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# The paradox of remote protection: digital surveillance and intergenerational conflict in Pakistani transnational families

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**Introduction:** This article examines the emotional and relational impact of transnational fatherhood within Pakistani families, focusing on the deep-seated gendered anxieties experienced by migrant fathers and the resultant emotional burden on their adolescent children (sons and daughters). While migration provides essential economic remittances, it disrupts the traditional patriarchal role of fathers as both providers and moral custodians, leading to familial strain.

**Methods:** Employing a qualitative, multi-perspectival approach, the study conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 migrant fathers residing in Italy and their 29 adolescent children in Punjab, Pakistan.

**Results:** Thematic analysis revealed a “paradox of remote protection,” where fathers’ fears—specifically regarding sons’ conduct, negative peer influence, and the protection of daughters’ modesty in the digital age—drive digital communication into a tool of surveillance and control rather than connection.

**Discussion:** This hierarchical, transactional mode of interaction exacerbates intergenerational disconnects, creating profound emotional and instrumental voids felt by both parents and children. The findings underscore the invisible emotional labor performed by left-behind adolescents and highlight the critical clash between rigid patriarchal expectations and the growing autonomy and globally-influenced realities of youth in transnational family spaces. This research calls for nuanced interventions addressing fathers’ anxieties and supporting authentic emotional exchange across geographical divides.

## KEYWORDS

adolescent development, digital surveillance, gendered anxiety, migration, Pakistan, patriarchy, transnational fatherhood

## 1 Introduction

The phenomenon of transnational fatherhood, where fathers migrate for economic opportunities while their children remain in the home country, has become a defining feature of contemporary global migration (Upegui-Hernandez, 2014; McAuliffe and Ochoa, 2024). While celebrated for its economic benefits, particularly through remittances (Heymann et al., 2009), this form of migration often conceals a more complex narrative of emotional disconnection, familial strain, and gendered anxieties (Schmalzbauer, 2015; Wilding et al., 2020).

Transnational fatherhood alters family dynamics, particularly the relationship between fathers and their adolescent children, exposing deep emotional and sociocultural tensions (Dreby, 2007; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). In the Pakistani context, patriarchal traditions position fathers as providers and moral custodians of the family (Butt et al., 2025) whose

authority encompasses material provisions along with regulation of honor and behavioral conduct (Khanlou et al., 2015). Migration of the father disrupts this dual role when fathers abroad attempt to assert influence remotely through digital communication, which can lead to a mismatch between intent and emotional impact (Madianou and Miller, 2011). Their anxieties are exacerbated by the encroachment of globalized digital culture, shifting values, and peer influences that appear beyond their control (Vo et al., 2024; Wilding et al., 2020).

These gendered concerns can be particularly acute regarding daughters' modesty and sons' adherence to conventional masculine ideals concerns grounded in hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal bargains (Donaldson and Howson, 2009; Pease, 2009). Technologies that were initially adopted to maintain intimacy often serve as tools of surveillance, intensifying familial tension (Lam, 2013; Madianou and Miller, 2011). At the same time, left-behind children navigate an emotionally ambiguous space. Adolescents are expected to mature early, assume responsibilities, and uphold family honor in their father's absence (Alipio et al., 2015; Battistella and Asis, 2017). This produces a form of emotional labor that is often invisible, where young people must not only deal with their own emotional needs but also manage the expectations and emotional dependencies of their absent fathers (Sorensen and Iedema, 2009; Baum, 2016; Sorensen et al., 2024). This dynamic may produce both a sense of duty and emotional burden. Rather than simply being victims of paternal absence, children demonstrate agency, negotiating identity and loyalty within a web of expectations (Dreby, 2010; Rohner, 2021). *Attachment theory* helps illuminate how prolonged emotional and physical absence of the father can compromise the adolescent's sense of emotional security and development of self (Li et al., 2023).

This intergenerational relationship is further complicated by communication breakdowns. Spatial distance exacerbates generational divides, with fathers clinging to idealized visions of their homeland and children growing up in dynamic, globally influenced environments (King and Christou, 2010; Herrero-Arias et al., 2021). Digital communication, while seemingly intimate, often reproduces hierarchical and emotionally superficial modes of interaction (Lam, 2017; Pink et al., 2015). Conversations via WhatsApp or video calls typically center on instruction and correction rather than emotional bonding (Wilding et al., 2020), which can leave both fathers and children feeling misunderstood and disconnected.

Sociological and anthropological scholarship of masculinity and migration reveals that transnational fatherhood disrupts traditional performances of masculinity (Parreñas, 2005; Boccagni, 2016; Hoang and Yeoh, 2012). While men continue to fulfill the provider role, their capacity to act as moral guardians and disciplinarians is increasingly mediated through digital platforms, remittances, and intermittent visits. Despite some research on the emotional labor of migrant fathers, it has been observed that transnational fatherhood experiences remain underexplored if compared to transnational motherhood (Pustulka et al., 2015; Schmalzbauer, 2015). Fathers play a multifaceted role in fostering emotional bonding, family cohesiveness, and child well-being, balancing breadwinner duties with caregiving responsibilities (Petren and Ferraro, 2024; Gežová, 2015). In Pakistani culture, the pressures of moral guardians are magnified by the moral economies of honor (izzat), which frame fathers, especially in relation to daughters, as protectors of family reputation (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Digital technologies reshape how distant fathers provide care and support (Suter et al., 2025; Madianou, 2021; Merla et al., 2020). Remote fatherhood via digital means creates an everyday co-presence,

but also an "always connected" culture that can heighten emotional pressures (Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016). The desire to assert control from a distance often manifests in gendered monitoring, where fathers express heightened concern over daughters' modesty, peer interactions, and digital behavior, while expecting sons to embody toughness, ambition, and academic success. Scholars such as Licoppe (2004) analyze the role of mediated presences in maintaining emotional ties in transnational families. However, these technologies often double as tools of surveillance, intensifying rather than mitigating gendered anxieties. Digital platforms, while offering unprecedented immediacy, do not necessarily foster intimacy. Technological intimacy can be a double-edged sword: while it allows regular contact, it can also generate miscommunication and a sense of surveillance (Lam, 2013). For many Pakistani families, conversations via WhatsApp or video calls revolve around instruction and inquiry rather than emotional bonding, exacerbating the sense of disconnect. While technology can bridge gaps, prolonged absence can still erode intergenerational cohesion if emotional connections are not actively maintained (Lei and Chae, 2024).

Studies of left-behind children (Battistella and Asis, 2003; Dreby, 2010) and divided families highlight the emotional burden and role reversals in transnational households. In collectivist contexts like Pakistan, children are not only emotionally affected but are also expected to uphold family values, assist in domestic affairs, and act as adults in the absence of parents. The absence of fathers can cause serious developmental and well-being challenges, including poor mental health, impaired social behavior, delinquency, and identity struggles (Herzog, 2013; Inclan, 2023; Ramatsetse and Ross, 2023; Markowitz and Ryan, 2016). Adolescent years are a sensitive period where parental support is critical for mental health, social responsibility, and resilience (Blakemore, 2019). At this stage, longer parental absence intensifies negative impacts on intergenerational solidarity (Lei and Chae, 2024).

The emotional remittances refer to the emotional messages, hopes, and expectations that circulate between migrants and their families, shaping behaviors and responsibilities (Huennekes, 2018). Children are not passive recipients of absence; they interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist the emotional burdens placed upon them. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) also provides insights into how long-term emotional distance from fathers can affect adolescents' sense of security and identity.

Fathers abroad often retain idealized visions of their homeland and their children's upbringing, while adolescents grow up in a rapidly transforming social environment influenced by digital culture and changing norms around gender and autonomy (Ducu et al., 2023; King and Christou, 2010).

The current study builds on and contributes to this scholarship by culturally contextualizing how Pakistani fathers' anxieties, particularly regarding social media use, friendships, and academic performance, are shaped by gendered expectations and broader moral discourses. It also considers how the very technologies meant to maintain intimacy contribute to misunderstanding and emotional distance. This study moves beyond economic-centric understandings of migration by investigating the social, emotional, and gendered dimensions of transnational fatherhood in Pakistani immigrants. It explores Pakistani migrant fathers' gendered anxieties about their adolescent children, analyzes adolescents' lived experiences of paternal absence and increased responsibility, and examines intergenerational

disconnects and communication challenges that shape familial bonds and development in transnational families.

## 1.1 Objectives

This study aims to:

- 1 Explore the gendered anxieties of Pakistani migrant fathers regarding their adolescent children's well-being, education, and social conduct in the home country, particularly concerning digital engagement.
- 2 To analyze the lived experiences of adolescents' interpretation of paternal absence and the burden of increased responsibility.
- 3 Examine the intergenerational disconnects and communication challenges within these transnational families, revealing how differing expectations and remote parenting styles impact familial bonds and adolescent development.

## 1.2 Theoretical framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework that integrates theories of masculinity, emotional labor, and attachment to understand the evolving dynamics of transnational fatherhood. This theoretical framework draws on the concept of emotional remittances (Levitt, 1998; Huennekes, 2018) and emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983; Opiniano and Tan, 2024), which allows for an examination of the affective responsibilities adolescents assume in the father's absence. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979) adds psychological insight into how distance may erode secure parental bonds, shaping adolescent identity and relational behavior (Li et al., 2023; Rohner, 2021). This integrative approach not only situates transnational fatherhood within broader debates on gender and migration but also highlights the affective, psychological, and relational dimensions often overlooked in migration studies. By foregrounding masculinity, emotional exchange, and attachment, the study underscores how migration reshapes both paternal roles and adolescent responsibilities. In doing so, it provides a nuanced lens through which the objectives are pursued.

This study utilizes emotional labor—defined by Hochschild (1983) as the management of feeling for public display—to analyze “care-at-a-distance.” In transnational settings, this involves taxing “kin-work” to maintain intimacy and project authority across borders. Migrant fathers must strategically regulate their personal anxieties while performing the role of a “present” moral guardian to compensate for their physical absence. Through the lens of gendered trajectories, the study examines migration as a non-neutral process of diverging social and moral paths. While fathers benefit from spatial mobility and the “patriarchal dividend” of provision, left-behind daughters often face “reputational stasis” tied strictly to family honor. This framework interprets the “paradox of protection” as a structural tension between a father's global mobility and a daughter's localized gendered expectations.

## 2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interview-based approach to primarily explore the emotional and relational experiences of

adolescent children living in Pakistan. It also gathers insights from their transnational fathers in Italy to provide a comprehensive, multi-perspectival understanding of family dynamics. By focusing on the children as the central unit of analysis, this research offers a unique and nuanced perspective often missing from migration studies, which tend to focus more on the migrant parents' experiences. The goal is to uncover the lived realities, emotional landscapes, and caregiving relationships from the perspective of those left behind.

### 2.1 Area of the study

This study was conducted in Bergamo and Naples, two Italian cities with well-established Pakistani migrant communities, providing the setting for the interviews with the fathers. The children were interviewed in Punjab, Pakistan, a region with a large number of families with a parent working abroad, providing a critical perspective that complements the fathers' accounts.

### 2.2 Sample and recruitment

The sample consists of two distinct groups, with the primary focus on the adolescent children: 16 adolescent sons and 13 adolescent daughters, all residing in Punjab, Pakistan, and their 30 Pakistani migrant fathers living in Italy.

The fathers, a majority of whom are employed in blue-collar jobs such as construction, agriculture, and factory work, had been living in Italy for a minimum of 5 years. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, leveraging community networks to identify suitable individuals.

### 2.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The researcher personally conducted all interviews to ensure consistency and build rapport. The interviews with fathers in Italy were held at a location of their choosing to ensure comfort and privacy. The interviews with their children in Punjab, Pakistan, were the central component of the data collection and were conducted in a private setting. All interviews were carried out in Urdu and Punjabi to allow participants to express their experiences in their native languages, facilitating a deeper and more emotionally resonant dialogue.

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 min. With their consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the lead researcher, who is bilingual in the languages used, to maintain linguistic accuracy and cultural fidelity.

### 2.4 Data analysis and trustworthiness

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017). The process involved familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes,

defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. To enhance analytic rigor and trustworthiness, two independent researchers reviewed the data, discussed initial codes, and collaboratively developed a codebook. The qualitative analysis software MAXQDA was used to efficiently organize and track themes across the large dataset.

## 2.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was secured from the Ethics Committee of Ca Foscari University of Venice. All participants were provided with comprehensive information about the research objectives, interview procedures, and confidentiality protocols. Informed consent was a continuous process and was sought at every stage of the research. For the fathers, written informed consent was obtained before each interview. For the adolescents in Punjab, the informed consent of both parents was obtained in advance, followed by verbal assent from the adolescent participants themselves before their interviews began. All data were anonymized, and all recordings and transcripts were stored securely. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 The paradox of remote protection: control, trust, and digital surveillance

This theme captures the profound gendered anxieties of Pakistani migrant fathers (Objective 1) as they navigate the complexities of transnational parenting. From their distant vantage point in Italy, fathers express a deep-seated fear for their children's well-being in the home country, a concern significantly amplified by their physical absence and the pervasive influence of digital media. The quote, "I work, day and night here in Italy, sending money home so my son can study. But I hear so many stories from Pakistan related to the prevalence of bad company, drugs, and risky behaviors. Who is there to watch him? I call, ask his mother, his uncle, but I am not there. This fear, it eats me from inside," encapsulates the core of this paradox. Here, the father's immense sacrifice and financial provision are overshadowed by a feeling of helplessness. His inability to physically "watch" his son leads to reliance on secondary sources of information ("I hear stories...") and a network of relatives, yet this remote oversight fuels rather than alleviates his fear of deviant practices and negative peer influence for his sons.

For daughters, these anxieties take on a distinctly conservative, honor-centric dimension, reflecting deeply entrenched cultural norms (Objective 1). The father's lament, "I want my daughters to be safe, to have a good future. But this social media... they are on Facebook, on WhatsApp. Who are they talking to? Are they making friends with boys? How can I protect their honor when I am not there to see with my own eyes?" highlights the perceived threat of digital platforms to traditional notions of female propriety and family reputation. This fear is further articulated: "The biggest fear is that my daughter might get involved with someone unsuitable, or worse, that something bad might happen. I try to control their phone usage, I ask their mother to watch them, but these things happen so fast now. It is a constant worry

for a father." These statements reveal a profound sense of vulnerability and a struggle to impose traditional protective measures across geographical and digital divides.

The fathers' attempts to mitigate these fears often manifest as assertive and controlling communication styles, which they rationalize as a necessity born of distance. As one father states, "They say I am too strict, too assertive. But what choice do I have? I am far away; I cannot see their daily lives. I must ask, I must inquire, to ensure they are on the right path, that they are safe, that they are studying. This is my responsibility as a father." This quote underscores the intergenerational disconnect and communication challenges (Objective 3). Fathers perceive their constant questioning as responsible parenting, a remote form of guidance. However, from the adolescents' perspective, this is often interpreted as a lack of trust and emotional support, exacerbating the emotional gap rather than bridging it. The digital sphere, while enabling communication, simultaneously becomes a site of paternal anxiety and perceived surveillance, highlighting how technology, despite its potential to connect, can paradoxically amplify feelings of mistrust and control in transnational family dynamics.

#### 3.1.1 Fathers' perspectives

Migrant fathers balance financial provision with deep anxieties over their absence in daily family life. While remittances secure children's education and futures, distance erodes their ability to guide, supervise, and emotionally connect. Concerns intensify around daughters' safety and digital interactions, where social media amplifies fears of moral risks and loss of control. Phone calls provide little substitute for embodied fatherhood, leaving fathers vulnerable, lonely, and constrained. Transnational fatherhood thus embodies tension between provision and presence, authority and vulnerability.

*"I work day and night here in Italy, sending money home so my son can study. But I hear stories... bad company, drugs. Who is there to watch him? I call, I ask his mother, his uncle, but I am not there. This fear, it eats me from inside."*

As quoted above, a migrant father reported that he has been working hard so that he may cover the educational expenses for his son, but at the same time, he gets worried for him too. Being physically unavailable, he's scared that his son gets into bad company. This has become a stressful situation for him because he's not there to keep an eye on him, and he's relying on his wife and brother to do so. He's actually hanging between his fatherly duties for providing a good life for his children, but watching them from a distance is painful. Distance creates chaos, and even the smallest matter can become a big source of worry. The fear that his son may get into bad company while he's struggling hard indicates an underlying pressure from society. Society will eventually blame the absence of the father in case the child is spoiled.

*"I want my daughters to be safe, to have a good future. But this social media... they are on Facebook, on WhatsApp. Who are they talking to? Are they making friends with boys? How can I protect their honor when I am not there to see with my own eyes?"*

Migrant fathers experience a lot of stress, and the biggest worry they have is being physically absent from the lives of their children. Talking on the phone does not fill the gap that a person really can.

Daily physical interactions are an important tool to feel wanted and heard. Even if children are going through something rough, they may not feel comfortable sharing that with someone who is living so far away from them. The fear of being misinterpreted and misunderstood is higher in that case. Fathers are equally worried for their sons and daughters, but they are more sensitive to their daughters. As the father quoted above, he wants a good future for her, but is scared of social media. He does not know what she is doing on the social media platforms and who her friends are. Being miles away, he does not know how to protect her daughter's honor. He wants the protection and security of her daughter so that she is not in the company of bad people. Things would have been different if she were in front of his eyes and people around her knew that she had a father beside her who would protect her in any case.

*“The biggest fear is that my daughter might get involved with someone unsuitable, or worse, that something bad might happen. I try to control their phone usage, I ask their mother to watch them, but these things happen so fast now. It is a constant worry for a father.”*

Fathers are always more conscious of their daughters so that they may not get involved in any bad act. In the era of social media, it has become a nightmare for fathers to see what their daughters are up to. In our society, it is believed that daughters carry the family honor, and it is their responsibility to keep their name out of any filth. A migrant father has quoted above too that he is constantly worried about his daughter, that she might choose someone unsuitable for her, or might get involved with that person. Even if something bad can happen to her, too. For him, the phone is the root cause of this, so they try to keep a strict check on their screen time. Also, he tries to control their phone usage. Obviously, in his absence, all the pressure is shifted towards the mother. Mother is being directed to see what's happening. This way, mother is living in an unseen pressure too, where she's being held accountable in case of any bad happenings. The mental health of migrant fathers is really affected because of many reasons, and the stress coming from children is one of those.

*“They say I am too strict, too assertive. But what choice do I have? I am far away, I cannot see their daily lives. I must ask, I must inquire, to ensure they are on the right path, that they are safe, that they are studying. This is my responsibility as a father.”*

Labor migration has several impacts on family dynamics. While the migrant worker is away to earn a living for his family, separation from home brings him stress. The relationship with their children is affected, and they no longer feel the same bond with them. Being physically away, they often regret that they are not providing them the support other than finances (Nguyen et al., 2025). As quoted by the migrant father above, feeling stressed for being away from their homes and not physically part of the kids' lives makes conversations difficult, too. Face-to-face daily conversations help solve matters way better than on phone calls. Being a father, feeling worried for his children is, at times, merely an exaggerated situation for them. At the father's side, it can be a way to be a part of his children's daily life, but for children, it can be perceived as another big task to be investigating and inquiring, which they may feel is annoying. Migrant fathers are dangling between a supportive father and a good earner. In between,

they are struggling with disconnection, which is hardly talked about. The constant fear that if the children do not opt the right way, all the struggles and sacrifices a father has made in his life will simply vanish.

### 3.1.2 Adolescent boys' perspectives

*“He worries so much about me getting into bad company, doing drugs, fighting. He calls my uncle, my older brother, everyone. But he's not here to see what it's really like, to see that my friends are good, that I'm trying. It just feels like he doesn't trust me.”*

Being physically away is really challenging when you are not here to see what things are in reality. Migrant fathers are worried for their children; meanwhile, children are equally stressed to show them a clear picture that whatever they are worried and stressed about, things are quite opposite at their ends. Fathers inquire about their sons by asking others to see what kind of company they have kept and what kind of activities they are involved in. As reported by a son, it feels like a gap that creates mistrust between a father and a son, and that is obviously the distance and physical absence. He says that if the father is here with me, he can better see the scenario and see everything that's bothering him. My friends are good, and everything else is fine too. There's a difference between seeing the picture by a person himself and listening to stories from different perspectives. Listening to stories like young boys becoming drug addicts, having bad friends, and poor academic performance is obviously very disturbing for a migrant father who is working hard to give a good life to their children.

### 3.1.3 Adolescent girls' perspectives

*“My father's biggest worry is always about 'honor.' He calls and asks who I'm talking to online, if I have male friends, if I go out. It's like he thinks I'll just forget everything we've been taught. It makes me feel like he doesn't know me at all, or that he doesn't trust me to be sensible.”*

Girls are expected to keep the family's name high by watching their conduct. They are expected to refrain from indulging in any bad activity that can tarnish their family's reputation. These are the standards that society has set for them. Migrant fathers are very worried about their children and what is going on in their lives. Distance makes things harder sometimes. As quoted by a daughter above, she's in constant justification mode. She is being asked by her father about her friends and the people she interacts with. Whether she has male friends and hangs out with them. The constant asking makes her feel suffocated and annoyed. She wants him to trust her that she will not do anything bad. There comes a vacuum in communication when it is not a face-to-face interaction. Both parties feel unheard, which ultimately creates chaos. There is unseen pressure on the father from society, where he fears the child might get spoiled in his absence, and he will be blamed for that. Although all that time, he was working really hard to make ends meet, he wasn't available for the children when they chose the wrong path in their lives.

*“He's so strict about social media. He thinks every boy is dangerous. But how can I live like that? All my friends are on Instagram, on WhatsApp. I just want to be normal, but he thinks it's all about finding a boyfriend or something bad. It's suffocating.”*

Wrong use of social media has tarnished its image among the elderly generations. They find it a bad thing that people are destroying their lives and ruining their careers. However, its correct use is the need of the hour. As the daughter shared above, her father is really strict about social media usage. He thinks that finding friends or knowing new people is just for one purpose: to find a boyfriend. That really makes her feel suffocated because all her friends are using social media, and under peer pressure, she wants to fit in the picture too. She is unable to make her father understand that using social media is absolutely normal and there's nothing bad about it. Here comes the difference in seeing things. The father is seeing it as a threat, while the daughter sees it as an opportunity to progress and live with the demands of society. There's a level of distrust between a father and a daughter that will eventually create a distance between them and weaken the bonding that they had previously.

*“He’s so worried about me getting into relationships or something dishonorable. It’s like he’s trying to protect me, but from so far away, it feels more like control. I wish he could see that I’m growing up, that I have my own thoughts, and that I know what’s right.”*

Parents always see their children as small and young; to them, they never grow up. Children see things differently. They want to have their own experience and thoughts for life. The generation gap makes things worse at times. As quoted above, the father is pretty much concerned about his daughter getting into relationships and any such activities that might bring shame to the family. She understands that he is trying to protect her from bad happenings, but feels like he is trying to control her while sitting miles away. This is frustrating for her because she wants him to understand that she is not a kid anymore. She is growing, has a life, and can make a decision herself. She wants to be trusted, not judged. She knows what is right for her, and that's completely okay if children can learn to make their own decisions. All they need is parental support.

### 3.1.4 Analysis

This theme highlights a significant tension: fathers' attempts at protection from afar, driven by fear and cultural expectations, are perceived by adolescents as intrusive control and a lack of trust. The digital sphere, intended to bridge distance, paradoxically becomes a source of heightened anxiety for fathers and a site of perceived surveillance for adolescents, exacerbating the emotional gap rather than closing it.

## 3.2 The emotional and instrumental void: absence, helplessness, and unmet needs

This theme profoundly delves into the practical and emotional consequences stemming from the fathers' physical absence, revealing a significant void in the lives of both fathers and their adolescent children. Fathers, despite their immense financial contributions, express a palpable sense of helplessness and regret over not being physically present for the daily challenges and milestones of their children's lives. The poignant quote from a father, “It breaks my heart that I cannot be there for their small problems, for their admissions, for a conflict with a neighbor. I feel helpless. I try to give advice over

the phone, but it is not the same as being present, as being able to solve things directly,” perfectly encapsulates this sentiment. This highlights the practical voids created by transnational fatherhood (Objective 2), where fathers are acutely aware that their remote advice, no matter how well-intentioned, cannot replace the tangible presence and direct intervention needed for everyday issues or significant life transitions like college admissions. This also speaks to the intergenerational disconnect (Objective 3), as fathers struggle to maintain their traditional role as problem-solvers and guides from afar.

From the adolescents' lived experiences (Objective 2), a profound sense of loneliness and a lack of direct support for both critical life events and emotional needs emerge. Boys articulate a burden of premature responsibility and a yearning for paternal presence in instrumental roles. One boy's frustration, “When there's a problem, like with the neighbors or something at home, we have to call Baba. But he's so far, what can he do? It just makes everyone more stressed, and then he gets angry because he feels helpless. I wish he was here to just deal with it,” illustrates the added stress and emotional toll when the absent father's helplessness translates into frustration directed back at the family. Another boy's lament, “I really needed him when I was applying for college. All the forms, the interviews... my mother tried, but it's different when your father is there to talk to people, to show confidence. I felt like I was doing it all alone. He just said ‘study hard’ over the phone,” underscores the critical practical void in navigating complex bureaucratic processes and the emotional need for paternal confidence and advocacy during pivotal life stages. This also contributes to the burden of responsibility (Objective 2), as expressed by the boy feeling pressure to be “the man of the house” now, even though I'm still in school,” highlighting the premature adultification that can occur in the father's absence.

Adolescent girls, similarly, express a deep emotional void and a lack of appropriate avenues for personal sharing. The quote, “When I have a problem, especially something personal, I can't talk to him. He's a man, and he's so far away. He wouldn't understand. And if I complain about my mother or something, it would just make him upset, and he can't do anything from there anyway. So I keep it inside,” reveals the gendered communication barriers and the emotional suppression resulting from the father's absence. This highlights the emotional chasm and intergenerational disconnect (Objective 3), as girls perceive their fathers as unable to comprehend their personal struggles or provide the nuanced emotional support they need. The feeling of isolation is palpable: “Sometimes I feel so alone, even with my family around. My friends understand me better, but I can't share everything with them either. It's hard to feel truly happy when you know your father is sacrificing so much, but he's also so disconnected from your daily life.” This quote powerfully conveys the deep sense of emotional loneliness (Objective 2) that can persist despite the presence of other family members, as the unique bond with the father remains unfulfilled due to the distance and communication challenges.

Overall, this theme demonstrates how the physical absence of fathers creates a complex web of unfulfilled needs—both practical and emotional—for adolescents, while simultaneously inducing feelings of helplessness and regret in the fathers themselves. This mutual struggle underscores the profound challenges of maintaining

strong, supportive familial bonds across geographical divides, directly addressing the article's objective to analyze the lived experiences of adolescents and examine the intergenerational disconnects within these transnational families.

### 3.2.1 Fathers' perspectives

*"It breaks my heart that I cannot be there for their small problems, for their admissions, for a conflict with a neighbor. I feel helpless. I try to give advice over the phone, but it is not the same as being present, as being able to solve things directly."*

Distance creates more problems in one's life when you cannot be present for those who really need you, and it becomes frustrating that you cannot even do anything about it. Communication over the phone is much different compared to sitting across the table and discussing. Migrant father shares how stressed he feels when his children need him, but he is not there for them. He tries to be a part of their problem solution, but it further creates distress for him, as he is not present physically. The father is trying to give a good lifestyle to his children, but he is not available when they need his guidance and support. This makes him feel left out of their lives, and it becomes frustrating. He feels helpless when he cannot help them out with their smallest tasks. He wants to be an actively participating figure in his family's life, but his job makes it impossible to happen. He cannot solve their problems directly, but indirectly, he keeps trying to fit into their picture. For a father, this phase is quite difficult and stressful when he is away from home just to earn a living for his family, and deep inside, he has the guilt of being physically unavailable for their problems.

### 3.2.2 Adolescent boys' perspectives

*"When there's a problem, like with the neighbors or something at home, we have to call Baba. But he's so far, what can he do? It just makes everyone more stressed, and then he gets angry because he feels helpless. I wish he was here to just deal with it."*

Father is a strong and dominating figure in a family. Everybody looks to him for any kind of advice or help in a problematic situation. Merely, his presence is enough for everyone. When he's not around when the family needs him, the situation becomes chaotic for everyone. They try to seek his advice, but the distance makes the situation more frustrating when he cannot solve the problem and feels helpless. As a son quoted that they try to reach his father when they have any problem, but they do know that he cannot do anything because he's sitting miles away. The situation is stressful for both parties. Father gets angry because he's unable to do anything, while the family is stressed because the person they looked up to is unable to help them. The son wants his father to be with them at that time. Father has the guilt of being away while his family needs him, while the family wants him too. At both ends, it is a difficult scenario.

*"I really needed him when I was applying for college. All the forms, the interviews... my mother tried, but it's different when your father is there to talk to people, to show confidence. I felt like I was doing it all alone. He just said 'study hard' over the phone."*

Migrant fathers' responsibilities are shifted to the other partner when they leave, while the children are unable to grasp this shift. Children need their father to do the outside work in the practical world because mothers are usually thought of as homemakers, while fathers are thought of as having more practical world knowledge because they work outside. They know the outer world more. As shared by his son, he felt the absence of his father when he was applying to college. Though his mother helped him, he felt that was different. With his father, things would have been different. He would've had more confidence while talking to people, or the entire process would've been smoother. Though he had his mother's support, he felt alone because that support was not as firm as his father's. His father simply asked him to work hard while he talked on the phone. The missing support from the father made him feel isolated and lonely.

*"I feel this pressure to be 'the man of the house' now, even though I'm still in school. My father expects me to handle things, but I'm just a kid. It's stressful, and sometimes I just want to escape, but where do I go?"*

In the absence of the father, the son takes up the responsibility because there must be someone who can take charge. In that scenario, the age is not considered. Even if he's small, he has to get up and take charge. As stated by a son, he feels this pressure of sudden responsibility to be the head of the household affairs, even when he's too young and still studying at school. The migrant father wants him to handle everything just as he used to do because he's grown up now, but the son does not feel ready yet to take up the responsibility. He still is too young for all this. The situation is just so stressful for him that he wants to leave everything and run away somewhere. When the father leaves for better earning opportunities, the rest of the family members are expected to support him in this cause because he's not doing this for himself rather he's struggling for his family's better life. So, the responsibility must be taken by someone in his place, and caution is expected from him too.

### 3.2.3 Adolescent girls' perspectives

Under this theme, the findings illustrate a deep sense of emotional isolation and containment among daughters of immigrant fathers. There is a sheer lack of communication and subsequent internalization of distress shaped by distance and emotional boundaries. An immigrant father's physical absence is accompanied by an emotional detachment, with his gendered identity perceived as a limiting factor in emotional understanding and empathy.

*"When I have a problem, especially something personal, I can't talk to him. He's a man, and he's so far away. He wouldn't understand. And if I complain about my mother or something, it would just make him upset, and he can't do anything from there anyway. So I keep it inside."*

*"Sometimes I feel so alone, even with my family around. My friends understand me better, but I can't share everything with them either. It's hard to feel truly happy when you know your father is sacrificing so much, but he's also so disconnected from your daily life."*

### 3.2.4 Analysis

The data vividly illustrate the dual impact of paternal absence: fathers grapple with a sense of helplessness and a diminished capacity for direct intervention, while adolescents experience a significant void in both practical support (e.g., college admissions, conflict resolution) and emotional connection. This creates a burden of premature responsibility for boys and a feeling of isolation for girls, highlighting the unfulfilled needs that distant parenting struggles to address.

## 3.3 Gendered trajectories and intergenerational expectations

This theme illuminates the profound ways in which migrant fathers' fears and aspirations for their children are distinctly gendered, often creating a significant clash with the adolescents' evolving desires and daily realities. It further highlights how the extended family, in the father's physical absence, frequently steps in to reinforce these traditional gender norms, leading to perceived inequities and heightened pressures for the children.

For sons, the fathers' concerns are heavily weighted towards their academic focus and avoidance of "deviant" behaviors, reflecting a desire for upward mobility and a fear of negative influences in the home country (Objective 1). The father's statement, "My son, he is becoming a man. I tell him, 'Focus on your education, don't waste your time.' But I worry about the streets, the peer pressure. Will he listen to me from so far away? Will he get into fights? I cannot guide him hand in hand," reveals a deep anxiety about his son's future trajectory and his own diminished capacity for direct guidance. This paternal expectation for academic and behavioral conformity, however, often clashes with the boys' personal aspirations, as articulated by an adolescent boy: "My father always talks about me becoming an engineer or a doctor, like that's the only path. But I'm interested in other things, like computers. I do not know how to tell him without disappointing him, especially since he's working so hard for us." This quote underscores the intergenerational disconnect (Objective 3), where fathers' sacrifices and hopes inadvertently create a burden of unexpressed desires for their sons. The fathers' distant efforts to provide ("I send money for their education, for their needs. But I also need them to understand my sacrifice. Sometimes they seem distant, busy with their own lives. I wish they would share more, but perhaps they feel I don't understand their world here") are met with a sense of emotional distance from the adolescents, who feel their personal worlds are not fully understood.

The father's absence also empowers extended family members to exert greater control over the boys' lives, aiming to fill the paternal void but often adding to the pressure. As one boy laments, "Since Baba is away, my uncles and even my grandfather feel they have more say in my life. They tell me what to do, where to go, and who to be friends with. It's like they are trying to fill his shoes, but it just feels like more rules. My cousins, whose fathers are here, do not get this much interference." This vividly illustrates the lived experiences of adolescents (Objective 2), highlighting the increased scrutiny and perceived unfairness compared to their peers. This sentiment is reinforced by another boy's experience: "They constantly remind me to be 'responsible' because I'm the eldest son and my father is not here. It's a heavy burden. If my father was here, he'd handle things, but now everyone expects me to be a grown-up before my time." These quotes

reveal the premature adultification and the imposition of traditional male responsibilities that boys face in the absence of their fathers, contributing to their stress and desire for escape.

For daughters, the paternal and extended family expectations are even more rigidly tied to notions of 'honor' and social propriety, reflecting deep-rooted cultural norms (Objective 1). One adolescent girl's frustration, "My father wants me to finish school and then get married. He doesn't ask what I want to do, what my dreams are. It's like my future is already decided for me, and I don't have a say because he's not here to listen to my side," clearly shows the clash between her personal aspirations and the pre-determined life trajectory imposed by her absent father. This highlights a significant intergenerational disconnect (Objective 3) where the father's remote authority stifles the daughter's agency and voice.

The surveillance and control from the extended family are particularly pronounced for girls. As one girl describes, "My grandmother and aunts are constantly watching me. They say, 'Your father is not here, so we must protect you.' They tell me how to dress, what to say, even how to sit. My cousins, whose fathers are present, have much more freedom. It feels unfair." This powerful quote underscores the lived experiences of adolescents (Objective 2), revealing the intensified scrutiny and reduced autonomy faced by daughters of migrant fathers. The perception of unfairness is palpable, as their lives are compared to those of peers with present fathers. This constant oversight leads to a feeling of being trapped by expectations, as another girl expresses: "They have so many expectations because Baba is away. They want me to be the perfect daughter, always at home, always helping. It's like they think I'll misbehave if they do not control every step. It's very difficult to live under such constant scrutiny." These narratives collectively demonstrate how the father's absence, rather than fostering independence, can paradoxically lead to a tightening of traditional gendered controls by the extended family, profoundly impacting the adolescents' well-being and sense of freedom.

## 3.4 Communication barriers and emotional disconnect

This theme critically examines the profound challenges inherent in maintaining robust familial bonds through the medium of remote communication, revealing how the often transactional nature of phone calls and the inherent inability to be physically present contribute significantly to emotional distance and a pervasive lack of authentic sharing within these transnational families. This directly addresses the article's objective to analyze the intergenerational disconnects and communication challenges (Objective 3).

From the fathers' perspectives, their communication style is largely driven by a sense of remote responsibility and deep-seated anxieties (Objective 1). The quote, "They say I am too strict, too assertive. But what choice do I have? I am far away, I cannot see their daily lives. I must ask, I must inquire, to ensure they are on the right path, that they are safe, that they are studying. This is my responsibility as a father," vividly illustrates this paternal dilemma. Here, the father rationalizes his interrogative approach as the only means to fulfill his perceived duty of protection and guidance from afar. His questions about safety and studies are not meant as emotional outreach but as a compensatory mechanism for his physical absence, inadvertently creating a rigid, one-way flow of information.

Furthermore, the father's statement, "I send money for their education, for their needs. But I also need them to understand my sacrifice. Sometimes they seem distant, busy with their own lives. I wish they would share more, but perhaps they feel I do not understand their world here," reveals his underlying desire for recognition of his efforts and a deeper connection, yet he acknowledges a growing emotional distance. He perceives his children as "distant" and "busy," unaware that his own communication style might be contributing to this very disconnect, making it difficult for them to share their "world" with him.

The adolescents' lived experiences (Objective 2) starkly contrast with the fathers' intentions, highlighting the impact of this transactional communication. For adolescent boys, the calls often feel like an interrogation rather than a conversation. The quote, "Baba [father] calls, and it's always about studies. 'Are you going to school? Are you studying?' Never 'How are you feeling?' or 'What's new with your friends?' It's like he only sees us as marks on a test paper, not as people," powerfully conveys their feeling of being reduced to academic performance, rather than being seen as individuals with complex emotional lives. This instrumental focus on studies, while reflecting the father's aspirations, neglects their emotional well-being and personal development. Consequently, boys often resort to superficial responses, as captured by, "Sometimes I'm out with friends, or I'm really tired, and his call comes. I have to answer, I cannot just ignore it. But what do I say? I cannot tell him I'm just hanging out, or that I'm sad. He'd worry too much, or he'd say I'm wasting time. So, I just say 'everything's fine.'" This illustrates a forced compliance and a suppression of authentic experiences, driven by a desire to avoid paternal worry or judgment, further deepening the emotional chasm (Objective 3).

Similarly, adolescent girls describe significant barriers to emotional intimacy and authentic sharing (Objective 2). The quote, "When I have a problem, especially something personal, I cannot talk to him. He's a man, and he's so far away. He would not understand. And if I complain about my mother or something, it will just make him upset, and he cannot do anything from there anyway. So, I keep it inside," reveals a gendered communication barrier. Girls perceive their fathers as unable to comprehend personal or sensitive issues, leading to self-censorship and emotional containment. This highlights the emotional voids created by the father's absence (Objective 2) and the lack of a trusted male figure for certain types of support. The transactional nature of calls is further emphasized: "I miss him when I need emotional support. Sometimes I just want to cry, or tell him about my day, but his calls are always like interrogation. 'What did you do today? Who did you meet? Did you pray?' There's no space for just being his daughter." This poignant statement captures the girls' yearning for genuine emotional connection, which is consistently unmet by the fathers' fact-finding and directive communication style. The absence of "space for just being his daughter" underscores the profound emotional disconnect (Objective 3) that arises when communication is driven by remote control and anxiety rather than empathetic engagement.

In essence, this theme demonstrates a vicious cycle: fathers' anxieties about distance lead to controlling, inquiry-based communication, which in turn causes adolescents to withdraw emotionally and offer superficial updates. This dynamic, while attempting to maintain oversight, ultimately undermines the very familial bonds fathers strive to preserve, leading to a significant intergenerational disconnect and unfulfilled emotional needs on both sides of the transnational divide.

## 4 Discussion

The study's qualitative findings reveal the complex psychological, familial, and relational challenges migrant fathers and their children experience. These findings uncover the quandaries of migrants' children, especially daughters, arising from prolonged physical separation. These findings align with and extend the intricate existing theoretical and empirical literature on migration, parent-child separation, and psychosocial well-being. Crucially, the data suggests a theoretical tension between the "doing" of family—primarily through the fulfillment of economic provider roles—and the "being" of family, which requires a physical and emotional presence that distance systematically undermines.

The fathers' narratives show that they worry about children's moral conduct, the influence of bad peers, and social media. The thought that phone calls 'cannot fill the gap,' echoes findings from studies of left-behind children (Dreby, 2007; Schmalzbauer, 2015), and they express deep anxiety over left-behind children's socialization and moral safety (Hoang and Yeoh, 2012). For example, in rural China, parental migration is associated with disruptions in caregiver support and adverse psychosocial outcomes among children left behind (Zhao et al., 2018). These studies similarly report emotional distress, feelings of abandonment, and weaker parent-child bonding when one or both parents are physically absent (Kharel et al., 2021). The literature suggests that parent-child separations are particularly deleterious at a younger age of children, impairing emotional regulation and weakening attachment security (Akezhuoli et al., 2025). These theoretical insights help to frame your findings, particularly the sense among children that fathers are absent not only physically but emotionally, and the fathers' own guilt or stress about not being able to intervene or guide in real time. This creates an analytical ambivalence: the father's "remote protection" is intended to foster well-being but is often interpreted by the child as an emotional vacuum filled only by disciplinary surveillance.

Our findings suggest that fathers are more worried about daughters, particularly regarding their reputation, social media misbehavior, etc. This reflects gendered cultural norms regarding family honor depending upon female behavior and the role of the father as moral guardian (Bocknek, 2020). Existing literature depicts that the experiences of migrant fathers are often excluded (Bond, 2019); while most of the studies merely emphasize their provider role (Guo, 2021). The findings of the current study show how fathers simultaneously perform a moral and protective role, especially over daughters. Theoretically, this suggests that in the absence of physical presence, patriarchal authority is "digitally remediated." The "gaze" of the father, once physical, becomes a digital surveillance mechanism to compensate for the loss of direct oversight. Some studies show that for migrant men, intimacy appears to be a greater challenge in sustaining familial connections (Salazar Parreñas, 2008). Fathers struggle to modify their roles to deal with the challenges of distance, instead maintaining conventional, gendered understandings of paternal responsibility (Vo et al., 2024).

Several participants reported the experience of monitoring their children, especially daughters' social media activities, as a profoundly stressful and anxiety-inducing which reflects a constant sense of vigilance and fear of moral or social transgression (Cabalquinto, 2018). In migration contexts, scholars call it the acculturation gap or value dissonance in families (Harris and Chen, 2023; Wolf et al., 2019).

While much of the literature focuses on immigration to a new culture, here the “gap” is both physical and mediated (via technology), with fathers perceiving risk and daughters perceiving overprotection. This reveals a central paradox in the digital age of migration: technology is sold as a tool for “closeness,” but in these families, it acts as a magnifying glass for suspicion. The data highlights a significant analytical tension where the same WhatsApp or social media platform serves as both a lifeline for emotional intimacy and a “digital panopticon” for moral policing. The broader studies on the impact of social media on adolescent identity formation and well-being (e.g., risky exposure, peer influence, social comparison), while not always conducted in migration settings, provide a backdrop for understanding fathers’ concerns (Ullah et al., 2024). Only a few studies have examined similar emotional dynamics, including pain, helplessness, and the struggle to balance familial duty across borders (Haider, 2025). Our qualitative findings confirm and extend the scholarly work around how fathers perceive their absence as a kind of moral liability, responsible for children’s futures but powerless to intervene in their daily lives.

The Family Stress Model posits that economic pressures lead to psychological distress among parents, which then undermines parenting and child well-being (Masarik and Conger, 2017). In our data, fathers are working hard (economic pressure), which causes stress, guilt, and anxiety about their children’s moral and academic trajectories. Children feel that parental relationships are strained (even if communication exists), and this contributes to psychological distress (for both children and fathers). The recent study on children left behind showing that psychological distress mediates between parent–child relationship quality and children’s well-being, particularly when parents are absent, is closely aligned (Mordeno et al., 2022). By critically integrating these insights, our study moves beyond the Family Stress Model to suggest a “Transnational Moral Stress” framework, where the distress is not just economic but stems from the conflict between the traditional identity of a “protective father” and the practical reality of being a “remote provider.”

The findings of this study contribute several key insights that extend beyond immediate empirical observations. It explains that while migrant fathers consistently try to meet economic obligations, their distress stems from the incapacity to perform supervisory, emotional, and moral roles, particularly with daughters. This identifies a “paternal identity crisis” inherent in long-term migration. The findings also reveal gendered moral expectations: daughters face heightened scrutiny over behavior, social media use, and reputation, leading to cycles of justification and strain. This highlights how “transnational honor” is maintained through digital policing. Technological mediation emerges as ambivalent, facilitating connection yet amplifying distance, suspicion, and emotional burden. Finally, fathers experience an embodied sense of absence, feeling powerless during crises and disconnected from everyday family life, which undermines their sense of paternal identity.

Support programs for migrant fathers could include counselling for dealing with guilt, anxiety, and strategies for remote moral/social guidance (e.g., helping children interpret social media, peer norms). Training or resources could help both fathers and children negotiate healthy boundaries around social media, honesty, trust, allowing autonomy while preserving oversight. Recognize that daughters face different pressures; policies or

community support could offer platforms where girls can communicate concerns or experiences without fear of dishonor or punishment.

## 5 Conclusion

The insights from Pakistani migrant fathers in Italy reveal a complex tapestry of gendered anxieties, profound helplessness, and a yearning for connection that define their transnational parenting experience. Their concerns, particularly regarding their sons’ vulnerability to negative influences and their daughters’ honor in the digital age, drive a remote parenting style often perceived as controlling rather than supportive. This dynamic creates significant intergenerational disconnects, where fathers’ attempts at protection from afar clash with adolescents’ desires for autonomy and understanding. The emotional and instrumental voids left by their physical absence are deeply felt by both fathers and children, leading to strained communication and unfulfilled emotional needs. These findings underscore the critical challenges inherent in maintaining strong familial bonds when physical presence is replaced by remote interactions, highlighting the need for nuanced interventions that address both the fathers’ fears and the children’s lived realities. Based on the study findings, future research is crucial to understand the evolving dynamics of transnational parenting. Studies should longitudinally track how fathers’ remote fears and control strategies impact children’s long-term well-being and development, while also exploring effective communication interventions that foster trust and authentic sharing across geographical divides. This will provide vital insights into supporting both migrant fathers and their left-behind children.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethics Committee, Ca Foscari University of Venice. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants’ legal guardians/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the minor(s)’ legal guardian/next of kin for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

SH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. FD: Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. MS: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

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