

## Return Migration is Not the End: How Families, Markets, and Institutions Shape Reintegration in Punjab Province, Pakistan.

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### Abstract

Return migration is often assumed to restore stability, yet reintegration can be a second rupture shaped by household pressures, market uncertainty, and social reception. Drawing on 30 semi-structured interviews with return migrants living in Punjab Province, Pakistan, this qualitative study examines how economic recovery, social belonging, and cultural adjustment interact to shape post-return outcomes. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the findings identify four reinforcing dynamics: limited conversion of overseas skills into decent work, rapid depletion of savings through restart costs, relational pressures driven by expectations and mistrust, and institutional inconsistencies that raise transaction costs and constrain opportunity. Family return intensifies these pressures by placing children's schooling and caregiving responsibilities at the center of livelihood decision-making. The study argues that sustainable reintegration requires coordinated governance skills validation, accessible working-capital support, reliable service navigation, trust-building market mechanisms, and family-focused transition support rather than isolated employment or loan interventions.

**Keywords:** *Sustainable Migration; Return Migration; Thematic Analysis; Reintegration; Zero Hunger; Pakistan.*

### 1. Introduction

Return migration is the migration process when people return to their home country after a certain duration of stay in a foreign land. However, even on the definitional level, the process of return is not as simple as a mere reversal of migration. According to King (2015), there are no accepted concepts of what constitutes return, and the standards differ in terms of voluntariness, help, forced situations, and minimum durations. Contemporary migration governance has focused on defining focus to differentiate between return and alternative types of mobility (Migration Data Portal, 2024). In the context of empirical research, return migration is comprehended beyond the perspective of physical movement; it is a change that reintroduces issues of subsistence, societal membership and identity within situations that might have evolved in the absence of the migrant (Hussain et al., 2025).

The presented paper is concerned with reintegration and not with return. Reintegration is the multidimensional process based on which returnees re-build or fail to re-build the economic, social, and

psychosocial pillars of the stable life back home (Majidi, 2022; Hussain et al., 2024). Such framing is important since even intended return can be disruptive. The consequences of migrants include empty savings, changes in family life, and transformed community expectations when they come back. When forced, sudden or driven by outside shocks, vulnerability is often increased. The aspect of reintegration is complex and cannot be boiled down to employment as the results are influenced by our social pressures, stigma, and daily pressure of finding our way to institutions and routines that might be foreign to us after years overseas.

Pakistan presents a very promising setting where the study of reintegration can be conducted. The nation is highly connected with the global systems of labor migration, particularly the movements to the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Demand and supply in overseas countries lead to massive outflows on the wage differentials and employment, as well as remittances have important contributions to the stability of households and the macro economy. The recent statistics indicate that the situation became extremely volatile: in 2020-2021, the number of Pakistanis leaving the country to work abroad dropped dramatically, whereas in 2022 and 2023, the number of workers leaving soared to more than 800,000 people annually (Shah, 2024; Hussain et al., 2025). Such oscillations indicate external shocks, which shrink the time horizons of migrants, interrupt the continuity of the contract and force households into riskier livelihood channels. Another structurally significant attribute of the Pakistani migration environment is the temporality of the Gulf-bound migration.

The globalization of residence in GCC countries is generally based on employment sponsorship, and opportunities of settlement on a long-term basis are still low in contrast to conventional immigration-receiving nations (Migration Policy Institute, 2024). Although the Gulf states have implemented selective long-term residency programs to encourage investment and skilled workforce, it does not fundamentally change temporary labor migration regime of majority of workers (Ali, 2024; Hussain et al., 2024). As a matter of fact, a good number of migrant Pakistani nationals in the Gulf are vulnerable to and even do experience the inevitability of home-coming, either by the expiry of contracts, loss of jobs, health shocks, or even by shifts in labor policies. Reintegration is not thus a peripheral matter but rather an institutional and social one that is impacting high populations of households on a repetitive scale.

This paper will limit itself to Punjab Province since analyses on the national level might not reveal much regional difference in migration patterns, destinations, and post-return opportunities. Punjab is characterized by high out-migration, a comparatively weak formal labor market and a close reliance on informal networks of labor and enterprise. These traits determine the way the returnees will be able to utilize their foreign experience. Even a skilled returnee who has been educated abroad might not be able to transfer these skills into domestic opportunities unless there is a recognition of credentials, it is not possible to raise start-up capital, or the market is based on personal contacts instead of merit. Meanwhile, communities that see migration as a source of upward mobility tend to have strong expectations of the appearance of return, which is synonymous with conspicuous wealth. These expectations may turn into a social pressure mechanism that may shape reintegration of trajectories, family relationships and psychological wellbeing.

The COVID-19 period highlights the necessity of reintegration to be viewed as a system and not a one-domain problem. Policy estimates estimated that many workers could be in Pakistan during pandemic conditions and contended that emergency-induced returns is qualitatively different than planned contract-end returns due to its links with abrupt joblessness, inadequate savings and increased amounts of stress (Farooq, 2021). In addition to the quantity of returns, the mechanism is relevant: as economic shocks drain financial resources, the families and communities previously depending on the remittances by migrants experience aggravating pressures. This process of reintegration in turn becomes a reinforcing process wherein social conflict is brought about by economic insecurity and social strain impairs the ability to participate in stable work or investment. In this regard, reintegration in Punjab is discussed as a system of interrelated barriers and negotiations over three interdependent areas: economic re-entry (employment, enterprise, conversion of skills and capital), social re-embedding (family obligations,

community acceptance, and support networks) and cultural/psychosocial adjustment (reverse culture shock, identity strain, and wellbeing).

Instead of viewing these areas as distinct issues, this paper explores the connection between them and how they support each other. This is a conscious move away in models of returnee predicaments based on lists in favor of mechanism-based analysis: what do processes that generate problems and reasons why these processes continue recursively. Although the Pakistani political economy is so obsessed with labor migration, there is still no consistency in the process of reintegration, especially beyond major cities. The research problem that the study resolve in this case is that, in Punjab, many returnees find it difficult to convert overseas experience into stable livelihoods and social welfare because they face a compounded burden of economic constraints, pressures of social expectation and cultural /psychosocial adjustments problems. By staying small on the policy discussion of remittances or entrepreneurship, these policies would risk overlooking the processes by which reintegration is not just stalled by a lack of jobs or money, but also ineffective trust networks, stigmatization of failure of return, and the pressure of using institutions that returnees would feel unreliable. The study pursues four objectives:

- (i) *To identify the major economic barriers affecting returnees' employment and livelihood rebuilding in Punjab.*
- (ii) *To examine how social reintegration dynamics family obligations, community expectations, discrimination, and support networks shape post-return outcomes.*
- (iii) *To analyze cultural and psychosocial challenges, including reverse adjustment pressures, identity strain, and the renegotiation of norms after prolonged exposure to different contexts.*
- (iv) *To derive policy-relevant implications for reintegration support that reflect the interdependence of economic, social, and psychosocial dimensions.*

The article develops existing arguments in the following ways. The idea is that first, it conceptualizes reintegration as an inter-dependent system that connects the economic challenge of conversion, the social expectations and all the daily governance experiences as opposed to each being a distinct domain of outcome. Second, it constructs mid-level ideas the "conversion problem," "expectation spiral" and "institutional shock" to establish certain mechanisms which reproduce vulnerability in the economic, social and psychosocial lives of returnees. Third, it presents qualitative data of 30 in-depth interviews with return migrants in Punjab Province, a large but under-researched area in Pakistan migration system and thus goes beyond macro-level debates about remittances and policy frameworks and looks at the process of reintegration in real life.

## **2. Literature Review**

Studies of return migration have no longer viewed return as the end of a linear migration process but as a less predictable change based on institutions, households, and social acceptance. Initial research pointed at the conceptual and methodological challenges with defining the term return due to its entrapment in timing, intent, and the extent to which it is permanent following the act of returning (King, 2015). Newer syntheses posit that a better way to consider return is as existing on a continuum of voluntary, assisted, and forced motions, with reintegration outcomes differing vastly even across these categories (Kuschminder, 2017; King and Kuschminder, 2022). In this transition, the idea of reintegration has taken center stage as a method of not only physical reparation but also measuring how much of the returnees can be able to reinvent sustainable livelihoods, social interactions and a feeling of belonging.

### **2.1 Theoretical Approaches to Migration and Return**

The push-pull model has continued to be relevant in explaining the reasons behind the exit of individuals and why they might reenter. In the model developed by Lee (1966), migration choices are influenced by the factors in the source and the destination regions and additional intervening barriers. This framework proposes, in the opposite direction, a situation in which the poor conditions in the foreign country (job insecurity, legal constraints, separation of family) can drive a migrant back, whereas the family ties, familiarity or the perception of opportunity back home may drive the migrant towards home.

Nevertheless, push-pull explanations run the risk of being too descriptive unless they are coupled with mechanism that connects migration and household strategies together with post-return consequences.

New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) provides one of these mechanisms by changing the player of analysis to the household. Migration is defined as an income diversification and risk management tool in the home country where there are imperfect credit and insurance markets (Stark and Bloom, 1985). In this sense, the notion of return is not necessarily a success; rather, it is where households seek to convert previously accumulated savings, skills, and networks into more secure livelihoods. Reintegration can be unsuccessful when these resources cannot be absorbed and legitimized by local institutions and markets and when savings are quickly spent.

There are also theories of return that emphasize the significance of preparing and mobilization of resources. According to Cassarino (2004), the results are shaped by the level of readiness and mobilization capacities of the financial, social, and human capital in the institutional and social contexts. This is a lens that can explain why migrants who come back with the surface-level similar profiles can pursue very different paths, based on the documentation, opportunity structures, and access to trusted networks. The current research is based on these frameworks but attempts to transform them into middle-level concepts which reflect the interactions of economic, social, and institutional processes in the daily lives of the returnees in Punjab.

## **2.2 Reintegration as a Multidimensional Process**

It is widely agreed that the process of reintegration is multidimensional and continuous and is not limited to an outcome. The IOM Reintegration Handbook states that to achieve permanent reintegration, economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial wellbeing, the development must proceed concurrently (International Organization for Migration, 2019). The employment factor is never a guarantee of stability as long as the returnee experiences stigma, unresolved family conflicts, or long-term stress; no amount of counselling will have a chance to replace insecure livelihoods in the precarious labor markets. Empirical evidence indicates that the returns come is important: abrupt or forced returns tend to be linked to inferior preparation, lower savings, and greater vulnerability. Recent assessments of evidence hence recommend the evaluation of reintegration assistance as how enhancements in one domain (such as livelihoods) cross-resonate to others (such as social relations and mental health) as well as how temporary migration regimes cycles of exit and return can normalize precarity and unrealistic anticipations (Salgado et al., 2022). This paper will take this multidimensional view but focuses on the role of certain mechanisms connecting economic, social and psychosocial spheres in the Punjab situation.

## **2.3 Return Migration and Reintegration Scholarship on Pakistan**

Pakistan is a big labor sending nation and has been migrating to the Gulf destinations since long history. Gulf-bound migration studies in the regions state that the trend is continuing to focus on overseas employment and is strongly related to pressure on domestic labor markets (Shah, 2013). Regardless of this scale, the study of the subject of return and reintegration has been quite fragmented. Governance reviews point to severe information and coordination deficiencies: roles are distributed across the institutions, and mechanisms of tracing of returnees or measuring the success of reintegration have not yet been developed (Cheema et al., 2025). The poor data infrastructure reduces the ability of the state to determine the needs, target the services or programs assessment.

Traditional empirical research based on national data demonstrates that reintegration in Pakistan is not automatic even in the case of coming back with overseas experience. Arif (1998) concludes that returnees have potential to experience unemployment and underemployment, and that work experience in the home country and household opportunity structure are very important in determining post-return labor market performance. These results substantiate the wider theoretical argument according to which the transformation of migration experience into livelihood stability is contingent not only on individual effort and human capital, but is also affected by conditions in the home country

## 2.4 Reintegration Challenges in Punjab Province

Punjab Province within Pakistan is the epicenter of both labor immigration flows and labor return flows and it explains why reintegration should be studied as a system in a system. There are indications of intractable issues of skill identification and job reassigning of the returnees, and inability to get finance to the business ventures in areas where the labor markets are informal and the credit facilities are relationship-based as opposed to rule-based (Arif, 1998). The recent qualitative research on Pakistan also records the social strain, identity conflicts, and the difficulties in maneuvering in altered expectations after spending time abroad (Zeeshan and Sultana, 2020). These understandings are consistent with global research which reveals that reintegration stress is relationally and psychosocially based and not only economically.

These weaknesses were further revealed during the COVID-19 period that heightened the risk of abrupt reversal and an interruption in the flow of remittances. Policy analyses in form of scenarios estimated high returns flows and stated that reintegration structures were to be enhanced to avoid shock-related returns translating to crises at the household level (Arif & Farooq, 2021, as cited in Farooq, 2023). In the case of Punjab, this associates reintegration requirements not just to personal adaptation but to macroeconomic shocks and governance ability.

## 2.5 Reintegration Policies and Governance Gaps

The role of policy-oriented work is based on the opinion that in Pakistan, reintegration governance is still at the underdeveloped stage. Institutional fragmentation and poor data systems are also reported in the literature hindering the design of the reintegration pathways (Cheema et al., 2025). The provincial structures also gradually recognize the significance of finding the returnees and creating evidence-based policy, but the capacity on the implementation and the coordination is different (World Bank, 2018). The international practice guidelines emphasize that effective reintegration assistance cannot include certain small-scale steps but rather coordinated services, which must include economic, social, and psychosocial aspects (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Nevertheless, it is not yet clear how these gaps in governance translate into day-to-day challenges faced by returnees in selected areas.

## 2.6 Research Gap

There are three gaps that arise when considering this literature. To start with, a lot of the Pakistan-related research on return and reintegration is either macro-level (flows, remittances) or more specifically economically oriented (employment outcomes), and there are few studies that combine economic obstacles with social reception and psychosocial wellbeing (Arif, 1998; International Organization for Migration, 2019). Second, the research on governance captures data and coordination issues but hardly follows the traces of how such institutional deficiencies are reflected in daily reintegration issues of returnees in specific provinces like Punjab (Cheema et al., 2025). Third, literature tends to enumerate discrete issues like employment insecurity, stigma, or even limited access to finance without defining how they are interrelated so that the challenges become persistent. This paper fills these gaps, looking at reintegration in Punjab as a mutually dependent process on the economic, social, and psychosocial levels, and forming mid-level concepts in which the dynamics reinforce each other in the daily lives of the returnees.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design and Rationale

The research design of this work was qualitative research to investigate the experience of reintegration by the return migrants in the Punjab Province, Pakistan. Qualitative methods should be used when it is desired to know about the meaning, perceptions, and processes of the phenomena and not to estimate prevalence and test causal effects. Here we are dealing with the interconnection of economic, social and psychosocial issues in normal post-return life. In analyzing the interview contents, the study used reflexive

thematic analysis that is suitable in identification of patterned meaning among all participants with the recognition of the interpretive role of the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method enables one to focus on repetitive processes like the problem of conversion or spiral of expectations as well as variation in the way these processes occur in the life of individual lives.

### **3.2 Setting and Sampling Strategy**

Fieldwork took place in several cities and towns in Punjab Province to capture variation in local opportunity structures and community dynamics. The study used purposive and subsequent snowball sampling to recruit participants who could speak in depth about post-return life. Initial contacts were established through community leaders, returnee networks, and personal contacts in neighborhoods with known histories of Gulf migration. These contacts then introduced additional returnees, which helped to reach individuals with different occupational backgrounds and migration histories.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) having lived outside Pakistan for at least five years; and (b) having returned to Pakistan with the intention of permanent settlement at the time of interview. The fieldwork period lasted approximately two months, during which the researcher approached more than 100 potential participants and completed 30 semi-structured interviews. Attempts were made to include variation in age, occupation, destination country, and current employment status, to reflect diverse reintegration trajectories within the province.

### **3.3 Sample Size Justification and Participant Profile**

The concept of information power informed the choice of the sample size, since it states that a study with a clear purpose, a definite sample, and rich interview contents may use fewer participants than a more general, more inductive project (Malterud et al., 2016). The study was precise in research question, recruited participants that had close association with phenomenon of interest (return after long-term Gulf migration), and produced descriptive narratives. With about 25 interviews, no new themes were produced with new interviews as they were seen as further elaborating and refining the previous patterns. The thematic structure that developed was checked and narrowed down to the final five interviews.

The interviews were between 30 minutes and 50 minutes long. The age of the participants was between 35 and 65 years. They worked in the construction, driving, hospitality, food delivery, agriculture, healthcare, freelancing, security and housekeeping. Most of them had been back to the Gulf countries though the few had been exposed to other destinations. It is this variety that enabled the analysis to follow both general mechanisms and location-specific variations in reintegration experiences.

### **3.4 Data Collection and Analysis**

The first author used semi-structured interview in Urdu and Punjabi to collect data. The interview guide included: (1) migration and return patterns; (2) reintegration difficulties at the economic, social, cultural/psychosocial levels; and (3) the perceptions of participants regarding their needs of support and policy issues. The guide was applied in a flexible manner such that the participants were allowed to raise issues, which they regarded to be of significance. Most interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the participants, where this was not permitted, close notes were made.

The interviews were transcribed and where the need arose translated to English to be analyzed and written. The first author (bilingual) did translation attentively to maintain the meanings and important phrases by the participants. In the case of selected excerpts, the researcher re-read audio files, as they were revisited by reading English translations to ensure that there was a tone and content equivalence.

Thematic analysis was done on an iterative and reflexive basis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researcher read transcripts repeatedly to get acquainted with the material and made initial impressions. Second, preliminary codes were created inductively, and they reflected interesting aspects of the data that revolved around economic re-entry, social relations, institutional encounters, and psychosocial experiences. Third, codes were clustered into potential themes that indicated repeated patterns and

possible mechanisms (such as, becoming stuck between overseas experience and local benefit, or having to meet rising social expectations on returning home). Fourth, the coded data was compared to candidate themes and narrowed down to a final thematic structure which focused on cross-cutting processes and not a solitary problem. During the process, analytic memos were applied to record the decisions and thoughts regarding the role of the researcher in interpreting the content.

### **3.5 Researcher Reflexivity**

The first author is a Pakistani researcher of Punjab who has experience in migration studies. This status as an insider made it easier to get along with the participants and enhanced the ability to understand local labor markets, family values, and daily institutions better. Simultaneously, it needed continuous reflexive consideration of assumptions regarding successful migration and concepts of respectable turnback. The researcher maintained reflexive notes related to fieldwork and analysis, in which he or she might influence the use of the researcher's background and expectations in shaping questions, interpretation and labeling the strategies used by the participants as being successful or unsuccessful. These notes were used in conversations of new themes and helped to verify that interpretations were not created based on what the researcher had thought but based on what the participants had said.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

All the participants were informed about the goals of the study, their interest in it, and their right to refuse or withdraw at any moment. Informed consent was obtained before every interview. In the name of maintaining confidentiality, the findings are presented with the use of pseudonyms, specific names, places of residence, places of work, and particular migration patterns have been changed or removed. Transcripts and audio recordings were placed in a secure place and were only accessible to the researcher.

Due to the context-specific, purposive sampling, the results are to be analyzed and not generalized statistically. There is always a risk of self-reported stories overemphasizing or underemphasizing certain experiences and when translated to English, the subtleties of expression are likely to be ironed out. The readers are encouraged to evaluate the relevance of the results to other settings by addressing similarities and differences in migration patterns, labor market and institutional provisions.

## **4. Results: Reintegration Challenges for Return Migrants in Punjab Province, Pakistan**

Findings from 30 semi-structured interviews with return migrants in Punjab Province, Pakistan, are presented in this section. Participants described reintegration as a taxing 'second transition' rather than a simple return home. They emphasized that post-return life involved rebuilding social belonging and cultural adjustment alongside economic recovery. The analysis identifies four main themes that show how challenges arise, connect, and persist over time: the conversion problem, relational pressure and the expectation spiral, institutional and everyday governance shock, and the rebuilding of belonging around family life and children's schooling. A fifth, shorter theme highlights cross-cutting dynamics and opportunity spaces.

### **Theme 1: The "Conversion Problem": Overseas Experience does not Easily Become Local Advantage**

One of the key findings is that returnees often have skills, work discipline and international exposure relevant to labor markets. However, they find it hard to convert these assets into stable livelihoods in Punjab Province. According to the interviews, the key obstacle is not that people do not want to work. Rather, returnees are faced with a 'conversion problem' wherein the value of their overseas experience is not overtly recognized, rewarded, or translated to local opportunities.

To begin with, most returnees reported that the processes of entering the labor market were primarily filtered through locally recognized signals such as personal recommendations, familiar training institutions, and informal relationships rather than the practical competences acquired abroad. Even

though returnees possessed good occupational skills in construction, transport, hospitality, and service jobs, many of them found that employers and contractors preferred local references and locally standardized certificates. Returned being directed to short-term work, low-status jobs, and underpaid arrangements that did not reflect appropriate skill levels.

In addition, returnees felt that reintegration was financially “front-loaded.” The initial costs of restarting life such as home repairs, rent or housing adjustments, school admissions, tuition fees, transport, healthcare for parents and regular household expenses rapidly consumed their savings. Many participants described this as shortening their investment horizon: money they had reserved for business or training started to smoothly shift towards survival expenditure. It is important because when buffers are used up, your ability to search for a better job, negotiate for fair wages, or absorb business losses in initial learning phases is reduced.

Additionally, respondents emphasized that micro-enterprise is appealing but risky. Numerous returnees endeavored small businesses because formal employment was perceived blocked or unreliable. Common ones were retail, food, transport and household businesses. According to the returnees, enterprise survival has proven difficult due to inflation and sporadic demand and pricing. When locals consume so many exotic goods, they are unlikely to buy everyday essentials from local brands. As a result, every newcomer to the local market faces the problem of stock planning, price-setting, and cash flow sustainability in the early months. This is when a brand has yet to earn a reputation and repeat consumers.

In the final instance, interviews noted that finding financial institutions and formal support systems is often difficult in practice. Participants spoke often of the burdens of documentation, unclear processes, and a lack of supportive intermediaries, who would help returnees navigate loans or registration processes. During delivery, returnees often relied on informal dealings borrowing money from friends, buying on credit informally or running a business without confirmed documentation. Entry barriers became lower in the short run, but it also increased long-run vulnerability.

## **Theme 2: Relational Pressure: Returnees are Evaluated, Priced, and Managed Through Social Expectations**

Another key theme is the role of community and extended family dynamics in shaping reintegration outcomes. Most returnees observed that the social context does not treat return as neutral but rather imposes meanings on return migration that create expectations, scrutiny, and reputational risk. As per these pressures it was believed to be mentally draining and economically costly.

An expectation spiral is a type of pattern that has been highly reported. Those who returned mentioned that people think just because one lived abroad, one has money without consideration to the actual costs of migration, remittances, and the financial burden of return. This assumption, it was said, leads to repeated requests for loans, financial help or sponsorship, and indirect pressure to display wealth through visible consumption. Because some returnees cannot fulfil these demands, they described reputational consequences: refusals were interpreted as stingy, arrogant, or morally failing. The pressure to meet expectations was experienced over time as a force that reshaped relationships and narrowed circles of contact.

In addition, returnees report “being treated as the outsider at home”. The temporal participants reported differences in speak pattern, routine, punctuality or manner of relating – which can be read as distance or superiority. It creates friction in everyday life and weakens social support. The returnees made it clear that it was not just about getting hurt, but instead weak social acceptance incurs low access to opportunities like info about jobs, trusted suppliers, credible customers, or price.

Returnees also described widespread robbery distrust. A lot of people felt that in normal market exchanges, one must always remain vigilant because it is felt that overcharging, low-quality goods, promises not kept and other opportunistic behavior are all very common. Returnees with limited local knowledge and mistrust put on a double burden on themselves to pay higher “learning costs” and pressure

to stabilize income quickly. In business decisions, returnees often described being coaxed into poor investments or shown partnerships with a weak degree of accountability.

The Woman's Place in Nation Building Within Households, Reintegration Refers to a Re-negotiation of Roles. Rather than the Restoration of Pre-migration Life A lot of participants returned with spouses and children which immediately increased financial and emotional burden. Those returnees noted a narrowing set of responsibilities. These included earning money, arranging schooling, managing family relations, sorting out elders' health issues, and completing administrative tasks usually under uncertain work situations. This pressure was not evenly felt. Men described high expectations to be providers, while women described stronger restrictions and increased social monitoring in their everyday lives. Stress levels increased with 'role compression, which also created conflict when finances didn't arrive quickly.

### **Theme 3: Institutional and Everyday Governance Shock: Norms of Reliability do not Travel Smoothly**

The third theme focuses on returnees' perceptions of the institutions and public life. Numerous participants had adjusted to the regimes, service norms, and routines of the host countries and in exchange they experienced frustration regarding what they defined as inconsistent enforcement, weak service reliability and regular procedural delays. This can be understood as institutional shock, a type of reverse adjustment that is not predominantly a matter of cultural taste but rather of expectations about how systems should function.

Participants characterized everyday interactions in the Punjab Province including dealing with offices, schools, healthcare, market regulation, and basic administrative tasks as demanding time, effort, and negotiation. Returnees were taking precautionary measures where systems felt unpredictable. They avoided complex transactions, delayed decisions, reduced trust in new partnerships, and increasingly relied on close family rather than broader networks. All in all, lack of human contact can create an economic cost since they are cautious in job searches. This limits mobility, investment, and entrepreneurship.

Social relations also affect institutional shock. Returnees noted that when rules are not consistently applied informal influence becomes a more important recommendations intermediaries' personal connections and perceived status. Overseas countries have weakened many participants' local networks, which made them feel disadvantaged in this setting. Institutional experiences were not separated from social reintegration; they shaped who could access opportunities and on what terms.

The institutional and social contexts were tied to gender and mobility. Especially women remarked that increased visibility and asking questions in public limit mobility and thus social participation. The limited ability to move was seen as both a cultural expectation and a practical barrier, as limited mobility reduces access to markets, education opportunities and social support.

### **Theme 4: Belonging is Rebuilt Through Family Life, Children's Schooling, and Identity Negotiation**

A fourth theme is identity, belonging, and the emotional texture of everyday life after return. The stories told by participants showed that return migration often produces a 'between-worlds' experience. Returnees do not feel like insiders after returning, but they cannot return to their abroad social position either. This feeling of being caught in two places was repeatedly related to family dynamics. Also, kids' reintegration and community judgement.

Children's schooling is a particularly important reintegration pressure point. Parents conveyed their struggles regarding curriculum differences, classroom norms, peer relations, and language or accent-related issues. Many participants noted that kids' stress quickly becomes a family issue: parents must spend money and time on tuition and monitoring, and sometimes even on a move because of their kids'

stress. The financial burden of tuition and repeated school costs diminishes savings while simultaneously increasing the hunger for cash at the same time.

Returnees also identified social etiquette and everyday civility norms as a point of conflict. In the Punjab Province, there are many interpersonal expectations surrounding hospitality, visiting, gift-giving, and relational maintenance which require time and emotional labor. Returners sometimes found it difficult to meet expectations after years away. Members of the community could see this as cold and arrogant, which then reinforced outsider labeling and reduced social support. Small misunderstandings had large consequences as they shaped reputations.

Participants encountered psychological burden throughout their accounts. Many described ongoing stress related to uncertainty, recurring conflicts or pressures to meet both the household and community demands. As a result of constant discord like economic insecurity, a lack of trust, daily social observation, some participants reported disturbances in sleep, irritability, and anxiety but termed them not as separate 'mental health issues.' When people feel emotional pressure all the time, they become more restrained in the decisions they make, less likely to take a chance on something new, and more withdrawn from broader engagement.

### **Theme 5: Cross-Cutting Dynamics and Opportunity Spaces**

Across the themes, reintegration problems in Punjab are reciprocal. Uncertainty in the economy increases vulnerability to social needs and social pressure. Social mistrust increases the transaction cost as well as destabilizing the small business. Institutional discrepancies drive back the returnees to informal impact and close contacts to the detriment of those whose connection has been loosened by the migration. Psychological strain, in its turn, shortens the planning horizons and decreases the readiness to take risks, which may leave some of the returnees in a long-term stage of restart when life seems to be in balance.

Meanwhile, opportunity spaces in which migration skills and habits were still useful were identified by participants. They identified niches in small business, repair and fixer services, agribusiness, logistics and transport and mere varieties of digital commerce in which overseas discipline, norms of customer service and technical capability might be assets. But achievement of this potential was determined by fair dealing, fairer pricing and more stable institutional backing. These cross-cutting dynamics imply that reintegration policies must not consider economic, social and governance conditions separately but as one domain.

## **5. Discussion**

Findings from Punjab show that reintegration after Gulf migration is experienced less as a return to stability and more as a second rupture. Economic, social, and institutional processes interact in ways that can keep returnees in a prolonged 'restart phase'. This section discusses three main contributions of the study: (1) specifying the conversion problem as a market- and institution-mediated process; (2) conceptualizing relational pressure and expectation spirals as central to social reintegration; and (3) showing how institutional shock and family-based belonging link governance and psychosocial dimensions.

### **5.1 Interpreting Reintegration as a System, not a Checklist**

The results from Punjab Province suggest that reintegration should be understood as an integrated system and not as three separate boxes (economic, social, cultural). According to returnees, the problems they face do not happen in isolation. They happen as a sequence of events. This is how: weak job match leads to unstable income. Unstable income derives pressure from families and communities. This pressure increases mistrust and stress. Mistrust and stress undermine business decisions and narrow social networks. Narrowed social networks reduce job and enterprise opportunities further. This pattern mimics international reintegration strategies, which envisage sustainable reintegration as multi-dimensional and mutually reinforcing in broad economic, social, and psychosocial terms (International

Organization for Migration [IOM], 2019). Put differently, the concern is not that returnees lack skills and motivation. Instead, the concern is that the environment converting their assets into stability costly.

These interviews challenge a widespread assumption in public debate: that return migration automatically produces “brain gain.” Skills and overseas exposure may not be self-activating resources, these interviews suggest. The author observes that, with rare exceptions, the wealth that can transform into capital must undergo thorough elimination of uncertainty. When these pathways are weak, returnees may end up underemployed, careful and socially constrained, which limits development effects even when migrants return with experience and ambition.

## 5.2 Push-Pull Theory: Return Decisions Versus Return Realities

Push-pull theory helps explain why return happens, but the results highlight an important twist: the same ‘pulls’ that attract return can become frictions on arrival. "Migrants act because of the inability to make a living in their own place of origin. They are also attracted by the prospects of making a living elsewhere." In the case of returns to Punjab Province, pulls often relate to family closeness, cultural familiarity, and the idea of doing “something at home”. Yet as the study shows, once return takes place pulls can very often transform into intensified obligations, public scrutiny, and constant demand on time and money.

The proximity of family and kin networks offers support but also brings financial commitments and a public assertion of success which is at times immediate. Similarly, cultural familiarity may not always lower stress levels; returnees described institutional and everyday governance shock – frustration when systems feel inconsistent or less reliable than those they adapted to overseas. The obstacles encountered after returning are not solely logistical, but also social and institutional in nature. As a result, returnees can be anchored by belonging but then experience belonging as conditional dependent on fulfilling economic expectations and complying with local standards of interaction.

According to King & Kuschminder(2022), return must be understood as a fluid and contestable process that is shaped by the reception environment where new arrivals arrive. Furthermore, it should never be treated as an end point. It also confirms with IOM’s position that the success of reintegration relies not only on individual preparedness but also on receiving-context capacity (IOM, 2019). Push and pull factors remain relevant for investigating return migration, but it is important to distinguish between why return occurs, and what return produces once the migrant has returned to local institutions and social hierarchies.

## 5.3 NELM and the Household “Conversion Calculus”

The New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) argues that it is not appropriate to analyze migration and return solely to the individual level. NELM suggests that households migrate to gain different sources of income from different locations. It also helps to manage risk and overcome problems with credit and insurance (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Strong backing of household centered lens comes from Punjab Province findings. Most returnees were not going back as individuals, but as family units or as central providers. Their return decision was influenced by children’s schooling, elders’ healthcare, household status, and family obligations. This is the reason why “work” was never just “work. It was the way through which families sought stability, dignity and security for future.

Nonetheless, the outcomes demonstrate, there is disparity between the household strategy and the local opportunity structure. As per NELM, the return phase occurs when the household attempts to convert the stored resources (savings, skills, networks) into assets. Returners faced repeated barriers preventing that transformation due to weak recognition of skills acquired overseas, limited access to formal credit, risk from informality and volatility of market. Due to restart costs and daily unpredictability, household capital does not get transformed into capital assets but rather gets absorbed. These cycles create a risk-averse household that limits the scope of investment decisions and relies on smaller, lower-yielding survival strategies.

Cassarino's assertion appears to draw on the idea that return outcomes rely on resource mobilization and preparedness but also on the receiving context's capacity to absorb and reward returnees' resources. Even prepared returnees can find their reintegration stalled when institutional pathways are weak. In Punjab Province, high transaction costs (time, mistrust, monitoring) and poor market intermediation (difficulty finding reliable suppliers, customers, or employment channels) interrupt household conversion calculus repeatedly.

#### 5.4 The “Triangle of Frictions” and Feedback Loops

The study extends Pakistan-oriented reintegration literature by clarifying how three frictions repeatedly combine into feedback loops:

- (i) *Market friction: skill misrecognition, unstable demand, limited access to finance, and informality traps.*
- (ii) *Relational friction: expectation spirals, outsider labeling, thin support networks, and reputational risk.*
- (iii) *Institutional friction: inconsistent service reliability, procedural delays, and reliance on informal influence.*

These frictions are not parallel problems; they amplify each other. Inability to meet family and community expectations, caused by unstable income, increases relational friction due to market friction. Market friction increases due to this relational friction, as it heightens transaction costs and limits information and opportunity access due to mistrust and vulnerability to reputation damage. Institutional friction increases both: when public systems fail citizens increasingly rely on informal networks. This disfavors returnees since their local networks are weakened by migration.

It is important to read systems-based testing as its re-centers what “support” should be aimed at. The assumption that employment programs can solve poverty rests on the view that the core problem plaguing the poor is lack of jobs. If the main challenge is the interaction of frictions, then reintegration policy must reduce transaction costs, create credible pathways for skill validation, and provide navigational support through services—in line with IOM's multi-dimensional reintegration framework (IOM, 2019).

#### 5.5 Family Return as a Structural Modifier

A significant aspect of the interviews from the Punjab Province is the number of full family returns. This serves as a structural modifier that changes speed, cost, and vulnerability. Families returning together incur high-cost commitments immediately, with new school admissions and tuition, housing change, daily consumption, with the main earner simultaneously trying to rebuild income. Children's schooling becomes a key area for reintegration and can impose swift choices regarding where to live, how much spending to allocate to tuition, and what time to dedicate to it. Returnees' economic strategies are strongly shaped by pressure to reintegrate within the family. Thus, these claims in favor of NELM clarify the assumption that migration and return are household, not individual strategies (Stark & Bloom 1985).

#### 5.6 Identity, Trust and Economic Life

The findings show identity and trust are not “soft” issues unrelated to economics, quite the opposite. Returnees living in the Punjab Province found social interactions as a basis to build trust. Where returnees struggled to regulate with anticipated routines of sociability, this behavior incurred reputational costs which later disempowered business and employment relationships. Identity work plays an economic role as it shapes who we trust, who we see as fair, and who has access to what.

This reinforces a wider point made by return migration researchers: reintegration is not just labor market insertion but regaining social membership and psychological stability (IOM, 2019). When trust is not present and membership is conditional, returnees react defensively. They reduce risk-taking, monitor transactions, and limit relationships to one another. Even though they have opportunities, such defensive reaction may delay recovery.

Taken together, these insights reinforce the argument that reintegration should be approached as a coupled system in which economic, social, institutional, and psychosocial processes are tightly

interlinked. Policies that target only individual employability or small-scale entrepreneurship are unlikely to succeed if they do not address social expectations, trust, and the reliability of everyday governance.

## **6. Policy Implications**

Based on these findings, three broad directions appear particularly important for reintegration policy and programming in Punjab and similar settings.

### **6.1 Skills Validation and Fast-Track Bridging**

A recurring barrier mentioned during the interviews is that work experience acquired overseas does not serve as a credible signal on local labor markets. As such, returnees remain underemployed considerably longer and their household stabilization is delayed. A pragmatic solution is to institutionalize quick skills validation via TEVTA-aligned institutes across the Punjab Province utilizing short practical assessments for common trades (construction, electrical, driving/logistics, hospitality and services), followed by 2-6 weeks of specific bridging modules and locally recognized certification. This would lessen the “conversion gap” between what returnees can do and what employers can confidently hire for. The number of returnees assessed, certificates issued, placement outcomes at 3-6 months, and wage changes from the pre-certifying baseline can be used to track progress.

### **6.2 Small Working-Capital Finance Paired with Basic Business Support**

Returnees tend to deplete their savings because revitalizing oneself is costly. Subsequently, they get into micro-enterprise under duress without reliable application of price, evidence of supplier choice or record keeping. An intervention that can be made to work is to offer small, staged working-capital products (micro-loans or revolving credit) bundled with short and concrete mentoring on essential business operations, risk management, as well as using “minimum viable compliance” for various mandatory registrations and taxes. We’re not trying to impose bureaucracy; we want to avoid failures of enterprises that are possible and cut down on transaction costs. We can monitor effectiveness by looking at enterprise survival at 6 and 12 months, repayment performance, uptake of basic registration and measures of income stability.

### **6.3 District-Level One-Window Returnee Facilitation Desk**

People returning home often do not know where to go for documentation to recognize their skills, enroll in schools, receive health or welfare referrals. Information gaps lead to delays, contributing to dependence on informal intermediaries. A Returnee Facilitation Desk should be established at the level of district linked to labor, TEVTA, social welfare, education and basic health services as a stable entry point into fragmented systems. The desk must provide the supported referrals and appointments as well as checklists for most common needs to reduce time costs and uncertainty. The indicators of performance we are going to use will be the time taken to resolve a case, number of referrals completed, user satisfaction scores and fewer repeat visits for the same issue.

### **6.4 Trusted Marketplace Mechanisms to Reduce Everyday Predation**

The interviews reveal that a lack of trust combined with the fear of being overcharged, fraud, and low-quality services increases transaction low-quality service. They create transaction costs and discourage investments, particularly by returnees in the process of reconstruction of networks. One way to empower people is to create verified registries of commonly used service providers (electrician, plumber, mechanic, transport operator) and small vendors. This can be supported through basic verification, a simple complaints pathway, and receipt norms which enhance accountability. It’s not a matter of smothering them in regulation; it’s about making things safer and more predictable in everyday transactions. Some aspects that can be monitored include the rate of registry use, the volume of complaints and the times resolution, reported changes in overcharging experiences, and the incidence of repeat transactions with registered providers.

## 6.5 Family Reintegration Support Through Schools and Community Wellbeing

Returnees come with spouses and children. Schooling transitions and household stress directly impact livelihood rebuilding. They absorb time, money and attention. A coordinated effort through school-based transition support curriculum orientation, parent onboarding, and targeted academic support where needed can lessen household disruption. At the same time referrals for stress and wellbeing support through primary healthcare or community centers should use culturally acceptable terms (family support, wellbeing, adjustment) to enhance acceptance and reduce stigma. The indicators of success include attendance and retention, reduced paid tuition over time, household self-reports of stress, and the level of participation in school/community events.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that getting back to Punjab is not a homecoming but a second transition that involves the economic, social, and institutional pressures that collide. Based on 30 qualitative interviews, the discussion showed the intersection of the conversion issue, relational pressure and expectation spirals, institutional shock, and family- and child-centered dynamics in influencing post-return trajectories. Instead of being isolable aspects, employment, social relations and psychosocial wellbeing constitute a highly integrated system where challenges in one area easily transfer over to the others. The results narrow down on current theories of return migration by defining the interaction of household strategies and local opportunity structures, and the network of trust and governance practices. The conversion problem demonstrates that foreign skills and savings do not necessarily mean local benefit, particularly in areas of formal recognition that are poor and credit where relationships are important. Relational pressure and expectations spirals emphasize the role of social assumptions about migrant prosperity in creating reputational risk and the small group of supporters. Institutional shock emphasizes the fact that the person must re-experience systems that are perceived to be unpredictable and discretionary upon returning to a less rule-bound environment. A combination of such mechanisms will explain the fact that some returnees are kept in a prolonged period of restart even after years of stay in foreign land.

The findings has policy implications that are the direct consequence of this system's perspective. The campaigns that solely focus on individual employability or small-scale entrepreneurship will not work in case the markets are opaque, the institutions are unreliable, and family pressures are not taken care of. Other more promising avenues involve the identification and certification of foreign talent, enhancing access to working capital within a more equitable market environment, enhancing service navigation and procedural transparency, and developing assistance that openly reflects the role of children in school and household. Placing Punjab into the wider discussion of temporary labor migration and cycle of return, the study proposes that reintegration needs to be sustainable through interdisciplinary intervention on the economic, social and governance fronts. Future studies would also be able to generalize this methodology to other provinces and places of origin of migrants to determine the variation of such mechanisms in various institutional and cultural environments.

## Declarations

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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