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Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Migrant Women Working in Pakistan

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1. Introduction

This study is part of a larger multi-country research project 'Gendered Dynamics of Labour Migration' involving three other countries and main cities, in addition to Islamabad in Pakistan: Istanbul in Turkey, Beirut in Lebanon, and Erbil in Kurdistan Iraq (KRI). The project set out to elaborate a gender-sensitive understanding of the interaction between economic and socio-cultural drivers of labour migrations, as well as women migrants' living and working conditions in Islamabad and Pakistan more broadly. The investigation was guided by pre-defined themes, such as:

- drivers of migration which are likely to comprise for women factors of discrimination arising from familial practices, access to resources and presence in the public sphere;
- their living and working conditions and experiences;
- their agency and coping strategies;
- spatial mobility and use of the city, in this case Islamabad.

The Pakistani research team interviewed a diverse group of women migrant workers, especially those working in the household, education, and NGOs and from neighbouring countries and other countries of the Global South (Africa and South-East Asia), Europe and North America. In addition, since the research was conducted during the unprecedented time of pandemic, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment and life of the women workers was also investigated.

It is important to note that this study, together with our larger multi-country project draws upon in the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI). SIGI is the method used by the OECD Development Centre to measure the levels of discrimination against women in social institutions worldwide. In 2019, 180 countries' laws, social norms and practices were measured and presented in the Index which is used to provide data to support policy-changes that aim at bridging the gap of gender inequalities. The Index divides discriminatory social institutions into four socio-economic areas affecting women's lives: discrimination in the family; restricted physical Integrity, restricted access to productive and financial resources; restricted civil liberties. We utilised the SIGI as part of the theoretical framework to analyse the existing literature and frame the questions for the field interviews. Whilst the SIGI was not established at first as a tool to monitor migration patterns, it has since been used by the OECD, other institutions and academia as evidence of the fact that woman labour migration results not only from economic motivations, but also because of broader discriminatory practices in the country of origin (e.g. early marriage, gender-based violence, discrimination in the workplace, lack of employment) which may have affected women and girls' decisions to emigrate from their country of origin to another (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015; Ruysen and Salomone 2018).

This report is theoretically grounded in critical migration and feminist theories. On the one hand, the political and economic factors of structural violence, and their role in women's migration, are acknowledged, while micro-processes are highlighted, on the other hand, thus enabling us to see the nuances of experiences at the interplay between power and agency beyond stereotypical understandings of South-South women's migration. This implies holding a perspective which is close to migrants' experience and their own sense- and self-making away from victimising stereotypes (Mulinari and Sandell 1999). The standpoint of this study is indeed distant from framing migrant women as only victims of the process of migration. Women's subject positions are located within intersecting structural conditions of oppression (Smith 2000; Crenshaw 2017). These are often rooted in unequal power relations and discriminating social and gender norms (such as the labour market, national regulations on visas, work/residence permits, wars, conflicts, and religious discrimination, gendered drivers of migration that effect their decisions to leave their countries of origin, and so on). The resources and strategies which helped the migrant women involved in this study, cope with both the conditions in their home countries, as well as the working and living conditions in the host country, are given voice. The emphasis on migrants' coping practices sits with the call for the necessity of dismantling the post-colonial, western-centric and patriarchal ideology whereby Global South migrants are constructed as disempowered and vulnerable which crystallise views of women migrants in the Global South as traumatised or resourceless subjects with little agency in need of assistance (Deshingkar and Zeitlyn 2015; Khan 2021; Aloudat and Khan 2022). These reified victimising views hold particularly true in relation to women migrants, within under-explored South-South mobility circuits.

As in the case of the other countries involved in the broader research project, the Pakistan country case expands our current knowledge of South-South migration and reveals the complexity and context of gendered migration dynamics and patterns (Khan 2021). South-South migration had for some time received little attention unlike South-North migration which focussed on the transfer of labour from poorer countries to affluent households in high income countries to fill the gap in social reproduction of families (Parreñas 2001; Hochschild 2014). Whilst women migrants tend to migrate to a greater extent to high income countries than men (UNDESA 2020), there has also been considerable intra-regional migration within the South, especially to upper-middle income countries, such as Argentina, South Africa and Turkey (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). In fact, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the demand for domestic and care workers also grew enormously in middle- and upper-class households in Asia, the Middle East and Central and Latin America. For wealthier urban households, employing a migrant worker not only helped to provide household service (cooking, cleaning, care), but was also seen as a symbol of social status. As with the studies of gendered migration to the North, attention has focussed on domestic and care work in particular (Izaguirre and Walsham 2021). Yet as (Deshingkar and Zeitlyn 2015, 170) note, the literature on this issue is mainly focused on 'power relations between workers and employers, the absence of protective legislation, neglect by states, and exploitation by recruitment agents and employers'. This study aims to make a step forward the importance of investigating and acknowledging migrants' agency, starting from their

desire and determination to flee gender-based discrimination in their country / contexts of origins (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015).

The focus on this study has been on gendered *labour* migration, spanning from higher- to lower-skilled workers refers to the different levels of education and occupations they undertake. Undoubtedly, education and training opportunities closely relate to socio-economic stratifications and classes, both at the global level, as well as in the countries of origin and of destination of the migrant worker. The literature on gendered skilled migration from South to North is much less abundant than that on less skilled sectors, with most studies limited to Western Europe, North America and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Kofman 2022; Kofman and Raghuram 2015). In the South, such studies are few but intraregional mobility of women academics and high-skilled professionals appears on the rise in some South regional growing economies, as in Argentina (Pedone and Alfaro 2018), Malaysia (Lee and Piper 2003), and South Africa (Izaguirre and Walsham 2021). Key sectors, such as health, in South-North movements are less likely to receive migrants in southern countries with a few exceptions such as South Africa (Deshingkar and Zeitlyn 2015; Wojczewski et al. 2015) and in GCC countries. Studies of gendered skilled migration have extended beyond the workplace to encompass the experiences of family life and other social dimensions. In addition, studies have highlighted the presence of skilled workers in the labour market, who have entered through other routes such as education, marriage, family reunification and refugees, and the articulation between them (Kofman 2012). These configurations also exist in South-South and North-South migrations as our research, which includes those entering through marriage and as refugees, demonstrates. Overall as Khan (2021) suggests, we should move beyond a simplistic view of migration in narrowly economic terms, and, we would add, recognise the complexity of gendered migrations within and to the South (Kofman 2022).

The report is structured in four sections in addition to this first introductory one. Section 2 reviews the scant literature on migrant women and the conditions and rights of women in the country. In the following Section 3 on Methodology, we describe study design, data collection and analysis, as well as recruitment, participants and research team, ethics, and the limitations of the study. Section 4 presents the results of the in-depth interviews. Results are presented of a highly diversified set of interviewees in terms of four sub-groups with different educational levels, occupations and nationalities. The first is constituted by the eight Filipino migrants who all started their migration journey as migrant domestic workers, with the exception of one professional who followed her Pakistani husband. Some also achieved social mobility. The second group is that of women who migrated from East and North of Africa. Three are highly educated Muslim women, working in the higher education sector, another is a professional working in the humanitarian sector, and the fifth a Tanzanian MDW. A third is that of migrant women, active in higher education and cultural conservation, originating from Global North countries, such as Germany, Canada, and the USA as well as Hong Kong. The last sub-group is that of five migrant women from Central/West Asia, where four are from Afghanistan, and one from Tajikistan. These are mostly refugees, who escaped the conflict, and gender and religious discrimination. We also

interviewed three NGOs officers, who mainly work with the Afghan community. The concluding Section 5 discusses the results, identifies the strengths and limits of the study, and formulates recommendations for policies, practices, and further research avenues.

2. Women and Migrant women in Pakistan

2.1. *Woman rights and conditions in Pakistan*

With a SIGI value of 59%, Pakistan has been ranked in the category of the countries with ‘very high’ discrimination against women (OECD 2019). In particular, discrimination in the family and restricted access to productive and financial resources are high. The sharp education gender gap sits behind sharp gender disparities in employment. According to government statistics, an estimated 22.8 million children aged between 5 and 16 years are out of school, and the primary-to-secondary retention rate of girls is 52 per cent (UN CEDAW 2020). Even though the Constitution prohibits discrimination based on sex in employment (Art. 27) and makes the State responsible to provide maternity benefits, for example; and even though Pakistan ratified the ILO Conventions on equal remuneration and non-discrimination in employment and occupation, nonetheless there is no legislation outlining how the principle of gender equality in employment is to be implemented, in terms of recruitment, promotion, training, wages, etc. (OECD 2019). Additionally, this scenario is even more invalidated by the persistent high degree of informality in Pakistan’s labour market, as indicated by the statistics of Pakistan Bureau of Statistics¹.

Research on women doing paid work in Pakistan revealed that women work out of economic need, face hostile work environments, limited employment options, unequal wages, bad working conditions and a double burden of labour due to unremitting domestic responsibilities at home (Shaheen et al. 2015). Out of the total labour force, men form 74% and women only constitute 24% (Government of Pakistan 2020). Women workers, compared to male workers, are considerably more likely to work in informal sectors, meaning in ‘bad working environment and poor conditions, low wages and inequality, absence of social security and poverty’ (Khan and Hussain 2021, 321). Overall, women are underrepresented in non-traditional, technical, high-skilled, and managerial roles. Even among university graduates only 25% work outside the home (Khan 2020). This estimate is of note also in relation to the deep-rooted intersection of gender and class in paid employment in Pakistan: for women, university education might be an investment in the marriage rather than the labour market.

¹ <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/> [Accessed on 26.1.24]

Legal barriers and cultural norms that discriminate between activities of men and women, as well as along social classes and castes, pose restrictions on women mobility as a sign of respect and are responsible for the social undesirability of woman employment in formal work outside home (Ahmed 2020). This socio-cultural norm is referred to as *pardah* (Urdu for ‘curtain’ or ‘veil’), and ‘denotes the spatial segregation of women’s and men’s spheres of circulation in the name of family honour’ (Grünenfelder and Siegmann 2016, 2); *pardah* has been a significant value affecting women’s labouring practices and is one of the reason as to why the greatest number of women tend to work in informal sectors, which are very present in the country, and most usually work on personal agricultural farms and livestock (Khan 2007; Grünenfelder and Siegmann 2016). Already ten years ago, the United Nations raised concerns about the low participation of women in the formal sector, the widening gender pay gap, the concentration of women in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, and the lack of legal protection for women working in the informal sector (agriculture, domestic and homebased work) to whom the federal and provincial labour laws and regulations do not apply (UN CEDAW 2013). Similar concerns have been raised in the most recent CEDAW report in relation to lack of labour law and social security programmes, such as wage protection and maternity leave, for working women who are highly concentrated in the informal economy (UN CEDAW 2020). Another worry expressed by the committee is the lack of reliable data on the number of women who are employed, including home-based women workers, women domestic workers, unpaid women care workers, women with disabilities and refugee women (UN CEDAW 2020).

Regarding the economy, recent estimates suggested that the economy was growing with the promise of rising up from the lower end of the medium development category, despite considerable multidimensional poverty and its sharp unbalance between urban vs rural areas (IOM 2019). However, more recently Pakistan has slipped down the ranking of the Human Development Index and the economy is stagnating (Ali 2023). These worsening conditions are expected to have an impact on the migration flows in and out of the country, as well as for migrants living and working in the country.

2.2. *Migration, labour, and gender*

In relation to regular labour migration, Pakistan is predominantly a sending country, mostly of lower skilled men, and a relatively low percentage of skilled and less skilled women, to the GCC, India, the UK, Europe and Canada (IOM 2019; Khan 2021). With a long-term policy of discouraging female labour migration due to cultural norms, women have been ‘left behind’, (Siegmann 2010). Regular labour immigration, with a few studies of migrant domestic workers to Pakistan, has not been investigated much in academic research and socio-economic and migration policies. It is worth adding that not only are disaggregated data in relation to the migrant populations missing, but also insights on the different migrant communities and their support needs.

In contrast, Pakistan is mainly framed either as a receiving country of international refugees or lower-skilled migrants and as a country with high levels of internal displacement – also due to its environmental insecurity (IOM 2019), as the floods of 2022 have recently re-confirmed (UNHCR 2022b). In addition to Afghan migrants, one of the largest groups of undocumented migrants and refugees, the other most significant migrant groups in Pakistan is that of nationals of India (IOM 2019). This group is followed by nationals of Bangladesh and Burma, as well as smaller communities of migrants originating in Middle Eastern countries (Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Oman and Yemen), in Central Asian states (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan-through Afghanistan), and in Armenia, China, Philippines, Somalia and Nepal (Cibea et al. 2013).

Within the framework of regional conflict-related displacement, Pakistan has received a mass influx of people, Afghan refugees being among the dominant and most recent ones. The fluxes of Afghan refugees reached a peak during the 1980's, as a result of the Soviet Union's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, and reduced after the 1990's (UNHCR 2023). Before the implementation of the so called 'Voluntary' Repatriation Programme – jointly implemented by the Pakistani Government and UNHCR starting from 2002, there were over 4 million registered Afghan refugees (UNHCR 2023). As of February 2023, there were approximately 1.3 million Afghans with a valid Proof of Registration (PoR) cards issued by Government of Pakistan Registration Authority (NADRA) (UNHCR 2023). Forty-seven per cent of them are underage girls and women (UNHCR 2023). These figures are potentially higher, considering that there are unregistered refugees as well as Afghan migrants who have illegally returned to Pakistan, with an invalid PoR. In fact, the Afghan community in Pakistan remains among the largest one among undocumented migrants living in the country: recent estimates calculated that there were 500,000 (IOM 2019). Other undocumented migrant groups comprise Bangladeshi nationals, for example, but figured in relation to their presence in their country are unknown (IOM 2019). Bengali and Burmese nationals are also present as undocumented migrants, but official statistics and studies are lacking, with only some media coverage documenting the hard conditions of these minority (Zahra-Malik 2017; Maryam 2021). Appendix 1 summarises the legal framework for labour migrants in Pakistan.

2.3. Migrant Filipino Domestic workers

The Pakistan case is clearly quite different to the majority of studies in countries where domestic and care work is predominantly done by migrant women, like Lebanon (Bechtold et al. 2022), or a mix of migrant and national workers, such as in Turkey (Ceren Eren-Benlisoy and Tuncer 2023). The domestic service sector is one of the largest informal employment sectors in Pakistan. Middle and upper-class households employ women domestic workers, primarily Pakistani domestic workers estimated at about 5 million mainly women and girls. As domestic work occurs within the privacy of a home, it has been excluded from general labour migration. This hidden form of employment performed within the four walls of other's households contributes to their exclusion, isolation, and invisibility and increasing their vulnerability and exploitation.

Local domestic workers perform menial jobs without formal contracts or legal protection and they can be fired at any time (Changezi and Biseth 2011) Without support structures their bargaining capacity is low and thus have to work according to the terms and conditions laid down by employers. However, during the past ten to fifteen years, Pakistan has become an 'employment destination' for Migrant Filipino Domestic Workers (MFDWs) (Shahid 2015). In Pakistan, during the last decade, increased urbanisation and faster economic expansion has fuelled significant job creation in the industrial and services sectors. This has led to the growth of a middle class in Pakistan, as has happened in many Global South countries. In the highly class-based society of Pakistan, the upper-class affluent Pakistanis, in particular, now prefer to recruit MFDW over local Pakistani domestic workers. Employing MFDW has thus become a status symbol and a mark of social prestige, reinforcing class-based hierarchies.

While Pakistan has not ratified ILO Convention 189 for Decent Work for Domestic Workers, it has signed an agreement with the Philippines Government for the recruitment of MFDWs, but MFDWs are not covered by labour legislation and in some cases, their immigration status is also dubious. The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) has issued registration forms to the residents of the capital city Islamabad on the orders of the Ministry of Interior to collect data about people employed across the city as domestic workers. The form includes questions related to the employee's nationality, nature of the work and other personal details (Shahid 2015). Despite this advancement, figures are still uncertain. According to the information given by the Philippines Embassy and employment agents, there were around 3,000 to 5,000 documented and undocumented MFDWs in Pakistan (Shahid 2015). The Philippines Embassy has a database for domestic workers in Pakistan. Most Filipinos are employed as *Mayordoma*, or head of the household staff, which also includes local women and men domestic workers employed as cooks, cleaners, chauffeurs, gardeners, and security guards. Their recruitment is mostly done through employment agencies and the process takes between six months up to a year. Before taking up a job, Filipinos must undergo a 15-day training programme in the Philippines and attend a pre-orientation seminar before they travel. For only 350,000 to 400,000 Rupees, a local agent can ensure that a trained, English-speaking MFDWs is legally brought to Pakistan. This amount covers the cost of the work visa, plane ticket, paperwork, and the agency's commission. Clause 15(h) of the job contract states that the employer will pay 500 Rupees per hour as overtime and a monthly food allowance. In most cases, the monthly allowance is paid to purchase groceries for their own meals. MFDW are also entitled to a month off with pay and after every two years, they can visit their families in the Philippines and the employer pays for their airfare (Shahid 2015). The higher salaries, together with these better conditions, lead to a higher job satisfaction which perpetuates MFDWs preferences for working for the elite class.

Unlike local domestic workers, MFDWs have written employment contracts with their employers that put them in a stronger position compared to local domestic workers who work without any written contractual agreement with their employers. Although the job contracts included a salary of US\$400, most of them receive only \$350 (Shahid 2015). These workers compromise on the salaries because they do not want to lose the opportunity of getting a job after paying fees to the

agencies. They also know that if they refuse, they will have to go back to Philippines where jobs are unavailable.

Finally, in a more tangible and institutionalised way than the Afghan or the professional communities for the other sub-groups, the Filipino MDWs stand out for their collective activism. Filipino workers have formed networks, such as the Progressive Filipino Society Pakistan, which is a network of various categories of Filipino employees working in both formal and informal jobs in Pakistan. This organisation arranges various activities for Filipinos and helps them if they have problems with their employers. In Karachi, at an informal level, MFDWs have formed their own network. Under this network they organise events on Christmas and Easter, raise small funds to support Filipino workers who lose their jobs, and coordinate with the Philippines Embassy in relation to other Filipino workers' employment and visa issues (Shahid 2015). This is an example of women's collective agency and how women can influence their environments through their participation and action to support their co-workers. Yet a major problem is the fact that the majority are unregistered with the Embassy. However, there is a stark absence of unions and other supportive alliances and networks that can fight for the rights of domestic workers in Pakistan. The right to form trade unions is recognised and guaranteed, not only in the main human rights instruments, but also in ILO Conventions No. 87 and No. 98. Given the regulation to constitute unions in the country (see Appendix 1), only 2.4% of the labour force is unionised and has access to collective bargaining for their wages and working conditions.

Domestic workers, both local and MFDWs, did not have any organisational representation in the form of unions and associations in Pakistan (Shahid 2015). It was only in 2015 that a Domestic Workers' Trade Union was established under the ILO project, Promoting Gender Equality for Decent Employment (GE4DE)², and more ILO-led projects and interventions have been developed recently, for example a Gap Analysis Study in relation to the Domestic Workers Convention (2011, n.189)³; the Punjab Domestic Workers Act of 2019 and the Islamabad Capital Territory Domestic Workers Act of 2022 (ILO Country Office for Pakistan 2023); and the intervention to extend social security coverage and benefits to domestic workers in Punjab (Pakistan), to be extended to Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), in turn contributing to increased formalization of domestic work⁴. However, some organising of domestic workers existed before, and it was largely NGO-initiated. Among the most notable examples, *HomeNet Pakistan* is a network of organizations formed to raise awareness about the working conditions of home-based women workers who

² https://www.ilo.org/islamabad/info/public/pr/WCMS_338484/lang--en/index.htm [Accessed 26.1.24]

³ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--asia/--ro-bangkok/--ilo-islamabad/documents/genericdocument/wcms_748997.pdf [Accessed 26.1.24]

⁴ <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/Contribution.action?id=858> [Accessed 26.1.24]

comprise 70% of the informal workforce behind the country's economic activities. *HomeNet* has been working for the recognition and support of home-based workers since 2005⁵.

2.4. *Afghan Migrants*

Pakistan is not a signatory of the "1951 Refugee Convention" and its "1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees". Additionally, the country lacks a national refugee law and, in this way, has been able to avoid granting Afghans clear and defined rights, legal integration and citizenship (Mielke and Etzold 2022). Accordingly, the Pakistan government 'cannot be legally sanctioned in case of rights violations and ruptures in protection, as the haphazard and irregular extension of the status of registered refugees since 2015 amply demonstrate' (Mielke and Etzold 2022). As NGO participant #1 in this study describes, Afghan migrants can have different statuses and permits, and this makes their legal status rather complex: 'The Afghans have two or three types of cards: (1) Asylum seekers certificate issued by UNHCR, (2) Proof of Registration (POR) that is issued by Pakistan and Afghan government which expired in 2016 and (3) Afghan Citizen (AC) cardholders are for those refugees repatriated from here, but who came back. So, they have three kinds of statuses. The third category, AC cardholders, are economic migrants. UNHCR gave them some compensation to return to Afghanistan, but they came back. Mainly they are back due to security reasons, but a significant reason is livelihood too' (NGO Participant #1).

NGO study participant #1 clarifies the reason why many Afghans decided to go back to Pakistan, which is security, due to the armed conflict, and also the difficulty in meeting ends meet (see also Mielke et al. 2021), as some migrant women involved in this study maintained too. Sociologists attentive to processes have critically framed the politicised notion of 'protracted displacement' in relation to Afghans in Pakistan. They emphasised, on the one hand, their historic transnational living, well preceding the turmoil of the late 1970s, and, on the other hand, a current trend of ongoing immobilisation that is 'experienced as involuntary immobility' (Mielke and Etzold 2022). Afghans' desire of mobility collides with the nationalistic logic of sedentariness and border control (Malkki 1995), which in this case sees the Government of Pakistan's official policy of return backed up by the UNHCR as the best durable solution (Mielke and Etzold 2022). Two important documents define the joint solutionist policy of UNHCR and the governments of Afghanistan, and Pakistan: the original Tripartite Agreement (UNHCR, Government of Pakistan, and Government of Afghanistan 2003) and the regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) (UNHCR 2012; Ghufraan 2011).

⁵ <https://pakngos.com.pk/listing/home-net-pakistan-hnp/> [Accessed 26.1.24]



*Picture 1. Afghan refugees returning to their country after Pakistan government deadline, near Khyber district (2023).
Credit: Voice of America*

The latter agreement includes two additional solutions to repatriation, local integration, and resettlement. However, the Pakistani government attempts to avoid local integration and resettlement (Mielke and Etzold 2022) and the return of refugees was promoted and prioritised during the 30th Tripartite Commission Meeting in 2019 (UNHCR Pakistan 2019). After this study was conducted, some UNHCR effort increased to support the Afghan community, including in the areas of education, health, resettlement, legal status, and return (UNHCR 2022a). However, the impact of this enhanced intervention of support, implemented also in reaction to the last rise of the Taliban in 2021, has not been assessed. What is known is that for the time being, the Government of Pakistan's official policy of return has intensified and for Afghans in the country it has become harder and harder to obtain UNHCR protection (Siegmann and Khattak 2023).

This complex legal status for Afghan refugees and migrants in Pakistan has several negative consequences on their economic situation and general integration in the country. In fact, as indicated by a non-Afghan professional, opening a bank account is a major hurdle, amongst other impediments, so is getting a driving licence. These obstacles were discussed during the last Tripartite Commission Meeting before the COVID pandemic in 2019 (UNHCR Pakistan 2019). However, tangible changes have not been implemented. Current impediments to resettlements have led some Afghan migrants and refugees to work illegally. Furthermore, this situation is exacerbated by the fact that for the Afghan population there are no quota/reserved seats in employment, as it happens instead for the deprived communities from the provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (NGO Participant #2). Afghan people have established their own schools, cultural centres (see above), 'organizations, beauty parlours or have computer skills-related jobs', NGO Participant #2 observes. Instead, if they work in statutory position, it is likely

that the permission was obtain illegally. Understandably, this limbo status on the legal level combines with and contributes to withdrawing, sometimes even to hiding, within their own minority community. NGO Participant #2 remarked that, in their experience, the Afghan community tend to be separate from the host community.

Most Afghan men and some women who do not have citizenship rights work as cheap labor in the construction industry. However, a significant number of Afghan women are engaged in teaching. In Pakistan, where the education system is mainly private, many Afghan women teach their children in their home, others in schools funded by Afghan and Pakistani NGOs. Many Afghan women who migrated to Pakistan are Hazaras. It is important to note that several waves of Hazara immigration to Quetta in Pakistan and many of the migrants have achieved a legal status as Pakistani citizens. This provides access to the formal systems of, for example, education, health, and politics (Changezi and Biseth 2011). This is not always the case, as we will see below with Afghan women in Islamabad who participated in this study. As the government of Pakistan does not provide basic education for the self-settled Hazara and Afghan immigrants, they themselves are responsible for educating their children. Within the context of their illegal status, the constant struggle of the Hazaras to keep their schools open bears testament to their commitment to young women education (Changezi 2009).

Contrary to the traditional gender socialization, some Hazara women have had to take on activities out of the house, and have become breadwinners, and hence their gender identity is slightly changed in the diasporic setting (Changezi and Biseth 2011), as happened to some of our Afghan participants. However, many Hazaras and other Afghan migrant women are involved in carpet weaving and production, which became one of the leading source of incomes for this community (Changezi 2009).

Migrant women also stitch in stitching centres, which – together with sex work and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) migrant workers – constitute further women migrant workers' industries on which there is some scant literature (Arif 2023; N. Akhtar et al. 2021). These are of interest as they provide a broader framework to women migrant workers in the country, however they are not strictly pertinent to either the industries of employment or the demographic profile of the migrant women involved in this study. Additionally, such scarcity of literature is telling of the important gaps that exist in the literature on South-South gender migration complexity in Pakistan.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Sample and data collection*

Aligned with its theoretical framework, this study adopted a participatory design based on the collaborative work of a research team made up by Western/North researchers and local/South

ones. This collaboration occurred in different phases of the project, such as adaptation of the interview guide, data collection and analysis, and writing-up phases. This approach not only contributed to de-Westernise the study and enrich it with the expertise of research belonging to the local context.

The qualitative design of this study is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted between December 2020 and June 2021. The sampling method was purposeful, rooted in convenience and snowball strategies (Palinkas et al. 2015). The study participants approached, were given full information about the project, and informed consent was taken before taking part in the study. Recruitment targeted two participant groups: 1. women migrants over 18 years of age working in Pakistan and 2. key-informants participants consisting of NGOs' officers engaged in the protection of migrants and refugees in Pakistan. The in-depth interviews were conducted to gather personal accounts, insights, and experiences from diverse groups of women migrants living and working in Pakistan. In key-informant interviews the focus shifted to understanding the socio-economic conditions that impact migrants and refugees in their labour participation and sectors where immigrants predominantly engage in. Thus, the aim was to cast light onto the socio-economic and political milieu where multiple factors shape migrants' experiences in Pakistan. Finally, our methodology has been participatory during analysis and writing stages too, as the authors have discussed this study with a pool of experts, as a part of triangulation, and the findings were 'bounced back'. Hence, not only in designing and conducting the study, national teams were equally involved also in formulating and peer-reviewing the results and recommendations.

The semi-structured interview topic guide covered a range of questions pertaining to drivers and motivation of migration, family and gender dynamics in the home country, and experiences in Pakistan. In addition, to socio-economic and gendered dynamics, the research explored the use of urban space and gendered experiences in urban space by these women migrants. Most research interviews were conducted in Islamabad, either in person or over the phone using WhatsApp, Zoom, or other apps during the Pandemic unprecedented time. Interviewees were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewee and verbatim, anonymised transcription was conducted.

Overall, 25 interviews were conducted, of which 22 were with migrant women with different skill levels, nationalities, and migration experiences. Additionally, three key-informant interviews were conducted with NGOs' officers that work with migrants and refugees in Pakistan. The migrant women included:

- Sub-group 1: 8 Filipina migrant workers, comprising 6 MDW, 1 ex-MDW now running a MDWs recruitment agency, and 1 highly educated, retired international humanitarian aid consultant now running an organic food products business.

- Sub-group 2: 5 African migrant women, comprising 4 highly educated professionals – where three work or have worked in the academic/teaching sector, and one is a UNICEF officer. The fifth African migrant woman is a Tanzanian MDW.
- Sub-group 3: 4 Global North migrant professionals. In this sub-group, all participants are highly educated, two of them work in academia, one in a university hospital, and another is an ex-UNESCO consultant now running her own cultural heritage agency.
- Sub-group 4: 5 migrant women from Central/West Asian neighbouring countries, comprising four migrant women from Afghanistan, three of whom entered the country as refugees, and work as beauticians or private tutors, whereas the fourth one works in a customer relation office of a café, where she previously was a waitress. The fifth Central Asian woman is Tajik and works as a tutor.

The majority of participants consisted of highly skilled and educated migrant women of diverse nationalities who migrated from the Philippines, Canada, China-Korea, Uganda, Germany, Egypt, and Somalia. Among these highly skilled women migrants, a good number hold a Ph.D. and/or have professional degrees and worked in formal sectors, i.e., in teaching and as development professionals in international NGOs/UN agencies. Notably, these highly skilled migrants came to Pakistan for different reasons: family reunification, marriage, independent work and for education and professional opportunities.

A significant proportion of labour migrants worked in the domestic care sector. Of the seven women migrants who worked in domestic and care work, six were Migrant Filipino Domestic Workers (MFDW) and one was from Tanzania. These participants lived in their place of work, as such they were difficult to contact as they were hesitant to talk about their experiences over the phone. Consequently, five of these interviews with domestic workers and caregivers were conducted face-to-face in an open space outside a mall.

All Afghan participants worked in the semi-skilled sector as self-employed workers in the service industry, such as beauty salons and carpet-weaving. Finally, a few research participants worked independently as business owners or in service industries.

The main socio-demographic characteristics sample are presented in Table 1 and a summary below.

- Migrant women are mostly from the Philippines (36%), from Afghanistan (18%), and Canada (9%). All the other eight participants come from different countries, five of which are in the African continent.
- The two youngest migrant women are both 24, from Afghanistan, whereas the eldest was the Canadian professional, in her seventies. The approximate mean age of the whole sample is 40 years, and in fact 50% of migrant women are in their 40s.

- Fifty-Nine per cent (59%) of participants has a high level of education, meaning they hold a BA (4), an MA (4), or a PhD (5). Apparently, there are no illiterate women, however, for four Filipina MDWs, the information on their qualification is not available.
- The occupational status in their country of origin varied considerably. The two major groups are: students (5) and unemployed (5) and/or housekeepers. There are three women who were paid domestic workers, whereas the other nine were active in the field of education, including tutoring, and in the development sector.
- At the time of study, 73% of the participants (16), have a work permit or a study visa that had to be regularly renewed, four have the Pakistani ID card or residency, and two have refugee status.
- There are eleven married women (50%), one of whom is a case of an arranged child marriage. Five women are separated or divorced, whereas all the others are single (neither separated nor divorced). Among the single women, only one had a child.
- Just over half of participants have between one and a maximum of four children (54%).
- The duration of their stay in Pakistan varies considerably, spanning from one to 30 years. The approximate mean duration of the stay in Pakistan in years is 9.
- Eight women had experience of working and living in other countries, and several others had family members and/or friends have migrated abroad.

The development sector workers are working with migrants and refugees in the protection and livelihood sector and capacity building including entrepreneurship and advocacy.

Table 1. Demographic information of migrant women participating in the study

No	Age	Nationality	Level of education	Occupation in the Country of Origin	Occupations in Pakistan	Marital Status & Children	Stay in Pakistan	Legal Status
1	24	Afghan	Nursing diploma	Nursing student	Self-employed-semi-skilled work/ beautician and carpet weaver	not married	6 years	UNHCR proof of registration
2	49	Filipino	BA (Associated Science)	Govt. Councillor, sold vegetables, and at times also worked as a kindergarten teacher.	Currently managing director of an agency (previously MDW caring for disabled child)	separated and 2 sons	10+ years	business visa
3	44	Afghan	BA degree	Student	Different jobs in telecommunications / now language private tutor	not married	20+ years	visa that needs to be renewed
4	40	Afghan	9th grade	Unemployed	Beautician running a beauty parlour-inherited by previous owner (previously working in father's bakery)	Child and arranged married with 4 children (two are in Germany)	25 years	Afghan citizen, but she has a NADRA card too. Not visa/work permit required
5	31	Filipino	BA degree in Education	Tourist Guide/MDW in Dubai caring for disabled child	Swimming Instructor / Sports Coach in school (previously MDW)	married to a Pakistani with two sons	approx. 10 years	Pakistan Origin Card (POC) needs to be renewed every 5 years.
6	70+	Canadian	PhD in Archaeology [in Hong Kong]	Student	Owns her consultancy business in archaeology/cultural heritage	divorced and 3 children	15 years	work visa
7	50	Filipino	MA degree	NGO employee	INGO/UN officer/NGOs consultant. Now retired running an organic food	married to a Pakistani, no children	30 years	resident

No	Age	Nationality	Level of education	Occupation in the Country of Origin	Occupations in Pakistan	Marital Status & Children	Stay in Pakistan	Legal Status
					products business			
8	28	Somali	PhD candidate in Islamic Studies	Student	Adjunct Lecturer	single	5 years	study visa
9	43	Filipino	n/a	Food business	MDW (cleaning only)	divorced, 2 sons	3 years	work visa with agency
10	44	Filipino	high school	None/ worked in Greece as cleaners in different settings	MDW (nanny)	divorced, 2 sons	1.5 year	work visa with agency
11	38	Iranian German	PhD in Political Sciences	Language and cultural mediator	Visiting fellow at Sustainable Development Policy Institute and QAU	married, no children	2 years	work permit
12	43	Tanzania	high school	MDW	MDW	single mother, one son	6 years	work permit
13	35	Filipino	n/a	MDW	Previously a MDW / small business from home	married to a Pakistani, no children	13 years	work permit first/ then permanent residency
14	24	Afghan	Graduation	Unemployed	From waitress to customer relations in mall café	single	2 years	work permit
15	44	Filipino	n/a	Jobless [housewife]/ online seller	MDW	married with 2 teenage boys	1 year	work permit
16	40	Filipino	n/a	Jobless [housewife]	MDW	divorced with 4 children	10 years	work permit
17	41	Ugandan	MA	International NGOs officers	UNICEF officer	married, 2 sons	2 years	work permit

No	Age	Nationality	Level of education	Occupation in the Country of Origin	Occupations in Pakistan	Marital Status & Children	Stay in Pakistan	Legal Status
18	40	Korean Chinese	PhD in Korean Language	University lecturer	Lecturer at National University of Modern Languages	married, no children	11 years	2-year visa
19	39	Egyptian	PhD in Arabic Literature	Teacher in a government school	Teacher in an International school	married, 2 children	2 years	work permit/ came with her spouse
20	26	Tanzanian Ismaili Canadian	MA in Public Health	Private home care services organisation	Executive officer at Aga Khan University Hospital	not married	2 years	work permit
21	33	Algeria	MA in Finance and Banking	Private tutor and part-time accountant	Accountant, teaching, customer relations company [French language]	married with 1 child	6 years	Pakistan Origin Card (POC) because married to a Pakistani
22	45	Tajik	BA	Student	Tutor	married	20+ years	Study visa, then passport, now UN refugee card

Their professional profiles are:

1. NGO's Participant 1. Officer in a project on skills development training for Afghan refugees and migrants. The project was funded by the UNHCR and implemented by Hashoo Foundation.
2. NGO's Participant 2 works in the same project and organisation as Participant #1.
3. NGO's Participant 3 is an officer at International Catholic Migrant's Commission which works mainly with refugees and internally displaced groups, such as Afghan, Persian, Uzbeks, Somalis

3.2. *Analysis*

The analysis of the interviews' transcripts followed a directed hybrid approach of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). As mentioned, five broad categories formed the code manual (drivers and processes of migration, experiences of gender discrimination in the countries of origin, living and working conditions in the host countries, public access and spatial mobility, women's agency, and coping strategies,).

3.3. *Limitations of the Study*

The sampling strategy, based on the networks of local the researchers and the uncertainties during the COVID pandemic determined the inclusion of certain migrant categories (e.g., academics and humanitarian sector professionals) and the exclusion of others (e.g., migrant working in informal restaurants and beauty salons). In general, conducting this research and finding migrant women working in Pakistan was challenging for two reasons. First, the study was the first of its kind, as it was an attempt to identify and approach women migrants in Pakistan that came from a diverse group of nationalities and work in sectors that were not previously identified in literature or reports. Secondly, access and reaching out to migrant women during the COVID-19 pandemic was difficult: (i) a significant proportion of migrants, especially expats and professional women, moved to their home countries since they could work from home during the lockdown; (ii) due to COVID-19 SOPs and physical distancing protocol, some interviews were conducted online which limits establishing rapport and familiarity that is typically ensured in an in-person interview. No migrant women from large minority groups, such as Indian, Bengalis or Burmese were interviewed. Additionally, it would have been interesting to compare the results by geographic background with socio-economic class group, but participants' identification in terms of socio-economic was not always elaborated or possible to infer given the focus of the study and the interview guide. Finally, it would have also been useful and relevant to record the ethnic background of the Afghan participants, as for example, Hazar Shias are more visible and far more discriminated.

3.4. *Ethics*

Laajverd's ethical guideline and code of ethics were adopted in this study (see Annex 2).

4. Results

4.1. *Filipino migrant women*

4.1.1. *Drivers and processes of migration*

The chief driver behind the decision to migrate among the sub-cohort of the Filipino migrants was described in financial terms. With the exception of the professional in the international development sector, the other seven Filipino participants stated that they took the decision to find employment abroad as migrant domestic workers (MDWs) to achieve economic prosperity. Generally, it is hard to find employment in the Philippines, despite the high education among the population due to limited opportunities in the home country. In these circumstances, going abroad is perceived as a necessity of economic survival. In a few circumstances, housewives (Participant 16) in the Philippines needed jobs to raise their children and provide better quality education, particularly in the absence of financial support from the husband.

According to other Filipino participants, there are job opportunities in their country of origin, but salaries abroad are much higher (especially when they are paid in dollars) ie. usually 3-4 times higher what they receive in the Philippines (Participant 5). For a few migrant women, the financial driver was reinforced by a personal situation that they wanted to leave behind, such as the ending of their marital relationship (Participant 2), or following their partner such as the starting of a marital relationship and/or building a business (Participant 9).

The decision to migrate to Pakistan was described by several women as appealing and feasible because at zero initial cost for them. A few participants underlined the importance of having to pay exclusively for the internal transfers from their place of residence in the Philippines to Manila, where the recruitment agency and the international airport are located. The agency and the employer would cover all other expenses, such as the visa application, the work permit, and the international flight (participants 10 and 19).

When they talked about the choice of Pakistan as a destination country, it often emerged that the Filipino participants were part of a network of migrant women who were agency-contracted domestic workers in a range of countries (Hong Kong, UAE and other CCG countries, such as, Bahrain and Qatar). Pakistan is part of the circuit of the possible destination countries offered by the agency to the participants. With a few exceptions within this sub-cohort, Pakistan was the first and only country of migration where they indeed arrived through an employment agency, with all the necessary documents (i.e., job visa). On a few occasions, participants' choice was influenced by the presence of friends and acquaintances in Pakistan. Others described the whole process of migration as casual, conveying the sense that the destination was not what mattered compared to the stronger economic driver to provide for the family – as Participant 15 above suggested. In the case of Participant 5, the move to Pakistan was determined by the fact that their employer moved here. A few participants described a situation of family diaspora, whereby several of their own family members were international migrant workers. This might have been

a further factor influencing their choice, which can be driven by the desire to provide for the family.

It is interesting to note that the choice/acceptance of Pakistan as a destination country was not deflated by the negative reputation. Some of the women interviewed described that they themselves, but also their families, had some concerns in relation to Pakistan because it was a Muslim country, very culturally different from the Philippines. Some explicitly referred to how the media had contributed to the construction of a negative image of the country also as the echo of the deleterious publicity of Islamic extremist movements in the previous decade. In general, women unveiled a general lack of knowledge and uninformed judgment in relation to this country.



Figure 2. Fatima Church in F-8 Islamabad, Pakistan, built in 1990 (2009). Credit Khalid Mahmood

4.1.2. Living and working conditions and experiences

Participants talked about how they overcame their initial homesickness and disorientation, including language and other cultural barriers, and about how much they generally found Pakistani people, including the employers, respectful, helpful, and friendly.

In line with this general positive impression of Pakistan and Pakistani people, most participants reported no sexual harassment and no ethnic or gender discrimination, with a few exceptions where women felt being stared at when they were going out. One participant described that only

rarely had she felt discriminated against, not for her gender, but precisely for her lower professional and social status as “servant”, and because she was “looking different”.

‘Yes, sometimes I do feel discriminated against. But that in the past when I was working as a caregiver. It was probably because I was just a servant and obviously not of their social standing.’ (Participant #5)

Conversely, the humanitarian aid professional recalled an episode when she was threatened by local leaders who were disputing her management position in a project because she was a foreign woman in a high decisional role.

Although seven women reached Pakistan as MDWs, three of them (Participants 2, 5, and 13), who had been in the country for ten years or more, subsequently left their jobs as domestic helpers. Two upgraded their position, as one was able to set up her own profitable recruitment and job agency for Filipino MDWs (2), whereas another one became a swimming/sport coach in her children’s school (5). The third one declared that her Pakistani husband did not allow her to work anymore, hence she quit at the cessation of her last contract as domestic helper. All Filipino MDWs’ living and working experiences in the host country are described as positive. All participants were content with their life and their job, appreciating their good salary, and their employers. They generally felt treated very well, almost like another member of the family.

In relation to documents and permits, most of them had no issue with the renewal of their visa and work permit, and talked of their agents as supportive. In most cases, it is unclear if their contract covered health insurance and social assistance. MDWs’ tasks varied, for some they were restricted to cleaning, for others to babysitting – including caring for a disabled child. Finally, it appears that, despite being a tiring employment, most MDWs had Sunday, or another weekday off, and all had their private room, apart from one participant who does not have privacy, and shares the room with other domestic workers (Participant 15).

Against this broadly positive picture, there are some migrant women who mentioned having employers that they considered unfair and strict. When this happened, participants were determined and able to change employer. In some cases, employer’s change entailed a battle with the recruitment agency, which shows a considerable level of agency on behalf of the MDW.

*‘I was a direct hire through an agent. I paid 20,000 pesos for my paperwork and ticket. To arrange this amount, I had to sell my cow. [...] When I decided to leave, the employer complained that he paid for visa and paperwork and tickets and I needed to pay all the money back before leaving. I told the employer that I myself paid for everything. When the matter was taken up with the agent it was found that the agent charged both of us which is nothing short of swindling. Finding no help, I wrote to the overseas employment agency in Philippines and complained against my agent.’
(Participant 2)*

Whereas Participant 16 tortuous trajectory demonstrates that, despite the fact that the recruitment agency was supportive, she had to fight and overcome several obstacles and suffering, and faced the risk of being undocumented for a while, before finding an employer that she was happy with. The story of this participant casts some interesting light onto unofficial routes and experiences of migrant women who fall out of the recruitment agency-led market and make their way into employment via personal connections.

'Agency helped me before the first time without any expenses, they pay for everything. All I need is for transportation from the agency to my place, and back. [...] I do babysitting there. And my madam is some kind of... not good. So, I always cry because it's my first time and I do cry and cry and cry. So they sent me back here to Lahore. So after that, I guess he [the agent] gave me another employer. The same thing, I just worked there for eight months, because my madam got jealous. [...] So again, they gave me another employer. And they sent me back again. And I said no, I refused to go through an agency for the fourth time. [...] And the agency blacklisted me, and the Ministry cancelled my visa. And I don't have a visa for one year here. So what I did is I found an employer. So they helped me get a visa.' (Participant 16)

On the other hand, the fact that several MDWs changed employer appears to be a pattern of this type of circular migration of domestic work (Parreñas et al. 2019; Silvey and Parreñas 2020) mediated by recruitment agencies and based on fixed-term contracts. Migrant workers are, to a certain extent, bound to the contract – but not necessarily, as mentioned, because they could change employer before the termination of the contract, if they have grounds to do so. Simultaneously, contract rotation gives the possibility to the worker to re-evaluate their economic and familial situation and re-plan each time if they wish to go back home or embark in another employment, in another city, or even country.

Looking at the only non-MDW among the Filipino sub-cohort, she felt privileged in relation to her employment compared to the many Filipino migrants working as domestic helpers, “from the houses”. Participant 7 comments on the circuit of MDWs international mobility, whereby Pakistan is indeed listed among Middle Eastern or Gulf countries as a destination for Filipino low-skilled workers (see above at the beginning of this section). This participant refers also to a phenomenon whereby Filipino MDWs first migrated to the Middle East, where they got married, apparently as second wives, to Pakistani men, and subsequently moved to their husbands' country of origin.

In line with the rare or inexistent perceived discrimination within the employment realm discussed above, none of the Filipino participants recounted being a victim of sexual harassment. This was interpreted by two participants along specific cultural lines that Pakistani people respect Chinese people in particular, and that Muslim people have a greater respect for women in general, at least concerning looking at the other sex in public. It is interesting to highlight that

those participants who had lived in Pakistan for many years, and even more those who were married to a Pakistani man, commented on the differences between the Pakistani and the Filipino culture, with reference to the role of the woman, to the household and family norms. In the Philippines, there is greater gender equality, and women have more independence, also to migrate for work – participants think (#5 and 10).

Within the framework of the differences between the two countries, the Pakistani custom of patrilocality was referred to. According to this custom, the bride moves into the husband's family house, with the parents-in-law, where she is expected to take care of the house and the household members. Together with this norm, the Filipino women married to a Pakistani man (Participants 7 and 13) noted the burden of responsibilities, including huge financial commitments, placed onto the first son towards all the members of this family of origin. The strong bond the first son has with his mother, was also highlighted with criticism. Significantly, the family customs in the Philippines are presented as more similar to the Western nuclear family conventions. Participant 7 recounts her negotiations with her husband and in-laws, showing how she was able to remain firm on her role as independent professional who refused to become a 'maid' in her in-laws house.

Some other participants elaborated on their processes of negotiation and adjustment to the local customs and norms, spanning from the more superficial wearing local clothes to more profound marital and familial dynamics. Participant 13 expresses her appreciation for the mutual patience that both sides need to have in the process. Only one Filipino woman expressed appreciation for the Pakistani family system, because the family members are more connected. Additionally, she feels that both women and men bear equal responsibilities towards their family.

Understandably, there is a considerable variation between those participants who started working in a Pakistani family relatively recently at the time of this study and those who had established a family and a new life in the country. The orientation towards and the integration with the local culture are very different. From the case where a participant plans to go back to her country upon the termination of her contract to the cases where participants describe their marriage with a Pakistani man, their conversion to Islam, the establishment of their own family, and the setup of their own business or of an association of Filipinos: the impact of the migration endeavour onto the lives of the participants varies substantially. For participant 13, migration turned out to be a substantial transformation of their personal, professional, and cultural identity.

'Now I am not working because my husband is not allowing me to work. I'm married here to a Pakistani man. I married in November 2016. So my husband is not allowing me to work this time. So, I'm fully in the house and doing some entrepreneurial work. Like I'm selling some crochet items handmade like that. And I'm getting some Filipino food for Filipino people. I am the founder and president of the United Filipino clan Islamabad.' (Participant #13)

None of the Filipino women talked of experiences of gender discrimination in the country of origin. Conversely, as already reported above, they describe the Philippines as a country where men and women enjoy equal rights in several realms, from children guardianship to assets inheritance. Filipino women are free and independent, in the words of the interviewees. Women can choose the job they want, receive maternity leave, have their own bank account, wear the clothes they want to and socialise freely in public spaces. They can also initiate and undertake a divorce and feel confident to report to the authorities if they are victims of domestic, sexual or other types of violence. One participant (16) described how she managed to provide for her family in a completely independent way.

However, the humanitarian aid professional (Participant 7), who was also a gender specialist, reflects on the important issue of the awareness of gender equality. She probably has in mind the women and families of the rural areas she works in, but she raises an issue which can be applied transversally. Being aware of what discrimination is and entails can make a difference, as well as it changes over time. Gender equality awareness evolves, and practices previously normalised can subsequently be categorised as women rights violation. This participant also suggests that women discrimination is far more ubiquitous and widespread, beyond Pakistan and the Philippines.

4.1.1. Agency and coping strategies

Despite the fact that it is certainly crucial to consider the component of awareness in relation to women rights, dignity and equality, the image of independent and free Filipino woman that the participants in this study depict is exemplified by their agency and coping strategies in Pakistan. Examples of agency exercise can be seen in the courage and determination to leave behind an unhappy marital situation, follow their sentiments and move to a country which had a negative reputation. The purpose behind making such drastic life change was, in several cases, also that of being able to give to their children a better education and provide for them. This often applies to those migrant women who had gone through a divorce, and felt both more independent and freer, but also more urged to take the lead on the family finances – and also in need to try to make a better income abroad. We have also seen how, on occasions, some of these women fought for a better employer, while others were able to upgrade their professional status. Besides one migrant who expresses that she is just focussing on her job but is struggling because seriously missing her family (Participant 9), none of the Filipino participants regret their choice. On the contrary, they think that it was the best choice they could make, for which they feel proud, stronger and more independent. Some also see a change in social status, which they look at with pride. One participant (10) also talked about her experience of migration in Pakistan as transformative on a personal level of wellbeing.

The religious conversion to Islam is experienced as potent act of self-change and evolution, which was completely personal and voluntary (Participant 13). Another participant (5) also described her getting closer to the Islamic religion and how this led her to fall in love with her Pakistani husband, get married, start their own family of which she is proud, and enjoy her marriage and

her new family life. For those Filipino women who married a Pakistani man (Participants 5, 7 and 13), it is interesting to look at their different exercise of agency vis-à-vis the Pakistani culture, their husbands and their husband's family. Broadly, it seems that while they accepted and compromised on certain points (i.e., stopped working as domestic workers), they were instead firm on other aspects (i.e., not moving in with their in-laws) and found alternative strategies for self-realisation (i.e., founding a Filipino association, working in their children school, hiring a housemaid). In relation to their families back home, most women are in regular contact with their families in the Philippines, as a way of coping with their homesickness and the sense of missing their children, for those who had them. For this, a few participants said that they were grateful that nowadays with the technology they could frequently, easily and quickly be in touch with their family members.

Many migrant women described that, after an initial period when they were saving some money, they started visiting the Philippines on a regular basis, during their holidays. Interestingly, no participant had her family members visit her in Pakistan. Besides those married to a Pakistani man, all the others envisioned going back home sooner or later, either when their contract will be over, or when their kids will have finished their education. Others admitted resorting to their religiosity or patience.

Two of the settled women were able to keep alive their bonds with their home country, which are keeping them occupied and active. One set up a business of organic fruit and vegetables, which initially started out from her roof top garden; whereas the other one, as mentioned, founded a Filipino association with the intent to help the minority community in different ways, from medical to financial aid, as well as to organise celebrations to keep a sense of community. This organisation has also the aim of keeping Filipino migrants away from illegal activities, such as drugs and prostitution.

4.1.1. Spatial mobility and use of the city

All the Filipino migrant women declared greatly enjoying their urban life in Islamabad, as well as their neighbourhood, and most of them greatly praise the beauty and the quietness of the city and the country more in general. They all talk about going out to malls, social events, churches, with both their Filipino and Pakistani friends (Participants 2, 5, 10, 15, 16). Filipino migrant women generally feel safe to go around the city and the country, also using public transport. None had any problems with security controls and check points. One participant feels that Manila can be a more dangerous place, also due to the more widespread consumption of alcohol. Some migrants dress in their own style, but being careful about the local codes, others have embraced the local dress code more fully. This variation and flexibility in the adoption of the local dress code suggests that there are contexts and situations where this is stricter or perceive as safer, whereas others where migrant women can wear what they feel like. This variation is also reported by the other sub-groups of participants in this study, as we will see.

4.2. The African migrant women

4.2.1. *Drivers and processes of migration*

Within this subgroup of five participants who migrated to Pakistan from different countries of the African continent, three are active in the field of higher education and come from predominantly Muslim countries, that is Somalia, Algeria, and Egypt. A strong driver in choosing Pakistan was therefore the cultural and religious affinity, whereby participants felt that ‘culturally I would not feel like an alien’ (Participant 8). Two migrant women decided to move to Pakistan to complete a PhD programme at the International Islamic University, which has a good reputation for their subject, that is Islamic Studies (Participants 8 and 22). The third one, who already held a PhD, wanted instead to have better paid employment as a university lecturer (Participant 19). Another motivation contributing to choosing Pakistan was the accessibility and economic convenience of the course of study and, in general, of cost of living, if compared to other countries, such as Western ones or in the Arabian Peninsula. It is interesting to note, however, that Pakistan was not the first country of choice for these women, who had all tried to migrate to other countries first. Diverse types of obstacles determined by complicated bureaucratic requirements turned Pakistan into an easier and hence the actual final destination.

The other two migrant women in this sub-group left their countries for completely different reasons. While they are both originally from East African countries, Uganda and Tanzania, and have experiences of living in foreign countries, their stories of migration have little in common. One participant (12) is an MDW, who ended up moving to Pakistan because she was following the family she was employed by. She is a single mother, and her aim was to earn a higher income so to be able to provide for her son and family. According to her, well-educated people also choose housework with international employers for the same reason.

The other Ugandan woman (Participant 17) is a professional working in the NGO sector and who applied for a position at UNICEF because she wanted to expand her experiences in an UN environment and in Asia. For both these migrant women moving to a Muslim country was a source of initial preoccupation due to the cultural difference – similarly to the Christian Filipino migrant women. Little knowledge and the negative reputation of the country – depicted by the media – is a feature that we also encountered among the Filipino migrant women too (see above). In the same way, however, the initial fears were also disproved in the case of the two East African migrants (see below). For migrant women coming from Muslim countries, an opposite rationale applies, whereby the religious affinity is instead a source of reassurance and comfort, as mentioned.

The choice of migrating was, for all these five women, an independent one, which was taken with the approval of their family. For Participant 8, the youngest in this sub-group, her father’s approval was important as he was also the one supporting her financially. Participant #19 took the decision to find a better paid employment together with her husband, who was able to secure a teaching contract at a university in Islamabad. Participant 21 worked in Algeria for a few years while also studying for her master’s degree, to save money to be able to do a PhD abroad.

The process of migration was described by all these women as very straightforward. All the paperwork for either their study or their work visa was taken care of by the university administrative office. Their permits could also be easily renewed, even online. Additionally, in the case of the Somali Participant #8, the whole bureaucratic process was further facilitated by some family members who were already living in Islamabad and working at the same university. The Tanzanian MDW did not need to take care about anything, as her employer did. Algerian Participant #21, who married a Pakistani man, was able to obtain a Pakistani Origin Card (POC). However, none of them had health insurance, and have to rely on private healthcare. They all flew to Pakistan with no issues.

An exception to this very smooth process of entering Pakistan is the Ugandan professional, who reports instead a more complicated procedure both prior to entering the country and at arrival. When she landed to Islamabad airport, she recalls a sense of being discriminated, based on her gender and ethnic background, in relation to the security check she went through. She associates the bureaucratic difficulty in obtaining and renewing her visa to the difficulty in socially integrating into Pakistani society, and she contrasts this to her own country.

All these migrant women appear to be inserted into networks where family members or friends have also migrated abroad. This is a sign that they belong to a layer of society connected with international migration, and which turns going abroad a more plausible option in life. As also seen in the case of the Filipino migrant women, Pakistan is considered as an atypical choice with people preferring to go to Western countries, UAE, or South Africa and it thus emerges as an unpopular destination country for employment and profit.

There is also a good level of consistency in relation to how the five African migrants describe their life, as well as more generally women's situation, in their different countries of origin. At a personal level, these participants recount their life in positive terms, whereby they could afford comfortable standards of living, suffering no gender discrimination or any other type of harassment, both within and outside the household. Within restrictions dictated by each Muslim country's interpretation of Islamic rules, regarding intersex befriending and dressing for example, these women could enjoy their social life and considered it 'easy' and safe to be a woman in their country of origin.

The three married women describe their marriage as one of love, and that getting married increased their responsibilities, but did not result in an interruption of their study or work careers. However, within the household, participants report that there was a gender-based division of roles and responsibilities.

'I got married after my first degree and then after that, I was able to do three other courses. Two were graduate diplomas, one in Monitoring & Evaluation and the other one was public study. Then of course the Masters. I got those three after my marriage. The only issue is that it is a bit challenging to cope. Because you are a wife and you have children you are taking care of. And then

you have a job as well. [...] When it comes to domestic work, especially household, men don't do it. Only very few. Even the highly educated ones, they don't believe that it is their role [...]. A guy will go and work and come back in the evening, sit in the living room, put his feet up and he will wait for you to come back from the office and start cooking.' (Participant 17 Ugandan)

The prohibition of public intersex friendships and the obligation for women to cover their body in specific ways do not obviously apply in the predominantly Christian countries of Uganda and Tanzania. However, both Eastern African migrants highlight that there are some socially established boundaries about the way a woman can get dressed, and, if these are overstepped, she can get harassed and even insulted. More broadly, in relation to the role of the woman in their country, the Tanzanian MDW, who had a son without getting married, retells a life experience which significantly shows both gender discrimination and agency. While in her country there is social pressure to get married, this woman decided that she did not want to marry someone whom she could not trust. In her words, it is also clear there is no confidence that her rights as a mother would be protected by law.

'I'm \not married, I just have a son. In my country there is somehow the pressure because, you know, you can get some man you can trust but after that, you can keep on you. If as a woman you are understanding a man, you know, what are you doing in your life? You just want to be alone to stay alone without anyone. So it's better to be a single mother.' (Participant 12 Tanzanian)

4.2.2. *Living and working conditions and experiences*

In relation to the living and working conditions in Pakistan, the five African migrant women recounted their living and working conditions in Pakistan positively. They all indicated that they were satisfied with their workload, salary and treatment in their workplace. Despite the scarcity in maternity leave rights, according to the two of who raised their children in the country, men and women are treated and paid equally in the workplace.

'I have never felt discriminated against all through my stay in Pakistan. Over the years so many people from African countries are coming to Pakistan and different skin color is not such an unusual thing for them.' (Participant 8 Somalia)

Migrant women are content with their accommodations, which spanned from being in the university hostel, in a private spacious apartment, in a flat inside the diplomatic enclave, to a room with a private bathroom in the employer's house. They all said that they had been able to make both local and other migrants' friend, including within their community. An interesting case is that of the Tanzanian migrant worker (Participant 12) who tells that the Filipino community, where several members work as MDWs, has become like a family for her. This may be attributed

to a professional and religious affinity, but it is also telling of the difficulty of integrating into Pakistani society. Her remark in relation to her little free time also reflects her condition as an MDW with little freedom for herself, in spite of the fact that she considers her employer like family, and she is very happy with them.

Algerian Participant 21, is also the only Muslim migrant who felt discriminated as a foreigner at times possibly due to a feeling of envy towards her profession and income – as in the case of the Filipina professional working in the humanitarian sector. The Algerian migrant woman recounts also a situation of humiliation within the family on behalf of her Pakistani husband's brother-in-law. In fact, she is highly critical of the strong bond that exists between mother and son in the country, and of the patrilocal custom whereby the wife is expected to move in with her in-laws and become their domestic helper. This is a cultural feature highlighted also by the Filipino migrants who married a Pakistani man. For her, the hostility of the mother-in-law contributes to domestic violence and discrimination she suffered. It is interesting to note that these are the same customs and cultural patterns that the young Somali migrant sees as insurmountable differences that would make it hard for her to marry someone in the host country. Even the Egyptian participant highlights that the responsibility placed on the bride to provide informal care and housework for the parents in law care constitutes a difference between the two countries.

Besides the patrilocal custom, these highly educated Muslim participants highlighted some minor differences such as in the weather, but in general they appreciate Pakistani people, including their food and clothes, which they consider similar to theirs, or easy to adapt to. All their country food and ingredients are to be found in Islamabad. This level of 'cultural familiarity' is understandably absent from the experiences of the two East African migrant women. Both talked about the need to adjust to the different dress code and the colder weather.

Additionally, the two East African migrants more strongly echo experiences of ethnic discrimination in a more radical way than the Algerian participant. The Ugandan professional also stated that sometimes she feels too much stared at in public, to the point that she avoids going to certain places in the city. This type of experience is shared by other African migrants; and it happens in spite of the fact that in the country there is already a community of Sub-Saharan Africans, from Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. In this respect, it is also interesting to note that the Ugandan participant reports that she finds very little knowledge of Africa and its numerous countries among Pakistani people. In UNICEF international environment where she works, however, she feels no gender discrimination whatsoever. On the contrary, she states that she appreciates 'the strong culture of embracing diversity, and of promoting the respect of women's rights' but she is also unable to infer whether this is a reflection of how women are treated in the Pakistani society or it a purely organisational culture.

4.2.1. Spatial mobility and use of the city

For some participants, Islamabad is a small and cheaper city, compared to Cairo for example, whereas it is very crowded compared to Mogadishu. Being away from her family, the Egyptian

migrant spends her free time at home in front of the TV. This is an interesting feature of the dimension of social solitude of many migrants. The Somali migrant thinks that people are less traditional in relation to some Islamic rules, for example drinking alcohol, compared to Somalia. However, in other aspects, women are considered as having more freedom and independence in Somalia, while at the same time being more observant of the local Islamic customs.



Picture 3. Rawalpindi Bazar (2022). Credit: Sobia Kapadia

Participants say that they move around the city and the country with no fear, occasionally visiting restaurants, malls, and markets. Most participants draw a picture of no ethnic or gender discrimination: quite the opposite, they revealed feeling valued and appreciated by Pakistani people who are described as helpful and friendly. All migrant women in this sub-group too are fond of their city and the country.

The Ugandan professional praises the beauty of the country and some of the locally manufactured products, up to the point that she thinks that the tourist industry should be improved and cultivated. This echoes the reflections of the German Iranian migrant (below) who also thinks that the valorisation of the cultural heritage of the country is under-developed. These observations are of relevance because they frame Pakistan as a dynamic country, which is attracting different types of migrants in different sectors. These are indicators leading to better consider Pakistan as a regional, potentially growing, hub of South-South migration flows.

Significantly, Participant 17 also highlights that the media portrait of the country does not reflect reality. Not only the fears of Pakistan as dangerous place are all disconfirmed – as several study participants have retold – but also the expectations in relation to it being an ‘underdeveloped’ country are refuted.

4.2.2. Agency and coping strategies

The three highly educated migrant women from Algeria, Egypt and Somalia demonstrated agency in the very decision-making of leaving their country of origin in order to pursue their education and working goals in the academia. They also exhibited effective advanced planning, as well as pragmatism and flexibility, while remaining firm on their own priorities. The Egyptian participant (19), for example, rejected an employment offer in Saudi Arabia because she was not allowed to bring her children with her straight away. In relation to prioritising maternal needs over the demands of the professional career, the Algerian woman exhibits strength, courage, and endurance in Pakistan. She retells changing jobs where she could obtain better conditions, while refusing other offers she was not happy with. Within her working environment, she recounts persevering in her own way of working, even at the risk of going against the direction of the school management and being fired. Thanks to a popular job recruitment platform, *rozee.pk*, she was eventually recruited in a multinational customer experience company. Additionally, in relation to her intra-familial conflicts mentioned above, she demonstrated determination in pretending ‘more respect’ from her husband’s family. In the meantime, she emphasises that she was able to move out from her in-laws’ house and city. Possibly also due to these familial conflicts, and to the more tortuous journey from one job to the other– her opinion oscillates regarding Pakistan and her choice to move here. Nevertheless, overall, she thinks that she is lucky as a woman in this country. All the other migrant women in this sub-group express being happy with their choice, and consider their migration experience as an empowering one. The Tanzanian MDW reveals how reminding herself about the underlying purpose of her very long migration trajectory gives her the strength to endure the suffering of having been away from her family and country for nearly 20 years. She also highlights with pride the respect that she receives from sponsoring two other children in her country of origin.

As described above, the migrant women involved in this study exhibit coping strategies of integrating in a new city, country, and culture, finding a balance between their own cultural identities and the norms and customs of Pakistan. In relation to the future, they have different plans, also in consideration of being at different life stages and conditions: while some are planning to go back home soon, others are open to building a life in Pakistan.

In general, the migrant workers from Africa have the idea and the dream of going back to their country of origin in order to reunite with their families or to move to other countries to pursue new job experiences and keep growing professionally. The only exception is the migrant woman (Filipina) who married a Pakistani man, who does not plan to move out of the country, but she is concentrated on an independent business project. Regardless of the different ages, life conditions, and priorities, all the participants express and exhibit a tenacious self- and sense-

making drive, allowing them to go through all the difficulties of being a migrant woman. This feature appears to be shared by all the other study participants, including those from a more privileged background, whose stories are presented in the following section, but also those of more disadvantaged conditions, such the Afghan migrant women, whose stories are covered in the last section.

4.3. *Global North migrant women*

4.3.1. *Drivers and processes of migration*

The sub-group of migrant women under the category of 'Global North' comprises four highly educated women who originate from high income countries and backgrounds, such as Canada, Germany, USA, Honk Kong and Chinese-Korean. Their choice for this country could be seen as determined by a mix of career-related reasons and personal and cultural affinities with Pakistan. Their cultural and ethnic backgrounds are diverse and multi-layered, and all four participants have experience of previous migration and/or are embedded in social and professional circuits of mobility. For Participant 6, the opportunity to migrate to Pakistan was taken because of an appealing job offer at the National College of Art, a family situation whereby she could abandon her household responsibilities as a mother – due to her kids having become adults – and a previous inclination towards the Islamic religion, to which she eventually converted. She had always worked in other Asian countries before.

The other two participants are professionals in the field of higher education. For one of them, choosing Pakistan was dictated by her marriage with a Pakistani man whom she met during a training course in the USA. Another one, an Iranian cultural mediator who had spent nearly ten years in Germany completing her PhD, was influenced by her husband's fascination for the country and by the prospect of finding a better job, in light of the greater similarities in language and culture, between Iran and the migrant communities in Pakistan. The fourth very young migrant woman (Participant 20) migrated to Pakistan due to an internship opportunity which then became a job post for an employer for which she had worked in Canada and who is also connected to her Ismaili cultural and religious community, the Aga Khan Foundation/University Hospital. The choice of migrating was in all these cases an independent one, taken in accord with the family where applicable.

As noticed above for other participants, in this sub-group family members and friends of the migrant women also had some reservations with respect to Pakistan, due to it being a Muslim country. This was because of the negative portrayal of the area during the conflicts in the Gulf Area and Islamic extremism terrorism, or because of a potential cultural clash which could be too distressing and unsolvable.

'My family had no objection to my decision of getting married to a Pakistani. I was happy with the decision to move to Pakistan and live here but my family had reservations firstly owing to the security situation and secondly, they thought I might have difficulty in adjusting to the culture and set of the

country. As parents they wanted to be safe and happy. Although I was living independently in China, but I was in the same city as my parents and could visit them as often as I wanted. By moving to Pakistan, I would not be able to frequently meet up with parents and siblings. Besides I had married a person with a totally different cultural background. They feared that I might have problems adjusting to the Pakistani family system and its demands.'

(Participant #18)

The process of migration was described by this group as smooth, apart from the case of the young Tanzanian Canadian for whom it was lengthy, complicated, and troublesome, starting from the paperwork to obtain the visa up to when she reached the country. Some of the difficulties were due to the fact that her mother is an Ismaili Tanzanian born in India and because her application occurred in a moment when the system was moving from paper-based to digital. None of the other three women reported any difficulties in the process of migration, but they all had to renew their visa regularly, even when they had resided in the country for many years. Not having the Pakistani ID card is sometimes described as an impediment, as others have also reported. One participant (6) highlighted that supposedly obtaining the permit was easier for her because she was Canadian, whereas due to institutional racism her Asian friends had more issues. Nonetheless she also thinks that there is no effort to help foreign applicants in the process. Participant 20 also expresses the opinion that some of the struggles she encountered with the system are more related to her being a foreigner rather than a woman. Interestingly, in her case, due to her somatic appearance and speaking a bit of Urdu, people would not believe or accept that she was not holding the Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC).

In relation to their life, women in this sub-group delineate a picture of equal gender rights in the different realms, from the household to the workplace, and from inheritance to financial independence and childcare. However, they are also aware of the existence of domestic violence, as well as of forms of discrimination at work and of potential risks for women in public spaces. The Chinese Korean participant also clarifies that she could finish her studies after her marriage, which therefore did not restrict her career in any way. Back home in China, she did not experience any discrimination or violence, and her current marriage with her Pakistani husband is set on very equal terms, whereby household responsibilities are jointly managed. Additionally, they enjoy the help of a cook.

4.3.2. Living and working conditions and experiences

Being a woman in Pakistan is perceived differently with respect to women's condition in their home countries. Two participants expressed the opinion that in Pakistan women are more limited and not considered/treated equal to men. With reference to their own personal experience and life as foreign women in Pakistan, participants express positive reflections and depict scenarios where they feel respected in their work environment and are professionally fulfilled and happy with their colleagues. None of them report feeling discriminated as a woman, but rather as a foreigner – according to some participants, as also seen above. The two participants with the

longer career in academia lament the existence of dynamics inherent to the academic environment, which apply to everyone, and everywhere in the field, not just to women and foreigners. The Korean Chinese notices however that there is no gender balance in her university, and she expresses having difficulties in managing students, which can be an obstacle related to cultural differences. The Tanzanian/Canadian woman highlights the existence of political factors within the university; however she was able to establish enduring positive bonds with some of her students.

In relation to coping with some cultural differences and adjustments, these women seem to have found a balanced compromise between adapting and retaining their own identities and customs. For example, in relation to food, Korean and all types of food are easily found in the markets. In relation to clothes, they all seem to retain a margin of free choice while also respecting the local dress code, which depends on specific context, such as work, the traditional market and rural areas. Some participants have made a greater effort to learn the language, such the Iranian/German, for whom learning Urdu is not only easier, but also a requirement for her career as language mediator. For the Tanzanian/Canadian it is less of an issue, because she is working in an international environment.

4.3.3. *Spatial mobility and use of the city*

The impression participants have of Pakistan as a country and of Pakistani people echoes the sentiment of the majority of interviewees. For them Pakistan is considered a very beautiful and diverse country, with a rich cultural heritage, Islamabad a beautiful city and Pakistani very kind and hospitable people.

In relation to moving around the city of Islamabad and using public transport, all these participants freely move around their cities and the country. Most of them use their own or rent a car. In terms of leisure time and social life, both the Canadian archaeologist and the Chinese-Korean linguist declare that they have little free time. However, when they can they both like to see some friends, and spend time in coffeeshops and bookstores. The latter specifies that she has never encountered any issue in public spaces because she always goes out with her husband and that also she is not inclined to an open socialisation, with her neighbours.

I always know when I miss things when I do go abroad, I do it immediately. One thing I missed is being able to walk on sidewalks and I missed going to movies and I missed spending literally hours in my favourite coffee shops, in my favourite cities. But you know I missed some restaurants but on the other hand, you know, when I am away, when I am not in Pakistan, of course, I miss everything here, so I can't win, where ever I am, I'm missing something and somebody someplace. Because my family is spread out between Canada and Northern Canada and the UK and you know my friends are all over Asia and Europe. So where ever I am, I am wishing if I am here, I sit around and thinking how much I wish I was in Holland with someone so sitting in a certain café and

watching the people go by. But if I am in Holland, then I miss it here. So, that's what happened if you set your life up this way. (Participant 6)

Instead, as the quote above highlights, another dimension of being a single woman in public spaces. It is interesting how this woman, with a life-long history of mobility, is able to encapsulate an existential dimension that can be considered typical of diasporic lifestyles as hers. This dimension is characterised by an inevitable sense of nostalgia, wherever one is, which is filled by the impossibility of being in different places and times.

4.3.4. Agency and coping strategies

Forms of agency and coping strategies in this group from the Global North are several. Expressions of agency can be found in migrant women's life before they leave their country of origin, during the journey, at arrival, in their lives in Pakistan and in their future projects. Additionally, their agency is expressed in different realms of their life, from their subjectivity to their romantic relationships and marriages, from their role as mothers/daughters, to that of workers. This sub-group share starting conditions of enhanced privilege and affluence, and higher social status – on a local and global level – which create, on paper, a larger space of freedom in decision-making. This space of freedom is enhanced because risk-taking in relation to potential negative personal or financial consequences of migration are lower. Additionally, their contexts with respect to gender norms and the condition of the woman in their countries are set on higher gender equality terms – also based on what this group of women narrated and with respect to other migrant women involved in this study. These women belong to a privileged international community and circuit of expats who have left their countries with good job contracts in their hands. The life conditions they would find in the host countries are therefore very comfortable. Both the Korean/Chinese and the Tanzanian/Canadian describe their future plans as a compromise with the partner they are tied to, affirming gender equal position within the personal sphere.

4.4. Participants from Afghanistan and Central Asia: migrants and NGOs participants

4.4.1. Drivers and processes of migration

Among the five migrant women in this group, four came from Afghanistan and one from the Central Asian country of Tajikistan. Tajikistan is an ex-USSR country separated from Pakistan by a narrow strip of Afghan land. As is known, Afghanistan is a country marked by years of severe political instability and bloody conflict which necessarily impacted the stories of the Afghan women who migrated to the neighbouring country of Pakistan. Among the four Afghan women there is however diversity in relation to the nature of the impact of the Afghan conflict on their migration. For two participants, the choice of leaving the country was directly dictated by the war.

'There were armed encounters between the Mujahideens and the Russians. That was the time when the Taliban emerged from among these Mujahideens.

The Russians suspected that my father [a highly placed bureaucrat in the foreign ministry] was a spy for the Mujahideens and gave our family a hard time.’ (Participant 3)

‘Twenty-five years back, the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan and for us survival had become difficult. My husband was beaten up twice by the Taliban for not having a beard. Life had become difficult for us and we decided to move to Pakistan out of fear and to escape from the Taliban’s insanity and strict rule.’ (Participant 4)

In another case, the motivation for the migration of the family was not clarified; possibly there were reasons related to the changes in ruling groups in the country. The fourth Afghan young migrant describes a situation where it was difficult to find a job, particularly for women who want to work in contact with the public. This situation may be attributed to the numerous extreme limitations of woman rights imposed by the Taliban governance.

*‘I was born in Iran. I lived in Iran, because of some problems in Afghanistan and then went back, but there were some family problems so we couldn’t live there or go back to Iran, so we came to Pakistan. [...] Our entire qaum [community] hides us here. No one knows we have come to Pakistan.’
(Participant 1)*

‘I lived in Kabul for a while during my graduation and I tried to find work there, but it was not very easy and I could not get a good job, you know... it did not pay well and also it was not easy... It’s easy here.’ (Participant 14)

The decision-making process to leave the country sometimes was taken at the family level, as seen above for Participants 1 and 3, alternatively it was a decision induced by her parents for the young women 14, or taken at the level of the married couple against the wishes of the husband’s family and with the support of a family member already moved to Pakistan, as in the case of Participant 4.

In the case of this last migrant woman, we can see that escaping a personal situation in the husband’s household, perceived as oppressive, was a key driver to emigrate (see more below on child marriage and women’s discrimination). Reaching consensus and eventually leaving was not a peaceful process in her case. The choice of Pakistan as a destination country was for her, and the other women too, mostly influenced and ultimately determined by practical considerations, such as the geographical proximity together with having relatives there and the possibility of easily and conveniently entering the country by land and with no or with little paperwork.

4.4.2. *Living and working conditions and experiences*

In relation to documents and permits to live and work in Pakistan, for some the lack of documents was more problematic than for others (see below, and NGOs participants below). Sharing the same religion and having acquaintances, friends, or relatives in Pakistan were additional motivations raised for choosing the country, as mentioned.

The relative ease in reaching Pakistan does not imply that the journey was easy. On the contrary, two participants entering Pakistan illegally and via non-traditional border crossing, described it as very scary, due to the conditions of the mountainous roads, the threat of being checked-in by Taliban troops, and the length of the journey without food or sleep (Participant 4 and 13).

The journey of the Tajik migrant woman was not as difficult and dramatic: she travelled by plane to Karachi and, subsequently, reached Islamabad by land. Although she never uses the term discrimination, but what she delineates resonates with a situation whereby Muslim people, despite being the actual majority, are not well accepted in her country of origin, (see discussion below and the hostility against Muslim people has worsened over the years. She initially came on a student visa, subsequently using her passport, but in the end, registered as refugees with the UN, because it has become too dangerous to go back to Tajikistan. This fact is a source of sorrow for her, because all her family, numerous siblings and her husband's family are in the home country, and they have never visited them nor has her family visited them in Pakistan. Participant 22 also had an experience of living in Iran where she studied for a year and where the language is very similar to the Tajik language – both being Farsi, one with Arabic and the other with Cyrillic alphabet. Upon her return, she had an arranged marriage and then followed her husband who was already living in Islamabad. Her reasons to migrate were therefore both personal and educational at the same time.

The stories of Participants 3 and 4 are interesting to compare because they can be taken as emblematic of two opposite poles regarding the condition of women in Afghanistan. Their migration trajectories had quite an opposite trend too, one upward, empowering and upskilling, and the other one downward and deskilling, as we will see below. Participant 4 lived in a rural, conservative context – and did not belong to the wealthy layers of society, as Participant 3. Participant 4's mobility was restricted and she could not go out alone, not even in women-only parks, or socialise with or have men as friend. She had to wear the burqa, because this was the norm in villages. 'It is totally out of question for a woman to wander out without a full head to toe covering'. Participant 3 belonged instead to the open-minded, international elite of Kabul. She was living a life of luxury and freedom. However, she emphasises that gender equality was concentrated in urban centres and in the upper layers of society where women have an education and financial independence.

In terms of overt verbal or physical violence, none of the Afghan participants reported having had any negative experience. In some cases, this can be attributed to the very protected and secluded life they were living. Domestic violence can occur in certain families, and can be also of

psychological nature, but it depends on the husband's temperament. Surely, for women is not easy to go against the men in the house, 'out of fear of their abuser and also because of societal pressure', as Participant 4 expressed.

Regarding living in her country, the Tajik woman has very good memories of the years when she was young living with her parents. She describes two interesting social phenomena. Due to the secular, communist regime that dominated her country for years as it was part of the Soviet Union, the value of equality was very strongly promoted, both in gender and economic terms. This is also why, she argues, Tajikistan families do not have domestic workers as they do in Pakistan. However, she feels that similarly to Pakistan, men and women can work alongside each other with no restrictions, but she personally chose to stay at home for the children.

With respect to her experiences in Pakistan, the Tajik refugee narrates how hard she found her initial period in Pakistan. During that time, she had to learn two languages, adapt to the new food, live in a very small apartment, and complete her BA studies while also giving birth to three children, and away from her family of origin. The support of her husband and friends was crucial for her to go through those initial challenging stages. Despite having to interrupt her education and afterwards her job as private tutor, she perceives herself as 'a family woman', as seen above, and she does not express any regret for this.

Differently from the Tajik woman who cannot visit her relatives in her home country, two Afghan women had a close relative in Pakistan. Their relatives received them on their arrival in the country and supported them in terms of accommodation, finding an employment and with the paperwork. Coincidentally, these two women are also those who describe their migration experience as successful – despite the fact that one of them had been in Pakistan for only two years at the time of the interview. Both participants reported a pathway of upskilling, growing responsibilities, and independence.

Moving from Afghanistan implied that Participant 3 had to interrupt her studies. Her family was convinced that they would return to their home country in a couple of months. Things turn out to be very different, because 20 years later she is still in Pakistan.. Despite several difficulties, however, finding an employment became necessary, yet not difficult at all according to her, both in terms of opportunities and paperwork. In the late '90s, Afghan people could more easily live and work in the country. However, Participant #3 explains that she could not access any statutory job or the state welfare system, such as health insurance. In Pakistan, there is no state welfare system or the state health insurance system for locals, let alone refugees. The Benazir Income Support Program is a very basic welfare support system, that operates on the basis of the national database, in which refugees don't qualify. The right to citizenship for the newborn is the constant debate. Despite the many years lived in the country, the family, including the children who were born in Pakistan, is struggling to obtain a residence status (see discussion below). Private companies were not concerned about permits and were focussed on productivity instead, she explained. Participant 3 changed several jobs, mainly within the telecommunication industry.

However, she grew tired of working in company offices and opted for freelance teaching and translating – Farsi, Urdu and English languages, in embassies, for the IOM, and as a private tutor. The downside of this job is that Participant 3 cannot support anybody with her scarce income:

Afghan participant 1 finds her life and work in Islamabad very difficult. She has gone through deskilling from her training in nursing, and struggled to find employment. With her sisters, she occasionally works as a beautician in a parlour and as a carpet weaver from home. She is struggling financially and workwise. Additionally, she is also the only participant who feels that she is systematically discriminated in the country as an Afghan migrant. She tells how her family is frequently victim of abuses and extortions on behalf of the local authorities. Echoing in more dramatic terms the difficulties of accessing statutory services that Participant 3 mentioned, she depicts a situation of structural discrimination by the Pakistani government against Afghan migrants and refugees. Without the ID card, she could not attend school, for example, or seek healthcare in a governmental hospital, or find an employment, as said (see section below on NGOs practitioners and further in the Discussion section). The discrimination that she perceived is however not only institutional, but also social – for reasons that she struggles to understand, and that she attributes to collective sentiments of hostility against Afghan people. For example, after 25 years living in Pakistan, Participant 4 also reports facing limitations due to lacking the ID card and being treated at times as a foreigner and that Afghans have no right to live in Pakistan. They cannot buy land or houses.

An element lacking from our interviews with the Afghan migrant women is any information in relation to the role of UNHCR, which has been relevant for the refugee community, according to the NGO Participant 2.

'Afghans are in Pakistan since the 1980s and UNHCR has done quite a lot for them. I forgot the year, but they were sent back as per repatriation policy and they had to return their POR [proof of registration] card and UNHCR gave compensation, in dollars, to return to Afghanistan. They would stay there for a while and somehow get another card and return to Pakistan. This is illegal, and UNHCR has a way to know who is living illegally here. So, they live here saying we are citizen too. So UNHCR refuses to assist them.' (NGO Participant 2)

NGO Participant 2 further describes humanitarian aid policies which are connected to the legal status of the migrants. UNHCR does not accept as beneficiaries of its projects those Afghans who received repatriation retribution, but subsequently managed to come back to Pakistan with an illegally obtained card as – this participant clarified. The UN organisation serves those refugees with a valid POR card released by the government only.

NGO Participant 3 corroborates and encapsulates the key legal issues for Afghan to integrate in the country, while also flagging the importance of language barriers and the diverse impact on their internal mobility. Importantly, NGO Participant 3 highlights the increased vulnerability to

exploitation for this community as a result of their status. The connection between legal frailty and labour exploitation is well established in the literature on refugees and undocumented migrants.

Migrant women's vulnerability is enhanced when they are already subject to other intersecting forces of oppression. Discriminating gender norms within patriarchal communities have, among others, the effect of relegating women behind domestic walls. This means that they are less easily reached by aid organisations. As NGOs Participant 2 commented, the difficulty to reach the Afghan women population in the country increases in rural areas, where their access to digital technologies of communication is very scarce. This is on top of the fact that men do not allow women to have mobile phones. The illiteracy of the beneficiaries can also be an obstacle against their involvement in the NGOs projects, which are often designed in Global North contexts of the donor and do not factor in local cultural and practical barriers. NGO Participant 2 raises other two interrelated practices: that of the dowry system and child marriage, which both create conditions for minors' exploitation and abuses. The case of Participant 4 is a good illustration of these practices (see above).



Picture 4. A woman worker manufactures a garment in a project beneficiary factory - women constitute a significant portion of the workforce in Pakistan's garment industry (2013). Credit: USAID Pakistan

The picture offered by NGO Participant 3 in relation to the types of work Afghan women engage with, when they are allowed to work, is well reflected in the stories of our interviewees, who work in sewing, as beautician and private tutoring. Overall, as a general comment with regard to the conditions of the Afghan community in Pakistan, NGO Participant 2 offers a picture of a

community struggling to reach a harmonious integration in the host country – which is understandable given the long-term, multiple issues between the two countries and around the Afghani mobility in the country, which recently further deteriorated (Shahzad 2023). Some members groups are indigent and in need of assistance, whereas other groups are stronger financially. This diversity is reflected in our sample of Afghan migrants. Unsurprisingly, institutional discrimination and neglect exist however, hitting more brutally the less affluent, even with cases of illegal arrest and deportation, according to NGO Participant 2.

4.4.3. Spatial mobility and use of the city

The obstacles to integration between the Afghan communities in Pakistan and the Pakistani government and society is reflected in the use of urban space and generally mobility and visibility of the minority group. When their legal documents are in order, members of this community feel free to move around and exhibit a sense of feeling at home in the host country. Finally, this hardship was exacerbated during the pandemic.

Participant 1 is the migrant woman who accesses public spaces and moves around the city the least which is in line with her sense of feeling unaccepted in the host country. On the contrary, the two Afghan women who have resided in Pakistan for over 20 years, describe their life in positive terms, where they are satisfied with their job and their housing, and can freely move around their city. Importantly, they recount having made friends, many of whom are Pakistani. This is also because several members of the Afghan community have emigrated elsewhere over the years, as Participant 4 mentioned. Pakistani people are considered welcoming and respectful, and the country has become their home. She feels comfortable wearing trousers and t-shirt, and she feels safe in Islamabad and socialises freely. Even if she is limited by her finances, Participant 3 occasionally goes with her friends to restaurants and shopping and also used to go to Muree for vacations. Despite the desire to be able to go back to Afghanistan, when the situation will improve there, she is also ‘happily settled here in Pakistan and have no plans of moving’ (Participant 3). The possibility of forging friendships with the neighbours is an aspect that she values positively because she did not have the same experience in Kabul. Another aspect that she highlights, when comparing Kabul to Islamabad, is that the latter is less modern, and for this, sometimes her and her family had to adapt to wearing more traditional, local clothes.

Social relations within the neighbourhood are also highlighted and valued by Participant 4, who considers Pakistan as her home, after over 20 years, and recounts having many Pakistani friends. However, the conservative norms she had been educated dictate that she does not go out by herself, apart from when walking to her parlour. This is in contrast with the younger Afghan Participant 14, who left her relative’s house and moved into a hostel where she feels more independent among many of her colleagues.

The Tajik migrant woman sketches her life in Islamabad as positive too. She has never suffered from any discrimination, and has been able to make Pakistani and Afghan friends in her neighbourhood. She has no problem going out when it is dark. However, she never goes out

alone with friends, but always with a family member. Sometimes they go to eat in the city centre, to an Afghan restaurant, where food is not very spicy and fried, and is more similar to the Tajik one, or they go to the nearby shopping mall. She can dress in the same way as she was doing in Tajikistan, with her scarf. The authorities sometimes come to check on them, because they are foreigners, but they have never experienced any troubles. Overall, she is happy in Pakistan, mainly because her children are able to study within the Muslim faith. The religious component evidently plays a fundamental role in her life as Islam was the reason for her and her husband to leave Tajikistan.

4.4.4. Agency and coping strategies

The Tajik participant is not seen as a foreigner, but a Pashtun. This can be interpreted as a sign of their level of integration in the host country. For the other three participants in this sub-group, the decision to leave their country was more a family one, and sometimes even a forced choice. However, their agency and coping strategies are visible in the realms of their job and social life. Despite her social status downgrading, Participant 3 pursued a job that could grant her more freedom as a freelancer, and she has cultivated a lively social life. In fact, she has made good friends, not only with her neighbours, but also by participating in the activities of the Afghan community. Significantly, she recounts an event which could be interpreted as one of institutional discrimination against the Afghan community by Pakistani authorities. The act of closing down the community centre may be interpreted within the framework of wanting to curb the 'isolationism' of the Afghan minority group. One could also read the closing down of the Afghan community centre in the context of the long-term accusations of the Afghan community hosting terrorists that organize bomb attacks (Noor 2006). Surely, such an act would further increase the community resistance to better integrate in the county.

Participant 14 also pursued her independence by leaving her uncles' house in Islamabad. Participant 1, despite all her expressed challenges and intense homesickness, makes the effort to socialise with her neighbours. She pursued online training and a job from home too, while hoping that things will improve. Finally, the Tajik woman recalls how her sentiment of loneliness could be overcome by sticking to the purpose of her migration to Pakistan, which was to study. In fact, she managed to complete her BA while having three children and living in a very small flat. Her plans are to go back to Tajikistan, but these have to wait until some of her children complete their education, so that they do not have to repeat years of schooling. She has never received a visit from her family, and as a way of coping with her feeling of longing for her home country and family, she expresses finding some solace in calling her family every day.

4.5. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

As literature has demonstrated (Foley and Piper 2020), the pandemic unveiled and deepened pre-existing socio-cultural and gender inequalities. Migrant women in general did not have governmental support as the Pakistani did, and the health care they received was far less supportive. In our sample, the impact of COVID-19 varied according to the type of work migrant

women undertook. For some MFDWs, as it happened to many around the world too (Foley and Piper 2020), the workload increased considerably, for others instead the situation remained unchanged, because their employer let them leave the house and their contract was protected. However, the threat of losing their job was nonetheless a worry. Additionally, for some MDWs ending the contract with an employer that they found exploitative became more difficult due the pandemic.

'My first employers were not nice. Because they are not giving my salary on time, ma'am. In my last two months, they didn't give me my salary. That's why I complained to the agency. And overworked also, until 3 am and until dawn, we were working. It was not easy to end the contract, because of the pandemic. They give them one month notice so that they can get me the money from my previous employer. [...] Now, it's very normal because my employer allowed me to go out. But I will just be careful: wear a mask and use sanitiser and go home at night. Yes, I was scared to lose my job, that's why I'm doing my job very good.' (Participant 15)

The founder of the Community Organisation however expressed concern for a situation whereby many Filipino migrant workers were instead at high risk of losing their jobs. She also emphasised the issue of those MDWs who were not allowed out of the house and could not enjoy a proper day off for months. Others had restricted hours of rest and holiday, where their mobility within the city and ability to go back to the Philippines were also reduced. The Tanzanian MDW describes her conditions as being similar to being in prison, despite remaining grateful that she kept receiving her salary.

The Afghan migrant woman (Participant 4) who managed the beauty parlour had to close it down for a period and she reported a drastic reduction of clients and hence income, whereby she had to resort to some extreme measures, such as selling her gold ring. The other Afghan woman who suffered a substantial income loss proportional to the loss of clients was that one working in private tuition who was already struggling financially, even prior to the crisis. Participant #3 managed to survive because she was living with her extended family, who also was in greater difficulty due to not receiving the rent from the properties in Kabul. Small vendors, vegetable sellers, etc. within the Afghan community were badly affected economically by the pandemic. Pakistani citizens had assistance such as Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme, but Afghan didn't have access to such programs (NGO Participant 1.) From this sub-group, the Tajik woman was also impacted financially, because her husband's teaching as well as his bakery business suffered. Additionally, she quit private tutoring and took care of teaching her four children.

The African and Global North migrant women, who for the most part worked in higher education, also recounted that the pandemic did not affect them in excessively negative ways. For the Chinese-Korean woman having to teach online entailed initially more work, but was also more enjoyable. The Somali migrant, initially lost her salary, but then classes were moved online, and

she could continue teaching. The Egyptian woman (19) continued having her full salary too, while working less. However, she expresses being impacted psychologically, with respect to being forced to remain distant from her family members – similarly to the Algeria participant who could not in fact attend her father’s funeral ceremony, a source of great sorrow. Finally, two professionals highlighted the negative impact that the pandemic had on their relationship with their co-workers. Due to remote working, the socialization aspect of teamworking had to cease, negatively affecting motivation and a sense of enjoyment and leisure.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to enriching the existing literature on migration to and within the South from a critical gender lens (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Kofman 2020). Gendered labour migration, both immigration and emigration, in Pakistan is an understudied phenomenon in academic research and policy discourses. Though our sample is not representative of the diverse population of women migrants and their experiences, nonetheless, some important points of discussion have emerged from this research.

In general, this study has offered insights into the nature of gendered migrations in the South which includes the overlooked group of qualified and skilled women, and not just MDWs (Izaguirre and Walsham 2021); the relationship between the formal situation of employment and actual experiences, especially for MDWs; initiatives to improve conditions, forms of activism and agency, including serial migration as a means of improving conditions of work and income (Silvey and Parreñas 2020). Further interesting features also emerged from the study and include: less stereotypical and more diversified and dynamic profile of Afghan women migrants and refugees; the experience of upwards social mobility, including among Filipino MDWs; former FSU and African countries with highly-educated Muslim women migrating to work in higher education and international humanitarian organisations.

Research on the use of the SIGI to study migration (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015; Ruysen and Salomone 2018) has argued that the SIGI is important in identifying the causes of migration beyond the purely economic and for women this is shaped by discriminatory practices. The group of MDWs, who were mainly Filipina, with the addition of a Tanzanian, moved due to financial drivers. Most of them, in fact, wanted to find either a job – if they were housewives in their country of origin – or a better paid one, highlighting the lack of opportunities. Most of them had children and providing for them was the chief motivation behind seeking a higher income. Other personal motivations included the desire to escape an unhappy marriage. Recruitment agencies recommended Pakistan as a convenient move, constituting an opportunity for the poorest women with the chance to migrate, which was previously not possible due to their lack of financial means. Their movement was facilitated by state intervention through bilateral agreements and managed through recruitment agencies (Wee et al., 2019). This specific corridor has received little academic (Shahid 2015) and media attention (Rehman 2013) in Pakistan, but clearly fits within well-established scholarship about international domestic service and

transnational families – whereby more and more Filipino parents and children live apart (Parreñas 2005). T

The sub-group of the Afghan women, with the addition of the Tajik one, gives a sense of the history and changing dynamics of Afghan and ex-USSR countries nationals' mobility in and out of Pakistan, around the region and beyond. The presence of family members in the country prior to 1980's and kin and friends migrating to other countries seem to speak to that dimension of transnational living of the community which collides with the more recent politicised figuration of Afghans' protracted displacement in the country (Mielke and Etzold 2022). Gender-based discrimination rooted in social norms (such as those normalising child marriage, or the difficulty of finding the desired employment out of the house, and that have been exacerbated by the Taliban regime (Amnesty International, 2022; ILO, 2022) is a key driver of migration. However, our group of participants shows also how these gender discriminatory practices are not ubiquitous in the country, and that, particularly in urban areas, and at least before the rise of the Taliban (Sirat 2022), there was an international elite, where women could enjoy their rights, such as education and financial independence. The case of the Tajik participant represents religious discrimination systematically perpetrated by the ruling government in her country of origin (Thibault 2018) which can be contextualised within the framework of religious migration (Beckford 2019). Her story further reflects historic circuits of migration shaped by very region-specific factors, such as language and religious education, beyond the more studied economic hub of Saudi Arabia, or in other South contexts (Izaguirre and Walsham 2021).

The two sub-groups of the African and 'Global North' migrant women participating in this study share some important socio-demographic features, such as their high level of education and sectors of employment (academia and international humanitarian industry), as well as higher socio-economic status. For women of African origin, it is interesting to note that literature on this regional flow of migration for educational purposes is virtually absent (Sondhi and King 2017). Our research in Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey also highlights the diversity of professional migration from the North and neighbouring countries. It is relevant to note that, for the Muslim African migrant women, the cultural and religious resonance with Pakistan, as an appropriate context for their own and their children's education/upbringing played an important role in their choice of mobility, together with the family approval, where this applies. This speaks to the importance of looking more critically at the role of cultural affinity in South-South women migration.

The education migration choice of these women is also in line with the evidence that women's education is not only catching up with males, but also surpassing it (Buckner 2013; Ouadah-Bedidi 2018). Educated women are migrating to a greater extent than men and now constitute just over 50% of educated migrants (Dumitru 2017). However, our participants suggest that the academic career in their country of origin is difficult to pursue, due to discriminatory factors, such as high study fees and a corruption (Rajab 2021) – this is again in line with SIGI dimensions as drivers of migration. Interestingly, migrant women in this study expressed that, in particular, the

disciplinary area of Islamic Studies in Pakistani universities has a good reputation in the Muslim region. This casts light on an understudied migrant group, that of foreign students studying in Pakistani universities, especially medical colleges (Cibea et al. 2013). These corridors of education migration can be contextualised within positive international relations between Pakistan and the sending countries, which normally goes hand-in-hand with the presence of migrant communities, as it is the case for Egyptians and Somalis in Pakistan (Cibea et al. 2013). Such corridors may also arise from or intersect with previous flows of conflict migration to Pakistan as with Somalis, who from the '90s with the start of the civil war and again in the 2010s with the Islamist insurgency in their country, sought asylum in countries, including Pakistan, and subsequently moved again to other countries (Fakhr 2012; Mussadaq 2012). The complexities of Somalis in Pakistan probably apply to other circuits.

Interestingly, among the group of the Global North professionals, two constitute intricate cases of South-North-South trajectories. The Chinese-Korean and the German-Iranian women both acquired higher education in a high-income country, USA and Germany respectively, and then moved to Pakistan for partially similar reasons, that is to follow their husbands. The German-Iranian woman's migration trajectory seems to speak more to a migration rooted in structural difficulties to fully integrate and professionally flourish in the high-income country, as a study on high-skilled Iranian refugee women in the Netherlands has shown (Ghorashi 2021). The Chinese-Korean migrant moved to Pakistan because she married a Pakistani man while both were studying in the USA. Virtually, no literature currently available investigates the phenomenon of Pakistani men marrying Chinese or South-Asian women, while media coverage is increasing about Pakistani women trafficked and/or married to Chinese men (S. Khan 2021; The Associated Press 2021). This phenomenon – on which hardly any academic evidence exists – is nested within the well-established flow of the male Chinese labour force in the numerous China-funded development projects in Pakistan (Cibea et al. 2013).

The sub-group of highly skilled participants in the International humanitarian industry and the intersection of academia and third sector are representative of South-South and North-South mobility of professionals who move for career aspirations and other family and personal factors for which studies are lacking (González Ramos and Torrado Martín-Palomino 2015). Our study suggests that a mix of personal and career drivers are at play, however the experiences of the international elite (Fassin and Pandolfi 2013) would need to be better understood to gain insights into how they negotiate their privileged global status and gender position with local norms and expectations. Tensions may arise linked to cultural clashes, with respect to gender and job position of power. Some participants reported instances of ethnic discrimination, sexual harassment, or an intersection of job status and foreignness discrimination. Previous work with Western women development workers in the North of the country has been unique in arguing that Global North-South, post-colonial hierarchies run along clothing and racialised sexualities (Cook 2005; 2006). Western women, as in this study, choose what to wear to establish spaces and places of inclusion and differentiation from the local Muslim women (Cook 2005).



Picture 4. Chinese trucks await custom clearance at city of Sost, Pakistan. Beginning of CPEC (2017). Credit: Szebkhani

Not many studies have explored the decision making processes of highly- skilled migrants, in relation to their family life, housing, future plans of migration, whether to return or to move to other countries (Kōu and Bailey 2014). One of the few studies on the life-course of highly skilled migrants highlighted that these are linked to their agency, depending on their age, ‘feeling of fulfilment and ideas about emancipation’ – in addition to other social conditions surrounding them, such career options and families (González Ramos and Torrado Martín-Palomino 2015). The Canadian older adult migrant woman, for example, waited until her children had grown up, before seeking a job opportunity in Pakistan and fulfilling her desire to convert to Islam. A better understanding of high-skilled migrants life-course trajectories is needed to assess their impact on the hosting countries, their own families, and the global labour markets, and how policies can support this group better (Bailey and Mulder 2017).

Significantly, gender-based discrimination is not openly reported by the migrant women workers participating in this study. Nearly all describe their living and working conditions in Pakistan in positive terms. Besides the MDWs, a recurrent issue reported is the challenging system in relation to their legal status, which poses several and continuing challenges to obtain and renew their permit. Many migrant workers provide instances of obstacles that they encountered in their daily life because they were not in possession of the national ID card. As the socio-demographic profiles of the participants suggest, there is considerable variation, however, in life and job conditions and experiences.

The only two cases of post-migration upskilling are those of two Filipina women both of whom have BAs, who went from being MDWs to establishing her own business of a job agency (hiring

MFDWs) or became a swimming coach in the school of her children (shared with the Pakistani husband). In Pakistan, MDWs constitute a small group, whose numbers have grown in the past two decades as they have become a status symbol with upper middle- and upper-class employers. Though with contracts, relatively well paid, reasonable accommodation and a day off, they did not enjoy protection from general labour laws. However, they were able to change employers more easily than MDWs in a kafala system, either by complaining directly to recruitment agencies or requesting assistance from their community organisation in Pakistan or an agency in the Philippines. Finally, in our sample, MDWs were all Christian and moving to a Muslim country – a diversity that created some initial reservations in the migrants.

The COVID-19 pandemic differently affected the living and working conditions of the migrant women in this study. The impact of COVID-19 varied according to the type of work migrant women undertook. It ranged from the possibility of loss or severe reduction of income for those with businesses, being forced to stay inside or working remotely, especially for the professionals' group. For some MFDWs (Foley and Piper 2020), the workload increased considerably, for others instead the situation remained unchanged, because their employer let them leave the house and their contract protected. However, the threat of losing their job was nonetheless a worry, and for all participants the pandemic had a negative impact on their overall wellbeing, also due to the impossibility of travelling to the families of origin, for example.

Migrant women's use of public spaces is an important key to interpreting and understanding the their position in the host societies and their level of integration (Calliol 2018; Schmoll 2019; Kofman 2024). For MDWs their process of acquainting with the host country and 'going out' to public spaces is filtered by the family they live with, and, to a certain extent, necessarily hampered by their home-based work, in which the boundaries between private and work life are blurred. Compared to the Ethiopian MDWs in Lebanon – who declared that they did not go anywhere, had no social life and attended no social events (Bechtold et al. 2022) – Filipina MDWs have a far greater 'spatial capability'. Not only have they established associations which organise events and celebrations, they also use their Sundays to go to restaurants, malls and to church. Increasingly, literature is paying attention to the importance of the role of migrant women in moulding the city's life (Xulu-Gama 2022) and the extent of their independent mobility, both at the local and at the international level, back and forth their home countries. For forced migrants, it is also important not to adopt a homogenising conception of their perception and capacity for spatial mobility and consider how this is affected by class position (Hunkler et al. 2022), as we have seen among Afghan refugees.

In contrast, there are the high-skilled migrant women, who live in expats' gated blocks and enjoy a life of restaurants and beauty salons as clients, and for whom the working experience in Pakistan constitutes an up-grading of their international working experience in their CVs. All these nuances and experiences are largely overlooked in the literature. Paradoxically, privileged groups are more spatially restricted, confined to places 'better suited' for the international community of expats (Tuncer and Ceren Eren-Benlisoy 2023). These urban spaces, which often

are physically delimited, like the gated blocks – only partially overlap with those of the local elites. In parallel, some places, like local markets, are forbidden to them, due to attraction that their foreignness causes. It is also interesting that only the Global North migrants mention reservations regarding the security situation which could be read against the framework of discourses of the northern rhetoric of insecurity. Often, international humanitarian workers are indeed ‘on the go’, following the next good opportunity, either horizontally – in another Global South country – or vertically, higher up in the professional ladder (Farah 2020). framing their whole life within a permanent mobility. Hence, they may remain ‘out-of-touch’ and segregated from the hosting society. Alternatively, they become respected outsiders, in a way that they feel they could not be in Global North countries. This is the case of the older adult Canadian woman, whose story points to the need to better understand the shifting ways in which intersectional discrimination is perceived and varies between the Global North and South, and across cultures. Her story also raises the importance of considering more closely the emotional dimensions of protracted distance from home, also among migrant categories different from those forcibly displaced (Lijtmaer 2022). Interestingly, in her case, the nostalgic ‘creation of “home”’ (Zulueta 2017) refers to and encompasses some specific places/dimensions scattered across all the countries she had lived in.

A better gendered understanding of international migration and collection of disaggregated data is necessary if we want to improve the working and living conditions of diverse groups of migrant women, enable them to become empowered through the migration process, develop appropriate support mechanisms and contribute to sustainable development goals such as gender equality, decent work and orderly migration. Little is currently known about the significance of women migrants and their incorporation in the Pakistani labour market across a range of sectors and skills, both formally and informally. Unlike the recent survey of women emigrants from Pakistan (Khan 2020), we have not been able to turn to a more comprehensive picture of contemporary gendered migrations into the country. This absence may reflect the assumption that most countries in the Global South are not attractive to regular migrants as students, workers or family members. We would therefore recommend that further studies of diverse groups of women migrants and their incorporation into the labour market in Pakistan and their working and living conditions be conducted. As we have shown, their presence in the labour market may be due to different drivers – employment, family, displacement. Their status may change over time, shifting from marriage to studying and working or being displaced and then entering the labour market. These complexities together with the different regions of origin are all to be found in women migrants in the labour market in Pakistan. Our study has also shown how migrant women can be agents of change, both of their gender pre-migration position, and of their post-migration gender expectations of the host society. Insights in these gender dynamics are again particularly missing from South-South gender migration studies.

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7. Appendix 1. Legal Framework and Implementation for Labour Migrants

1. In Pakistan, Emigration ordinance (1979) and Emigration Rules (1979) are the primary legal framework which is responsible for safeguarding the rights of overseas workers and regulating the activities of overseas employment promoters or recruiting agents. Overseas employment is regulated under Section 8 of the Emigration Ordinance.
2. The Emigration Ordinance (1979) establishes guidelines and protocols for licensing, recruitment, and protection of workers against malpractice, and for the redress of workers' grievances.
3. The BEOE is the central organization for regulating the export of manpower from Pakistan. It was established in 1972 under a presidential order to regulate overseas employment on a planned and systematic basis and to safeguard the interests of migrant workers
4. The Director General BEOE, the Protector of Emigrants, and the Community Welfare Attachés are the three pillars of the Emigration Ordinance. They play an important role in enforcing the Ordinance's provisions governing the recruitment of workers for employment abroad. They deal with issues such as the protection of workers' rights while working abroad and abuses by overseas employment promoters, agencies and employers.
5. Pakistan must explore ways to regularise and regulate the status of the existing irregular migrant population. UNODC recommends to the Government, in cooperation with UNHCR to find long-term solutions for the Afghan population in Pakistan, particularly as the Proof of Registration Cards for 1.6 million Afghans expired on 30 June 2013. In addition, with UN assistance, the Government should also find solutions for the combined Bengali, Bangladeshi, and Burmese population, including stateless people.

There are strict criteria applied by the Government of Pakistan for licencing to private recruitment agencies and overseas employment promoters. Numerous formalities must be completed by an applicant, before a license is granted, including; police clearance, verification of character, experience and certificates on financial soundness. Past records are verified to check for possible criminal involvement. Applicant must provide government fees and financial guarantees alongside a list of documents including; Proof of nationality, i.e. attested copies of National Identity Card (NADRA), for the applicant and all business/work partners (three copies); Conduct certificate for the proprietor, partner and director, from the District Coordination Officer (one original and two photocopies); Certificate of Registration which shows National Tax Number; Bio-data of the applicant and each partner and director, showing date and place of birth, occupation, educational qualifications, telephone number, permanent and present addresses; a requisite for bio-data of father/husband for the applicant and the partner; Three, duly attested, specimen signatures for that person (three copies); Name, address and telephone number of two respectable individuals holding a responsible position and having known the applicant for five

years; Bank Certificate confirming the financial soundness of the applicant; Five passport-sized photographs of the applicant and each partner, all duly attested. Proposed name of the firm/recruiting agency (in triplicate); Bank accounts and transaction statements of the account in the name of applicant/each partner for the last three years.

The Protector of Emigrants maintains close monitoring of different activities of relevant overseas employment promoters and agents. Overseas employment promoters and agents are also encouraged to boost the export of manpower from Pakistan through legal channels. Good conduct and legal bindings are rewarded annually with incentives, such as best performance awards and trophies.

Pakistan is a party to the 1948 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention (No. 87) and the 1949 Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention (No. 98). Despite being a party to these two significant conventions, there are no unions or any other organisations that provide support and protection to workers. In Pakistan, for instance, Article 17 of the Constitution provides for the fundamental right to exercise the freedom of association and the right to form unions, but this constitutional right has been restricted as the minimum number required to form a union is 40

8. Appendix 2. Laajverd's Feminist Ethics Code, Safeguarding Principles and the Codes of Research Conduct

In order to uphold our commitment to a feminist ethics, we will:

1. Be attentive to, and work towards overcoming, power inequalities and inequitable gender dynamics within and among research partners.
2. Adhere to the highest ethical standards in our research design and practice, knowledge
3. Production, knowledge dissemination, impact and capacity building work must be attentive to the risk it may generate for researchers as well as research participants or organisations.
4. Communicate in ways that are positive and respectful, that promote or support the participation of people whose voices are often marginalised and that allow a diversity of points of view to be expressed.
5. Be respectful of the social, cultural, religious and political contexts of the field sites that we visit and our actions must be appropriate for these contexts.
6. Engage in open and honest discussion about concerns or difficulties as soon as possible after they arise.
7. Monitor our practices according to our ethics as well as our objectives.

Field work Management & ethics

1. Carefully read the Field Research Package before embarking upon field work as you must abide by the code of conduct and follow certain procedures while conducting each method.
2. Check if you have the recording devices (dictophone, smartphone, camera) and these are sufficiently charged to carry out the planned fieldwork activity.
3. Pre-plan and pre-schedule fieldwork with research participants and upon entering a locality, look for safe, accessible and quiet place to carry out field research. At no point should this fieldwork harm any community member or the locality.
4. Introduce and explain the project to the research participants before you get the consent form signed and start the field research activity.
5. Get participant consent forms filled by each participant that takes part in the research focus groups and mapping exercise. These should be filed according to location and focus group number.
6. At no time should you photograph community members without their consent. For landscape photography consent is not required; photos of locality and landscapes are only permissible if persons within it are not recognisable, picture is taken at a distance or persons faces are intentionally blurred.

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