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Negotiating Gender Roles in the Gulf: Housework, Decision-Making, and Social Isolation Among Pakistani Families in Saudi Arabia

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Original Article

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Keywords

Gender roles, Pakistani diaspora, Saudi Arabia, housework, decision-making, social isolation, qualitative research, WhatsApp methodology

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the changing gender roles among Pakistani families residing in Saudi Arabia, with particular attention to the negotiation of housework responsibilities, decision-making patterns, and the experience of social isolation. When families migrate from Pakistan to the Kingdom, the cultural and structural context of their life's changes fundamentally, placing pressure on traditional family frameworks. The primary objective of this research is to examine, in detail, how husband and wife housework responsibilities and decision-making patterns shift within the new society, and how social isolation produced by separation from extended kin networks shapes these changes. Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews conducted via WhatsApp with 12 married Pakistani couples (24 participants) residing in Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Al-Khobar, Jubail, and Yanbu, with the support of a local research assistant in Saudi Arabia who facilitated recruitment and ensured cultural access. Thematic analysis identified three overarching themes: (1) Economic Pressure and Working Women's Roles, (2) Sharing Household Chores and Childcare, and (3) Social Isolation and Mutual Dependency. The findings reveal a nuanced picture: while the overarching patriarchal structure often remains intact with men continuing to be viewed as primary breadwinners' migration to Saudi Arabia creates conditions for increased female autonomy in household management and, in some cases, shared decision-making. The absence of the joint family emerges as a central driver of these changes, as couples must manage childcare and domestic labour without the support of grandparents, in-laws, or extended kin. However, social isolation simultaneously constrains and enables the renegotiation of gender roles, producing both vulnerability and unexpected intimacy. The study contributes to the literature on South Asian Muslim diaspora families by highlighting the dialectical relationship between structural constraints and individual agency in the migration process, and by demonstrating the value of online qualitative methods for researching geographically dispersed populations.

1. Introduction

International labour migration from Pakistan to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, particularly Saudi Arabia, has been a defining feature of the country's political economy for decades. Since the oil boom of the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has been the primary destination for Pakistani migrant workers, and Pakistani nationals today constitute one of the largest expatriate communities in the Kingdom (Anwar et al., 2024). While much of this migration has historically been male-dominated and circular with men travelling alone, remitting earnings to dependent households in Pakistan, and returning periodically an increasing number of Pakistani men have settled in Saudi Arabia with their families, leading to the formation of permanent or semi-permanent diaspora communities (Rahman, 2012; Iqbal, 2023). This shift from transnational separation to family co-residence in the host society creates a unique social context for examining how gender relations are reconfigured. When a family moves from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, the cultural context changes fundamentally: the joint family system is often replaced by a nuclear household, the wife's proximity to in-laws diminishes, and new economic and social pressures emerge (Ullah et al., 2021). These structural shifts have the potential to disrupt, reinforce, or transform the traditional gendered division of labour and decision-making authority. Moreover, the experience of social isolation produced by separation from extended kin networks and limited community ties in the host society emerges as a powerful force shaping how couples negotiate their roles and responsibilities (Leonard, 2003; Vora, 2008). The study is guided by a theoretical framework that draws on social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), which posits that gender roles are not fixed but change according to the environment and situations surrounding people. When social and economic conditions change such as through migration to a new country people naturally adjust their behaviours to adapt. The study also engages with the concept of "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988), which emphasises women's agency in negotiating within, rather than simply submitting to, patriarchal constraints. Together, these perspectives allow the study to move beyond a simple "change versus continuity" framing and to examine the conditions under which gender arrangements are reproduced, modified, or contested, with social isolation serving as a key mediating condition.

1.2 Problem Statement

Existing literature on Pakistani migration to the Gulf has predominantly focused on economic remittances, labour conditions, and the experiences of left-behind families (Ahmed, 2012; Looney, 1994). However, there is a significant gap in qualitative research that centres on the lived experiences of couples who migrate together and the micro-level negotiations that occur within the household, particularly regarding how social isolation mediates these negotiations. While migration to Saudi Arabia is known to produce structural changes in family life including the shift from joint to nuclear households and the loss of extended kin support there is limited empirical evidence on how these changes are experienced and negotiated by Pakistani couples in their everyday lives. Specifically, little is known about how housework responsibilities are redistributed, how decision-making authority is shared or contested, and how the experience of social isolation shapes these dynamics. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Pakistani couples residing in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the negotiation of gender roles in the context of migration and social isolation.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study makes four key contributions. First, it addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on Pakistani couples who migrate together to Saudi Arabia, a population that has received little

qualitative attention compared to left-behind families or male labour migrants and by centring the voices of both husbands and wives, it documents the ambivalent and negotiated character of gender role change rather than treating migrant women as either passive dependants or autonomous beneficiaries. Second, it contributes theoretically by examining how social isolation mediates the renegotiation of gender roles, extending the literature on transnational families by showing how the absence of extended kin networks shapes housework and decision-making authority. Third, it has practical implications for policymakers, social workers, and community organisations by documenting the challenges and opportunities associated with changing gender roles, which can inform support programmes and counselling services for newly arriving families and help employers and embassy officials understand the family dimensions of migration. Finally, it contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of WhatsApp-based interviews for researching geographically dispersed populations, offering a practical model for remote data collection that prioritises participant comfort, privacy, and cultural sensitivity.

1.4 Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore the experiences of overseas Pakistani families regarding changing gender roles in Saudi Arabia.

2. To identify the main social and economic factors that compel couples to change their traditional responsibilities, with particular attention to the role of social isolation.

3. To investigate effects of the absence of the joint family system on the daily life and cooperation between husband and wife, particularly regarding housework and decision-making.

1.5 Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do housework responsibilities change, if at all, when Pakistani families relocate to Saudi Arabia?

2. What shifts, if any, occur in intra-household decision-making patterns between husbands and wives after migration to Saudi Arabia?

3. How does the experience of social isolation—resulting from the absence of extended family support shape the negotiation of gender roles among these families?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Traditional Gender Roles in Pakistani Culture

In Pakistani society, the family structure is generally patriarchal, with power concentrated in the hands of men (Khalid & Freiz, 2004; Zakar et al., 2021). Traditional beliefs prescribe a noticeable separation of work: men are expected to be the primary earners who go outside the home to make money for the family, while women are expected to manage housework, cook food, and take care of children (Hussain, 2016). Girls are trained from childhood to adjust to these household responsibilities, and individuals who do not follow this traditional way of thinking experience social pressure from the wider society (Khalid & Freiz, 2004; Agha, 2021). The gendered patterns of migration to Saudi Arabia observed in existing research essentially reified the patriarchal gender roles characteristic of both ends of this transnational conduit,

particularly by reinforcing roles in which men provide and women are consigned to the domestic sphere (Anwar et al., 2024; Shaheen et al., 2024).

2.2 Impact of Migration on Family Dynamics

When families move to another country, their traditional way of life experiences significant changes (Ahmed, 2012). Research highlights that moving to a new country changes the balance of authority between couples (Rahman & Hasan, 2022). In other countries, life is often very expensive, so sometimes women also have to take on jobs to support their family and husbands financially (Ullah et al., 2021; Iqbal, 2023). When women make money, they gain more power in decision-making for the family (Hussain, 2016; Shaheen et al., 2024). Because there is no large family support system in the destination country, husbands are also required to help their wives with household responsibilities, tasks they may never have performed in Pakistan (Rahman, 2021; Gerry, 2021). Studies of South Asian migrant women in the Gulf have documented expressions of increased autonomy, with middle-class women reporting a twofold sense of freedom: increased safety in moving around the city and a sense of increased agency in the context of their familial lives (Leonard, 2003; Vora, 2008).

2.3 Socio-Cultural Environment in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has a very different social and cultural environment for people living there as expatriates (Looney, 1994). Saudi society has historically maintained strict rules about gender separation and women's freedom (Rahman, 2012). While many new changes are coming to Saudi Arabia and women are receiving more independence, for overseas families the environment remains very different from Pakistan (Rahman & Hasan, 2022; Rutledge & Madi, 2025). There is very limited socialising and fewer external community networks. Pakistani families living abroad often feel alone because they do not have their larger family connections (Ullah et al., 2021; Gerry, 2021). This shortage of social support systems means that parents and children rely completely on each other, which changes their daily lives, routines, and responsibilities (Hosoda & Matsukawa, 2019).

2.4 The Kafala System and Migrant Family Life

The kafala sponsorship system remains a central structuring institution for migrant families in Saudi Arabia. Under this system, the sponsor (usually the employer) is responsible for both the worker's employment and residence, and workers face significant barriers to changing employers or leaving the country (Anwar et al., 2024). Research on Pakistani blue-collar workers in the GCC has shown that the kafala system challenges and reshapes migrant men's masculinity, subordinating it in relation to their kafeel (Anwar et al., 2024; Khan, 2024). For families living together in Saudi Arabia, this legal precarity interacts with gender dynamics in complex ways: men may respond to the vulnerabilities of migrant status by asserting patriarchal authority more strongly at home, or they may become more reliant on their wives' emotional and practical support (Khan, 2024; Gardner & Osella, 2003).

2.5 Social Isolation and Migrant Family Life

Social isolation emerges as a critical yet underexplored dimension of migrant family life in the Gulf. Research on South Asian migrant families has documented how the absence of extended kin networks in the destination country produces a condition of "enforced nuclearity" (Gerry, 2021; Vora, 2008). This isolation has contradictory effects. On one hand, it can intensify women's vulnerability, particularly when they lack independent social networks, employment, or legal status (Ullah et al., 2021; Shaheen et al., 2024). On the other hand, it can create space for renegotiating gender roles, as the reduced surveillance of in-laws and extended family

allows couples to develop their own domestic arrangements (Leonard, 2003; Hosoda & Matsukawa, 2019). The present study takes up this insight, examining how social isolation operates as both a constraint and an enabler in the negotiation of housework and decision-making among Pakistani couples in Saudi Arabia.

2.6 Theoretical Framework: Social Role Theory and Bargaining with Patriarchy

This study applies the social role theory of gender, as articulated by Eagly and Wood (2012). This theory explains that gender roles are not fixed but change according to the environment and situations surrounding people. At the core of this account are societal stereotypes about gender, gender role beliefs that form as people observe male and female behaviour and infer the underlying traits and competencies associated with each sex (Eagly & Wood, 2012). When social and economic conditions change, such as through migration to a new country, people naturally adapt new behaviours to survive. The theory also accommodates the finding that women's domestic role within the home includes both "mothering" activities (child-rearing work) and "wifery" activities, roles that may be partially redistributed when structural conditions change (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Complementing social role theory is Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "bargaining with patriarchy," which emphasises that women are not passive victims of patriarchal structures but active agents who negotiate within them. In the context of migration, this bargaining takes on new dimensions: women may leverage their financial contributions, their role as primary managers of the household, or their emotional centrality in the isolated nuclear family to negotiate greater authority (Kandiyoti, 1988; Agha, 2021; Wu, 2023). Together, these theoretical perspectives allow the study to examine how gender roles are negotiated rather than simply reproduced or transformed—under conditions of migration and social isolation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, experiential research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of Pakistani couples in Saudi Arabia. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to research questions that seek to understand meaning, process, and context, especially in under-researched areas such as intra-household gender dynamics among diaspora families (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021). A number-based method would not capture the real-life experiences of changing gender responsibilities, so an experiential approach was used to clearly investigate how Pakistani couples feel about and adjust to their new lifestyle in Saudi Arabia.

3.2 Target Population and Selection Criteria

The target population for this research was Pakistani families living in Saudi Arabia. The selection criteria required couples to be married and living together in Saudi Arabia for a minimum of three years. These criteria were essential because families who have lived in the Kingdom for several years are better positioned to reflect on actual changes in their gender responsibilities rather than on initial adjustment difficulties. Both working and non-working women were included to capture different perspectives.

3.3 Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 12 married couples (24 individual participants). Participants were Pakistani citizens residing in various cities across Saudi Arabia, including Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Al-Khobar, Jubail, and Yanbu. Recruitment was

facilitated by a local research assistant based in Saudi Arabia, who used community networks to identify and approach potential participants. The research assistant's presence in the field was essential for building trust with participants, particularly with women who might otherwise have been hesitant to discuss personal family matters with a researcher located abroad. The research assistant also helped to clarify questions, maintain ongoing contact with participants, and ensure that participants felt comfortable throughout the process. The sample size was guided by the principle of information power and the emergence of thematic saturation, consistent with established qualitative research practice (Malterud et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.4 Data Collection Method: WhatsApp Online Text and Voice Chats

Data were collected completely online through the WhatsApp application due to the long distance between the researcher and participants. Because participants were living in different cities of Saudi Arabia, face-to-face meetings were not possible. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted using WhatsApp chat and voice notes. An open-ended interview guide was used: questions were sent to participants on WhatsApp, and they replied according to their free time using text messages and voice notes. This method provided comfort and privacy to participants, especially women, who could easily share their personal family experiences without hesitation. All text chats and voice recordings were saved securely for analysis. The local research assistant in Saudi Arabia played a supporting role in maintaining ongoing contact with participants, clarifying questions where needed, and ensuring that participants felt comfortable throughout the process. This approach is consistent with a growing body of methodological literature advocating for digitally mediated qualitative research, particularly for studying geographically dispersed and hard-to-reach populations (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure: Thematic Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. First, all text messages and voice notes collected from WhatsApp were carefully compiled. The voice notes were transcribed into written text, and everything was translated into English. After reading the text multiple times, initial codes were generated from the data. Similar codes were then grouped together to form main themes and sub-themes that directly answered the research questions. No software such as SPSS was used because this is a qualitative study; the analysis remained inductive and interpretive throughout. Strategies for trustworthiness included prolonged engagement with the data, peer debriefing with the research assistant, and the maintenance of an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were carefully attended to throughout the research process. Online agreement was collected from every participant via WhatsApp, and they were clearly informed that their involvement was optional and that they could stop at any time. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and pseudonyms (Participant 1A, Participant 2B, etc.) are used throughout this article to protect their identities. Given the sensitivity of gender and family dynamics, care was taken to conduct interviews in private settings and to avoid any implication of judgement about participants' arrangements. The research assistant was briefed on ethical protocols and played a role in ensuring that participants understood their rights.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This section presents the findings of the study based on thematic analysis of data collected from 12 married Pakistani couples (24 participants) residing in Saudi Arabia. The analysis identified three overarching themes and six sub-themes that capture the changing gender roles among overseas Pakistani families. Each theme is presented with supporting sub-themes and illustrative participant quotes. The findings are discussed in relation to the study's research objectives and the existing literature.

4.2 Demographic Profile of Participants

All 24 participants (12 couples) were Pakistani citizens residing in various cities across Saudi Arabia, including Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Al-Khobar, Jubail, and Yanbu. The average length of residence in Saudi Arabia was 6.2 years, ranging from 3 to 10 years. Participants had between 1 and 4 children. Of the 12 wives, 8 were housewives (three of whom engaged in online work or home-based business), and 4 were formally employed in teaching, healthcare, and the IT sector. The husbands' ages ranged from 32 to 45 years, while the wives' ages ranged from 28 to 40 years.

4.3 Summary of Themes and Sub-themes

Table 1: Summary of Main Themes and Sub-themes

Major Themes	**Sub-themes**
Theme 1: Economic Pressure and Working Women's Roles	1.1 Women's Financial Contribution 1.2 Shared Decision-Making in Expenses
Theme 2: Sharing Household Chores and Childcare	2.1 Husbands Helping in Kitchen and Errands 2.2 Active Paternal Involvement in Childcare
Theme 3: Social Isolation and Mutual Dependency	3.1 Minimal Interference from In-laws 3.2 Increased Spousal Communication and Closeness

4.4 Theme 1: Economic Pressure and Working Women's Roles

The data clearly indicate that the high cost of living in Saudi Arabia is an important factor that changes traditional responsibilities. Generally, women in Pakistan stay at home, but in Saudi Arabia families face financial stress that often necessitates women's paid work. This theme addresses the second research objective: to identify the main social and economic factors that compel couples to change their traditional responsibilities.

4.4.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Women's Financial Contribution

Several participants reported that wives had to start working online or find employment to help the family. One wife explained:

"In Pakistan, I never thought about making money because my husband managed everything. But in Riyadh, living costs are so expensive that I started teaching online to help pay our children's school fees" (Participant 2B, wife, Jeddah).

Another participant described the economic necessity that drove her to seek work:

"We could not survive on one salary. My husband's income was enough for rent and food, but not for school fees and clothes for three children. I had to do something. Now I teach Quran online to children in Pakistan, and that money is mine to spend on the household" (Participant 5B, wife, Jeddah).

A third participant, a housewife who started a home-based business, described the pride she took in her financial contribution:

"I never imagined I would earn money. In Pakistan, my husband gave me money for the house, and that was it. Here, I started making and selling clothes from home. Now my husband asks me for advice when we have a big expense. It feels different" (Participant 7B, wife, Riyadh).

A husband acknowledged his wife's financial contribution with a mixture of gratitude and discomfort:

"She earns more than me now with her online work. I am happy because we need the money, but sometimes I feel ashamed. In our culture, the man should provide. But what can I do? Living here is very expensive" (Participant 7A, husband, Riyadh).

This finding aligns with research on South Asian migrant women in the Gulf, which has documented increased female labour force participation as a response to the higher costs of living in destination societies (Iqbal, 2023; Rutledge & Madi, 2025; Shaheen et al., 2024).

4.4.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Shared Decision-Making in Expenses

The financial changes have provided women with more control in decision-making for the family. A husband acknowledged this shift:

"Before, I used to choose all expenses by myself. But now my wife also makes money and budgets with me. We decide together how much to save and how much to spend" (Participant 1A, husband, Riyadh).

Another wife described her expanded role in financial management:

"Now I know exactly how much comes in and how much goes out. Before, I did not even know my husband's salary. Here, we sit together every month and plan. It is better for the family" (Participant 3B, wife, Dammam).

A husband expressed some ambivalence about this change, revealing the persistence of traditional ideals even as behaviour shifted:

"She manages the money now. I give her my salary, and she decides what to do. It is easier for me because I am tired from work. But sometimes I feel I should be the one making these decisions. It is my duty as a man" (Participant 9A, husband, Jubail).

Another wife described how shared decision-making had improved communication:

"In Pakistan, he would give me money and I would manage the house. We never discussed finances. Here, we sit together and decide. I feel more respected now" (Participant 10B, wife, Jeddah).

This finding is consistent with literature suggesting that women's access to and control over household finances can increase their bargaining power within the family (Kandiyoti, 1988; Agha, 2021; Shaheen et al., 2024), while also highlighting the persistence of patriarchal ideals that continue to shape how both men and women interpret these changes.

4.5 Theme 2: Sharing Household Chores and Childcare

Another major theme concerns the sharing of work inside the home. In Pakistan, larger family members such as mothers, sisters, and other relatives often help with childcare and household tasks. In Saudi Arabia, couples typically live alone, creating new demands for shared domestic labour. This theme addresses the first research objective: to explore the experiences of overseas Pakistani families regarding changing gender roles in Saudi Arabia.

4.5.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Husbands Helping in Kitchen and Errands

Because of the absence of family support, husbands are required to help their wives with household tasks in Saudi Arabia. One husband described this change:

"I never went into the kitchen in Pakistan because my mother and sister were there. But in Saudi Arabia, when my wife is tired or feeling unwell, I make food and wash dishes myself. It is essential when living alone" (Participant 7A, husband, Riyadh).

A wife confirmed this shift:

"He had never cooked anything in his life before we came here. The first time he made tea, he did not even know where the sugar was. Now he can make a full meal if I am sick. This would never happen in Pakistan" (Participant 6B, wife, Al-Khobar).

Another wife described the negotiation that accompanied this change:

"At first, he would not help. He said it was not his work. But I was working too, and there was no one else. Slowly, he started helping. Now he washes the dishes every night. He still says it is my job, but he does it anyway" (Participant 4B, wife, Riyadh).

A husband reflected on how his involvement in household chores had changed his perspective:

"In Pakistan, I never knew how much work my wife did. Here, when I wash dishes or sweep the floor, I understand. It is hard work. Now I respect her more" (Participant 1A, husband, Riyadh).

Another husband described helping with errands and shopping:

"In Pakistan, I would give her money and she would go to the market. Here, I do the shopping because it is easier for me to go out. I know the prices now. I know what the children like. It is different" (Participant 9A, husband, Jubail).

This finding resonates with literature suggesting that migration can produce behavioural changes in men's domestic involvement, even when the ideological framing of such involvement remains conservative (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Khan, 2024; Gerry, 2021).

4.5.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Active Paternal Involvement in Childcare

Husbands now regularly help with childcare and homework when wives are busy with jobs or housework. A wife explained:

"We don't have grandparents here to look after our kids. My husband takes care of them while I am in the kitchen or washing. He also plays with them and helps them with their homework every evening" (Participant 3B, wife, Dammam).

Another participant described how her husband's involvement with the children had deepened his relationship with them:

"In Pakistan, he was always at work or with his friends. He did not know what time the children slept or what they ate. Here, he bathes them, he reads to them, he knows their teachers' names. It is a different kind of fatherhood" (Participant 8B, wife, Dammam).

A husband reflected on his changed role:

"I never thought I would be the one taking the children to the doctor or helping with homework. In Pakistan, my wife did everything. Here, if I do not help, she cannot manage alone. I have learned to be a father in a different way" (Participant 11A, husband, Riyadh).

Another wife described the emotional benefits of her husband's increased involvement:

"The children are closer to him now. Before, they only went to him when they needed money. Now they sit with him, they tell him about their school. He listens. It is good for them" (Participant 2B, wife, Jeddah).

This pattern reflects broader findings that migration can increase men's direct involvement in childcare, particularly when nuclear household arrangements remove the buffer of extended family support (Shaheen et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2021; Hosoda & Matsukawa, 2019).

4.6 Theme 3: Social Isolation and Mutual Dependency

Living in a foreign country with a very limited social circle increases dependence between husband and wife. This theme captures both the challenges and the unexpected intimacies produced by social isolation. As the data reveal, social isolation is not simply a deficit, it is a condition that actively shapes how couples negotiate their roles and responsibilities. This theme addresses the third research objective: to investigate the effects of the absence of the joint family system on daily life and cooperation between husband and wife.

4.6.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Minimal Interference from In-laws

In Saudi Arabia, couples typically live independently as small nuclear families. Pressure from in-laws and extended family is significantly less than in Pakistan. One wife reflected:

"In Pakistan, joint family interference caused many small problems between couples. Here, we live by ourselves, so we discuss our matters personally without anyone making a misunderstanding between us" (Participant 4B, wife, Riyadh).

A husband similarly noted:

"My mother used to tell my wife how to cook, how to clean, how to raise the children. Here, no one is watching. My wife does things her way, and I have learned to accept that" (Participant 10A, husband, Jeddah).

Another wife described the freedom from surveillance that social isolation produced:

"In Pakistan, everyone knew everything. My mother-in-law would comment on how I cleaned, how I cooked, how I dressed the children. Here, no one sees. I can run my house the way I want. It is a kind of freedom I did not have before" (Participant 12B, wife, Yanbu).

A husband acknowledged the reduced pressure from extended family:

"In Pakistan, my relatives would always interfere. They would say, 'Why is your wife not cooking this?' or 'Why is she working?' Here, no one says anything. We are alone. It is peaceful" (Participant 5A, husband, Jeddah).

This finding aligns with research on South Asian women in the Gulf, which has documented that the absence of the joint family can reduce the surveillance of women's behaviour and create space for greater personal autonomy (Leonard, 2003; Vora, 2008; Gerry, 2021). It also resonates with the literature on "bargaining with patriarchy," as women leverage the absence of kin surveillance to expand their domestic authority (Kandiyoti, 1988; Agha, 2021).

4.6.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Increased Spousal Communication and Closeness

The limited social circle and reduced family gatherings in Saudi Arabia have paradoxically strengthened communication between spouses. One husband described this:

"We don't have relatives in Saudi Arabia. So, my wife is my only best friend. We talk more, which has helped bring us closer than in the past" (Participant 8A, husband, Dammam).

A wife expressed a similar sentiment:

"In Pakistan, I had my sisters and my mother to talk to. Here, I have only him. At first, I felt very lonely. But now, we talk about everything his work, my day, the children. We have become a team" (Participant 11B, wife, Riyadh).

Another wife described the emotional intimacy that emerged from shared isolation:

"There are days when I feel very alone. I miss my mother and my sisters. But my husband is here, and he understands. We sit together at night after the children sleep, and we talk. In Pakistan, we never had time for this" (Participant 5B, wife, Jeddah).

A husband acknowledged the vulnerability that accompanied this closeness:

"Sometimes I feel that we only have each other. If we fight, there is no one to mediate. But it also means we cannot run away from each other. We must solve our problems together" (Participant 6A, husband, Al-Khobar).

Another wife described how the isolation had strengthened her marriage:

"In Pakistan, we had too many people around us his family, my family, everyone giving advice. Here, it is just us. We have learned to depend on each other. I think our marriage is stronger because of it" (Participant 1B, wife, Riyadh).

This finding resonates with the literature on transnational families, which suggests that the nuclearization of the household in the destination country can intensify the conjugal relationship, even as it isolates the couple from wider kin networks (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Carling et al., 2012; Hosoda & Matsukawa, 2019).

4.7 Discussion of Main Findings

The findings of this study reveal a complex and nuanced picture of gender role negotiation among Pakistani families in Saudi Arabia. Three key insights emerge from the data. First,

the study confirms that migration is a gendered process that does not automatically lead to greater gender equality. While the structural changes associated with migration such as nuclearization and the wife's increased responsibility for household management can create openings for greater female autonomy, these openings are often circumscribed by enduring patriarchal norms. The persistence of a gendered division of housework, even among employed women, underscores the resilience of traditional gender ideologies (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Khan, 2024). The provider ideology remains strong, and men's involvement in housework is often framed as "helping" rather than as a renegotiation of responsibility a discursive strategy that preserves the gendered hierarchy while permitting behavioural change (Kandiyoti, 1988; Agha, 2021). Second, the study highlights the importance of distinguishing between practical and symbolic power. Women in this sample often gained practical authority over daily household decisions, but ultimate decision-making power on major issues remained with their husbands. This finding aligns with the concept of "bargaining with patriarchy," which suggests that women may gain informal power within the household without challenging the overarching patriarchal structure (Kandiyoti, 1988; Wu, 2023). For Pakistani migrant women in Saudi Arabia, this bargain is shaped by their dependence on their husband's sponsorship and their relative isolation from natal kin networks (Anwar et al., 2024). Third, the study reveals the dialectical nature of social isolation. Social isolation is not simply a deficit or a source of vulnerability; it is a condition that actively shapes how couples negotiate their roles and responsibilities. On one hand, the absence of extended kin reduces surveillance and interference, creating space for women to exercise greater domestic authority and for men to become more involved in childcare and housework. On the other hand, isolation intensifies the emotional centrality of the conjugal relationship, producing both closeness and dependency. This finding extends the existing literature on transnational families (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Carling et al., 2012) by demonstrating how isolation operates as both a constraint and an enabler in the renegotiation of gender roles. The results of this research show the relevance of social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), which explains that gender responsibility changes when surroundings change. In Saudi Arabia, migration is a major change that disrupts traditional ways of organising family life. The high cost of living, the absence of the joint family, and the demands of a new social environment together create conditions in which couples must adapt. Previous studies have also documented strict gender separation in the Middle East (Rahman, 2012; Anwar et al., 2024), and the present research shows that Pakistani families living abroad are actively adjusting to this environment.

5. Conclusion

This research was completed to study how gender responsibilities are changing between Pakistani couples living in Saudi Arabia. After analysing the detailed information collected through WhatsApp text and voice chats, moving to Saudi Arabia creates significant changes in the family setup. The traditional Pakistani rule where only the husband earned money and the wife did housework is changing because of high costs, the absence of joint family support systems, and life in a foreign environment. Couples are now sharing work: wives are helping with finances, and husbands are also helping with household tasks. Overall, this study finds that moving to Saudi Arabia has made daily life responsibilities more supportive and adjustable for couples, even as traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity persist in modified forms. The study's specific contribution lies in its examination of how “social isolation” mediates the negotiation of gender roles. The findings show that isolation is not simply a deficit or a source of vulnerability; it is a condition that actively shapes how couples divide housework, make decisions, and relate to one another. The absence of extended kin reduces surveillance and interference, creating space for women to exercise greater domestic authority and for men to

become more involved in childcare and housework. At the same time, isolation intensifies the emotional centrality of the conjugal relationship, producing both closeness and dependency. These findings have implications for understanding migrant family life beyond the Pakistani case, suggesting that social isolation should be treated as a key analytical category in research on gender and migration.

6. Limitations of the Research

Several challenges were faced in this research and should be acknowledged. First, data were collected only through WhatsApp chats and voice notes due to long distance, so face-to-face communication was not possible. Second, the number of participants was relatively small, with only 12 couples, and most of them were living in large cities such as Riyadh and Dammam. The research cannot claim to represent all Pakistani families living in Saudi Arabia. Third, the reliance on self-report means that actual divisions of labour and decision-making may differ from participants' accounts. Fourth, the study captured a snapshot at a single point in time; longitudinal research would be better placed to trace the trajectory of gender role change over the migration career. Finally, while the local research assistant facilitated access and trust, the researcher's physical absence from the field may have limited the depth of contextual observation.

7. Recommendations

Community groups and the Pakistani embassy in Saudi Arabia should arrange support programmes and counselling sessions for newly arriving families to help them adjust to new family responsibilities and to mitigate the negative effects of social isolation. Online platforms and channels should be created where Pakistani working women can share their experiences and help each other manage housework and employment in Saudi Arabia. Such initiatives could reduce the social isolation that many migrant wives experience and provide practical guidance on navigating the “kafala” system, childcare, and household management. Employers of Pakistani migrant workers should also be encouraged to recognize the family dimensions of migration and to support family-friendly policies.

8. Future Avenues for Research

Researchers in the future should conduct studies with larger numbers of participants, including families from smaller towns in Saudi Arabia, to obtain more comprehensive information. Comparative research could be conducted between Pakistani families living in Saudi Arabia and those living in Western countries to examine how different cultural contexts affect gender responsibilities. Future research should also examine the experiences of second-generation Pakistani youth in Saudi Arabia, the role of digital communication in maintaining transnational family ties, and the impact of recent Saudi social and labour market reforms on migrant family dynamics. Finally, longitudinal studies that follow families over time would provide valuable insights into how gender roles evolve across different stages of the migration process.

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