

Stakeholders, Structures, and Narratives: Rethinking Irregular Migration from Pakistan to Europe

Muhammad Hasnain Bilal*¹

¹*Lecturer of Sociology, Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding author: hasnainbilal@fccollege.edu.pk

ORCID No: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4992-1179>

Keywords: Irregular migration, Illegal migration, South Asian migration, Dunki, Donkey Flight

DOI No:

<https://doi.org/10.56976/jsom.v4i4.357>

This paper involves an extensive analysis of the socioeconomic and cultural factors behind irregular migration between Pakistan and European countries based on ten detailed interviews with migration experts and policy makers, including agency officials of United Nations, European Union delegation in Pakistan, and an international investigative journalist. The key results indicate how widespread the power of social media and misinformation are, and it keeps most aspirants unaware of the real dangers and consequences of this very dangerous journey. In this context, migration agents play a significant role during the process who exploit aspirants financially and physically thus contributing to making the current responses of the institutions ineffective in alleviating the socioeconomic factors behind it and dispelling misinformation. The implications of the findings on migration governance are profound, and it is evident that there is a need to organize awareness activities, initiate meaningful policy changes and ensure the effective provision of the reintegration support in the sending countries. The research also supports context-based interventions that go beyond the securitized response and understand the socio-political realities of Pakistan. Thus, it suggests a paradigm shift in the migration governance to development-oriented measures in lieu of punitive control mechanisms, by aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The policy recommendations imply the reinforcement of institutional capabilities, promotion of trans-national technocollaboration and creation of digital counter-narratives.



1. Introduction

Why do people migrate? Is migration a conscious, deliberate choice, or is it the result of structural disparities that leave individuals with a few viable alternatives? This question lies at the heart of contemporary migration studies, particularly in the context of irregular migration. Global migration saw a major upward trend between 1970 and 2017 according to Betts & Kainz (2017) who identified 244 million people on the move worldwide: representing about 3.3% of total world population. The process of globalization together with advanced transportation systems and communication tools is seen as responsible for escalating the magnitude of human mobility while extending its geographical scope (Castles, 2017; Petrova, et al., 2025). However, it is also crucial to acknowledge that all the migrations are not done under favorable circumstances and carried out through legal channels. In the contemporary global landscape, irregular migration tends to exist as a tangible reality; at the heart of debate, there is Europe and its hinterlands (Morehouse & Blomfield, 2011; Zammit, 2024).

Here it is very crucial to understand that Smuggling of migrants and human trafficking are often used as interchangeably terms in public sphere, but both the terms have a very diverse range of social and political implications (Aronowitz, 2001; Aronowitz, 2023). Human smuggling is facilitation of unauthorized entry of human across borders for financial or material gains and is usually done with the consent of the person being smuggled (UNODC, 2004; Triandafyllidou, 2022). In contrast to that, human trafficking refers to the recruitment, transfer, and exploitation of people through coercion, misrepresentation, or by taking advantage of the people's vulnerabilities, and this does not necessarily involve international borders (UNODC, 2000; Ikefuma, 2023). While smuggling of migrants is limited to crossing the borders with consent but trafficking is an ongoing process that is just not limited to crossing the international boundaries but continuous exploitation. Distinguishing between the two ensures analytical precision and avoids conflating issues that require different legal and policy responses (Zhang et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2024). This paper argues that irregular migration from Pakistan to Europe is driven not merely by individual choice, but by a combination of structural economic inequalities, socio-political instability, and culturally embedded practices that normalize migration, even through unauthorized channels. (Triandafyllidou, 2015; Zammit, 2024). Despite significant policy interventions aimed at curbing irregular migration, the number of Pakistanis using illegal routes to reach Europe continues to rise everyday (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2021).

The chain-migration system (Goering, 1989) combined with emulation (Laghari, 2009) within the Pakistani context known as *dekha-dikhi* (Khan, 2017) works through social and kinship networks to support migration specifically irregular migration from this area (Khan & Awan, 2020). An estimated millions of undocumented individuals bypass borders for which they lack authorization and documentation leading to socio-economic and political repercussion according to Koser (2010) and Gebre (2024). The statistics indicate that irregular practice has been ongoing in South Asian countries particularly Pakistan which ranks it among the top ten origin countries of irregular migration (UNODC, 2013; Ullah et al., 2025). The combination of elevated border protections with substantial asylum rejections of Pakistani

applicants and perilous migration paths does not result in lowering irregular migration flows from Pakistan into European Union territory (Shah, 2020). Recent report data shows that between October 2023, and October 2024 Pakistanis submitted asylum applications to the European Union (EU) totaling 28,000. The majority of Pakistanis seeking asylum chose Italy as their primary destination country, but they also applied for protection in France and Greece and Germany showed lower interest (Dawn, 2025). The present study looks at the irregular migration as a serious risk to the Pakistani population; it is the result of socio-cultural elements and economic conditions along with European prospects influence migration patterns in Pakistan (Naveeda 2017; Ullah et al., 2025).

The current research aims at identifying the push and pull factors that determine irregular migration and, at the same time, fulfills a gap in the academic literature by incorporating the voices of the stakeholders involved in the phenomenon into Pakistan. Using a qualitative research approach based on ten in-depth elite interviews, the paper revealed two key variables; structural and individual dimensions that help to draw five themes, 1. Migration Drivers, 2. Risks of the journey 3. Role of Migration agents, 4. Legal framework and Institutional Responses and lastly Call for action. The analysis revealed that irregular migration from Pakistan to Europe is primarily influenced by economic distress including economic hardship coupled with joblessness and lack of new opportunities. Furthermore, the combination of structural inequalities and social media success stories produces an intense force that leads people toward irregular migration because it offers financial growth alongside social reward. In the light of the above given insights the article comes to the conclusion that irregular migration is a severe danger to the security of both host and migrant communities, and that it also is the threat to the security of their rights and dignities. The paper sums up by emphasizing the importance of aligning SDGs with every initiative taken to minimize irregular migration.

2. Literature Review

Irregular migration is a concept that covers all types of unauthorized border crossings, overstaying of the visa, and entering or living without proper documents, and it is broadly conceptualized (Triandafyllidou, 2023). These activities form an important aspect of modern global human mobility. Although the concept of irregular migration is broad enough to encompass unauthorized entry, fraudulent documents, and breach of visa terms as established and enforced by states in accordance with the UNHCR (2023) definition, it is important to note that this term is still broad and can be understood as cross-border movement without the state approval of either state. Conversely, regular migration is defined as a movement via the legally recognized pathways, such as work permits and family reunification, as well as the accepted asylum processes (IOM, 2022).

Irregular migration in the Pakistani context is usually done via unlawful means popularly known as the donkey flight or *dunki*. It was coined based on the Urdu word *dunki* and is slang to refer to illegal paths to Europe made possible by smuggling networks (Munsinghe et al., 2024). The literature of South-Asian migration recognizes that *dunki* is a local term that is integrated into the human smuggling (Khan, 2021). This phenomenon has been widely studied by Pakistani scholarship, which emphasizes the socioeconomic inequality

and the desire to rise in social status as the main factors driving people to make these dangerous trips (Shah, 2022).

On theoretical Landscape, world Systems Theory and the Theory of Capital proposed by Bourdieu theoretically could act as valuable prisms to explaining irregular migration in the Pakistani case. The World Systems Theory concept by Wallerstein (1974) explains the factors that cause structural economic imbalances between core and peripheral states to drive individuals in countries like Pakistan to seek improved opportunities in European core states. Capitalist growth and unequal development create labor demands in the core economies whilst restricting legal migration opportunities on people in the peripheral regions, resulting in more people being dependent on irregular routes. In tandem with this, the Bourdieu (1986) model of capital, habitus and field sheds light on the influence of economic, social and cultural capital on migration patterns. The availability of such capital sources determines the possibility of *dunki* and the ability of migrants to change and adjust in the destination and this intersection reflects the relationship between migrants' choices and structural conditions. The magnitude of irregular migration has been highlighted through statistic evidences shows that over 2,500 migrants died in 2022 trying to cross the Mediterranean (IOM, 2023), and 18,000 attempted irregular migrations by nationals of Pakistan into Europe were registered by Frontex (2023). These statistics shed light on the dire need to understand why people are engaging in dangerous travels even when the European immigration laws are strict.

Economic hardships are one of the main driving forces behind the Pakistani emigrants, which are exacerbated by political unsteadiness and the desire to lead a better life (Koser, 2011; Triandafyllidou, 2017). Increased inflation, low levels of education, and economic precarity that is created by their dependence on informal labor (30% of the workforce (ILO, 2022)) drive most towards migration. Migration is also triggered by political instability and security issues. Pakistanis take refuge in other countries due to terrorism, sectarian violence, and political oppression (Chaudhary and Wadhwa, 2019). Last year, more than 12,000 Pakistanis applied to be asylum seekers with the European Union, referring to security considerations and few domestic opportunities (UNHCR, 2023).

Social media has become a decisive force of migration because it has helped in the dissemination of information and the way migrants perceive the opportunities and risks. As Dekker and Engbersen (2014) note, social networks like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube provide potential migrants with personal testimonies related to successful experiences, helpful advice on how to cross the border, and how to find jobs in Europe. According to European Migration Network (EMN, 2023), more than 70% of migrants are using social media as one of the key sources of information, but such sources are often used to spread false success stories about irregular migration. Smugglers are also using social media to sell their services with exaggerated offer of finding their way into Europe at high prices. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), there is an ascending tendency to use online platforms in the recruitment, payment arrangements, and route guidance. Despite the high volume of literature on irregular migration, there is a significant gap in place: the voices of stakeholders who are literally engaged in irregular migration. This study, therefore, offers a comprehensive conceptual framework that shows economic as well as socio-cultural factors as

push and pull factors of irregular migration to Europe and thus it adds another layer of knowledge to the current academic discourse.

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed to examine the underlying key factors as it allows researchers to find out the detailed meanings (Lewis, 2015). The aim was to understand how stakeholders interpret irregular migration, and how their perspectives reflect broader governance. Ten experts were chosen through purposive sampling, keeping in mind their affiliation with relevant institutions and their direct involvement in dealing with the issues of irregular migration. The samples were taken from Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and representatives of international organizations such as UNODC and EU Delegation to Pakistan and a senior International investigative journalist. The rationale for selecting elite participants was based on their access to Policy making process, enforcement and firsthand observation of migration dynamics. Their expert knowledge helped assessment of institutional responses to the very issue and identifying systematic gap between legal frameworks and enforcement. Their insights helped to understand the manipulation of agents and also supported the triangulation through enhancing the rigor of the analysis, linking individual migration choices with structural disparities.

The researcher-maintained reflexivity throughout and remained attentive to his role as an academic while understanding how it has shaped participants' responses and overall narratives. Positionality subtly affected the research process at essential points as the researcher straddled both inside and outside positions by having prior knowledge through literature cited while not being affiliated in any governmental or internal organizations. This dual position influenced the originality and tone of the narratives.

The semi-structured interviews created flexibility for participants as well as researcher to bring analytical focus and it also helped participants to articulate their responses within their own terms but ensuring study's objective (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The researcher carried out meticulous transcriptions and precise language translations with high degree of accuracy. A reviewing process by senior researcher was made to verify transcriptional accuracy before formatting into Microsoft Word and Excel. A hands-on method of manual coding allowed researcher to identify recurring patterns together with concepts and meanings. Inter Coding reliability was ensured through collaboration with another researcher for incorporating multiple interpretations and meanings.

4. Findings

The finding section is based on ten interviews with the experts, which shed light on the most important observations concerning the irregular migration flows between Pakistan and Europe. The results are presented in 5 major themes, the Drivers of Migration, risk of the journey, the role of migration agents, the legal framework and institutional response, and the call for action. These themes consist of micro- and macro-level factors, such as economic and socio-cultural influences, misinformation through the use of social media, risks of the journey, agent facilitation, and institutional responses.

4.1 Migration Drivers: Economic Factors and Sociocultural Influence

The interviews with journalists, migration consultants and some governmental officials revealed that irregular migration is the result of structural inequalities to personal aspirations. Many young people in Pakistan today feel captured by unemployment, inflation, and a lack of opportunity. In the absence of any viable options, irregular migration serves as their essential survival strategy, however, communities like Gujrat and Jhelum treat migration as a norm, even a socially rewarded practice. Social media postings that show rich lives become a source of migration longing for people who ignore migration risks. Each individual shapes their migration decisions from personal preferences to profoundly influenced by existing structure and cultural patterns according to Koser (2010) and Triandafyllidou (2019).

4.1.1 Economic Instability and Unemployment

Economic instability emerged as the main migration driving force throughout all interviews. All stakeholders agreed that poverty together with unemployment and absent local opportunities served as fundamental reasons behind irregular migration from Pakistan. During an interview with a United Nations agency officials they stated: *“Due to the prevailing economic instability and limited job prospects, individuals are compelled to seek better opportunities in foreign nations.”*

Researches on Global South migration reveals that poverty and joblessness are the fundamental structural elements that drive irregular migration (de Haas, 2010; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). A FIA official expressed this view exactly when he stated: *“Poverty stands as the key driver together with unemployment and cultural elements. The present economic instability generates pervasive despair which motivates people to engage with unsafe migration routes for foreign opportunities.”*

These statements have been backed by several studies, and one of them states that people use irregular migration as a survival method because they lack suitable choices within their local environment (Castles et al., 2014). Individuals who face persisting poverty alongside joblessness tend to choose migration as a solution. An EU Delegation official observed: *“Within the country, due to lack of job creation and prevailing unemployment, people seek better opportunities abroad.”* According to Sassen's (1991) political economy of migration intensifies the local labor market and compels individuals to seek transnational economic opportunities.

4.1.2 Sociocultural Influences

Despite the economic hardships, socio-cultural forces have a significant implication on the aspirations that people seek in regard to migration. In some communities, the idea of migration has been deeply entrenched in the social context, and it is now viewed as the symbol of individual achievement and the shift to adulthood, rather a perilous journey (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019). Diaspora networks play the crucial role of providing the necessary information and offering symbolic motivation to potential migrants. As one EU official remarked. “The diaspora network of Pakistani migrants plays a crucial role in attracting new individuals to settle in European nations.” It is backed by Massey et al. (1993) the cumulative

causation theory that how each successful migration episode makes it easier for potential migrants by lowering down the perceived danger and difficulties.

Migration through irregular means has become a conventional passage of life for people who reside in Gujrat together with Jhelum and Mandi Bahauddin (Khan, 2020). This emulative behavior, described as “Dekha-dekhi” by immigration consultant, reinforces the cultural normalization of irregular migration: “ ‘Dekha-dekhi’ (Emulation) inspires individuals to take this journey to earn the same level of success”. An EU official pointed out that deportees from hotspot areas persistently try to migrate again, which demonstrates the strong migration culture that exists. An international journalist noted while talking to an irregular migrant “...families send their children to European countries to get validation from their community... because of the social status associated with living and earning abroad.”

The emergence of digital platforms has completely changed the mass perception of irregular migration. People hear overseas success stories through social media, but these fabricated posts deceive them about the actual hardships of the irregular migration and life abroad. Talking to an International Journalist who worked on reporting irregular migration from Pakistan to European countries revealed that: “People hide the actual reality but paint a rosy picture on social media”.

4.2 Risks of the Journey: Experience and Challenges

Irregular migration is a path full of danger, and it can cause significant psychological suffering to the people who decide to go on this journey. Both migration expert, policymakers, and civil society actors have noted that migrants face significant challenges along the way to their desired destination. Exposure to natural dangers and exposure to law-enforcement investigations, human-trafficking exploitation, and extreme abuse put people directly at risk because of the course of irregular migration. The following sub-themes outline the salient risk factors and abuses that are inherent in the irregular migration experience.

4.2.1 Risks and Dangers Along the Way

People who enter countries without official documents face many safety dangers as they travel to rough areas under extreme climate conditions while being hunted by law enforcement and criminals. As one official from FIA described: “The migrants encounter numerous weather types when they travel. The weather changes abruptly taking temperatures from extreme heat to extreme cold. Their trip becomes harder as a result.” Migrating without papers produces life-threatening situations when people attempt risky desert travels or perilous ship voyages (Carling, 2007; IOM, 2020). Law enforcement agencies have been known to harm migrants physically by placing them under arrest or sending them back to their country according to Achilli (2018).

4.2.2 Abuse and Exploitation

People without legal protection in their irregular migration face severe risks of mistreatment during every phase of their journey. According to the stakeholders two distinct types of abuse currently exist during the course of migration: Financial and Physical. Migrants are exploited when human traffickers and smugglers charge high fees and fail to keep them safe. A migration consultant noted: “Smugglers often charge high fees for dangerous and

uncertain travels". After arrival irregular migrants typically absorbed into the black market and their illegal status doesn't let them claim labor rights and face considerable challenges such as wage theft, unsafe workplace and many more. In his comments to EU representatives in Pakistan this official explained: "...most of the irregular migrants end up settling in the informal sector due to unavailability of regular visa."

Current studies reveal that irregular migrants are clustered in exploitative labor markets where the employers habitually abuse their illegality status by subjecting them to hazardous work environments, low wages, and physical abuse (Anderson, 2010; Lewis et al., 2013). Besides economic exploitation, women and minors are exposed to an increased risk of sexual and physical abuse during the process of migration due to the lack of a strong legal framework and security systems. This is one of the vulnerabilities that have been highlighted by a government official "Female migrants and minors are highly vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse during their journeys, often lacking sufficient access to legal recourse or support."

4.3 Role of Migration Agents: Services Providing and Facilitation

Migration agents are an important nexus in terms of facilitating irregular migration from Pakistan to European destinations for most of the potential migrants especially those who are coming out of rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and see them as the gatekeepers. However, academic literature indicates that these actors are acting in structured smuggling networks that coherently take advantage of the vulnerabilities of migrants. These agents rely on social media communication to offer logistical aid, their actions often involve fraud and manipulation (Achilli, 2018). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020), such networks usually blur the line between facilitation and trafficking by distorting the actual picture of journey and the risks involved in it.

4.3.1 False Promises

All interviews revealed that migration agents commonly employ deceptive methods to deceive their clients. Agents use deceptive tactics to attract people into migration through unrealistic European life that ignores all potential dangers. A journalist detailed her investigative work with these agents when she explained: "The agents don't tell the exact things, but the agents spoke to us in a relaxed manner while saying 'we transport children who are 12, 14, and 15 years old every day so why you are scared?'. Zhang et al. (2018) shows that these coyotes use fabricated stories combined with emotional control to conceal the actual dangers lie in irregular migration.

4.3.2 Network Operation

These migration networks are present in an organized system with extensive connections spreading worldwide. Agents prefer to operate in collaboration through interconnected facilitation networks extending between international borders. A journalist noted: "They are everywhere, in Pakistan, Iran, France... because when you go from one place to another, an agent tells you to go there, you will find someone else, in that place, one of their agents."

A Federal Investigating Agency official stated: "Prospective migrants receive assistance and support from their extensive contacts throughout the countries they transit".

A consultant elaborated further: “Agents are part of a large and highly organized network that extends multiple countries, operating virtually. They determine the price based on the route and risk associated with the route... handling everything from the start to the finish, without the agents themselves crossing the border.”

4.4 Legal framework and Institutional Response:

Irregular migration cannot be addressed through border management in the long run; it requires systematic legal framework and an institutional response. Pakistan have shown the progressive developments in regulating irregular migration alongside international collaboration in recent years. The existing framework of laws and policy faces difficulties with translating into practical implementation as well as systematic structural response. According to Ghosh (2012) origin countries face problems with under-resourced or misaligned legal systems which fail to hold stronger writ of the state with shifting migration patterns. The theme highlights the Collaborative response to mitigating irregular migration.

4.4.1 National Laws

The laws of Pakistan have developed through time to criminalize migrant smuggling while aiming to strengthen immigration control systems. A FIA official explained:

“In 2018 Pakistan passed the Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act 2018 to handle migrant trafficking. Such illegal activities will result in penalties for all individuals who organize or provide assistance for them”.

The presented laws adhere to international standards identified in the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (UNODC, 2004). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) serves as a central authority for national capacity support by providing technical assistance that impacts Pakistan's legislative development. A UNODC official noted:

“We have provided extensive support to the Pakistani government, assisting with drafting legislation, developing standard operating procedures for victim care, running awareness campaigns, and creating migration-related curriculums for law enforcement agencies.” Organizations must develop these alliances because they enable domestic jurisprudence to meet international requirements for human rights protections and anti-smuggling conventions (UNODC, 2021).

4.4.2 Policy Formulation

A long-term migration governance system requires both legislative enactment and strategic policy planning beyond basic legal frameworks. In this matter the European Union stands as a major influential partner. The official from the EU delegation in Pakistan stated: “The organization works toward building legal structures to handle irregular migration challenges. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) enables our association for border management improvements alongside offering vital information to policymaking processes. Our organization devotes significant effort to developing better policies while enhancing our competency to help the government to deliver necessary skillset for potential migrants.”

The elimination of irregular migration requires proactive intervention on core migration causes such as poverty together with insufficient job opportunities and underdeveloped local economies. The EU delegation established local development strategies as their essential prevention method. An EU official emphasized “The organization provides people with essential tools for success in their home countries through joint donor collaborations which establish local development projects.” Youth skills development alongside vocational training and entrepreneurship programs provide young people with alternatives to choose staying home over migration (de Haas 2010, Carling & Schewel 2018).

4.5 Call for Action: Steps and Directions

While legal and policy framework lays down a foundation for minimizing the trend of irregular migration, on the other hand, the research participants of this study are of the view that call for action is beyond law enforcement. Building inclusive policies in context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and spreading awareness to Public through digital are most crucial steps towards combating irregular migration. These directions follow worldwide best practice standards by emphasizing prevention along with empowerment and cooperative approaches (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014). The interviews produced two essential pathways involving the incorporation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within migration governance and the usage of media platforms to create awareness and dismantling the fancy side of irregular migration.

4.5.1 Sustainable Development Goals as a Way Forward

All institutional stakeholders agreed that migration policy development should be based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework. During the interview UNODC representative identified poverty and limited opportunities as main factors behind irregular migration while advocating for Sustainable Development Goals as a longer run solution.

The call for action is backed by three SDG targets including 1.2 focused on poverty reduction together with 8.5 regarding employment and 10.7 enabling safe migration. The official from the EU delegation in Pakistan expressed this vision when he stated: “Our program supports various Sustainable Development Goals such as safe migration and poverty reduction together with gender equality as well as economic development.”

With the focus on development-oriented approaches direct investments toward enhancing local economic systems and vocational training programs while focusing on equality between genders to lower down the magnitude of irregular migration. This essential strategy for dealing with push factors finds support in scholarly work which advocates migration-development linkages as alternative to irregular migration (Carling & Schewel, 2018; de Haas, 2010).

4.5.2 Role of Media in Spreading Awareness

Media stands out as a vital theme because it acts as both a catalyst for irregular migration through social media platforms and a possible tool to fight it. Social media can be used for sharing both misinformation by migration agents and counter-messaging and public awareness initiatives according to stakeholder assessments. A journalist provided these

observing remarks: "Law enforcement agencies can investigate migration agents through their social media activity because tracking their IP addresses can reveal their identity which enables agents' detection for spreading false information. The suggestion highlights the necessity of monitoring online activities because smuggling networks use digital platforms for recruitment. The EU official promoted social media applications for positive purposes. "Social media with the help of youth can be used in raising voices against the irregular migration and spreading awareness on the danger of this journey to combat this issue."

5. Discussion & Conclusion

The current research determines that the factors fueling irregular migration in Pakistan are deeply embedded structural and social factors, such as limited economic opportunities, peer pressure, dissemination of false information, and weak migration governance. Migration in this milieu cannot be interpreted as a simple pursuit of jobs or escape from unemployment but rather it is deeply linked with family expectations, influence of peers, and the success stories shared on social media. However, in such districts as Gujranwala and Gujrat, Punjab community pressure to migrate is particularly strong, with social mobility often being associated with the migration to another country (Stratfor, 2023).

In these socio-cultural settings, irregular migration does not appear to be a risky activity, rather, this is seen as a means of gaining social supremacy as well as accessing a more promising future. Consequently, there is a normalization and magnification of irregular migration, making migration less critically understood about its dangers. In these regards, social media is not just an actor as a medium of communication but as a recruitment ground that sustains and expands networks of smugglers. These daily postings of success stories on social networking apps make potential migrants unaware about risk and contribute to the continuation and reinforcement of unrealistic expectations (Stratheia, 2023). Analysis of the research findings shows that the current legal systems are not adequate in responding to these changing dynamics. Although the Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act (2018) was introduced, the enforcement is still rather low, with the lack of convictions and the persistence of the use of the old Immigration Ordinance (1979).

The insights show that a paradigm change must take place: a punitive approach should give way to a development-based, proactive strategy. Migration governance must align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing the root cause factors including poverty, inequality, and indecent economic opportunities. Creating more decent jobs, promoting gender equality, and creating human capital can change the migration pattern where people are forced to survive to a voluntary, informed decision (UNODC, 2022).

Simultaneously, the research also emphasizes the duality of the media, specifically social media, as a catalyst of irregular migration and a possible prevention tool. Although smuggling networks are now dominating the digital world, digital spaces also offer some grounds to counter-narratives that will inform about the risks, bust the myth that it is a sure way of success, and spread information on legal migration routes. Law enforcing organizations have started surveilling trafficking networks over the internet; however, the participants of the study highlighted that digital campaigns organized by youth, and solutions to online

exploitation should be taken up by civil society to turn the exploitative online space into the space of awareness and empowerment (Infomigrants, 2023).

In the theoretical framework, World Systems Theory, in combination with the theory of capital of Bourdieu, suggests a framework that can be used to explain the structural and agency components of irregular migration. In the light of the world-systems, the peripheral status of Pakistan creates a continuous economic insecurity and limited mobility, but European core states are a good destination in an unequal world order. These structural inequalities act as the structural push factors and perceived pull factors are social and symbolically constructed by the transnational success stories shared on social media. Bourdieu theories of economic, social, and cultural capital also further elaborate how migration desires are not evenly converted into action; only individuals with enough financial funds, social ties, or informational capital, which can be obtained through smugglers and digital platforms, can afford to pursue irregular migration. In such a way, irregular migration becomes a negotiating result of structural inequalities of the world and the agency of individuals.

To conclude, irregular migration out of Pakistan cannot be viewed simply as the security concern but rather as a highly human process, which is influenced by hope, deprivation, and the system of inequality. The paper shows how these vulnerabilities are used by the actors of smuggling networks and worsened by institutional failures. The cross-border collaboration, socioeconomic development and the acknowledgment of the migrants as right-bearing citizens are all requirements of sustainable and efficient migration governance. A proactive, humane policy intervention, and easy access to lawful migration channels and addressing structural disparities remains central to reducing the human cost of irregular migration.

6. References

Achilli, L. (2018). The “good” smuggler: The ethics and morals of human smuggling among Syrians. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 676(1), 77–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217746927>

Anderson, B. (2010). Migration, immigration controls and the fashioning of precarious workers. *Work, Employment and Society*, 24(2), 300–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017010362141>

Aronowitz, A. A. (2001). Smuggling and trafficking in human beings: The phenomenon, the markets that drive it, and the organisations that promote it. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 9(2), 163–195. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011253129328>

Aronowitz, S. (2023). Against schooling: Education and social class. In *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 133–149). Routledge.

Betts, A., & Kainz, L. (2017). *The history of global migration governance* (Working Paper No. 122). Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/the-history-of-global-migration-governance>

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.



Carling, J. (2007). Unauthorized migration from Africa to Spain. *International Migration*, 45(4), 3–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2007.00418.x>

Carling, J., & Schewel, K. (2018). Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), 945–963. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146>

Castles, S. (2017). The forces driving global migration. In *Human trafficking* (pp. 16–34). Routledge.

Castles, S., de Haas, H., & Miller, M. J. (2014). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (5th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Chaudhary, S. A., & Wadhwa, V. (2019). Terrorism, sectarianism and migration in Pakistan. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 27(3), 289–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2019.1654263>

Crawley, H., & Hagen-Zanker, J. (2019). Deciding where to go: Policies, people and perceptions shaping destination preferences. *International Migration*, 57(1), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12483>

Crawley, H., & Skleparis, D. (2018). Refugees, migrants, neither, both. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(1), 48–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224>

Dawn. (2025, February 2). *Pakistani asylum seekers in EU hit 28,000 in past year*. Dawn News. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1737421>

de Haas, H. (2010). Migration and development: A theoretical perspective. *International Migration Review*, 44(1), 227–264. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2009.00804.x>

Dekker, R., & Engbersen, G. (2014). How social media transform migrant networks and facilitate migration. *Global Networks*, 14(4), 401–418. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12040>

European Migration Network. (2023). *How migrants use digital tools in migration decision-making*. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/migration-and-asylum/european-migration-network_en

Frontex. (2023). *Risk analysis for 2023*. European Border and Coast Guard Agency. https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2023.pdf

Gebre, H. T. (2024). Impacts of illegal trans-border migration on socio-economic conditions of migrants in Atsbi Wenberta Wereda, Tigray Region, Ethiopia. *Daagu International Journal of Basic and Applied research (DIJBAR)*, 6(2), 451-472.

Ghosh, B. (2012). *Managing migration: Time for a new international regime?* Oxford University Press.

Goering, J. (1989). The location of migrants in urban space. *Urban Studies*, 26(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420988920080011>



Hacsek, Z., & Visnansky, B. (2017). *The impact of social media on the smuggling of migrants*. Regional Academy of the United Nations. http://www.ran.org/uploads/4/7/5/4/47544571/2_unodc_2_final_paper.pdf

Ikefuama, O. L. (2023). Overview of Nature, Types and Vulnerabilities of Human Trafficking in West Africa. *Journal of Peace Studies and Practice*, 2023(12), 130-144.

International Labour Organization. (2022). *Informal economy in Pakistan: Policy brief*. ILO. https://www.ilo.org/islamabad/publications/WCMS_834661/lang--en/index.htm

International Organization for Migration. (2020). *World migration report 2020*. IOM. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf

International Organization for Migration. (2022). *Migration data portal: Smuggling of migrants*. IOM. <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/smuggling-migrants>

International Organization for Migration. (2023). *World migration report 2023*. IOM. <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2023>

Khan, M. (2021). Irregular migration networks in South Asia. *South Asian Studies Journal*, 36(2), 115–133.

Khan, S. (2017). Dekha-dikhi: Migration culture and kinship networks in Pakistan. *South Asian Studies*, 32(2), 145–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2017.1304200>

Khan, S., & Awan, N. (2020). Social networks and irregular migration from Pakistan. *Journal of International Migration Studies*, 12(1), 77–95.

Koser, K. (2010). Dimensions and dynamics of irregular migration. *Population, Space and Place*, 16(3), 181–193. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.587>

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2014). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Laghari, J. (2009). Migration and emulation in rural Pakistan. *Asian Population Studies*, 5(2), 153–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730902992031>

Lewis, P. (2015). *Qualitative research practice*. Sage.

Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. (1993). Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal. *Population and Development Review*, 19(3), 431–466. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462>

Morehouse, C., & Blomfield, M. (2011). *Irregular migration in Europe*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/irregular-migration-europe>

Naveeda, T. (2017). Irregular migration from Pakistan. *Journal of Asian Migration Studies*, 8(3), 199–214.

Petrova, M., Sushchenko, O., Dekhtyar, N., & Shalbayeva, S. (2025). The Prospects of Sustainable Development of Destroyed Tourism Areas Using Virtual Technologies. *Sustainability*, 17(7), 3016.

Sassen, S. (1991). *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton University Press.

Schaub, M., Narducci, D., & Henneböh, D. (2021). Social media and migration aspirations: Evidence from Europe. *International Migration*, 59(5), 29–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12778>

Shah, N. (2022). Human smuggling from Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, 5(1), 45–61.

Shah, Z. (2020). Border security and irregular migration flows. *Contemporary South Asia*, 28(4), 495–509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1832345>

Triandafyllidou, A. (2017). *A sociology of irregular migration*. Polity Press.

Triandafyllidou, A. (2019). *Migration governance and social norms*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Triandafyllidou, A. (2022). Migrant smuggling. In *Routledge handbook of immigration and refugee studies* (pp. 426-433). Routledge.

Triandafyllidou, A. (2023). *Irregular migration and migration control policies*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Ullah, I., Khalid, S., Zakir, M., & Kashif, M. (2025). Labour Market Inequities and Informal Migration: Economic Pressures and the Growth of Human Smuggling. *Inverge Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(3), 112-128.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023). *Global trends: Forced displacement*. UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-2022>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2000). *Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2004). *Protocol against the smuggling of migrants*. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/smuggling-of-migrants.html>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2013). *Global study on smuggling of migrants*. UNODC. https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Migrant-Smuggling/Global_Study_on_Smuggling_of_Migrants_2013.pdf

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2021). *UNODC support to Pakistan*. <https://www.unodc.org/pakistan>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2022). *Migration and development*. UNODC. <https://www.unodc.org>



United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2023). *Global report on trafficking in persons*. UNODC. <https://www.unodc.org>

Wallerstein, I. (1974). *The modern world-system*. Academic Press.

Wang, X., Wu, Y. C., & Ma, Z. (2024). Blockchain in the courtroom: exploring its evidentiary significance and procedural implications in US judicial processes. *Frontiers in Blockchain*, 7, 1306058.

Zammit, M. (2024). *The politicisation of irregular migration by the far-right in the European Union* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Malta).

Zhang, S. X., Sanchez, G. E., & Achilli, L. (2018). Crimes of solidarity in mobility. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 676(1), 6–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217750568>