Original Research

Urbanization and Its Impact on Traditional Family Structures in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background: Family structures have been drastically transformed globally because of the process of urbanization and Pakistan reflects this. However, with urban areas growing bigger and constituents finding that modern demands require resources that joint families can't provide, traditional family systems like joint families are changing.

Objective: This thesis examines the effect of urbanization on family structures in Pakistan specifically in terms of the differences between the extended and nuclear family's systems, changing intergenerational relationships and the role of the economic, spatial and cultural forces.

Methods: Research draws upon the mixed methods technique by using the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews in gauging the developing dynamics in urban family life in the major cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad.

Results: Results indicate a marked decline in joint family systems and about 66percent of respondents lived in a nuclear family. As the generation gap is growing, intergenerational bonds have weakened and cultural conflicts between generations have increased, especially among the younger than older generations who increasingly adopt individualistic values. Major contributing factors to these changes are economic constraints, housing limitations and technological advancements.

Conclusion: The results of this study underscore the requirement of policy interventions in urban housing, family support systems and community social engagement for combating the negative impacts of these transformations and keeping the social fabric of families intact in Pakistan. Findings also hint at more research into the long-term implications of urbanization in terms of familial relationships and digital media's role in reshaping family interactions.

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest social changes of the 21st century is urbanization, a massive shift by rural populations to urbanizations, thereby altering landscapes and lifestyles (Anestis & Stathakis, 2024; Hoffmann et al., 2023). Rapid urban expansion in developing countries such as Pakistan has resulted in deep transformations not only in economical and infrastructural planes but it also shaped economic and infrastructural transformations as well as cultural and familial patterns and activities (Mughal 2023). Pakistani society was once built upon the old traditional family, but under the pressures and promises of urban life, the family's true definition has changed (Rice & Quan, 2023). Socially speaking, the country is undergoing an unprecedented transition from joint to nuclear family system; redefined gender roles; generational differences and the changing family values (Wilson et al., 2024; Mehdi, 2024).

According to Arashad et al. (2022) and Zafar (2024), the rate of urbanization in Pakistan and particularly in the province of Sindh has been steadily on the rise for the past several decades. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics indicates that whereas currently more than 36% of the population resides in urban areas, this number is expected to rise exponentially (Aziz & Anwar, 2024; Mehmood et al., 2022). Not only is this a demographic shift, but we have also seen changing employment patterns, educational opportunities, social mobility and the ways that people choose to live their lives (Kalemba, et al., 2022; Molina Caminero & McGarrigle, 2023). Urbanization has been the driving force of economic growth and modernization in Pakistan which, on the other hand, has tested the very fundamentals of centuries old norms and values of Pakistani society to the extreme (Mughal, 2023; Nasir, 2024).

The joint family system has been a legacy of Pakistani culture (Shafiq, 2024; Bilal, 2024). In this multiple generations live under one roof essentially a system that gives emotional, financial and social support (Van Gasse & Wyninckx, 2024; Souralová, 2022). Usually grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts and cousins all live together in one place, creating a very tight community where that sense of belonging and continuity is very visible (Savage, 2024). In such families, there is a sharing of responsibilities, children are raised collectively and their elderly members looked after during old age (Smith et al., 2022). It is seen as a source of longterm resilience and social capital (Tanner et al., 2022).

But urbanization means space, independence and flexibility, all of which can be at odds with the ideal of the joint family (Hua et al., 2024). In a situation where people are moving to cities in search of education or employment, the practicalities of urban living—the high rent, cramped apartments and the demanding work schedule render the joint family system untenable (Fritzsche, 2023). Therefore, nuclear families, those made up of only parents and children, are becoming ever more common (Amorim & Deming, 2022; Kuhnt & Passet-Wittig, 2022). This deviation away from the traditional is a significant step that also has both positive and negative ramifications (Luo, 2024).

HIGHLIGHTS	
Research insights	The study reveals that urbanization significantly alters Pakistan's traditional family structures, reducing joint families, weakening intergenerational bonds, and promoting individualistic values due to economic and spatial pressures.
Practical insights	Policymakers should strengthen urban housing initiatives, develop family support systems, and promote community engagement to mitigate the adverse social impacts of shrinking joint family structures.
Industry insights	Urban development and housing industries must consider social implications of family structure shifts, ensuring designs and policies foster intergenerational connection, affordability, and community-oriented living environments.

On the other, nuclear families often provide more privacy, autonomy and individual freedom. For young couples, it may be less difficult to make independent decisions, as extended relatives can help keep boundaries (Monteiro, 2022). Where urban living may also promote more egalitarian gender roles, giving women improved access to education and employment (Van der Horst, 2024). It shows that modern parenting styles that accentuate individuality and psychological development of the child can be beneficial to those reared under nuclear families.

However, if the joint family structure gets eroded, there could be a dent in the intergenerational kin bonds and a decrease in the support network that the extended kin have long been accustomed to (Funk, 2022). Elderly parents can become isolated or subject to external care. Nuclear families are struggling with balancing the duties of childcare and career without grandparents or family members (Bai et al., 2023). In addition, traditional emotional as well as moral guidance formerly provided by elders may be lost and arise a sort of rootlessness or identity confusion in younger generations.

In addition, the cultural and religious values surrounding family life are affected by urbanization (Yeganeh, 2024). Individuals from urban settings such as towns and cities may experience a change in their perception towards marriage, relations between men and women, child-rearing and family responsibilities in case of exposure to diverse worldviews, consumerist lifestyles and modern standards (Bansal, 2022). Such exposure makes for progress and tolerance, but can also create value conflicts between the generations and in families where the generation of older people is attached to conservative traditions.

Urban stressors, including job insecurity, social isolation, housing shortages and fast lifestyles, may also put tremendous strain on family relationships (Percudani et al., 2024). A rise in domestic conflicts, divorces and mental health issues in urban households further illustrates the complicated interaction between urbanization and maintaining familial stability (Gao et al., 2024).

These transformations have tremendous implications in Pakistan, where the family is more than a private unit — it is a cultural and religious institution (Mansab, 2024). Policymakers, social workers, educators and communities need to understand how traditional family structures are being reshaped by urbanization (Chen & Li, 2024). It demands a balanced view that acknowledges the necessity of modernization as well as maintenance of the basic values of unity of family, respect for elders and interdependence.

The aim of the paper is to investigate the far reaching influence of urbanization on the traditional family structures of Pakistan. Drawing upon sociological theories, census data and real life case studies, it will examine how urban life impacts family composition, relationships, roles, values. This evolving dynamic is intended to be understood more profoundly, in order to propose what can be done to better adapt to change whilst maintaining cultural integrity.

METHODOLOGY

This study conducts a research using the mixed method research design that is a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods for a better understanding of how the urbanization is affecting the traditional family structures in Pakistan. On the quantitative side, it includes statistical trends and measurable changes in the structures of families. And then it includes, on the qualitative side, it covers people's personal experiences, cultural shifts, etc which can't be numerically captured.

Hence, the study deals with urban centers of Pakistan, like Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad and Peshawar, where the urbanization is very much felt. The focus cities are a combination of diverse ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds which permits an understanding of the intricacies of the impact of the urban setting on family systems.

The population of study comprises of married people, parents, elderly family members and young adults (ages 18–65) who are living in nuclear and joint families. Sample consists of individuals that have migrated from rural areas to urban centers in the last 20 years as well as those born and brought up in urban locations.

To include individuals from joint and nuclear family systems as well as from varying socioeconomic classes (low, middle and upper income), a purposive sampling technique is used. Moreover, qualitative interviews use snowball sampling to identify people with valuable insights or interesting experience in the transition from traditional to urban family setting.

Three hundred people are selected for the quantitative survey and twenty in-depth interviews for the qualitative one.

A structured questionnaire was developed to gather quantitative data from several key sections covering as much information as possible. Demographic details as age, gender, education, income and city of residence is what the questionnaire begins with. It also asks questions on family structure, indicating between the nuclear and joint family and duration of urban stay, with a view to reference the exposure to urbanization. Subsequent sections are intended to elicit respondent's perceptions of shifts in family roles, support systems and values and the implications of these shifts on intergenerational relationships and caregiving patterns. The survey is administered online as well as on a face to face basis to ensure maximum reach and inclusivity.

Qualitative Data Collection

Semi structured interviews are also conducted with selected participants to expore deeper insights into how urbanization affect traditional family values and relationships. These are open ended questions to illicit more detailed and personal responses. Prompts involved questions like, 'How has living in an urban environment changed the structure of your family', 'Are joint families still practical in today's cities', 'What challenges have you come across on the path of upholding the older set of values' and 'How has your role within the family changed over time'. Interviews take about 30 to 45 minutes and are recorded with the participants permission to be able to collect and analyze data.

Quantitative Analysis

SPSS software is used for the analysis of quantitative data. Participant characteristics and family structures are summarized using descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentage). Chi-square tests, correlation analysis and other inferential statistics are used to explore the relationships between changes in family systems and being an urban dweller.

Thematic analysis is used to analyse the qualitative data generated from interviews. Transcripts are reviewed with care and the recurring themes are coded. Loss of intergenerational bonding, increase in independence, gender role transformation and conflict between tradition and modernity may be among the themes that emerge. The goal of analysis is to deliver rich, narrative grounded information about the sociocultural facets of urbanization.

Ethical Considerations

The study maintains ethical integrity all through. Informed consent is obtained from each participant after informing them the purpose of the study. Names and personal identifiers are not included in the final report and confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed. Withdrawal of participants from the study is allowed at any time with no adverse consequences.

Limitations of the Study

This would result in findings that may not be applicable to all regions of Pakistan but will especially exclude remote rural areas that were not part of the sample. The sensitive nature of family related questions may cause response bias. Interview scope and geographic diversity may be limited by resource constraints and time constraints.

RESULTS

It conducts a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews to assess the effect of urbanization on the traditional family structure in

Pakistan and presents the results in the present chapter. Findings are partitioned into two major sections: (1) Quantitative Results and (2) Qualitative Insights.

Three hundred respondents were used for the survey. Below are summarized key demographic and family structure details.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	162	54.0%
Female	138	46.0%
Age Group		
18–30	104	34.7%
31–50	138	46.0%
Above 50	58	19.3%
Marital Status		
Married	214	71.3%
Unmarried	86	28.7%
Family Type		
Joint Family	102	34.0%
Nuclear Family	198	66.0%

**Table 2: Duration of Urban Living vs. Family Type**

Duration in Urban Area	Joint Family (%)	Nuclear Family (%)
< 5 years	40 (39.2%)	62 (31.3%)
5–10 years	32 (31.4%)	88 (44.4%)
> 10 years	30 (29.4%)	48 (24.3%)

Interpretation: Individuals who have lived in urban areas for longer periods are more likely to adopt a nuclear family structure.

Table 3: Perceptions of Change in Family Dynamics (Likert Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)

Statement	Mean Score
"Urbanization has weakened intergenerational bonds."	4.2
"Joint families are harder to maintain in cities."	4.4
"Urban life promotes individualism over collectivism."	4.3
"Technology has replaced physical family interactions."	4.0

Figure: 1
Figure: 2

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Mean Score
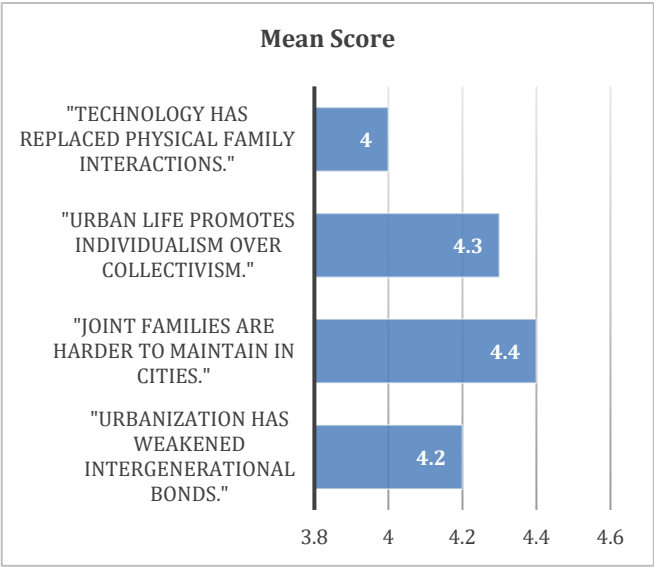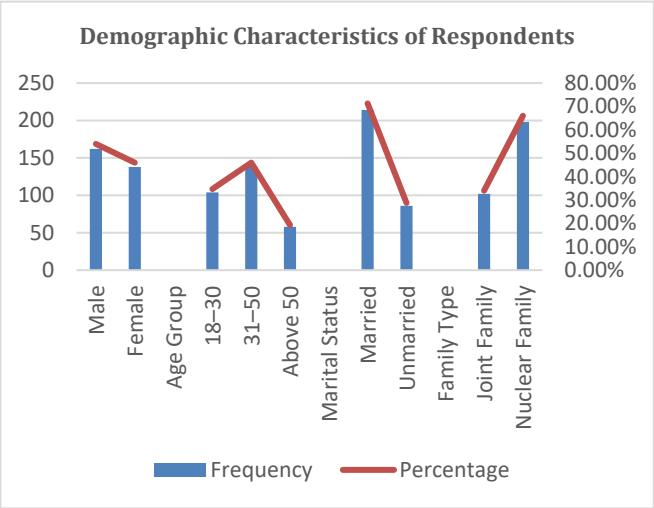
Chi-Square Test: Family Type vs. Perceived Family Support

Variables	χ² Value	df	p-value
Family Type × Family Support	8.62	1	0.003**

Family Type × Family Support
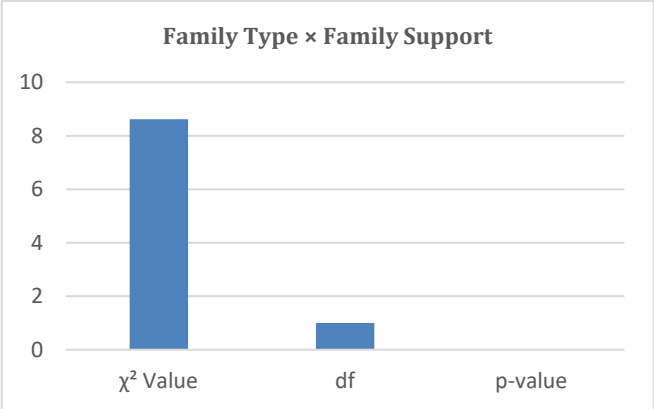
Interpretation: A statistically significant relationship exists between family structure and perceived support, with joint families reporting higher emotional and caregiving support.

Qualitative Insights
To deepen this understanding a total of twenty in-depth interviews that explore how traditional family structures and values are

influenced by foreign elements of urbanization were conducted. The interview data was thematically analyzed, uncovering a few key things. Participants discussed how demands of living in cities such as job mobility and independence are aggravating the weakening of traditional family hierarchies and roles of caregiving. They noted that the involvement of elders had fallen off dramatically and family interactions took place primarily around holidays and special occasions. 'Earlier, we used to live with grandparents,' said one respondent. Now it's just me, my wife and kids. Male (42, Islamabad), also said that 'there is no bond with elders except during holidays.'

High rent, transportation costs and job instability were often mentioned as economic pressures making smaller nuclear households preferable over living with extended families. 'We just can't afford to live together with my parents in Karachi,' said one participant. "For space and expenses this doesn't work" (Female, 36, Karachi).

The interviews also showed generational tensions; notably younger participants described problems around values, autonomy and privacy differences within families. Many of these tensions lead to the breakdown of joint family systems after marriage. One respondent said that "my parents expected me to follow village customs but here we have different routines and values." This causes tension (Male, 28, Lahore).

But they also pointed to decline in collective child rearing – a practice historically supported by extended families. Parents are increasingly relying on daycare centers, digital tools and domestic help and as a result, grandparental involvement has decreased. One mother commented, saying, 'My child is closer to the tablet than to his grandfather. 'That's what hurts me the most' (female, 34, Peshawar). They give a picture of the immense changes that city living has brought to family structures.

Summary of Key Findings

The study findings show that most urban residents (approximately 66 per cent) are living in nuclear families. One notable trend that I can note is that the longer the amount of time spent in the urban areas, the higher the probability for people to live alone rather than living with extended family. The results quantitatively support the contention that urbanization has a negative effect on intergenerational relations and contributes into the decay of classical family support systems. These conclusions are furthermore supported by qualitative data which show that economic pressures, shifting cultural values and cramped living space are the primary forces responsible for these changes within family structures and roles. When viewed together, these insights appear to decouple the traditional fits of caregiving and collective family practices in an increasingly urbanizing environment.

DISCUSSION

In light of these findings, this chapter discusses these findings in comparison to existing literature. Questions to be interpreted are: how is urbanization affecting family structure in Pakistan and what are related implications for the society.

Quantitative data showed that 66 percent were living with nuclear families with an observable pattern of progressive fall in joint family systems with over five year residence in urban areas. In line with this is Qureshi (2018) that has noted the increasing population of nuclear families in metropolitan cities including Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. These pressures come from economic pressures, housing constraints and individual aspirations.

The growing trend of urbanization pushes privacy, mobility and dual income households into more practical and in some cases necessary grounds. Their response to statements about the fact that urbanization has weakened ties within the family between generations also indicated a strong agreement (mean score = 4.2). This was qualitatively supported by multiple participants expressing

the regret of losing close relationships with the elders and the minimal attendance of grandparents in children's rearing. This aligns with Hussain and Khan (2020), who also showed that in urban family settings, emotional distancing can occur between generations because of busy lifestyles as well as not having interactions between generations.

Transformation has taken place not only in regard to the physical living arrangements but also with regards to the roles played and the functions performed which are traditionally performed by extended family members.

A recurring theme from the interviews was a clash of traditional values and modern urban lifestyles. Younger participants also expressed tension with older family regarding differential expectations of autonomy, gender roles and child-rearing. Such conflicts frequently lead to joint families being fragmented and accentuating the trend toward nuclear living.

Shah and Malik (2019) also observed similar arguments; specifically, younger urban population in Pakistan is taking up individualistic values, that does not correspond to collective family norms and hence resulting into generational rift.

Another major reason for the decline in joint families was inability to accommodate large families in the limited urban space with high living costs. As is the case with the observations of Ahmed et al. (2021), urban planning in Pakistan has not been inclusive of multigenerational living causing it to inadvertently focus on the nuclear family structures.

Along with this, women are increasingly joining the workforce, leading to the creation of dual income households who, based on convenience and manageability, favor convenience and manageability over tradition.

Moreover, interestingly a large portion of respondents (mean score: 4.0) agreed that technology is gradually replacing the way people interact with each other in the family. And screens have come to dominate the ways in which we communicate, entertain ourselves and even parent, reducing time for face to face bonding and eroding traditional structures, even more.

CONCLUSION

The structure, roles and relationships of the family are being reengineered due to the urbanization of Pakistan. On the other hand, this study clearly found the rapid increase with the most dominant types of families as nuclear families that were in urban areas. Intergenerational ties and traditional family roles are weakening at the same time, pressured by spatial, economic and cultural forces. Conflict between older and younger family members, who hold on to traditional norms and increasingly independent and private younger generations becomes the norm. These transformations are driven mainly by economic factors, lifestyle changes and technological advancements. Although these changes usher in advantages, most notably independence, mobility and flexibility for modern lifestyles, they come at a cost too which includes breaking of family support systems, emotional detachment and social isolation, including but not limited to the elderly.

Implications

Policy interventions in the urban housing market, family support systems and in engaging the community are required to retain the social capital and the values around which extended families are built. Multi generational housing models need to be considered in urban planning and social campaigns would bridge the value gap between generations.

Recommendations for Future Research

Regional variations can be further investigated in a comparative study on urban versus rural family structures. Longitudinal studies allow us to track how urbanization induced changes develop across multiple generations. Further exploration of how digital media and migration are reshaping family norms is in order.

Author Contributions
Zahir Shah: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation.

Fiaz Mahmood: Supervision, Validation, Writing, Review & Editing, Project Administration.

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