



Cultural transformation and social sustainability among Pakhtun internally displaced families

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Abstract

This study examines the implications of rural-to-urban migration for social, cultural, and economic sustainability among Pakhtun migrant families in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty migrant families to explore how migration reshapes family structures, gender relations, and cultural practices in rapidly urbanizing contexts. The findings reveal a transition from joint to nuclear family systems, a decline in traditional patriarchal authority, and evolving gender roles that enhance women's empowerment and household resilience. These transformations significantly influence social sustainability through changes in family cohesion, decision-making, and inter-generational relationships. Urban migration also affects parenting practices, child socialization, marriage customs, and *pardah*, generating identity negotiations as families balance cultural preservation with urban adaptation. While cities offer economic opportunities that support economic sustainability, they simultaneously challenge cultural continuity. Framed within sustainable development discourse, the study demonstrates that internal migration both challenges and strengthens pathways toward inclusive and resilient urban futures. By linking family-level change to broader sustainability transitions, the research contributes to understanding migration-driven social transformation in rapidly growing urban regions.

Keywords: Pakhtun Families; Social Sustainability; Rural-to-urban Migration; Cultural Transformation; Gender Roles

Introduction

Migration is a powerful social force that not only reshapes geographic boundaries but also plays a critical role in influencing social, cultural, and economic sustainability within rapidly urbanizing societies (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014)⁵⁶. When individuals or families migrate from rural to urban areas, they encounter new socio-economic and environmental contexts that challenge deeply rooted traditions, identities, and everyday social practices (Croll, 2006)⁵⁶. In collectivist societies such as that of the Pakhtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, migration extends beyond economic mobility and becomes a transformative process with long-term implications for cultural continuity, social cohesion, and sustainable family systems (Shah, 2018)⁵⁷. The Pakhtun social structure is historically grounded in *Pakhtunwali*, a customary code emphasizing honor, hospitality, collective responsibility, and respect for elders values that often come under strain in urban environments characterized by individualism, anonymity, and rapid social change (Shinwari, 2020)⁵⁸. Over the past few decades, rural-to-urban migration in Pakistan has increased substantially, driven by poverty, limited access to education and employment in rural areas, and the pursuit of improved services and living

conditions in cities (Gazdar, 2003; Deshingkar & Grimm, 2005)⁵⁷. As migrant families settle in urban centers such as Peshawar, they become part of expanding urban systems that place pressure on traditional kinship networks and communal forms of life, raising important concerns for social sustainability (Rahman, 2019)⁵⁷. Urban living often weakens extended family bonds and alters collective support mechanisms that previously ensured social stability in rural Pakhtun society. Consequently, cultural transformation becomes an adaptive response as migrants negotiate new lifestyles that frequently conflict with the collectivist ethos of rural communities (Khan & Zeb, 2021)⁵⁷. These transformations influence religious practices, gender relations, language use, family rituals, and inter-generational communication, contributing to a redefinition of Pakhtun identity within the broader context of urbanization and sustainable social change (Barth, 2025; Tariq & Javed, 2021)⁵⁶.

One of the most visible cultural transformations associated with migration is the gradual erosion of traditional marriage customs. In rural Pakhtun society, marriages are typically arranged by family elders and serve as mechanisms for reinforcing kinship ties and tribal alliances, thereby supporting social cohesion. However, urban migration has expanded individual choice and personal autonomy in marital decisions, creating inter-generational tensions and challenging established cultural norms (Yousafzai & Gohar, 2015)⁵⁸. Similarly, religious life has shifted from collective, community-based practices centered on mosques and *Jirgas* to more individualized forms of observance shaped by urban work routines, spatial dispersion, and time constraints (Shah & Ali, 2018; Tariq, 2022)⁵⁸. These changes highlight how urban environments can disrupt traditional support systems, raising questions about the sustainability of communal religious and cultural institutions among migrant populations (Iqbal, 2020)⁵⁷.

Language, as a core marker of cultural identity, is also undergoing significant transformation in urban settings. While Pashto remains the native language of Pakhtuns, urban education systems and labor markets increasingly prioritize proficiency in Urdu and English, particularly among younger generations (Rahman, 2010; Kakar, 2018)⁵⁷. This shift has led to widespread code-switching and a gradual preference for non-native languages, weakening inter-generational communication and contributing to cultural dissonance within migrant families (Hussain, 2016; Bashir, 2019)⁵⁷. Beyond linguistic change, this process symbolizes broader patterns of cultural assimilation that influence dress codes, social etiquette, and leisure practices, with long-term implications for cultural sustainability in urban contexts (Shinwari, 2020; Yousafzai, 2018)⁵⁸.

Gender norms represent another critical dimension of migration-induced social change with direct relevance to social sustainability. Urbanization has expanded women's access to education and employment, increasing their visibility in public spaces and participation in household decision-making, in contrast to the traditionally private and domestic roles assigned to women in rural Pakhtun society (Shinwari, 2019; Jahangir & Aziz, 2021)⁵⁷. As women engage in coeducational institutions and professional environments, practices such as *purdah* and strict gender segregation have diminished, often generating ideological and generational tensions within migrant households (Kakar, 2004; Tariq, 2021)⁵⁷. While these changes contribute to women's empowerment and household resilience, they also provoke cultural anxieties among elder family members seeking to preserve traditional values, reflecting ongoing negotiations between cultural continuity and urban adaptation (Rahman, 2015; Shah & Ali, 2020)⁵⁷.

This study focuses on Pakhtun families who have migrated to urban neighborhoods in Peshawar and examines how their cultural identity, traditions, and value systems have evolved in response to the social and institutional pressures of urban life. Moving beyond the dominant emphasis on the economic outcomes of migration, this research foregrounds the lived cultural experiences of migrant families and highlights how migration reshapes everyday practices, authority structures, language use, and gender relations within urban settings (Hugo, 2013; Castles et al., 2020)⁵⁶. By emphasizing these cultural transformations, the study contributes to a broader sustainability-oriented understanding of migration as a process that not only facilitates spatial mobility but also generates profound social and symbolic change, with important implications for social cohesion, cultural continuity, and long-term urban sustainability.

Literature Review

Migration has long been examined as both a driver and outcome of social transformation, with recent scholarship increasingly highlighting its implications for cultural continuity and social sustainability, particularly within collectivist and tradition-oriented societies (Giddens, 2006; Vitale, 2025)⁵⁸. In the South Asian context, rural-to-urban migration exposes individuals to modern, competitive, and relatively anonymous urban environments that challenge established cultural values, especially among tribal and ethnic communities such as the Pakhtuns (Das, 2025; Badri, 2025)⁵⁷. Within traditional Pakhtun society, cultural identity is sustained through communal living, kinship networks, and inter-generational transmission of values structured around Pakhtunwali, which regulates both personal conduct and social relations. Migration disrupts these foundations by relocating individuals from tribal territories into urban settings that prioritize individual achievement over collective belonging, thereby weakening mechanisms of cultural and social sustainability (Shah, 2019)⁵⁷. As urban life increasingly emphasizes time discipline, economic productivity, and the privatization of social space, communal practices central to rural Pakhtun society such as extended family interactions, collective religious observance, and shared child-rearing are gradually diminished (Khan, 2020; Wahab, 2024)⁵⁸.

Marriage practices offer a clear lens into the cultural changes wrought by migration. In rural areas, marriages are arranged by family elders, often based on tribal honor and inter-clan alliances (Shinwari, 2018)⁵⁷. However, in urban settings, young adults are exposed to modern concepts of love, compatibility, and personal choice, leading to a growing trend of self-choice or “love marriages” (Yousafzai & Gohar, 2015)⁵⁸. This phenomenon creates inter-generational conflicts, as parents often view such behavior as a direct threat to the honor and cohesion of the family unit (Shah & Ali, 2020)⁵⁷. The weakening of elder authority in marriage decisions is a recurring theme in studies on urban Pakhtun families, pointing to a broader cultural shift in power dynamics and family autonomy (Barth, 2025; Rahman, 2019)⁵⁶. Religious practice is another critical domain affected by migration. In rural Pakhtun settings, religion is a community-based affair, with regular participation in mosque activities, Jirgas, and communal rituals such as Eid gatherings (Ahmed, 2013)⁵⁶. Migration to the city disrupts these traditions due to time constraints, lack of established community networks, and the physical layout of urban life that discourages communal interaction (Shah & Ali, 2018)⁵⁷. Moreover, individual interpretations of faith have gained ground, especially among the youth, who increasingly engage with religious content through digital platforms rather than mosque-based teachings (Tariq, 2022; Iqbal, 2020)⁵⁸. This transformation from collective to individual religiosity marks a critical cultural rupture in Pakhtun society.

Language also serves as a potent symbol of cultural retention or loss. Numerous studies highlight how rural-to-urban migration compels linguistic adaptation, especially in multi-ethnic urban centers like Peshawar where Urdu and English dominate education, media, and employment sectors (Rahman, 2010; Kakar, 2018)⁵⁷. Among second-generation migrants, the inability to speak fluent Pashto is a common issue, which not only hampers communication with elders but also weakens cultural memory and identity transmission (Hussain, 2016)⁵⁷. This language gap has been associated with increased feelings of alienation among older generations, who perceive the younger members as drifting away from their cultural roots (Shinwari, 2020; Bashir, 2019)⁵⁸. Gender norms have seen some of the most significant transformations. Studies from urban Peshawar indicate that women in migrant families have gained increased autonomy and visibility in public life, especially through access to education and employment (Jahangir & Aziz, 2021)⁵⁷. Traditional norms such as purdah and strict gender segregation are gradually declining, often leading to familial disputes and generational clashes (Shinwari, 2019; Tariq, 2021)⁵⁸. The shift in gender dynamics is not simply a matter of economic necessity but also reflects the reorientation of values in urban settings, where women’s independence is increasingly normalized (Small, Dehn & Beltran-Figueroa, 2025)⁵⁸.

inter-generational conflict is a recurring consequence of these cultural changes. While older family members emphasize cultural preservation, younger migrants are drawn toward urban lifestyles characterized by independence, self-expression, and technological engagement (Rahman, 2015; Yousafzai, 2018)⁵⁸. The result is often an identity crisis among second-generation migrants, who struggle to reconcile their heritage with the

demands of urban modernity (Shah & Ali, 2020)⁵⁷. Cultural associations and informal community gatherings have attempted to mitigate these tensions, but they often fall short in maintaining cultural continuity in the face of rapidly evolving urban norms (Khan, 2019)⁵⁷.

In sum, the literature clearly demonstrates that rural-to-urban migration is not merely an economic transition but a cultural transformation that reshapes language, gender roles, religious life, and generational communication in Pakhtun society. These changes reflect broader global patterns of cultural fluidity and identity negotiation in migrant communities, while also revealing the unique challenges faced by ethnic groups like the Pakhtuns in preserving their heritage amid urban modernity (Castles et al., 2020; Hugo, 2013)⁵⁶.

While existing literature has explored the economic dimensions and mobility patterns of rural-to-urban migration in Pakistan, the cultural consequences of this migration remain under-examined, particularly among ethnic communities such as the Pakhtuns. Most studies tend to focus on material outcomes like employment, housing, and infrastructure, while overlooking how migration reconfigures cultural identity, family values, and inter-generational relationships. Additionally, the urban center of Peshawar, despite being a key destination for Pakhtun migrants has received very limited academic attention in terms of how internal migration reshapes cultural practices and social norms. This study addresses this research gap by providing a rich, qualitative analysis of how Pakhtun families in Peshawar experience cultural adaptation, identity shifts, and social restructuring as a result of migration.

Theoretical Framework

This research article uses two theoretical lenses to explore the cultural transformation of Pakhtun migrant families: Everett Lee's Push-Pull Theory of Migration and the Contemporary Cultural Assimilation Theory. Lee's theory offers a comprehensive framework to understand the drivers of migration, emphasizing how socio-economic and environmental factors "push" individuals from rural areas while urban advantages "pull" them toward cities (King & Skeldon, 2022; Adepoju, 2023)⁵⁸. This model is particularly relevant in the context of rural Pakhtun families, who often migrate due to poverty, underdevelopment, and limited access to education and health services.

The Cultural Assimilation Theory, particularly in its modern interpretation, is also central to this study. It views migration as not only a physical transition but a process of gradual cultural adaptation, where migrants begin to absorb the dominant norms, language, behaviors, and values of the host urban culture (Berry, 2017; Alba & Foner, 2020)⁵⁸. This theory is especially suitable for examining how Pakhtun families negotiate their traditional customs; including gender roles, language use, and family rituals within the context of urban Peshawar's multicultural environment (Castro & Taniguchi, 2021)⁵⁸. These two theories together offer an effective lens to analyze both the causes of migration and the cultural consequences that follow, particularly how deeply rooted traditions are challenged, reshaped, or even replaced during the urban adaptation process.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the cultural transformation of Pakhtun migrant families, allowing an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, identity negotiation, and shifting family dynamics in urban settings. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews focused on themes such as family structure, gender roles, cultural adaptation, child socialization, and inter-generational relations. Interviews, conducted in Pashto or Urdu and later translated into English, lasted 40–60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis. Purposive sampling selected 30 Pakhtun migrant families (fifteen each from Canal Town and Latifabad) who had migrated from rural areas to Peshawar and lived there for at least eight years. Both male and female household heads participated, ensuring balanced gender perspectives. This approach provided rich, contextual insights into how migration

reshaped family structures, decision-making, cultural practices, and social cohesion, highlighting the challenges and opportunities for cultural, social, and economic sustainability in urban migrant communities.

Discussion and Analysis

Shift in Family Structure

Migration led to a shift from joint family systems to nuclear families, bringing both positive changes (increased autonomy) and negative aspects (emotional isolation and loss of kinship support). Traditionally, the joint family system in rural Pakhtun society functioned as a unit of economic cooperation and moral support, encompassing multiple generations under one roof. However, urban living, marked by space limitations, rising housing costs, and increasing individualism, renders such arrangements unsustainable within dense urban settings. Many respondents noted that the city lifestyle encourages smaller households where privacy and autonomy take precedence. While some viewed this shift positively, particularly younger couples who felt liberated from elder control, others especially women and elderly parents expressed feelings of emotional isolation and disconnection, raising concerns related to social sustainability and the weakening of informal support systems. This trend reflects broader patterns observed globally, where urbanization tends to favor nuclear family arrangements due to spatial, financial, and cultural pressures (Dommaraju, 2016; Giddens, 2006)⁵⁸. For many male respondents, the transition meant a heavier sense of responsibility. One male participant shared his view:

“In the village, we lived with my parents, my brothers and their families all under one roof. It was noisy but warm. After moving to Peshawar, we rented a small house, just enough for me, my wife, and children. Now, we rarely meet our extended family.” (individual interview, 2 March, 2025)

His tone reflected nostalgia for the communal life he left behind, alongside an acceptance of the new arrangement shaped by urban living conditions. He acknowledged the comfort of privacy but admitted that the sense of shared burden had diminished, making urban life more isolating. One female respondent also expressed mixed emotions, stating:

“We had a big house in the village with all in-laws together. Here in the city, I live only with my husband and kids. Sometimes I feel free, but I also miss the support and company of other women in the family. (individual interview, 2 March, 2025)”

Her words revealed both relief and loss. While she valued the autonomy associated with nuclear family life, she also missed the sisterhood, shared parenting, and informal social support that contributed to household resilience in joint family systems. Many respondents voiced concern about children growing up without regular interaction with grandparents, cousins, or extended kin, highlighting long-term implications for inter-generational bonding and social cohesion. A shift from joint to nuclear family structures has similarly been observed as migrants settle in urban areas characterized by limited space and resources (Siddiqui et al., 2019)⁵⁹.

Decline of Patriarchal Authority

In urban settings, traditional patriarchal authority weakened, with younger family members, especially women and educated youth, taking on more decision-making power, challenging traditional family hierarchies. The study found that traditional authority structures central to the Pakhtun patriarchal family model, have weakened considerably in the urban context. In rural areas, the eldest male family members, particularly fathers and grandfathers, held the central decision-making role. However, in the post-migration urban setting, these hierarchies are being renegotiated. Younger family members, particularly women and educated youth, are increasingly asserting autonomy in household decision-making, reflecting changing gender norms and contributing to more participatory family structures. Physical separation from extended kin networks and the practical demands of urban life have encouraged more egalitarian relationships within households, altering long-standing patterns of authority. Several respondents noted that elders' roles have diminished, with many expressing a sense of lost influence and purpose, raising concerns related to inter-generational cohesion and social sustainability within migrant families. These patterns align with existing literature showing that migration destabilizes established power structures and leads to the reconfiguration of inter-generational dynamics in urban contexts (Khan, 2015; Croll, 2006)⁵⁸. During the interview a male Government Employee had said that:

“Back in the village, any major decision about children’s schooling, buying something big, or family issues was taken by my father or jointly with my brothers. We all sat together and discussed. Since moving to the city, it's mostly me and my wife. I have to think more carefully now because there's no one to advise or support if something goes wrong. I ask my wife, and we decide together, but sometimes I miss those long family discussions.”
(individual interview, 9 March, 2025)

In summary, following migration to urban areas, decision-making processes have become more personal and couple-based, particularly within nuclear family arrangements. Migration has shifted decision-making from collective family consultation to greater individual autonomy, reflecting changing household dynamics in urban contexts (de Haas & Rodríguez, 2010)⁵⁷. Many respondents reported making decisions independently of elders, which provides increased freedom but also places greater responsibility on individuals and couples. Several men described a heightened sense of pressure, while many women reported feeling more included and valued in household decisions, indicating a shift toward more participatory and gender-inclusive family practices. At the same time, both men and women acknowledged missing the shared deliberation and guidance traditionally provided by elders, pointing to a gradual weakening of informal support mechanisms. These findings suggest that although urban migration enables more efficient and flexible decision-making, it also introduces emotional and practical challenges that have implications for family cohesion and social sustainability among migrant households.

Gender Role Transformation

Urban migration opened opportunities for women in education and employment, increasing their visibility in public life and participation in household decision-making. These changes have contributed to greater gender inclusion and household resilience, yet they have also generated tensions with traditional practices such as *purdah* and gender segregation. In rural Pakhtun society, women were largely confined to domestic

responsibilities and limited public engagement due to cultural norms surrounding modesty and seclusion. However, migration exposed families to urban environments where women increasingly assumed roles as income earners, decision-makers, and educators within the household. Many female respondents reported that after migration they enrolled in educational institutions, accessed paid employment, and gained a stronger voice in family affairs. While these shifts were experienced as empowering, they also produced tensions within households, as men and elders struggled to adapt to the erosion of long-standing patriarchal norms. This pattern reflects broader global migration trends in which urban settings expand women's roles and enhance gender equity, while simultaneously challenging established cultural frameworks and requiring ongoing negotiation to sustain social cohesion (Chant & McIlwaine, 2016; Small, Dehn, & Beltran-Figueroa, 2025; Silvey & Elmhirst, 2003)⁵⁸. During in-dept interview one of the female respondent stated that:

“Back in the village, my mother-in-law decided everything even what I should cook or wear. I had no say in anything. Since we moved to the city, it's just me, my husband, and our kids. I run the house now. I even take embroidery orders and manage the money I earn. It feels good to have some control over my life.”(individual interview, 1 march, 2025)

This discussion shows how migration and nuclear family life gave her personal freedom and the confidence to contribute financially. Another female respondent opinion while asking the same question migrated from Buner to Peshawar she stated that:

“In the village, I was never asked for my opinion. I had to follow what others told me. Here in the city, my husband includes me in decisions about money, children's school, even where to shop. It's not easy doing everything alone, but I feel stronger and more independent.”(individual interview, 16 march, 2025)

The discussions and interviews revealed that migration to urban areas, along with the shift to nuclear family structures, plays a significant role in empowering women. Migration and the shift to nuclear family structures can enhance women's empowerment by increasing their decision-making power, autonomy, and participation in household finances (Chant, 2016)⁵⁸. They gain more freedom, confidence, and participation in decision-making. Although urban life brings challenges and a heavier workload, it also provides women with opportunities for personal growth, independence, and a stronger voice within the household. This transformation marks a meaningful step toward gender empowerment in migrant families.

Language Shift

Migration resulted in a significant shift in linguistic practices within Pakhtun migrant families, particularly among younger generations who increasingly prefer Urdu and English over Pashto. In rural contexts, Pashto functioned not only as a means of communication but also as a key marker of cultural heritage, embedding values, proverbs, and social norms that reinforced Pakhtun identity and cultural continuity. Following relocation to urban centers, many parents reported a decline in their children's fluency in Pashto, largely due to schooling in Urdu or English medium institutions, increased exposure to digital media, and interaction with diverse peer groups. This linguistic transition has created communication gaps between generations and weakened the symbolic role of language in the inter-generational transmission of cultural identity, raising concerns related to cultural sustainability in urban migrant communities. These findings are consistent with

broader research showing that migration often accelerates heritage language decline and reshapes identity formation among second-generation youth within urban environments (Fishman, 1991; Rahman, 2011; Khan, 2020)⁵⁷. During an interview, one father expressed his concern:

“My daughter speaks Urdu all the time. When I talk to her in Pashto, she replies in Urdu or sometimes English. She understands Pashto, but she doesn’t speak it properly. Sometimes I feel she is losing our language slowly.” (individual interview, 3 March, 2025)

Similarly, mothers shared their worries about children’s difficulty understanding traditional Pashto expressions and proverbs. One female respondent explained:

“In the village, children learned Pashto from elders. Here they learn Urdu from school and cartoons. My son mixes Urdu and English when talking. Sometimes he doesn’t understand the meaning of our Pashto proverbs.” (individual interview, 28 February, 2025)

These experiences highlight that language shift is not merely about adopting a new mode of communication but also about negotiating cultural belonging. The increasing dominance of Urdu and English among migrant youth reflects the influence of urban schooling and media but simultaneously contributes to a gradual erosion of cultural continuity and inter-generational dialogue. Previous studies suggest that linguistic assimilation among migrant families often reshapes cultural values, weakens ethnic identity, and creates identity hybridity among younger generations (Hornberger, 2002; De Houwer, 2009)⁵⁷. While some parents appreciate the advantages of bilingualism or trilingualism for academic and social mobility, many express concern over the potential loss of cultural identity rooted in Pashto. Overall, language shift represents one of the most significant cultural transformations triggered by rural-to-urban migration in Pakhtun society.

Cultural Adaptation and Loss

Many traditional Pakhtun cultural practices, such as arranged marriages and *purdah*, weakened in urban settings as migrant families adapted to new values and practices, sometimes leading to identity struggles, particularly among the second generation. In rural areas, customs such as arranged marriages, *purdah*, communal living, and strict gender segregation are reinforced through strong community ties and elder authority. However, after settling in the city, families reported a gradual erosion of these norms, reflecting the pressures of urban life on cultural continuity and social sustainability. Respondents noted that their children no longer spoke fluent Pashto, preferring Urdu or English acquired at school, alongside visible shifts in dress codes, religious practices, and gender interactions, especially among youth. Many families also stopped participating in traditional religious gatherings and observed a rise in individualized spiritual beliefs. These changes illustrate how cultural identity is fluid and reshaped in response to new socio-economic contexts, intergroup exposure, and the demands of urban living, highlighting the challenge of maintaining cultural sustainability in migrant communities (Rahman, 2010; Shah & Ali, 2018; Kakar, 2018)⁵⁷. One of the male respondent share his experience during interview and stated that:

“In the village, we followed every tradition big or small. We wore traditional clothes, sat together, respected elders, even ate in one big plate. Now in the city, everyone is busy. My

children prefer jeans, fast food, and hardly speak Pashto at home.”(individual interview, 22 Feb, 2025)

The respondents' views clearly show that migration to urban areas has caused a noticeable shift in cultural and traditional practices. Rural-to-urban migration leads to adaptation to urban modernity, causing changes in cultural traditions, social norms, and dress styles (Ghimire & Samuels, 2014)⁵⁷. A noticeable change in dress codes, especially among youth, reflects the adoption of modern urban fashion and the fading of traditional attire. At the same time, changes in social norms such as reduced neighborly contact and weakened elder authority show a shift toward individualism. For women, *pardah* practices have also changed balancing between traditional expectations and urban realities. Families are trying to adjust while holding onto their cultural values, but urban life continues to reshape how culture is lived and expressed.

Change in Child Socialization

Migration led to shifts in child-rearing practices, as the absence of extended family support in urban areas made it more difficult for parents to transmit traditional values. Children's exposure to urban norms further contributed to generational differences in identity and values. In rural settings, child-rearing was a collective responsibility involving extended kin, which facilitated the preservation of cultural values and provided emotional and practical support to parents. In urban areas, where nuclear families predominate, the responsibility of raising children falls almost entirely on parents, particularly mothers. Many women reported feeling overwhelmed by the dual demands of work and childcare without the assistance of extended relatives. Parents also expressed concern about their children being influenced by liberal urban values, peer pressure, and media, potentially drifting away from Pakhtun traditions. These observations reflect broader migration patterns in which urban environments weaken communal child-rearing systems, impacting inter-generational cultural transmission and raising challenges for social and cultural sustainability among migrant families (Zaman, 2016; Fan et al., 2020; Jordan & Graham, 2012)⁵⁹. During the interview a male Doctor had said that:

“Back in the village, children learned by watching elders how to speak respectfully, how to sit with guests, how to help in the mosque. Now, they learn from YouTube. Even if I try to teach them, the environment outside the home is different. They copy what they see on screens or in school.” (individual interview, 22 Feb, 2025)

These statements show that how the breakdown of shared authority weakens the socializing power of the family. The absence of multiple role models and social accountability has made the task of moral instruction more challenging for urban parents.

Marriage Customs

Migration contributed to a shift in marriage practices, moving from arranged marriages toward self-choice or "love marriages," which has generated inter-generational tensions between modern values and traditional expectations. Traditionally, marriages in Pakhtun society were arranged by elders, taking into account caste, tribal affiliation, and social reputation. However, after migration, families reported an increasing trend toward self-choice marriages, particularly among educated youth. Some participants welcomed these changes as indicators of modernization and individual rights, while others expressed concern over the erosion of parental

authority and the potential social repercussions associated with non-traditional unions. This tension between modern and traditional expectations illustrates how migration exposes families to pluralistic urban worldviews, necessitating cultural negotiation and adaptation, with implications for the social and cultural sustainability of migrant households (Shinwari, 2018; Yousafzai & Gohar, 2015)⁵⁷. One of the male Respondent stated that:

“In the village, we had big weddings tents, food for the whole neighborhood, and music that went on for days. After moving here, we did my daughter’s wedding in a hall. We invited fewer people, booked catering, and finished everything in one evening. It’s more organized now. Also, young people today don’t want old customs they prefer modern styles.”(individual interview, 16 march, 2025)

Rural-to-urban migration often results in a shift from traditional to more modern marriage customs, including changes in matchmaking, wedding practices, and gender roles (Thornton, 2001)⁵⁸. Migration to urban areas has transformed marriage traditions in Pakhtun families. Large, collective rural weddings have given way to modern, organized hall events with a focus on personal choice, style, and practicality. Arranged marriages by elders are still present, but love marriages are increasingly accepted, especially among the educated urban youth. The change reflects a blending of tradition with urban modernity.

Identity Crisis and Inter-generational Tensions

Second-generation migrants often experienced an identity crisis, balancing traditional Pakhtun values with the demands of urban life, which sometimes led to conflicts with older generations striving to preserve cultural heritage. Parents, particularly those raised in villages, reported feelings of disconnection from their children, who had grown up in urban environments with different values, language preferences, and social behaviors. While parents emphasized cultural preservation and the transmission of Pakhtun identity, children often gravitated toward urban norms, Western fashion, and mixed-language communication. This dynamic created inter-generational tensions, with older family members perceiving their cultural legacy as threatened, while youth felt misunderstood or constrained. These identity negotiations highlight the challenges of maintaining cultural sustainability in migrant communities, where biculturalism and urban adaptation can produce psychological stress, particularly among youth navigating the intersection of traditional expectations and modern urban life (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rahman, 2015; Yousafzai, 2018)⁵⁸. While of the participants expressed his views and shared their opinions in detail:

“Back in the village, my son used to help in the fields and listened to elders. Now, after moving here, he talks more in Urdu than Pashto and spends most of his time on mobile. He’s smarter, yes, but less connected to our traditions.” (individual interview, 23 Feb, 2025)

The responses clearly show that migration to the city has had a strong impact on children’s identity and behavior. Unlike their parents, who grew up with strong Pukhtun traditions, children in urban areas are influenced by modern education, technology, and city lifestyle. Rural-to-urban migration often leads to identity shifts in migrant children, who adopt urban norms and values, leading to a gradual departure from traditional cultural practices (White, 2011)⁵⁹. They are growing up with a mix of values keeping some traditions but also adopting new ideas and habits. This shows a cultural shift in the younger generation. While

some parents see this as a sign of progress, others worry about losing important parts of their culture. In the end, children of migrant families are creating a new kind of identity one that reflects both their traditional roots and their new urban surroundings.

Impact on Family Dynamics and Social Cohesion

Migration also had a profound impact on family dynamics and social cohesion within Pakhtun migrant households. In rural settings, extended families lived collectively and relied on strong kinship networks for emotional, social, and economic support. Daily interactions with relatives, shared responsibilities in child-rearing, and communal decision-making reinforced social cohesion and fostered a deep sense of belonging. However, after migration to urban areas, these collective structures weakened considerably. Respondents described the shift from tightly bonded joint family systems to nuclear households, where autonomy, privacy, and individual responsibilities dominate daily life. This transition has disrupted long-standing patterns of social interaction and reduced the spontaneous communal gatherings that were central to village life, raising concerns about the social sustainability of migrant communities. These findings are consistent with existing research showing that migration often fragments social networks and encourages more individualistic lifestyles, thereby diminishing community cohesion (Young & Wilmott, 1973; Castles et al., 2014; Amjad & Khan, 2021)⁵⁶. One female respondent described this emotional shift:

“In the village, every evening relatives visited each other. We talked, laughed, and shared small problems. Here, everyone is busy. Even our neighbors don’t know us well. Sometimes I feel we are living alone in this crowd.” (individual interview, 4 March, 2025)

Men also highlighted the loss of collective responsibility and the increased pressure of managing household issues without the support of extended family. One male participant reflected:

“There is no joint support system here. In the village, my brothers were always around. If there was a problem, everyone helped. Now if something happens, we are on our own.” (individual interview, 2 March, 2025)

These statements reveal how migration reshapes the social fabric of Pakhtun families, leading to more individualized lifestyles but also creating emotional gaps, loneliness, and reduced kinship engagement. Urban life, characterized by fast-paced routines, limited time, and reduced social interaction, often leaves migrant families without the communal warmth and support present in rural environments. The weakening of social cohesion affects not only emotional well-being but also children's upbringing, elder care, and the preservation of cultural practices. Studies show that migration-induced transformations in family structure often result in less interdependence and greater personal autonomy, reshaping traditional communal identities (Giddens, 2006; Putnam, 2007)⁵⁷. While some respondents appreciated the freedom and independence of nuclear living, many expressed nostalgia for the strong social bonds, trust, and collective spirit that defined their rural life. Migration, therefore, represents a shift from collective belonging toward individualized living significantly altering the cultural and social landscape of Pakhtun families.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to support Pakhtun migrant families in adapting to urban life while preserving their cultural identity. Since rural-to-urban migration significantly reshapes family structures, gender relations, and cultural practices, targeted social, educational, and institutional interventions are essential. These recommendations aim to strengthen social cohesion, reduce cultural dislocation, and promote inclusive and sustainable urban integration of migrant communities in Peshawar.

- Government agencies and NGOs should provide awareness sessions in rural areas about urban life, including housing, employment, cost of living, and cultural adjustments, incorporating real-life experiences from migrants.
- Support programs should help migrant families, especially women and children, adapt to urban culture without losing their identity, through community centers, schools, or cultural hubs.
- Social and institutional support is needed for nuclear families, including daycare, counseling services, women's support groups, and community halls for social interaction.
- Cultural centers and school programs should promote Pakhtun traditions, language, dress, storytelling, and festivals to maintain cultural continuity.
- Vocational training, skill development, micro-financing, and home-based employment opportunities should be made available to support economic integration, particularly for women.
- After-school programs, youth clubs, and family-based mentoring can enhance children's social skills, confidence, and cultural pride while strengthening inter-generational communication.
- Urban planning and policies should address migrant family needs in housing, schools, healthcare, and public transport, including subsidized housing or reserved school quotas for low-income families.
- Accessible, culturally sensitive counseling and mental health services should address emotional stress, isolation, and nostalgia, with special attention to women and elderly migrants.
- Encourage regular communication with relatives in villages and promote rural-urban visits or cultural exchanges to maintain family and cultural ties.
- Migrant families should be included in policymaking processes, supported through associations or committees that voice their concerns and suggest practical solutions.
- Continuous research and data collection are essential to monitor changing family dynamics and inform evidence-based interventions.
- Promote gender equity in education, employment, and household responsibilities, including awareness campaigns encouraging shared parenting and support for women in nuclear families.
- Community and religious leaders can facilitate patience, cooperation, and family bonding to ease adaptation challenges in urban contexts.

Implications

The findings of this study highlight that rural-to-urban migration is more than a geographical shift it is a transformative process that reshapes Pakhtun family structures, cultural practices, and inter-generational identity. Migration influences daily routines, decision-making, and the transmission of traditions, reflecting the subtle yet profound ways cultural transformation occurs in urban settings. These results underscore the need for targeted support for migrant families to navigate urban life while preserving cultural identity.

Schools, community organizations, and local governments can play a crucial role by providing programs that strengthen inter-generational communication, promote cultural continuity, and address the emotional and social challenges of migration.

Overall, the study demonstrates that migration acts as a driver of both opportunity and cultural change, requiring families to renegotiate identities and social roles. Recognizing these complexities can guide policymakers, educators, and community leaders to design culturally sensitive, socially sustainable interventions that balance integration into urban life with the preservation of heritage.

Conclusion

This study examined the cultural transformation of Pakhtun families migrating from rural areas to urban neighborhoods in Peshawar. Findings revealed significant shifts in family structure, gender roles, child-rearing practices, marriage customs, and cultural identity. Migration emerged as a transformative force, dismantling traditional joint family systems, weakening patriarchal authority, and exposing families to modern urban values that challenge deeply rooted customs. While many families embraced new opportunities for education, autonomy, and economic mobility, others experienced inter-generational conflicts, identity struggles, and emotional isolation. These outcomes highlight the dual nature of migration offering both empowerment and disruption. Urban life reshapes not only daily routines but also social relationships, authority structures, and cultural belonging, requiring families to actively negotiate their values and identities. The study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive policies, community support, and urban planning that recognize the social, cultural, and economic sustainability needs of migrant families. Understanding these processes can help policymakers, educators, and community leaders design interventions that support integration while preserving cultural heritage and fostering social cohesion in urban settings.

Declarations

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Ethics Approval / Ethical Declaration: This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with established ethical research principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for cultural norms and sensitivities of internally displaced populations. Formal institutional review board (IRB) approval was not obtained, as the author was not affiliated with an academic or research institution at the time of the study.

Consent to Participate: Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Consent for Publication: Consent for publication was obtained from all participants.

No identifying personal information or sensitive details that could reveal participants' identities have been included in this manuscript.

Data Availability: The qualitative data generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations, confidentiality obligations, and the vulnerable status of internally displaced families. Anonymized data may be made available from the author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval and participant protection.

Author Contributions: The author solely conceived and designed the study, conducted fieldwork and data collection, performed data analysis, and prepared the manuscript.

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