

Beyond the Traditional Landscape: Postmodern Transformations of Family Institution in Contemporary Pakistan

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Received: 14-01-2026

Revised: 29-01-2026

Accepted: 13-02-2026

Published: 27-02-2026

ABSTRACT

This study was planned to explore changing family patterns and structures in contemporary Pakistani society. Conducted in selected locales of Lahore city, the study investigates how modernity, urbanization, socio-economic considerations, and technological advancement has reshaped family relationships, social expectations, gender role and overall family organization in the country. Data were collected from a sample of 23 purposively selected participants through Semi Structured Interviews (SSIs) to explore the lived experiences of the study participants regarding evolving family dynamics. The collected data was recorded in the form of field notes and thematic analysis were subsequently performed. The findings suggest a gradual social transition of family institution as the collectivistic family patterns are evolving toward more individualized family forms, affected by urban living conditions, economic pressures, educational expansion, and increasing preferences for personal choices, autonomy and privacy. The study further highlights another important shift in the traditional gender role as women's educational and employment opportunities increase, while traditional expectations continue to shape family interactions.

Keywords: Family; Society; Urbanization; Gender; Values; Relationships

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Pakistani society has undergone major social transformation driven by technological advancement, globalization, urbanization and the rapid expansion of digital media. These developments have not only changed economic and political spheres but drastically reshaped the patterns, forms, functions, structure, and social expectations of families (Rahman, 2018). Traditionally, primary function of a typical Pakistani family was to transmit cultural values, gender norms, social responsibilities and religious beliefs, across generations. Inside joint family system, collectivistic values existed whereby interests, social identity, interdependence, and respect for elders were taught to the younger generation. Furthermore, major decision concerning education, marriage, and occupation were largely guided by collective interests rather

than individual choices and personal preferences. However, the rising tide of urbanization, educational attainment, and exposure to global cultural influences have gradually transformed the dominance of collectivistic values in an individualistic cultural system in the form of nuclear family system (Mahmood, 2014; Rahman & Uddin, 2017; Shah & Mahmood, 2024).

Among the various drivers of these transformations, urbanization and mass media has played a crucial role in bringing new ideas and alternative lifestyles and individualistic orientations. Consequently, traditional collectivistic family arrangements were gradually giving way to nuclear family structures, particularly in urban centers in Pakistan (Mahmood, 2014). Besides, the increasing participation of women in higher education and the subsequent labor force participation of female has also played a significant part in the reconfiguration of status, roles and household power relations. Likewise, the increasing economic contributions of women and active involvement in decision-making processes have altered the conventional gender role expectations that further led to a more egalitarian family relationship. In combination of all these factors, the recent developments have tremendously restricted the the value system of Pakistani family system and redefined the ways family members behave, interact, and negotiate their role, status and responsibilities in contemporary society (Sharif, 2016).

Although studies have reflected on the changing nature of family structures in collectivistic cultures including Pakistan, there is limited grounded work has done that explores how generational differences and socio-economic factors shape family values, particularly in the context of urbanization, globalization and technological advancement. Unlike the previous studies, which have primarily used quantitative methods and focused on specific aspects of family life, this research adopts a qualitative, multidimensional approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the changing nature of the family in modern Pakistan.

The underlying objective of this study is to systematically reflect on the transformation of traditional family values and structures in ever evolving contemporary society of Pakistan especially in the recent rapid waves of globalization, urbanization, and socio-economic changes. Furthermore, the specific focus of the study is to explore the nuclearization of family system and the changing process of gender roles and household power relations, and analyze intergenerational differences in attitudes toward family formation, social transiting of the marriage institutions, family responsibilities, and individual autonomy. The study further embarks upon to investigate that how these cultural influences have shaped family norms, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making processes. Lastly, the study also focuses on the ways in which these transformations affect intergenerational choices, social ties, familial cohesion, communication, family cohesion, and how they navigate and negotiate the rising tide of modernity and individuality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies have revealed that Pakistani family system have tremendously shifted under the influence of globalization, modernity, migration, and media exposure. They have reported that a vast shift has been witnessed by family system especially a visible change was observed from joint or extended family network toward smaller nuclear family arrangements particularly in the urban settings (Monteiro, 2022; Shah, 2024; Rasool, 2024; Basit, 2026). These studies have revealed that in some cases, there is a gradual disappearance of collectivistic values are occurring as the multigenerational and joint living arrangement still in vogue and continues to provide social, emotional and caregiving support although issues such as autonomy, privacy and intergenerational conflict haunt these social arrangements (Waqas, 2024; Ashraf, 2025).

Studies have further investigated that family shift appears closely linked to modernization-led changes and urban pressures in housing, education, and employment opportunities. A study conducted in the urban center of Pakistan has recently revealed a significant decline in joint family network and the argument was supported by another study reporting that 66% of the sampled respondents in the urban area had nuclear

families, while another study reported a smaller family size with majority having with one child or none. The study has further reported that the social transitioning of family system is not driven only by cultural and technological advancement but also spearheaded by economic challenges, migration, social adjustment, housing limitations, and opportunities in urban life (Shah, 2024; Rasool, 2024). Furthermore, the advent of global culture, mass media and education has also reshaped had weaken older communal support system, and marital expectations, contributing to greater individualistic choices and personal preferences leading to rising intergenerational tension and changing attitudes toward marriage and marital instability among young population in Pakistanis (Ali et al., 2016; Qureshi et al., 2012; Savage, 2024; Hanan, 2025).

Another major area of departure witnessed in the family system second is the reconfiguration of gender role ideologies and gender power arrangement and decision-making power. Multiple studies have explored the deeply embedded patriarchal culture and normative order within family system in Pakistan encourage male elders to dominate decision about women's education, mobility, work, marriage, and financial empowerment (Rahman, 2025; Ali, 2022; Ashraf, 2025). Studies have argued that joint family network extend social, financial and emotional support but they are driven by strict normative orders of compliance, obedience, constraints and thereby limiting women's autonomy through dependence on in-laws, husband, and senior male members (Fafchamps, 2019; Ashraf, 2025; Ali, 2022; Smith, 2022). On the other hand, evidence has suggested that gradual changes pertaining women's education, participation in the job marketplace, and economic contribution have put women in a stronger bargaining position, empowerment, and more power in decision-making, especially in urban settings especially among younger generations (Imran, 2026; Shah, 2021; Noman, 2021).

Another dimension of changing family system is the growing significance of intergenerational differences in value system especially individual autonomy, individuality, and human agency. Moreover, prolonged education, unstable employment, delayed marriage, and financial dependence, causing the social transitioning more complicated these days in relation to the older family models (Shah, 2025). Additionally, such changes are varying across different sections of the society as people belonging to different social class, gender, and place: upper-class urban youth are appearing to have more opportunities and social leverages for identity exploration, while socially marginalized and disadvantaged youth experience this transition very differently (Shah, 2025).

Furthermore, evidences from intergenerational research suggest that older members of the earlier extended family networks including parents, and grandparents believe and cherish somewhat different family values as they emphasize religion and social relations, parents stressing financial independence while the younger generation including children and grandchildren value autonomy, individuality, personal efforts, self-belief and academic achievement (Rahman, 2018; Sajjad, 2022). Overall, the literature supports the argument that family life in contemporary Pakistan is being reshaped and renegotiated rather than simply replaced as collectivist expectations, gender hierarchy, and elder authority persist but are increasingly contested by urbanization, women's education, labor force participation, and youth aspirations (Waqas, 2024; Basit, 2026).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research paradigm was used to conduct this study with the aim the carry out an in-depth exploration of the changing family patter, structures, function and social expectations in contemporary Pakistani society. The primary objective was to explore how family values have been influenced by the processes of modernization, urbanization, and globalization, and how these changes have shaped intergenerational relationships, gender roles, and generational differences. A qualitative case study approach was adopted to facilitate an in-depth examination of family dynamics within their socio-cultural context.

Locale and Sampling Technique

The study was conducted in the selected urban cites in the city of Lahore where purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information related to the research objectives. The study was conducted with families living in the urban centers with a focus to include respondents from a diverse socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels, and generational groups. Participants were purposively selected on the basis of their knowledge, consent and ability to openly communicate and share insights regarding the social transitioning of family values and pattern in Pakistan. The sample included parents, children, young adult, senior citizens to capture a holistic understanding on the selected topic.

Tools of data Collection

Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) were conducted because of its flexibility allowing the participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely while enabling the researchers to explore key issues related to family changes, meaning of marriage, gender expectations, and the balance between individual independence and family obligations. Prior to data collection, an interview guide was developed with open ended questions to encourage in-depth discussions. Questions were framed in such manner to encourage openness, independence of the participants to speak openly and freely on the selected subject.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was secured in the form of field notes which was arranged in a separate file. Later, all the data was properly read and studied multiple time so that familiarity with the narratives of the respondent may be developed. After studying the narratives multiple time, the data was coded, and major themes were extracted. Furthermore, the extracted themes were revisited and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the participant's narrative. Any overlaps or inconsistencies in the data were identified, removed, resolved before final interpretation. The final themes were interpreted in relation to the research objectives and the existing literature. This process provided a deeper understanding of the evolution of family values and the socio-cultural factors contributing to these changes in contemporary Pakistani society.

Ethical Considerations

Participants' rights and privacy were upheld in accordance with ethical guidelines. The study followed the principles of ethics. Initially, all the participants were briefed and informed the research purpose and objectives, the voluntary participation was requested and the possibility of dropping out without any consequences. Participants' confidentiality and respect for privacy was maintained during the study. Additionally, it was ensured that no harm whatsoever shall be inflicted on the participants because of the discussion of sensitive topics such as family conflict and societal pressures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The underlying aim of this study is to explore the transformation of family structure, function, and associated values in contemporary Pakistani society with special reference to the rise of mass media, globalization, modernity and technological advancement. Specifically, the study is focused on to outline critical dimensions where family system has undergone social transformation with special interest in the structural changes and patterns of family, changing gender roles and household power relations, and analyze intergenerational differences in attitudes toward marriage, family responsibilities, and individual autonomy. The study has identified four major themes that reflect the overall social transitioning of family system in contemporary Pakistan.

Changes in Gender Role Ideologies

The study found that there was a substantial shift in the role of women and change in gender roles in Pakistani families regarding their role in the family and in the job market. The younger women, particularly those with higher education, had higher levels of empowerment and autonomy at home and in society. They wanted the relationships with the males to be more equal. He said that a university student explained:

“It is my personal choice that educated girls, and young women shall pursue economic empowerment and financial independence. This is the one area where a girl and a women can find their true self, autonomy and agency. Women who are financially dependent on male members have no personal choices and individuality”.

Another respondent with senior age group has narrated that

“In our society, women have always been performed as caregiver which I think is their primary role in the family. Their primary role is to look after their kids, perform elderly care and also manage domestic affairs. This is the only way to strengthen social cohesion and harmony within family circle. Education is equally important which is the right of every individual, I believe their priority should remain their family.”

Older people, especially older men, were more likely to have a more stereotypical attitude about women taking care of the house and children. But the changing attitude of the younger generation to education and jobs has changed this attitude little by little. A large number of young adults stated that they wanted to share responsibilities in the home and there was a growing awareness of the importance of women’s economic contribution.

The findings indicate that changes in family structure are closely associated with evolving gender roles in Pakistani society. Greater participation of women in education and the workforce has increased their autonomy and involvement in household decision-making, thereby challenging traditional patriarchal norms. These findings support earlier studies suggesting that improved educational and professional opportunities have enabled women to play a more active role both within the family and in society. The gradual movement toward more egalitarian family relationships is also associated with women's economic independence and educational attainment (Smith, 2008). In addition, legal reforms relating to marriage and family rights have contributed to increasing individual agency in marital decisions (Alvinus, 2017). Collectively, these developments reflect a gradual transformation in family relationships, with greater emphasis on shared decision-making and personal choice.

The Nuclearization of Extended Family Network

One of the significant findings of this study was the noticeable shift from the traditional joint family system to the nuclear family system, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas. Participants, especially those from the younger generation, reported that changing economic conditions, social influences, and evolving lifestyle preferences have contributed to the growing preference for nuclear families. Many young adults expressed that living in a nuclear family provides them with greater independence, personal freedom, and reduced dependence on extended family members. This shift reflects broader societal changes in Pakistan, where modernization and urbanization are influencing family structures and living arrangements. One of the participants, a young woman from Islamabad, stated:

“While growing up in an extended family network, I have seen my parents and grandparents living together, and that family arrangement was useful in providing us a strong sense of purpose, security,

belonging and social support. However, life has drastically turned today. Job opportunities, educational aspirations, and alternative lifestyles have made it difficult for big families to live together in a single house. Me and my spouse are happily living in a separate house. This gives us time, power and privacy to make our own decisions, manage our financial matter independently, and raise our children according to our own standards and social preferences. On the other hand, I still consider the importance and usefulness of joint family system, having our own space gives us greater privacy and freedom.”

In contrast, older family members expressed a strong preference for the traditional joint family system. They believed that living in a joint family fosters stronger intergenerational relationships, provides emotional and financial support, and promotes a greater sense of unity among family members. Many elderly participants viewed the decline of the joint family system as a loss of important cultural values and social connectedness. One elderly participant, a grandmother, shared:

“While lived life in the joint family network, we had learned respect, care and patience for one another. We used to gather on one table to eat where we celebrated together and faced hardships together. In contrast to this, everyone looks very busy with their own lives, and family members often live apart in distant places. I miss the sense of unity and closeness that defined family life in our time. I severely feel that the strongest emotional connections in that golden we had may return in the current time again.

The data reveals that modernization, urbanization, higher educational attainment, and increased exposure to global media have contributed to the gradual decline of the traditional joint family system and the expansion of nuclear family systems in Pakistan. In particular, the growing preference for smaller families and the increasing acceptance of love marriages reflect a departure from traditional family structures and partner-selection practices. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that urbanization contributes to smaller family sizes through changing gender roles and improved economic opportunities. Furthermore, the weakening of traditional kinship networks may reduce opportunities for mutual support and the transmission of cultural values across generations. These changes may also reshape responsibilities toward older family members and influence the continuity of family traditions.

Family Values and Marital Preferences Across Generations

One of the most significant findings of the study was the clear generational difference in perceptions of family values. Younger participants generally favored more individualistic values, whereas older participants expressed a stronger preference for traditional collectivist values. Younger participants frequently emphasized the importance of personal freedom and independence in family-related decisions, particularly regarding marriage and career choices. As one young male participant stated:

“As a person, I have the firm belief that matrimonial ties are one of the most significant decision a person makes in his or her life. Owing to the utmost importance of this, I think I should have full authority and personal choice to make this important decision by my own. One should respect parental opinion and in some circumstances shall value their guidance, but the final decision should be in the hand of the person who is going to live that life. Mutual understanding, marital compatibility and emotional connection are very important in my view. These days, younger generations are educated, and open to different ideas therefore majority held the views that a successful marriage requires consent, personal choice and likes. By doing so, partners can develop better understanding, belongingness, and fulfilling relationship.”

In contrast to this, an older respondent expressed his views as

“In old times, marriage was viewed as social bond between two families rather than an individual choice. Parents and elder members of the family usually played an important role in mate selection for boys and girls. This is because they possess understanding and had the experience of selecting the spouse and they were thinking what would be best for the family. Everyone used to trust the decision, choices, and judgment of the elders in this regard. Marriage was not only about a tie or connection between two individual but it was considered as a reflection of family values, respect, dignity and strong kinship. Although young people today prefer to make their own choices, we believed that family involvement helped ensure stability and long-term compatibility in marriage.”

In contrast, older participants continued to view marriage as a family-centered institution in which elders play a central role in selecting a suitable partner. As one older female participant explained: Such an intergenerational clash was most evident in the debate on marriage. Younger generation preferred love marriage while the older generation was more willing to accept arranged marriages.

The findings reveal significant generational differences in attitudes toward marriage, family responsibilities, and personal autonomy. Younger participants generally expressed more individualistic views, whereas older participants continued to value traditional collectivist norms. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the tension between traditional cultural expectations and emerging modern values (Sharif, 2016; Shah & Mahmood, 2024). The increasing preference for nuclear families among younger generations reflects their desire for greater independence and privacy, while older generations continue to favor extended family living arrangements. Such differences may influence expectations regarding caregiving, financial support, and family decision-making (Waqas et al., 2024).

The Influence of Technological Advancement

Technology and globalization emerged as significant influences on family values, particularly among younger family members. Participants described how the internet, social media, and exposure to other cultures had shaped their attitudes toward relationships, marriage, and personal independence. Younger participants, especially those with regular access to digital platforms, expressed a greater willingness to adopt contemporary values, which at times conflicted with traditional family beliefs. As one female participant in her late twenties stated:

“The use of technology especially social media and internet have changed the social landscape of family, social relationships, and our future. More specifically, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube has consistently exposed us to different cultural values, and lifestyles across the globe. Movies, films, dramas with the help of television network has drastically influenced young minds with regard to familial bonds, family care and social support. This exposure to mass media and platforms has tremendously affected the thinking patterns of younger generation. They have developed an alternative explanation and mindset regarding gender role, marriage, gender roles, and personal freedom. For instance, in my case, I strongly believe and support the notion that both men and women should have equal opportunities to pursue education and careers, and that individuals should have a greater say in decisions that affect their lives. Sometimes these views create value conflict with those of the elder family members, but I think technology has helped us become more aware of different possibilities and ways of living.”

Another respondent added that

“Technology has significantly changed the patterns and ways of family interaction. Marital communication, togetherness and family connections have become weak. Although mobile phones and social media has greatly helped us in staying connected with our relatives living elsewhere but

this has also reduced direct and face to face communication within the household. Often family members especially the younger generation prefer spending more time on their phones in place of talking to each other. Likewise, technology has exposed the younger generations to know and learn ideas about marriage, marital relationships, and independence.”

In contemporary Pakistani society especially in urban centers, technological advancement including the use of mobile phone, and access to online platform such as social media, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram has caused a tremendous shift in the social lives. On one hand it is giving us more opportunities to explore and understand global culture but, on the hand, it brings us more challenges. While it has familiarized the younger generation with alternative thinking and lifestyles, but it has caused value conflict and social rift in the cultural landscape of the society. Narratives of the respondents highlight the ongoing and never-ending interaction between the channels of globalization and cultural preservation that encourage collective wisdom, solidarity, social networking and ties. The narratives further suggest that technology and globalization have significantly influenced family values, particularly among younger generations. Findings of the study also in line with the previous studies who have highlighted similar impact and challenges posed to the collectivistic culture and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the Pakistani family has undergone profound transformations owing to the diffusion of global culture, urbanization, mass mobility and technological advancement. The findings reveal that the century old collectivistic traditions, family arrangements and value systems have not simply disappeared but renegotiated and refined in response to the emerging social realities. The gradual shift from joint family model to nuclear family structures, the changing gender roles, the increasing shift to pursue personal choices in marriage and career, and the widening generational differences in social expectations and attitudes reflect the changing nature of family pattern in contemporary Pakistani society. Additionally, the study shows that traditional values of mutual respect, social cohesion, family solidarity, and respect for elders continue to influence social relationships, creating a dynamic coexistence between continuity and change. The findings further reveal that advent of global culture, and technological development have become a binding force in shaping new identities, cultural aspirations, and patterns of interaction among younger segment of society. These developments have given birth to new possibilities by expanding personal choices and opportunities for individual freedom while simultaneously challenging the existing norms governing family institution. Consequently, Pakistani families are experiencing a tough and complex phase of negotiating the boundaries between collectivist notions and individualistic orientations, resulting in new forms of family forms and social patterns. By providing an in-depth account of these social changes, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the changing family dynamics in South Asia and offers a valuable insights for policy influencers, development practitioners, educators, and researchers. The outlined challenges posed by the rapid advancement demands for a proper direction through viable and actionable policies that may protect the social erosion of family institutions by strengthening family cohesion while accommodating the aspirations and needs of future generations.

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