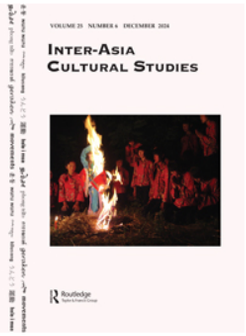

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Mengwei Tu

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Education mobility at the cost of widening gender gap? The silent women behind Pakistani male students' success stories in China

Mengwei TU

Department of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

ABSTRACT

This study examines the gendered consequences of "South-South" education mobility, through a four-year longitudinal study with Pakistani international students in China. China's extensive scholarship programme has significantly contributed to the transnational education mobility of lower-income Pakistani students who would otherwise not be able to study overseas. However, behind this mobility lies a staggering gender imbalance. Extant research has pointed to an approximate 1:10 gender ratio between Pakistani female and male students in China. This is also reflected in the sample of this study, with 16 male and no female participants, despite efforts to include both genders. Pakistani male students and graduates have made progress in their education and subsequent careers without delaying marriage or fatherhood. These "success stories" build on the compromises of female family members and make the male Pakistani student the centre of the support network. Transnational female domesticity reproduced gender division between Pakistan and China, allowing female family members to continue shouldering care responsibility and risks associated with migration. This paper bypasses methodological barriers to accessing female absence in the host country. It questions the lack of gender sensitivity in the Pakistan–China education pathway and stresses the risk of further gender inequalities in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Education mobility; gender disparity; Pakistan; China

Introduction

Pakistan's tertiary education enrolment has remained low, at 11% in 2023, while the world average was 43%, and the rate in China was 75% (World Bank 2024). Such a rate is alarming, especially given Pakistan's university-age population is the third largest in the world, after India and China (Ilieva, Killingley, and Tsiligiris 2024). China's helping hand lends a much-needed resource for disadvantaged Pakistani students who wish to continue their higher education. One-third of Pakistani students in China study for a PhD, 1 in 5 study for a master's degree, and the majority are funded with a full scholarship offered by the Chinese government (Ministry of Education 2019). It is in this context that I conducted a longitudinal study (2019–2023) on 16 Pakistani post-graduate students/graduates to observe education and career mobility as individuals' life course unfolds. I discovered that China's extensive scholarship programme significantly contributed to the transnational education mobility of less affluent Pakistani students who would otherwise not be able to pursue a postgraduate degree.

CONTACT Mengwei Tu Mengwei.tu@swansea.ac.uk

However, behind the education mobility from Pakistan to China is a staggering gender imbalance. No official statistics indicate the gender ratio of Pakistani students in China, but there are clear signs of male overrepresentation. For example, a 2017 survey on Pakistani students in China was responded to by 247 students, among whom only 21 were female (Su 2017). Such gender imbalance is also reflected in the sample of my study, with 16 male and no female participants, despite efforts to include both genders. The interviews with male students largely entail "success stories" of their journey from a rural or semi-rural hometown to a funded postgraduate studentship in China with the prospect of professional careers in China and abroad.

Being in a more advantageous position to access education and mobility to travel, Pakistani men are more likely than women to benefit from China-funded studentship which enables them to study abroad. In addition, drawing on longitudinal interviews which traced significant life stages of Pakistani male students/graduates, I argue that, as men's attendant migration trajectory generates more needs for family support, these responsibilities are shouldered by female family members who redirect their gendered identity by becoming "trailing spouses" or "left-behind spouses." In other words, the education support from China not only disproportionately benefits men but also results in more compromises by the young women in the same society because of men's pursuit of education abroad.

In the absence of the female "voice," I use analysis based on men's narratives to raise concerns about the impact of China–Pakistan's education mobility on the already wide gender gap in Pakistan. This approach reflects the importance of going beyond women's experiences to understand how women experience im/mobility. Biao Xiang (2005, 359) writes that the common tendency in the literature on migration and gender is to focus solely on women's experiences. He argues that, instead, we should examine gender as a "central organising principle of social life" and see "migration as a critical force that reconfigures social relations." This will require an examination of how the migration process as a whole is gendered in its construction.

In this article, I combine spatial and temporal approaches to understand the gendered education and migration process. Seclusion in Pakistan entails physical and social boundaries for women, limiting their mobility within a *space*, and the severity varies depending on how families culturalise Islam (Khattak 2020). Such domestic gender *space* persists at the transnational level, resulting in gender imbalance among the students who benefit from Chinese scholarship opportunities. Furthermore, the longitudinal approach in this study unpacks the migration process into stages before, during, and after overseas eduction. I demonstrate how the gender disparity continues to shape migrants' transnational home-making process. Each stage plays a part in the recreation and reinforcement of gender disparity in Pakistan and abroad. This paper, therefore, puts forward a critical gendered angle on the impact of "South-South" education mobility: In a society where significant gender disparity exists, a development scheme with a gender-neutral selective strategy is likely to benefit the male population, thus risking the danger of reinforcing gender inequality.

Gender disparity in Pakistan–China education mobility

China became the third largest international student-receiver (after the US and the UK) in 2018 (Yang 2022). Pakistan was China's top degree student-sending country in 2018 and is also the top beneficiary of Chinese Government Scholarship (CGS): In 2018, 8163 Pakistani students[1] were provided a full scholarship to study for a degree in China, making up 13% of all scholarships awarded to 182 countries worldwide (Ministry of Education 2019). The education resource directed from China to Pakistan aligns with the close geopolitical relations between the two countries.

The establishment of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013 followed China's Belt-and-Road initiative of the same year. In her analysis of the online discourse of CPEC, Ashraf is one of the first to ask "Where are the women?" in China–Pakistan relations and proposed a critical feminist perspective on the study of the Belt-and-Road initiative (Ashraf 2024). Although the Belt-and-Road initiative has received mixed opinions concerning China's political influence, the generously funded Chinese scholarship has hardly been regarded as a negative influence on the sending countries. However, this study questions the implication of CGS on Pakistan's gender (in)equality and calls for a gender-sensitive approach to examine such education development schemes.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established by the United Nations in 2000 set out to promote gender equality and empower women. However, in 2023, Pakistan ranked 142 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report. Pakistan has long struggled with gender and class disparity in education. A state obligation to provide free and compulsory secondary education was included in Pakistan's 1973 Constitution. An "Education for All" project was launched by Islamabad in 2001 (Kronstadt 2004). The shooting incident of Malala Yousafzai by the Taliban in 2012 brought to the world's attention the limited access to school and education for Pakistani girls. In the same year, the National Assembly ratified Pakistan's first Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill. However, the free universal education objective in government policies has not resulted in equal education for girls (Purewal and Hashmi 2015).

Pakistan's rural population suffers more due to the underdevelopment of its education infrastructure. In their research into rural Punjabi parents' attitudes towards girls' education, Purewal and Hashmi concluded that

> [G]irls' education immediately poses a challenge to the binaries of male and female spaces so central to the social world of the rural Punjabi household by drawing girls out of the feminine, inward space to the outward, masculine public space. The continuing failure of policies to bring about significant improvements in female education is due to an inability to recognise this fundamental feature. (2015, 992)

The physical and social boundaries that constrain daughters at home directly disadvantage women when opportunities to pursue higher education abroad arise. Furthermore, the absence of women who engage in international migration and education risks the danger of "mobility bias" (Schewel 2020) in migration research. Researchers tend to focus on the population "on the move" and overlook the factors and consequences of immobility. Therefore, an important question to ask here is, despite the scholarship availability and geopolitical closeness, why are there so few Pakistani female students in China? In the attempt to answer this question, I first review the biases in the research that focuses on women in transnational mobility.

Gendering migration process: researching women in transnational migration

The literature in gender and migration research which focuses predominately on women's experience has mainly portrayed women in three distinct roles. First, women are "discovered" as active agents in international migration decisions and practices. This "discovery" shifted the discourse of international migrants away from predominantly being "young males crossing borders primarily consciously for livelihood reasons" (Christou and Kofman 2022, 13). However, female migrants who travel for economic purposes tend to find themselves simultaneously trapped in a gendered division of labour, such as domestic workers (Lan 2003) and nurses (Kingma 2006). The segregation of women in these jobs reinforced gender hierarchies, and most migrant women compromise rather than challenge gender values and division (Morokvasic 2007).

In the second stream of migration research, women appear as family members on the move. For example, "study mothers" who look after their underage study-abroad children in Singapore (Huang and Yeoh 2005) and Canada (Waters 2011), "trailing spouses" who accompany their husbands to a host country (Jiang, Soylemez-Karakoc, and Hussain 2021), and "flying grandmas" who travel from Asia to Europe and America to look after grandchildren (Lie 2010). Women's roles as carers and their identity as mothers and wives are stretched and reproduced at the transnational level. However, it is important to recognise the temporal nature of such patterns as the need for childcare and the ability to provide care change over time. Women's long-term migrant patterns are commonly shaped by their offspring's life course, for example, "study mothers" plan to return home when adult children start university (Waters 2011), and grandmothers plan their retirement around their overseas grandchildren's birth and school age (Tu 2023). I will show in this paper how wives' coming and leaving China are decided by husbands based on the husbands' timing of graduation and employment as well as the need to have children.

The third theme looks at those who are so-called "left behind" as the male members of the family/community travel for employment. Fernández-Sánchez et al. (2020) review article on the experience of left-behind wives (LBW) found that most research on that topic was conducted in origin countries like Mexico, China, and Nepal where more conservative family-centric norms prevail. In addition to their social obligations as wives and mothers, LBW adopt new roles and responsibilities in household management. Such modification of gender roles can be empowering, but LBW suffer from an increased workload and become more disadvantaged and less satisfied than women without a migrated partner. Females in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India face further seclusion as migrated males adopt a more orthodox attitude with inflated dowry value in the sending society (Xiang 2005). However, little attention has been paid to the mobility implications on "left behind" women following education-motivated emigration. Instead of receiving remittances, female family members may need to support the overseas men's education pursuit. This new gender dynamic needs investigation in terms of its effect on female's well-being at home.

The three streams of research are not separate from each other. Immobile women who were "left behind" may later join their partners overseas, women who move as "dependent" to provide care may venture into the local employment market. Migration patterns are not gender-neutral. While discriminatory social structures have weaker effects on male migration (IOM 2017), discrimination against women influences *whether* and *how* women decide to engage in transnational mobility (Jannatul 2024). "Migration is both a gendered and gendering process." (Szczepanikova 2024, 1) With this statement, Szczepanikova pointed out three levels of implications. First, it is important to explore how gender permeates migration practice. Second, these gendered practices also impact migrants and receiving countries. Third, gendered migration and gendering are *processes*, behind which there are complex histories and legacies (Szczepanikova 2024).

Building on this, I explore the gendered time–space in the migration process. Combining home and host countries as a transnational social space, the migration process brings forward the elaborated gender inequality. Domestic gendered space is reproduced as a transnational gendered space. In addition, a time dimension allows for a more comprehensive explanation of the gendered outcome and highlights the entanglement of life course between men and women and gender dynamics in the transnational social space. Recognising that "gender relations are central in producing the migration system itself" (Xiang 2005, 358) allows for the study of women's disadvantages in spite of the absence of women participants. It is especially important for international student mobility (ISM) research given that inequality in education penetrates other aspects of the society both domestically and abroad.

"Silent women": discovering gender sensitivity in ISM

Despite the mainstreaming of gender perspective into migration research, gender was often overlooked in ISM research (Raghuram and Sondhi 2021; Sondhi and King 2017). The lack of gender-based official statistics on ISM from the two largest student-sending countries, China and India, is an indication of the negligence (Sondhi and King 2017; Tu and Xie 2020). However, there exists a small body of gender-sensitive research which highlights women's ISM experience from Asia to the "West." For example, female university students from China to Australia (Martin 2018) and to the UK (Tu and Xie 2020); and from Pakistan and India to the UK (Sadia et al. 2022; Sondhi and King 2017). A common theme from such research findings reveals a constant struggle of young women who are caught between more conservative patriarchal values from the sending society and the identity exploration in the "West," which forms a contrast to the traditional gender norm at home. However, a research gap exists in females' experience when they move from one family-centric country to another.

Most female students in these studies are self-funded with financial support from relatively affluent families at home. ISM from the global south to the global north reflect a privileged background of the mobile students in general, and female students in particular. Despite belonging to the relatively more affluent class of Asian society, daughters' education pursuits are considered necessary but secondary to sons' education. Similar attitudes are found among urban middle-class Pakistani parents: pursuing good credentials for daughters is more about cultivating the ideal Muslim girl while safeguarding against future marriage uncertainties; while economic and career advancement is the objective of the education for sons (Taj 2024). Therefore, more girls being admitted to universities does not necessarily mean greater gender equality in economic achievement. The knock-on effect of gendered motivations for education is a gender gap in economic participation. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, India's education attainment rank improved from 120 in 2013 to 26 in 2023, while its economic participation and opportunity rank dropped from 124 to 142. The indicators for Pakistan, however, revealed that it remained one of the lowest countries throughout 2013 and 2023.

What about the less affluent end of the spectrum in ISM, such as students from Pakistan to China? What does being a male or a female mean for an individual's education trajectory in non-urban, non-middle-class Pakistani families, especially when faced with opportunities to study abroad? A gendered and gendering angle has been missing in ISM research within the Global South. In their review chapter of existing research on gender and international student migration, Raghuram and Sondhi (2021) echo this research gap: we do not yet know about gendered variations in class mobility; different new centres of student growth outside of the Global North needs a new theoretical understanding; nor do we know how gender is operationalised, (and performed differentially) following education-motivated migration. They conclude that "the need to think through the presence of gendered international students in a gender unequal world is now pressing" (231).

One of the anticipated obstacles to studying women's (im)mobility among students from poorer and highly patriarchal countries is the likely lower presence of female international students. However, it is as important to ask why people do not migrate as it is to ask why they migrate. Schewel (2020) has importantly called for migration research approaches beyond the mobility bias and stressed that immobility is deeply gendered, just like migration. The absence of mobile female students makes it difficult to access their experience, but the "silent women" should not be overlooked in the education and migration research agenda. On the contrary, a new methodological approach should be adopted to overcome such obstacles. In this study I will seek to tell the story of the "silent

women" based on what can be captured "in the field"—the visible men's accounts. Gender is relational and men and women's experience of migration are the two sides of the same coin. Recognising the gendered process of study and migration opens a new methodological possibility to "research" women who have been left out of the education mobility and research agenda. In what follows, I will reflect on the methodological considerations of studying women through men's interviews. The women's stories will be presented in biographical stages before delving into the discussion on silent women and transnational female domesticity.

Method

My data rest on interviews with 16 Pakistani students and recent graduates (See Table 1). Among the 16 students, 14 were on a CGS-funded studentship and 2 Master's degree students were funded by China Road and Bridge Corporation (which also benefit from Chinese government funding). These participants formed part of a larger sample recruited for a project which looked at Belt-and-Road countries' student mobility to China and their attendant career trajectory. Through snowball sampling strategy, the Pakistani cohort stood out as the largest in number (16 out of 32 participants) and was most male-dominant. The socioeconomic background of the 16 Pakistani respondents belongs to the lower-middle income level of the society. These students were not affluent enough to afford self-funded overseas education, but resourceful enough to commit to a 3–4 years full-time studentship instead of generating income for their family. The majority have a rural background but were inspired by the chance of upward social mobility.

First-wave interviews were conducted in 2019 which were aimed at final-year postgraduate students. The interviews captured the individuals' decision-making process at the crossroads

Table 1. Participants' information.

	Name	Subject	Degree	Age at 2019 interview	Marital status 2019	Age at 2023 interview	Marital status 2023	Job in 2023
1	Kabir	Economics	PhD	32	married with 2 children	36	married with 3 children	Lecturer (Middle East)
2	Aleem	Economics	PhD	29	married	33	married with 2 children	Lecturer (China)
3	Omar	Engineering	PhD	33	married	37	married with 1 child	post-doc (China)
4	Salim	Anthropology	PhD	29	single	33	single	post-doc (Pakistan)
5	Ali	Engineering	Master's	31	married	35	married with 1 child	PhD student (China)
6	Javid	Engineering	Master's	27	single	31	single	chemical engineer (China)
7	Said	Chemistry	Master's	28	single	32	single	chemical engineer (China)
8	Najib	Engineering	PhD	31	single			
9	Jameel	Engineering	PhD	29	single			
10	Bashir	Engineering	PhD	31	single			
11	Ismail	Anthropology	PhD	32	single			
12	Hamid	Engineering	PhD	33	married with 1 child			
13	Abid	Engineering	Master's	23	single			
14	Umar	Engineering	Master's	28	single			
15	Jawad	Engineering	Master's	29	married			
16	Dawood	Engineering	Master's	26	single			

of migration and employment choices upon graduation. The follow-up interviews in 2023 were conducted with 7 of the original cohort. Because of the disruption of Covid, and China's border closure from 2020 to 2023, I have lost touch with a great number of participants. These in-depth interviews unpack different stages of the Pakistani students' education, home-making, and migration process.

This research was not designed to explore gender gaps, nor did I enter the field with the agenda to find the "missing women." It was only *after* the fieldwork and during the data analysis that the pattern of the gendered education disparity emerged. The mention, or the lack of mention, of female family members in the migrants' decision-making process reflects a patriarchal norm that dictates the life trajectories of men and women in their home society. These stories tend to be male-dominated. For example, sisters find themselves in arranged marriages, and out of work and education, early in their lives; while brothers enjoy the privilege of higher education and professional careers. Likewise, in these interview accounts, there is a near-absence of wives and mothers' opinions on migration decision-making.

The religiously and socio-culturally grounded norm that regards women as a domestic subject may discourage male participants from talking about *their women* with an outsider researcher. However, my identity as a Chinese female may have placed me in an advantageous position. In Choi and Peng (2016)'s study on Chinese male migration workers, they used a team of male and female interviewers. They found that both young and middle-aged male workers were more likely to talk about their conjugal relationships to female interviewers than to male interviewers. Participants spontaneously told me about their wives' pregnancy and miscarriage experiences. It is reasonable to assume that they may be reluctant to share this information with a male interviewer.

Although this article took an unusual approach in its male sample and female-focused data analysis, it is legitimate and necessary to study females from males' accounts, and vice-versa. My other study about Chinese students in the UK, which is made up of three female case studies, demonstrates that women's migration decisions are deeply influenced by the power of their fathers and husbands (Tu and Xie 2020). Furthermore, Ashraf's analysis of male-dominated public media on CPEC also proved fruitful in raising awareness of female absence (Ashraf 2024).

The next section will present the experience of female family members captured in participants' narratives. The lack of opportunity to directly interview these women means data extracted from the men's accounts must be interpreted with caution. Therefore, I present the findings of men's interviews from three approaches: the factual (e.g. marital status, profession), the way women were *constructed* in men's account, and their *perception* of women's roles in their mobility journey. In my effort to piece together the life story of the Pakistani women none of the respondents referred to the female member of their lives by name, so I deliberately left these women nameless instead, they appear as "sisters," "wives", and "mothers" of the 16 respondents, consistent with how the men's narratives reflect the identity of these women.

Her story through his accounts

"My sisters married early"

"To start, could you tell me about your family in Pakistan?" With this open question, I hoped to draw some idea of the participant's socioeconomic background; furthermore, the participants' ways of constructing their responses helped to reveal what they regarded to be important in

their upbringing. Among the 16 Pakistani males, I found a somewhat homogeneous format in describing their family. The narrative usually started with the father and his profession, and then the brother(s), and the respondent himself. Sometimes, the mother is mentioned as being a housewife, and nearly half (7 out of 16) did not mention their mothers at all. Participants have an average of 4 siblings, ranging from having 2 siblings to 8 siblings. When introducing their siblings, brothers were given substantially more mention than sisters. For example, Omar's (PhD, 33, married) account of his siblings represents a common scenario in this study, and he gave more details about his sisters when enquired:

> Researcher: So how many siblings do you have?
>
> Omar: In total five of us, the first two are sisters, and they are married. And the other one next is my elder brother and then me and then my younger brother. So sisters, they are married and they are living with *their* families. And my elder brother he finished his master's degree in Geography in 2007 … [the brother's job history] … was selected in a UNICHEF project … [the details of the project] … And my younger brother, he finished Masters in Economics in 2014, and he's working in a bank since 2015 … [details of younger brother's job history].
>
> Researcher: Did your sisters go to school?
>
> Omar: My older sister, she went to, like high school. When she was in high school, she got married. Then the next one, she was not good at study, and still she finished middle school. She could not pass ninth grade. She doesn't work, but only stay at home and 2008 she married. And now she has two daughters and one son. [Emphasis mine]

Marriage seemed to be the common destination of sisters, and once they were married their identity shifted to being the "housewives" of their husband's families. It is common to learn the contrast between brothers' socioeconomic achievement, and sisters' lack of them. Only one participant, who completed his PhD in Anthropology in China, reflected on the contrast. Ismail's (PhD, 31, single) description of his family started with: "I am from an average kind of economic background. My family is not too much rich. My siblings are very much educated in my hometown." He went on to elaborate on the "well-educated siblings":

> Ismail: My elder brother is a surgeon in hospital. He is a district specialist, and he guided all of us to get a very good education … like I'm a PhD, my other brothers are all engineers. That's a good family background like from the educational perspective.
>
> Researcher: Do you have any sisters?
>
> Ismail: One.
>
> Researcher: So what about her? Did she go to university?
>
> Ismail: No, she didn't. So there's a problem of our society, like in 2000s, was a kind of very strict, patriarchal kind of society. And the woman here, when get married, they don't go anywhere, they must be housewives.

Notably in this interview, sisters were not immediately included as core members of the "siblings." While Ismail's postgraduate training in Anthropology may have contributed to his awareness of the patriarchal structure in Pakistani society, most of the other participants took it for granted that sisters should prioritise marriage over education. The common belief that daughters should marry early negatively affects daughters' "value" in the household and limits parents' investment in girls' education (Farooq 2020).

Nevertheless, a small number of participants revealed sisters who were working or in higher education. Javid (MSc, 27, single) was the only participant whose mother had a job, a teacher, and "my mom did a lot for me. Even she tried working extra hours for my tuition fees. She put me into one of the good schools." At the time of the interview in 2019, Javid's older sister was studying in China for a medical degree as a self-funded student. The funding came from their parents. Bashir's (PhD, 31, single) sister was a practising medical doctor. The other two cases where sisters were in higher education were both involved in medical degrees.

While it is a small sample the dominance of medical degrees among the educated sisters is revealing: it reflects what Pakistani media calls "doctor brides"; female doctors getting married and quitting practice in favour of a full-time role in the family. While the percentage of female students in medical schools in Pakistan is as high as 80–85%, less than half of them join the medical profession after graduation, and even more, quit after marriage (Mohsin and Syed 2020). Taj's research (2024) on Pakistani parents found that certain professions, like medicine or teaching, are considered respectable for daughters and valued not for financial returns but as an extension of their legitimised social roles as mothers or supportive deputies within the family unit.

There is, by no means, any evidence in this study to suggest that the sisters with a medical education background would become "doctor wives." It is worth noting that a participant's (Aleem, PhD, 29, married) sister who became a housewife was working as a teacher before marriage. Commenting on his older sister's early marriage after secondary school, Salim (PhD, 29, single) said, "It was marriage a kind of interruption in her education system." Growing up with sisters who discontinued their studies for marriage arguably contributed to the gender norm that is taken for granted by the male participants.

"My family had arranged a marriage for me"

In the 2019 interview, 6 participants were married. Three of them were married before the start of their study in China. Among the other three, Ali (MSc, 31) became engaged and then married during his study in China, Omar (PhD, 33) was engaged before leaving Pakistan and got married during his PhD, and Aleem (PhD, 29) was engaged and planned to get married upon completing his PhD in the same year. The latter three participants shared more details of their engagement. Their marriages are all family-arranged and with a relative from their own kinship. Ali's (MSc, 31) wife was the sister of his brother's wife, and this marriage was arranged by his brother. Similarly, Omar and Aleem are married to a second cousin arranged by their families.

The majority of marriages in Pakistan are arranged, including a high proportion of between 38 and 49% with first cousins (Maqsood 2024). Marrying "in the family" is traditionally preferred in South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. It can be seen as a strategy for daughters' easier transition into their husbands' households (Shaw 2014). Young women were found *opting for* arranged marriages (within or outside the family) to gain respect and recognition of the extended families and access to wider family resources (Khurshid 2020). However, it also means that the nuclear family is deeply embedded and entangled with the kin network, which partly limited the direct influence wives have on their husbands' decisions.

Among the 6 married/engaged participants, there was only a limited reference to the wife's opinion on the husband's decision to study in China for a length of at least 3–4 years. In most narratives, it was a decision made by the participant with consultations with the father or older brothers. Kabir (PhD, 33) was married and was father to a 2-year-old girl and a 1-month-old baby when he left Pakistan in August 2016. When asked "How did your wife feel about your going abroad?", he

said, "She was crying because she wasn't willing to let me go abroad, she said she cannot live comfortably without me. She was kind of more emotional than me."

Kabir and his wife were separated for 6 months before they were reunited in China. How did Kabir's wife look after their children during the 6 months without an income? "We are living kind of a joint family like with parents or with brothers and sisters, when I came here (China) my wife was living with her parents. So her parents were looking after her with all the expenditures." Marrying "in the family" means easier resource-sharing. However, in the absence of a husband as the mediating role, the wives may face new challenges in the everyday negotiation of domestic and public practicality.

Different from migrant workers who send regular remittances back home, Pakistani students in China live on a limited stipend. Their student visa does not allow part-time work to help with income. No participant reported that they had enough money to send back to support a family member; most could save only just enough for a return flight ticket to visit home each year. Seven participants admitted struggling with the limited stipend from the scholarship, and 4 of them sought financial help from family in Pakistan in cases of emergency as they did not build up savings for such situations. Therefore, the "left behind" spouses, in this case, needed to rely on other family members at home for financial support.

"My wife came to join me in China"

All 6 married participants but one had their wife (and children) join them in China, after a period of initial separation. There was a sense of taken-for-grantedness in this arrangement that women should travel overseas to a completely strange country to join their husbands. This pattern forms a sharp contrast to the strict female domesticity during their pre-marital days. Nevertheless, new mobility restrictions have arisen in China. The wives of Pakistani students in China were restricted to a physical and social space largely because of the language barrier, student accommodation limitations, income shortage as well as exclusion from the social infrastructure in the host country. Kabir was living in a single room in the on-campus student dormitory. Apart from free accommodation, his monthly stipend was 3500 RMB (approx. 483 USD) to be spent on maintenance in Shanghai.

> Kabir: I spend around 2,000 RMB on my personal like, eating and going outside or something. When she was here, we used to spend all that money. When she came here, she brought her clothes, our children's clothes so we do not need to buy new clothes or new shoes or something … I am very blessed that my kid didn't get sick … [citing a case where his friend's child's hospital visit cost 5000 RMB].
>
> Researcher: Do you have a backup plan? What if something like that happens?
>
> Kabir: No, I didn't have any backup plan cause, you know, it's a kind of belief on God. In any case, whatever the case is, Allah will help me. So I brought my family here. I didn't have much. So there wasn't any backup plan but if that's the situation I may ask my family if they can help.

CGS-funded students are covered under a healthcare insurance scheme for international students where most of their hospital expenses can be reimbursed. However, their "dependents" are not included in the insurance. Furthermore, "dependents" of Chinese student visa holders tend to have very limited rights. For example, they are not entitled to work nor expect any form of public welfare. As an emerging migration-receiving country China still lacks a substantial social and public infrastructure to cater for student migrants' needs (Speelman 2020): there is an even less established support system for any international student's spouse. I have elaborated on infrastructural

gaps experienced by international students in China and the negative impact on their emotional, well-being in a previous publication (see Tu 2022).

However, the question to ask here is that, given the lack of social contact and supporting networks, how do spouses get on with their lives in China? This is also a question I put to participants, and no one responded negatively to this question. For example, Hamis (PhD, 30) had his wife and 5-year-old daughter join him 3 years previously, they spent the first 6 months living on campus but were told to rent outside due to the dormitory shortage. I asked: "Have they (wife and daughter) experienced difficulty adjusting their life?"

> Not too much, because when I came here I have seen all the market areas and all the things that we need in our daily life. When we move outside, fortunately in Shanghai there are so many Pakistani families. So, immediately outside of the university I found 10–15 Pakistani families here living, so it was very easy for me. And also it is a good social circle and social gathering. The ladies social together, children together, even if I go to lab and my families have a social circle.

Living out of campus could pose a challenge. In Hamis's narrative, he believed the markets, and other Pakistani wives, should form a sufficient network supporting his wife's daily needs. Kabir, on the other hand, lived on campus in a single dormitory room with his wife and two daughters. The only complaint he expressed was that it was "irritating for them (daughters) like they didn't have much place to play. So every day I bring them out twice to the playground so they can get little relaxed there." It was unclear whether Kabir's wife was allowed to go out on her own with the children in the absence of a mahram. Children were given substantially more mention when family life in China was asked in the interview.

The only exception was Aleem's (PhD, 29) case, where his fiancée/cousin also came to China to do a CGS-funded PhD in Sociology a year after Aleem started his PhD in the same city. Their engagement had been established in the family "6 or 7 years" ago, and Aleem "just guided her and she did all the documents." For Aleem's wife, her future husband/cousin's being in China contributed significantly to her being granted permission to study abroad.

At the time of the 2019 interview, Aleem was near the completion of his PhD and his wife expected to finish her PhD in 2020. When asked about her career plan after graduation, Aleem replied:

> Of course she will be working. And actually, she really like cultural clothes, you know, that Pakistan clothes … So like in designing, she's very interested. So she just wants to do some type of business. So I told her that, no matter what you want, you may go because you already have finished your PhD. You are going to finish your PhD. So you can do anything if you like, as a housewife as well as you do your businesses. It's okay.

It sounded contradictory that there is no mention of an academic career for a Sociology PhD graduate. In the meantime, Aleem has applied for multiple academic positions in China and started to receive job offers in 2019. Women's education credentials are more seen in their symbolic value rather than possible economic returns (Taj 2024). In the follow-up interview with Aleem in 2023, I learned that Aleem's wife did not graduate in 2020 as planned, nor did she start a clothes design business, instead, she gave birth to a daughter in 2021 and a son in 2022. However, she continued her PhD, albeit it was delayed for 3 years due to the COVID-19 and childbirth.

"We had another child during my PhD"

In the 2023 interviews, all the married men (4 participants) had become fathers. They either had children during their studies or shortly afterwards during COVID-19. While the respondents'

education and careers suffered little disruption, childbearing, and childrearing became the main responsibilities of the wives. Respondents often had to turn to the extended family network in Pakistan due to the lack of support in China. In earlier sections, we learned that Kabir's wife joined him in China in March 2017 with two children. When I interviewed him in 2019, his wife had returned to Pakistan with their children in late 2018 because she became pregnant with their third child. Kabir stressed that the third pregnancy was planned because his oldest daughter was reaching school age and needed to go back to Pakistan for schooling. They hoped to have a third child, so they planned in such a way that his wife could become pregnant before taking the children back to Pakistan in 2018. Kabir remained in China to finish his PhD. As a pregnant woman with two young children, it is reasonable to assume that Kabir's wife had to rely entirely on female relatives for substantial care responsibility and daily responsibilities.

Not all childbearing was carried out smoothly. Without medical insurance, or the supporting network of extended family, childbearing in China could be expensive and challenging. In the follow-up interview with Omar in 2023, he was working as a post-doc researcher and had just become a father, but he revealed that his wife had had a miscarriage when he was doing his PhD; she was hospitalized for three days, and he had to borrow money from his brothers to pay for the medical expenses. His wife returned to Pakistan to recover in the care of her parents. Relatedly, when Ali's (32, MSc) wife fell ill he reported language barriers and trust issues with hospitals in China. Although his wife wanted to have her condition treated in China, he decided to take her back to hospitals in Pakistan for a second opinion. "She came and she saw the things from my perspective. And she could understand the problem though she wanted to go with the earlier doctors and tried to convince me, but she gave me the space to make a decision."

They went back to Pakistan to have her treated and she recovered at home. In 2021 and during COVID-19, Ali had a son. At that time, he was doing a full-time PhD online at a Chinese university. Ali did not have an income, so they relied on their extended family's support for three years.

"She said it's for you to decide"

The 2019 interviews and 2023 interviews saw all the respondents at the cross-roads. The former stage is the point of graduation, and the latter stage is the end of the pandemic and the increasing job insecurity in Pakistan and China. At each stage, I asked respondents about their migration plan; they typically expressed their desire to remain in China or find a job somewhere in the "West." Among the married participants, the wife's opinion rarely contributes to the decision-making narrative. In the 2023 interview, however, since all married respondents had children, children's education became an important factor in their future migration decisions. Because Chinese public schools do not teach English and private schools are unaffordable, married respondents would stress that they could not live long-term in China.

In 2023, employment markets in Pakistan and overseas had become more competitive following the COVID disruption. Aleem and Omar had temporary academic jobs and were trying to apply for the next opportunity. Ali was in his third year as a PhD student and had just returned to China after its border re-opened in January 2023. This time Ali left his wife and 2-year-old son in Pakistan and he had a plan:

> What's in my mind is that my son is still like 2 years old. So I have like this 3 years period till my son becomes of age to go to school. So for these 3 years, I can work anywhere. But after that, I have to find a

> country where the education system is good and my son can be just [educated], the health system is good, and like the culture difference is not that much or like it's adaptive or accommodative.

In this picture of future migration trajectory, Ali, like other father participants, had revolved his plan around a career, and the timing of his children's education. Likewise, the role of his wife was missing from the picture; I had to pose a specific question: "Have you discussed it with your wife?" to bring "the wife" back to the picture. Ali responded: "She says that it's for you to decide, but I think she said like eventually we should go back and rest." Ali's wife was perhaps suggesting that she preferred to settle in Pakistan and avoid the upheavals of being a migrant. However, her opinion was not essential in the decision. In general, when asked how their wives felt about their migration decision, participants often said that "she was happy about it."

Discussion: silent women and transnational female domesticity

This paper started with the puzzle of missing women in CGS-funded students from Pakistan and explored the reason and consequences of the male-dominated Pakistan–China education pathway. In sketching the female "life story," each stage of the female life course is deeply shaped by the gender expectation to keep women in a private space. In Pakistan female domesticity has long been determined by *purdah* (the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty) which dominates female (and male) daily behaviour and predetermines women's life choices (Papanek 1973). Although market liberalisation and the rise of the middle-class have transformed purdah modalities during the past three decades (Husain 2020), such changes are largely limited to big cities like Karachi. A consequence of such an internalised value system is that no questions are raised when it comes to unequal opportunity for women in public life. Studies that looked into Muslim women's education and work, use phrases such as "invisible resource" (Wallace 1987), "silent voices"(Khattak 2020), and "missing doctors"(Mohsin and Syed 2020) in their titles, stressing a gender group that is not *seen*, *heard*, or *found*, and such state of Pakistani women were found to have been consistent for decades.

This study uses "silent women" to reflect the presence, or the lack of it, of females as interpreted in Pakistani male international students' narratives. I highlight "silent women" in three levels. First, at the macro-level, "silent women" refers to the young female population who could have benefited from the education pathway from Pakistan to China but did not. Second, at the micro-level, "silent women" refers to the wives (and female relatives) who bear the risks, and shoulder care responsibilities as the husbands embark on an education journey in a non-traditional study destination which turns out to be full of precarity and uncertainty. Third, as a methodological reflection, "silent women" points to the barrier to researching women. I will elaborate on the three levels of analysis and show how female domesticity has become a social "gate keeper," which itself reinforces a gender bias; and it also poses barriers to encouraging and researching Pakistani female mobility.

The discouraged female students

The male participants in this study come from lower-middle-income backgrounds. None of them reported having a university-educated parent, the fact that they are doing a Master's or PhD degree in China already suggests some level of social upward mobility. At least three participants stressed that they were the *first person* in the extended family or in the village to have gained a PhD. These respondents come from a family that placed importance on education. However, in contrast to the men's success, women in these families tend to take the traditional path of early marriage and

become full-time housewives. Women are *allowed* by men to enter the public domain (e.g. university or workplace) as carriers of family honour, thus they are subject to more regulations of purdah observation (Khurshid 2017). Men's decisions are usually not in favour of women leaving the domestic "safety." Research shows that male members, such as brothers, are usually reluctant to allow females access to public transport, a mixed-gender university, and workplaces because of the "risks" of interacting with external males (Khattak 2020; Mohsin and Syed 2020; Sadia et al. 2022).

Therefore, for a young, female student to benefit from CGS-funded postgraduate study opportunities, she needs to overcome the restrictive domesticity barrier in her cultural value system, gain male approval in the family, arrange accompanied overseas travel, and be highly regulated in mixed-gender interaction. Such demands put most daughters of all classes in a very vulnerable position, thus systematically discouraging female application. The CGS selection process appears to be gender-neutral and merit-based. However, meritocratic impartiality is a myth and academic excellence is inherently gendered (Mohsin and Syed 2020). A gender-neutral selection system in Pakistan is arguably gender-biased because it ignores the significant gender disparity in student mobility.

The "trailing spouse" and the "left behind" spouse

Interviews in 2019 and 2023 showed that male students and graduates have been able to make progress in their education and subsequent careers without delaying marriage or fatherhood. Two patterns of "doing family" are common and changeable: the wife comes to China and looks after her husband and children, or the wife stays in Pakistan and looks after children with the extended family. Either the trailing spouse or the stay-behind spouse arrangement builds on the compromises of female family members and makes the male Pakistani student the centre of the support network. Arguably, the husband/son/brother's education mobility to China has intensified the labour demand on female family members at home.

Having a husband who studies in China generates an almost reversed requirement for female mobility. Women are not only allowed but also encouraged to travel abroad to be with their husbands. Women's activity in China is still limited to their domestic space such as cooking and childcare, hence reflecting a reproduction of Pakistani gender division in China. However, the trailing spouse suffers more risk and challenge than women who do not migrate. Husbands are typically in a non-income generating, full-time study state, thus limiting the provisions for their living costs in China. Students' spouses are excluded from any public support, including healthcare. Since women are also expected to have children regardless of whether their husband finishes his studies, pregnancy and childbirth can be more challenging as a migrant in China. Furthermore, a trailing spouse who had never been abroad, and was experiencing the sociocultural shock in China may also suffer a serious impact on her well-being. However, none of these concerns were "voiced" in the husbands' accounts.

Without conducting in-depth interviews with the students' wives, I have no means to interpret their perception of their well-being while living in China. I met Omar's wife on a social occasion and informally asked how she felt about life in China. She said that she preferred living in China as she was happy to have the distance from extended families and valued the sense of safety she felt in the Chinese city streets. Geographical distance from home may introduce room for a new gender dynamic between Pakistani couples in China. Research on Asian female students in a "Western" country has captured different levels of "suspension" from sex-gender norms at home (Martin 2018) and emerging "hybrid identities" (Sadia et al. 2022). More research is needed to examine

the perception of the student spouses who move between two Asian countries both of which have conservative gender norms.

The hard-to-reach group in research

The severity of female domesticity makes it difficult to access Pakistani women as research subjects. Men act as gatekeepers between the domestic and the public world. Papanek (1973) wrote half a century ago about her fieldwork in Pakistan that women were not accessible to male researchers, and "women's daily activities might be less visible and certainly less interesting to study." Being a foreign female researcher, she felt the privilege to have "a much higher degree of 'role flexibility' than men in societies where indigenous women are secluded." Admittedly, till today, male researchers would face greater barriers than female researchers to access Pakistani women, or women in any culture that requires gender segregation. Such a trend is harmful to knowledge production because important Pakistani female research agendas could be "silenced" due to inaccessibility.

Some research on Pakistani women involved the researcher also being from the same gender and nationality. For example, in Mohsin and Syed's (2020) research on female doctors, they adopted "convenience sampling based on ease of access" and interviews "were conducted by a 25-35-year-old, Pakistani national, female researcher"; In Sadia et al.'s (2022) research on Pakistani postgraduate students in the UK, the lead author was a female Pakistani postgraduate student herself. "A recruitment advertisement was posted in the Student Union building, and circulated through student societies as well as word of mouth in the University," they found a total of 6 participants. In spite of the researchers' efforts, compromises need to be made to prioritise access and settle for small sample numbers. As a result, data analysis could only reflect the scope of the extremely limited sample who participated in the research.

Conclusion

Gender disparity in education and attendant socioeconomic participation have been a long-existing problem in Pakistan. Gender segregation divided men and women into "separate worlds" (Papanek 1973). Universities and workspaces are public and mixed gender, and, therefore, not accepted as appropriate for women. Although a small number of women are allowed to enter public spaces, their presence is to facilitate maintaining gender segregation, for example, female doctors for female patients, and female teachers for girls. Equal access to education is not sufficient to ensure equality between the sexes because women of all classes are subject to gender seclusion and female domesticity (Khattak 2020). The male-dominated recipients of the China-funded studentship, as demonstrated in this study, is a telling case of how contemporary women miss out on transnational education mobility as a direct outcome of gender inequality at home.

The impact of gender disparity did not stop at the point of young women missing out on the overseas education opportunity. As men's roles progress into being Master's and PhD students/graduates in China, and their life stage unfolds, women in their extended family and kin community enter marriage and motherhood to continue as the "silent women" that support these postgraduate students in China. Women's role as "left-behind" wives or "trailing spouses" saw a transnational continuity of gender division and female domesticity. Women shift between the two kinds of status depending on the need for childrearing. The strict spatial boundary for women's mobility was redefined between China and Pakistan: it was where the husband was. However, women's opinions and feelings about the migration experience were missing. How the students'

spouses cope with cultural adaptation and social barriers in China is not known. The lack of knowledge of women's perception is largely due to the inaccessibility of Muslim wives who are secluded from public life. Although this article made an inferential effort to learn about the women's stories through husbands' accounts, the information revealed by the male gatekeepers is limited.

This article makes three contributions to gender and migration literature. First, by capturing Pakistani students' different life stages before and after graduation, I add spatial and temporal reflection to the long-existing gender disparity in Pakistan. Second and empirically, I introduced a critical angle to a newly emerged intra-Asia development programme. China and Pakistan both suffer from severe gender inequality. The often-cited political symbol of China and Pakistan as the "Iron Brothers" becomes the means of vindicating the patriarchal norm shared by the two countries (Ashraf 2024). I call for gender sensitivity in examining development programmes such as government-funded scholarships. In a society where women are disadvantaged, a gender-neutral programme is likely to entrench the existing gender gap. Finally, and methodologically, I took an inferential-exploratory approach to "reach" women through men's narratives. How men choose to present the images of their sisters, mothers, and wives, reflected the norms of women's role in society, thus contributing to the understanding of women's disadvantage in the absence of women's voices.

Note

1. The actual number of funded studentships is more than 8163. The statistics issued the MoE only recorded CGS funded studentships. There are provisional level, municipal level, and university level scholarships available for those who failed to obtain CGS. However, those students need to enroll as self-funded first, hence the under-representation of funded Pakistani PhD studentships in official statistics.

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Notes on contributor

Mengwei Tu is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Swansea University, UK. Her research focuses on international migration, specifically on two streams: first, she looks at international student cohorts both from China and to China and investigates their post-study career and migration trajectories; second, she explores the familial side of highly skilled migration by conducting qualitative longitudinal research on transnational families between China and the UK. Mengwei is the author of the book *Education, Migration, and Family Relations between China and the UK* (Emerald, 2018, 2020). She also leads a funded project "Students/graduates from Belt-Road countries in China: migration networks and career trajectory" (2018–2023).

ORCID

Mengwei Tu http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6855-1381

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