Statement

Existing literature shows that Pakistani migrant workers in the UAE encounter various socio-economic and adjustment challenges that affect their well-being and integration into the host society. Economic vulnerabilities, social isolation, legal uncertainties, health concerns, and family pressures are among the critical issues faced by these migrants. It is argued that addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy reforms, including improvements in labor rights protection, healthcare access, and social integration programs, to enhance the overall welfare of Pakistani migrant workers in the UAE (Dawn, 2023; Mustafa, 2018).

Significance

It is worth arguing that the UAE and Gulf states are among the most attractive destinations for global migrants due to abundant employment opportunities, higher earning potential than their home countries, opportunities for entrepreneurship, and diverse communities despite numerous challenges, including governmental policies. Estimates indicate that migrants remitted \$105 billion to their home countries from the UAE and Gulf states in 2015, comprising 18% of the global remittance total of \$581 billion (Fargues & Brouwer, 2017). The remittances support tens of millions across South Asia, East Africa, and the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean regions, facilitating investments in housing, education, assets, and business ventures for family members beyond the immediate nuclear family (IOM, 2019).

The economic and demographic dynamics of the UAE and Gulf states underscore a critical need for foreign labor due to substantial wealth and rapid growth fueled by oil resources amidst a relatively small local workforce (Wagle, 2024). This demand led to recruiting foreign workers, initially in oil-related industries and subsequently across various sectors, to sustain growth.

Despite their need for labor, the UAE and Gulf states have maintained stringent immigration policies distinct from traditional Western immigration models in countries like Canada, the USA, and Australia, where migrants and their families can obtain permanent residency and citizenship. Instead, these countries enforce strict separation between nationals and non-nationals, with policies like the Kafala system tying foreign workers to sponsors (Madhavi, 2017). This system limits job mobility and requires adherence to sponsor directives, with severe penalties, including termination, contract end, and deportation for violations.

Objectives

This paper aims:

1. To explore the experiences of Pakistani men who live and work in UAE and financially support their families living in Pakistan.
2. To investigate how Pakistani men, working and living in UAE, cope with the pressures of living and working – visa issues, permanent impermanency, bringing families, the stress of going back to home countries, not earning enough, not fulfilling the demands of the families - and how they accommodate and adapt according to the culture and needs of the working life.
3. To understand the challenges and opportunities they face in their living and working lives in the UAE.

Literature Review

Migration from Pakistan to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been a significant phenomenon driven by economic opportunities. Yet, it presents various socio-economic

challenges and adjustment issues for migrant workers. This literature review explores the key themes and findings from existing research.

Economic Challenges

Economic challenges are central to the experiences of Pakistani migrant workers in the UAE. Many migrants from Pakistan seek employment in low-skilled and semi-skilled sectors such as construction, hospitality, and domestic work, which often offer lower wages than their counterparts from Western countries (Oxfordbusinessgroup, 2023). Though higher than in Pakistan, the earnings are usually insufficient to meet the high cost of living in the UAE, especially in urban centers like Dubai and Abu Dhabi (Siddiq, n.d).

According to Ali (2011), Pakistani migrants in the UAE face precarious employment conditions, including long working hours, limited job security, and delays in wage payments. The sponsorship (Kafala) system, which ties workers to their employers, exacerbates these vulnerabilities by restricting job mobility and making workers dependent on their sponsors for legal status (Robinson, 2022).

Social and Cultural Adjustment

Social and cultural adjustment is another significant challenge for Pakistani migrant workers in the UAE. The cultural differences, language barriers (especially for those with limited English proficiency), and the strict social norms in the UAE can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation among migrants (Mustafa, 2018). Many Pakistani migrants experience challenges in integrating into the host society due to these factors, which can impact their mental health and overall well-being (Ahmed, 2019). Hussain (2017) highlights that Pakistani migrant workers often live in labor camps or shared accommodations, which may lack adequate living conditions and social amenities. This further isolates them from mainstream UAE society and limits their social interaction and integration opportunities.

Legal and Policy Challenges

Legal and policy challenges, particularly related to immigration and residency regulations, are critical for Pakistani migrant workers in the UAE. The lack of a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship in the UAE means that many migrants are constantly deported or have legal penalties (Ali & Cochrane, 2024). The frequent changes in immigration policies and regulations add to the uncertainty faced by migrant workers and their families back in Pakistan. Moreover, the legal framework governing labor rights and protections for migrant workers in the UAE has been criticized for its inadequacies and gaps in enforcement (Bahrain, 2024). This leaves Pakistani migrants vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by unscrupulous employers who may withhold wages or confiscate passports illegally.

Health and Well-being

Health and well-being issues are significant concerns for Pakistani migrant workers in the UAE. The demanding working conditions, lack of access to healthcare services, and limited social support contribute to physical and mental health problems among migrants (Dawn, 2023). Studies have documented high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among Pakistani migrant workers attributed to their precarious living and working conditions (Ornek, 2022). Access to affordable healthcare remains a challenge for many migrants, especially those in low-income brackets, which can lead to untreated medical conditions and exacerbate existing health problems.

Family and Social Remittances

Remittances sent by Pakistani migrant workers play a crucial role in supporting their families and communities back in Pakistan. However, the obligation to send remittances can create financial strain and emotional stress for migrants, particularly when faced with unexpected expenses or job loss in the UAE (Ali & Cochrane, 2024). The pressure to fulfil familial expectations and social obligations through remittances can impact migrants' financial planning and savings in the long term. Additionally, the separation from family members due to restrictive family reunification policies in the UAE can have emotional and psychological consequences for Pakistani migrant workers, affecting their overall adjustment and well-being (Qaisrani A., 2021). Furthermore, public sentiment and governmental policies in the Gulf states and the UAE often express concerns about large foreign populations' perceived cultural and economic impacts. Traditional sponsorship rules under the Kafala system reinforce these sentiments by closely monitoring non-citizens through national sponsors (Mustafa, 2018).

In conclusion, despite the economic benefits of foreign labour, the UAE and Gulf states' strict immigration policies and the Kafala system have significant implications for migration patterns and migrant experiences. Addressing these challenges could involve reforms to enhance labour mobility, improve migrant rights, and potentially reduce irregular migration, contributing to more sustainable regional migration practices.

For this research, the social scientific theory of migration addresses how immigrants select destinations, adapt to new environments, and impact both host and home societies. This theory has been developed through contributions from various scholars (Portes, 2006). Migration is influenced by broader economic, political, cultural, technological, and demographic changes. However, this theory elucidates how individuals choose migration destinations, adapt to local conditions, and make decisions in response to broader processes and personal choices. It recognizes migration as a social process involving adaptation and change (de Haas, 2021).

Methodology

For this research, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Pakistani men (living in Pakistan at the time of this study) who worked and lived in UAE for at least three years, returned, and then went to other countries or the same countries again to explore more opportunities. The primary purpose of this research is to explore the challenges and opportunities that Pakistani men face while working and living in the UAE.

This research spanned eight months (November 2021- June 2022) because I needed to connect with Pakistani men who were coming - either permanently or on holiday to Pakistan – for an interview. The age group was 25 to 50-year-old Pakistani men. However, the average age of the interviewees ranged from 30 to 45. Convenience and snowball sampling are used in this research because I required to know the first person, and then he told us about his colleagues, family members and friends who are/were living and working in UAE and had some plans to come to Pakistan. The shared contacts were contacted through WhatsApp, and their consent was obtained for the research. In this process, I have contacted more than 50 men. However, only 25 men responded positively because of their short time in Pakistan and their business. Those who consented to this research, their presence was confirmed through telephonic communication and time was taken from them. As this research was completed in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the time and place of the interview were set by the key informants of this research. All prescribed research ethics were followed in this research, and rapport-building was initiated with them before the physical interviews. As all key informants were above the 18 age bracket, verbal consent was taken from them for the interviews and recordings, and it was assured that their names would remain anonymous and pseudonyms would be used. It was also assured that if they think that questions related to their lives, stress, frustration, challenges, and issues are difficult to answer, they can skip the question and not be forced to respond.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher listened to the recording repeatedly to immerse in the data. Thematic analysis is done to explore different themes discussed in the next section of this research article.

Research Findings

This section of the paper presents the key themes that emerged from the data analysis. In this section, only three main themes are discussed because they were the most important themes that repeatedly came up in all interviews till the saturation point of the data analysis.

Policies of the Host Countries

The male key informants in this study discussed the legal challenges prevailing in the UAE and the Gulf states. They emphasized that the Kafala system constitutes a significant hardship in their lives while living and working in these countries. Under this system, individuals must have a sponsor (Kafeel) to reside and work in these nations, which is highly restrictive. According to these informants, the Kafala system severely restricts their freedom of movement and prevents them from working independently. They must remain with the same employer throughout their contract period and are prohibited from seeking better employment opportunities elsewhere (Errichiello & Nyhagen, 2021). The informants noted that within the Pakistani community, both abroad and at home, it is widely recognized that an unfavorable sponsor can severely limit one's ability to achieve the aspirations that led them to migrate, forcing them to maintain a low profile until their contract expires. Mr. Arshad (aged 45) explains “a long list of responsibilities under the Kafala system; however, it does not provide the necessary protection of rights to everyone who comes through it”.

Similarly, Mr. Ahmed (aged 35) shared that:

In the Kafala system, sponsors often confiscate our passports, although it is not allowed in the new UAE government's rules and regulations, but the sponsors do. Additionally, other restrictions, such as we cannot move independently to any place, not changing employers even if the employer is abusive and exploitative, and not looking for other employment opportunities under this Kafala system.

As presented in the facts above and discussed at length with all key informants, there are many issues related to the Kafala system, which restricts them from going for better opportunities. All key informants agreed that it is one of the main reasons that many people (including some) break this contract and live illegally for some time in the host countries to earn money. Many of them shared that when they got the sponsorship, they were over the moon and were thinking that they would dig out of the well of money and be able to do what they wanted at that time. Upon inquiring, the key informants shared that it is possible to take the sponsor to court for breaking the conditions of the contract. However, they prefer not to because it costs money and energy, consumes time, and gives a chance to develop enmity with the employer who is well-connected to all other employers. One of the considerable things is that during court proceedings, one has to remain undocumented and work in the informal economy. It also means that workers are suffering the brunt of getting the rights, especially bringing their families and access to universal labour rights (Fargues & Brouwer, 2017).

The key informants said that it is usual for their work contracts to be renewed for disagreeing lengths of time. If this renewal is timely and continuous, they can reside in the UAE for many decades, although in a temporary capacity (permanent impermanency), depending on the contract's validity. However, if there is failure to issue or renew a work permit or residency permit can result in the worker's illegal status, thus bringing new challenges for the workers on how to get absorbed in the informal economy and change of lifestyle in the UAE and also of

the family – which becomes more challenging in later years of their permanent impermanency lifestyle (see (Shah, 2012) and (Madhavi, 2017)).

Cultural and Demographic Threats

Foreign workers are considered a threat to the cultural and demographic dynamics of the societies of the UAE and the Gulf states. As per the findings of (Fargues P., 2017) and (Fargues & Brouwer, 2017), the governments of the countries mentioned above feel threatened by non-citizens. The researchers found that non-citizens are a threat because the governments think that they will bring in the cultural traditions, norms and practices of their countries, which will spoil the Arab culture of their societies. Similarly, the governments think non-citizens will stand for their rights and participate in political protests. It has also been researched that if these non-citizens are given citizen status, they will burden governments with their social security and other benefits, like in Western countries. The governments are trying hard not to give any chance to non-citizens to integrate into their societies and keep them as alien in their states that they will not be able to settle down in their countries; that's the reason that bringing families and getting universal workers' rights is one of the biggest challenges for non-citizens in addition to Kafala system, as explained above.

The same findings were discussed by key informants of this research, who shared their experiences. As per the discussion, they mentioned that they could not bring their families here to UAE due to the Kafala system, restrictions, and strict conditions. This is the main problem with those who have low pay and are doing blue-collar jobs. However, this situation is different for those in higher positions in other companies, and their companies arrange all the visa-related issues for their employees' families. However, to get that kind of treatment, one has to be well-equipped with the required skills in the UAE. As a study group of this research had mainly blue-collar jobs, they mentioned different aspects of their experiences in the UAE and the Gulf. For example, Mr. Adam (aged 33) exemplified this:

I came here in 2016 as a truck driver. I came here through my cousin, who works in the UAE. Here, life is callous, though I would earn much in less time and will come back to my family. I have four children, and all are studying. I have the eldest daughter, who is going to complete her 10th grade, 10th grade and I am now arranging money for her marriage. It is tough to earn money here. Dreams are dreams that will never come true as I wanted. The shifts are very long; I drive the whole day and night. We live in a small apartment shared by many other Pakistani nationals. We all have a close network of help and support. However, we are considered second-class citizens because of our working conditions and opportunities. There is no chance or time for us to communicate with other nationalities, including citizens of the UAE. Here, we have feelings that we are a threat to the culture and demographics of the UAE, as we (non-citizens) are increasing in numbers, and their people are less in number.

This sharing exactly goes to the finding that are 200 nationalities present in the UAE (UKEssays, 2018). These nationals came from different regions, religions, languages, cultural heritage and traditions. It is also interesting to note that many interact daily in small cities in the UAE. The cultural changes are vivid, such as the Emirati young population being more comfortable in the English language than the Arabic language due to international brands, cultural change and the influence of media. Similarly, Urdu comes as the second language after English and Arabic is the third language spoken in the UAE. It is also interesting to note that Chinese people and language, like elsewhere, can be seen as an emerging population with their brands (Zhang, 2021).

As far as the demographic is concerned, the estimate shows that almost 50% of the UAE's population is Pakistani and Indian, working in different sectors (DESA, 2021). The existing literature and this research show that low economic opportunity, lack of information, a culture of migration, transnational migrant networks and the operation of unregulated intermediaries are the critical determinants of migration from Pakistan to UAE. A large number of people opt for (illegal) migration; however, this research does not focus on this aspect of migration. The non-citizens work in the UAE and send remittances to their families, who depend on them for financial support. Only 5% of the Emirati population is fit for the required and desired skills, thus needing more foreign workers to fulfil their desires and help them maintain the Arab lifestyle. There is also a need to analyze remittances sent to workers' home countries, which is a kind of drainage of the money from the UAE.

Skills

The skills gap in the UAE is explored by Saeed et al. (2015). They have found a severe skills gap in the UAE, where 39% of people under 25 are either unemployed or underemployed, and 44% of college-educated workers under 25 have jobs that do not require a college degree (World Bank, 2022). It is also explored that due to the unavailability of the necessary skills and expertise, employers are having difficulty hiring even though more people are graduating from college and entering the labour market (Saeed et al., 2015).

Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MoHRE) classifies employment into 9 skill levels according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) issued by the International Labour Organization (UAE job, 2024). These levels are:

Level 1: Legislators, managers, and business executives

Level 2: Professionals in scientific, technical and human fields

Level 3: Technicians in scientific, technical and humanitarian fields

Level 4: Writing professionals

Level 5: Service and sales occupations

Level 6: Skilled workers in agriculture, fisheries and animal husbandry

Level 7: Craftsmen in construction, mining, and other craftsmen

Level 8: Operators and assemblers of machinery and equipment

Level 9: Simple professions

In addition to this, Westford university College reported that communication skills including English language, teamwork, problem solving, decision making, self-motivation, leadership skills, adaptability, skills related to sustainable energy are skills which are needed in the UAE (mywestford, 2017).

Similarly, experts like Dekkak (2017) argues that other scientific technical skills such as statistical analysis and data mining, Algorithm design, web architecture and development, are some of the other skills needed by the organizations working in the UAE.

By looking at the required and desirable skills by the UAE governments and other experts, it is asked from key informants of this research about their skills adaptation and upgradation to earn and live a quality life in the UAE. The answers of the key informants were not very encouraging because most of them were involved in blue collar jobs. Most of them were involved in which simple certificates are needed such as welding, taxi and truck driving, involved in construction, daily wage laborer, gardeners, riders, clerks/assistants, and security guards as well as people working in the hospitality industry among others. Mr. Ahsan (aged 30) shared that:

I came here as a cook here with a Pakistani sponsor who own the restaurant where I work. I am working quite well and as I don't need further certification to work, as a result have no plans to get more skills or education.

In the same vein, Mr. Hassan (38) explained that:

Look! Everything costs here and it is very expensive to get certificates. We are earning money to support ourselves and our families back home and I am not in a position to upgrade myself. Sometimes I think that when I visit Pakistan, I will do a course. But most of the time, I go for a month and during that month, but it is not possible to get time for such an upgradation.

It was obvious during the interviews that they realized that upgrading is important to live and earn good in the UAE, however circumstances are not supporting them. As they did not work long in the UAE and focus is to earn as much as possible in their contractual time-period. However, upon asking if they want to work in any other country, they answered that:

Definitely! We need to upgrade our skills and working style. English language is an important skill which is the need of the hour as there are many international tourists, workers, employers with whom we cannot communicate fluently. We know English a little bit, but it does not help much.

While looking at their educational and current skills level, it seems difficult for them to upgrade skills or switch their profession, and they also realized it. According to Mr. Kamal (aged 40):

When we look at the needed and desired skills to work in good and well-paid industries, we start to think whether we invest in ourselves or in our families. Because children are studying in schools and colleges, and we need to support them. However, I am thinking of upgrading my skills in IT so that I can switch my job, [see (Szelenyi, 2016) for similar findings].

It can be analyzed that Pakistani men are under the stress of family obligations despite knowing that they need more skills, they cannot invest at the time of interviews. However, some of them are thinking of upgrading their skills to get new jobs and also to move to other countries because of the Kafala system, as discussed above.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed different issues, challenges and coping strategies of Pakistani diaspora working and living in the UAE. It is analyzed that almost all key informants were involved in blue collar jobs which do not offer much money and a luxurious life, however better than the home country. Issues of visas and permanent impermanency keep them stressed and force them to work in an exploitative environment. In this paper, I do not aim to present key informants as passive objects because they have chosen to go abroad to work. There are many broader factors such as economic, political, cultural, technological and demographic changes that cause migration decisions. However, Pakistani men made rational choices as per the economic situation in the country. In this whole process of migration, they invested, they selected the country, and they adapted accordingly, though faced different challenges.

It has been discussed that the Pakistani community and other expatriate communities are sometimes viewed as a potential challenge to the UAE's culture and demographic balance. Despite the significant number of Pakistanis living and working in the UAE, many still feel a sense of alienation due to the UAE's laws and policies, which restrict their access to citizenship and make it difficult for those in lower-level professions to bring their families. Estimates indicate that the UAE was the second-largest source of remittances to Pakistan during the July-March 2021-22 financial year, with remittances amounting to \$4.28 billion in 2022, down from \$4.52 billion in 2021 (IOM, 2024).

Given this situation, where Pakistani nationals continue to seek employment in the UAE despite these challenges, it may be beneficial for the employment and citizenship policies to be reassessed. The Government of Pakistan could negotiate with the UAE to improve wages and working conditions for Pakistani workers, addressing issues like the exploitative visa market,

which drives up the cost of securing employment in the UAE and other Gulf states. This would help in reducing the burden on job seekers and could lead to a better quality of life for expatriates (Arif & Ishaq, 2017).

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