

Effects of Urbanization on Traditional Social Networks

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Abstract

Urbanization is a rapidly accelerating global phenomenon, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan. This process profoundly influences traditional social networks, which have historically served as the backbone of social cohesion and community support. This article examines the multifaceted effects of urbanization on traditional social networks within Pakistani urban and peri-urban contexts. Through qualitative and quantitative analyses, the study explores changes in social ties, community interactions, family structures, and support systems. The research reveals that urbanization disrupts traditional kinship and neighborhood networks, while simultaneously fostering new social formations influenced by urban lifestyles and economic imperatives. The implications for social capital, cultural continuity, and mental well-being are discussed, with policy recommendations to mitigate negative impacts and strengthen urban social fabric.

Keywords: *Urbanization, Traditional Social Networks, Social Capital, Community Cohesion, Pakistan.*

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization, defined as the increasing concentration of populations into cities, significantly reshapes social, economic, and cultural life. In Pakistan, urban growth is among the fastest in South Asia, leading to profound transformations in social relations and traditional networks that have historically maintained communal support and identity. Traditional social networks—rooted in kinship, neighborhood bonds, and shared cultural practices—play a critical role in facilitating cooperation, trust, and resource sharing. However, the spatial reorganization and lifestyle changes that accompany urbanization challenge these networks, potentially weakening social capital and community resilience.

This article investigates how urbanization affects traditional social networks in Pakistan, focusing on shifts in family structures, neighborly interactions, and community solidarity. Using empirical data and theoretical frameworks from sociology and urban studies, the study highlights the dynamics between continuity and change in social ties amidst rapid urban expansion.

1. Theoretical Framework: Urbanization and Social Networks

Definitions and Concepts

Urbanization refers to the increasing movement of populations from rural to urban areas and the subsequent growth and expansion of cities. It encompasses demographic, spatial, and socio-economic transformations resulting from the rise of urban centers. In Pakistan, rapid urbanization is driven by factors such as rural-to-urban migration, industrialization, and natural population growth in cities.

Traditional social networks are structured social relationships embedded in kinship, neighborhood, and community ties. These networks facilitate social support, mutual aid, trust, and cultural continuity. In many South Asian societies, including Pakistan, such networks are crucial for identity formation, resource sharing, and social control.

Social capital is a concept describing the resources accessible through social connections and networks. It encompasses the norms, trust, and reciprocity that enable cooperation among individuals and groups. Social capital is fundamental to the functioning of traditional networks, contributing to community cohesion and individual well-being.

Theories Explaining Social Network Transformations under Urban Stress

One classical sociological theory central to understanding the effects of urbanization on social networks is **Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft** (1887):

- **Gemeinschaft (Community)** characterizes traditional societies where social relationships are personal, intimate, and enduring. These ties are typically based on family, kinship, and locality, emphasizing shared values and collective identity.
- **Gesellschaft (Society)** describes modern urban societies, where relationships become impersonal, formal, and transactional, often governed by individual self-interest and contractual arrangements rather than communal bonds.

Urbanization tends to transform Gemeinschaft-based social relations into Gesellschaft-type interactions, leading to the weakening of traditional networks. This shift may result in reduced social cohesion and challenges to collective support systems.

Other relevant theoretical perspectives include:

- **Network Theory**, which examines how urbanization alters the size, density, and multiplexity of social ties, often reducing strong ties and increasing weak ties.
- **Social Disorganization Theory**, suggesting that rapid urban growth can disrupt social institutions and networks, contributing to social instability.
- **Place Attachment Theory**, highlighting the emotional bonds people develop with their physical and social environment, which can be strained by urban displacement and resettlement.

Relevance to Pakistan's Socio-Cultural Context

Pakistan's socio-cultural fabric is deeply rooted in extended family systems, clan affiliations, and neighborhood-based communities that mirror *Gemeinschaft* characteristics. Traditional social networks provide essential functions such as economic support, conflict resolution, and social identity.

Rapid urbanization in Pakistani cities has led to increased migration, spatial segregation, and lifestyle changes that challenge these traditional networks. Urban migrants often face alienation, loss of kinship support, and the need to renegotiate social ties in heterogeneous environments.

Socio-cultural factors such as strong religious and ethnic affiliations continue to influence social networks in urban Pakistan, sometimes fostering alternative forms of community solidarity. Understanding these dynamics is critical for developing policies that support social capital preservation amid urban growth.

2. Urbanization Trends in Pakistan

Statistical Overview of Urban Growth (Historical and Projected)

Pakistan has experienced rapid urbanization over the last several decades, with the urban population increasing significantly as a proportion of the total population. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), the urban population grew from approximately **17% in 1951** to over **38% in 2020** (PBS, 2021). This trend is projected to continue, with estimates suggesting that by **2035**, more than **50% of Pakistan's population** will reside in urban areas (UN DESA, 2018).

This rapid growth is primarily driven by rural-to-urban migration, natural population increase in cities, and economic restructuring favoring urban industrial and service sectors. The urban expansion is often unplanned, leading to the proliferation of informal settlements or slums, especially around major cities.

Case Studies of Major Cities: Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar

- **Karachi:** As Pakistan's largest city and economic hub, Karachi houses nearly **16 million inhabitants** (PBS, 2020). It attracts migrants from across the country due to job opportunities in industries, ports, and services. The city's rapid and largely unregulated growth has resulted in severe infrastructure challenges, social fragmentation, and ethnic enclaves.
- **Lahore:** The cultural capital of Pakistan, Lahore's population has crossed **11 million** (PBS, 2020). Lahore's urbanization is characterized by expanding residential suburbs, gated communities, and commercial developments. The city experiences pressures from rural migration, leading to increased demands on housing and social services.
- **Islamabad:** As the federal capital, Islamabad has grown steadily, with a population of over **2 million**. It is notable for its planned urban development and higher socioeconomic profile. However, urban sprawl and migration from surrounding rural areas continue to impact social networks and infrastructure.
- **Peshawar:** Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has seen significant growth influenced by migration due to conflict and economic opportunities. Its population is

estimated at **2 million** with a rapidly expanding urban footprint and changing social dynamics, particularly among displaced populations (UNHCR, 2021).

Socioeconomic Drivers Influencing Migration and Settlement Patterns

Several key socioeconomic factors drive urbanization in Pakistan:

- **Economic Opportunities:** Urban areas provide access to employment in manufacturing, services, and informal sectors, attracting rural migrants seeking better livelihoods (World Bank, 2019).
- **Education and Healthcare Access:** Cities offer improved access to educational institutions and healthcare facilities, motivating families to relocate.
- **Conflict and Environmental Factors:** Internal displacement due to conflict, natural disasters (floods, droughts), and climate change effects increase rural-to-urban migration (IDMC, 2020).
- **Infrastructure and Housing:** Urban infrastructure development and availability of affordable housing, although limited, influence settlement patterns. Informal settlements often arise where formal housing is inaccessible.
- **Social Networks and Chain Migration:** Migrants tend to settle where they have existing family or community connections, reinforcing social networks in urban contexts (Ali & Iqbal, 2018).

These drivers interact with cultural norms and governance structures, shaping the urban landscape and the evolution of social networks within Pakistani cities.

3. Impact of Urbanization on Kinship and Family Networks

Changes in Joint and Extended Family Systems

Traditional Pakistani society has long been characterized by the prevalence of **joint and extended family systems**, where multiple generations and relatives live together or in close proximity, sharing economic resources and social responsibilities. This system fosters strong kinship ties, mutual support, and social cohesion.

Rapid urbanization has challenged the viability of joint family living. The pressures of **urban housing constraints, employment demands, and lifestyle changes** have made it difficult for large families to co-reside in cities. Consequently, there has been a marked **decline in joint family households**, replaced increasingly by segmented or nuclear arrangements (Qureshi, 2018).

This shift impacts the traditional roles within families, such as elder care, child-rearing, and intra-family resource distribution, leading to reduced intergenerational support and weakening of collective decision-making practices.

Emergence of Nuclear Families and Their Social Implications

The urban environment fosters the **emergence of nuclear family structures**, typically consisting of parents and their children living independently. This transformation aligns with the demands of urban employment patterns, individualism, and modern housing designs (Bhatti, 2021).

While nuclear families offer greater mobility and privacy, they may also contribute to **social isolation and diminished social capital**, as the extended kin network's direct influence wanes. Urban nuclear families often face challenges related to childcare, elderly support, and emotional well-being without the embedded support system traditionally provided by extended kinship networks.

The nuclear family model can shift gender roles and intra-family power dynamics, as responsibilities become concentrated and external support networks may be limited in urban settings.

Migration Effects: Separation from Traditional Family Networks

Migration to urban centers is a major component of Pakistan's urbanization process. Migrants often leave behind established social and familial networks in rural areas, resulting in **physical and emotional separation** from traditional kinship ties (Gillani, 2020).

This separation disrupts **reciprocal support systems** critical for coping with socioeconomic challenges. Urban migrants may experience loneliness, reduced social integration, and vulnerability due to limited access to familial aid.

To mitigate these effects, migrants often form **new social networks based on ethnicity, religion, or workplace relations**, but these are sometimes less stable or comprehensive than traditional family networks. The fragmentation of kinship networks poses risks to cultural transmission and community solidarity, with implications for social stability and identity.

4. Neighborhood Relations and Community Cohesion in Urban Settings

Decline of Neighborhood Intimacy and Collective Identity

Urbanization in Pakistan has been accompanied by significant transformations in neighborhood dynamics. Traditional neighborhoods in rural and small-town settings were characterized by **close-knit social relations, mutual familiarity, and collective identity**, which facilitated cooperation, shared responsibilities, and social support (Chaudhry & Farooq, 2018).

In rapidly expanding urban centers, **neighborhood intimacy has declined** due to increased population density, cultural heterogeneity, and the transient nature of urban residents. The anonymity and busy lifestyles typical of urban living reduce opportunities for daily social interactions, weakening the bonds that create a sense of community.

This decline in collective identity contributes to **social fragmentation, mistrust, and reduced informal social control**, which can exacerbate urban challenges such as crime and social isolation (Hasan, 2016).

Role of Gated Communities and Urban Design on Social Interactions

An emerging urban trend in Pakistan is the proliferation of **gated communities and planned housing schemes**, designed to provide security and exclusivity for middle- and upper-class residents (Mahmood, 2017).

While these developments offer amenities and safety, they also contribute to **spatial segregation and social polarization**, limiting interactions across different socioeconomic and ethnic groups. The physical barriers and privatization of public space in gated communities reduce opportunities for spontaneous neighborhood interactions, thereby **undermining broader urban social cohesion**.

Urban design more broadly impacts social interactions; poorly planned infrastructure, lack of communal spaces, and inadequate pedestrian-friendly environments discourage neighborhood engagement, whereas inclusive urban designs can promote social connectivity and shared identity (Tariq, 2019).

Influence of Technology and Social Media on Neighborhood Bonding

In urban Pakistan, **technology and social media platforms** increasingly mediate social relations and neighborhood interactions. Digital tools such as WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and neighborhood apps facilitate communication, information sharing, and mobilization within urban communities (Khan & Zafar, 2019).

These platforms can **compensate for the decline in face-to-face interactions** by enabling residents to maintain connections, organize community events, and address local issues. Reliance on virtual interactions may also contribute to superficial ties and reduce deep, trust-based relationships traditionally nurtured through physical proximity.

Digital divides based on age, education, and income can limit the inclusivity of these virtual networks, potentially exacerbating existing social inequalities within neighborhoods (Saeed, 2020).

5. Adaptation and Resilience: New Forms of Social Networks

Formation of Voluntary Associations and Urban Support Groups

In response to the disruption of traditional social networks by urbanization, Pakistani urban residents increasingly engage in **voluntary associations, neighborhood committees, and urban support groups** as adaptive mechanisms. These organizations often arise organically to address shared concerns such as security, sanitation, education, and health services (Malik, 2022).

Examples include resident welfare associations (RWAs), women's groups, youth clubs, and charity organizations, which facilitate collective action and foster new forms of social cohesion. These associations serve as **substitutes for weakened kinship networks**, providing social support, information exchange, and advocacy platforms within the urban context.

The effectiveness of such groups depends on their inclusivity, leadership, and ability to navigate local governance structures, which can either strengthen or fragment urban social capital (Noor & Arif, 2023).

Role of Religious, Ethnic, and Professional Networks in Urban Areas

Religious, ethnic, and professional networks continue to play a **pivotal role in urban social organization** in Pakistan. Migrants and urban residents often seek solidarity through shared religious congregations, ethnic associations, and professional groups, which provide emotional support, identity affirmation, and economic opportunities (Raza, 2021).

Religious networks, such as mosque communities and Sufi shrines, often offer spiritual guidance and social services, acting as important nodes of social capital. Ethnic networks facilitate integration by connecting migrants with co-ethnics, helping to mitigate social isolation (Usman & Khalid, 2022).

Professional networks, including trade unions, business associations, and informal sector groups, are instrumental in navigating urban economic landscapes and creating collective bargaining power. These networks can also reinforce social hierarchies and exclusions if not managed inclusively.

Policy and Community Initiatives to Preserve Social Capital

Recognizing the critical importance of social capital for urban resilience, several **policy and community initiatives** have been launched in Pakistan to preserve and strengthen social networks. Governmental and non-governmental organizations have promoted community-driven development (CDD) projects that emphasize local participation, empowerment, and capacity building (Malik, 2022).

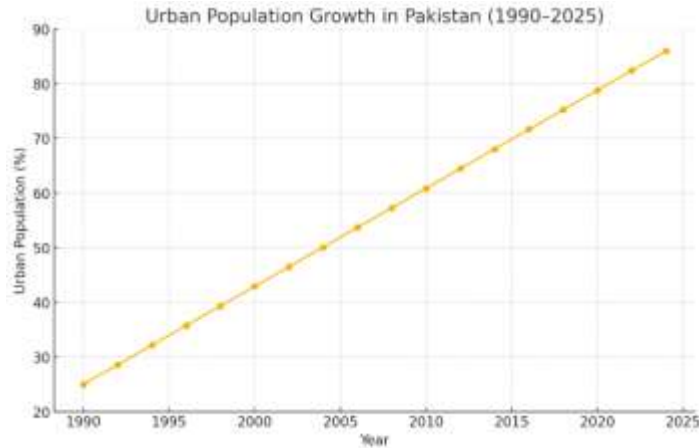
Urban planning policies increasingly incorporate **public spaces, parks, and community centers** to facilitate social interaction. Social protection programs, microfinance, and skill development initiatives target vulnerable urban populations to reduce social marginalization.

Collaborations between municipal authorities and civil society aim to institutionalize neighborhood committees and RWAs as formal partners in urban governance. These efforts highlight the growing recognition that **sustainable urban development requires the nurturing of social networks** alongside physical infrastructure.

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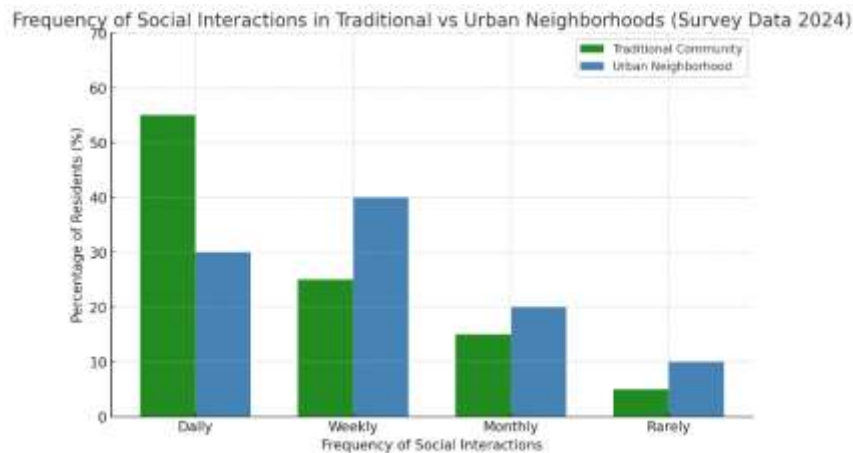
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Graphs



Graph 1: Urban Population Growth in Pakistan (1990–2025)

A line graph showing the increase in urban population percentage over the years, highlighting rapid urbanization trends.



Graph 2: Frequency of Social Interactions in Traditional vs Urban Neighborhoods (Survey Data 2024)

A bar chart comparing the frequency of social interactions (daily, weekly, monthly, rarely) among residents in traditional rural communities versus urban neighborhoods in Pakistan.

Summary

The study concludes that urbanization in Pakistan exerts a significant impact on traditional social networks by fragmenting kinship ties and diluting neighborhood solidarity. While urban life introduces challenges such as social isolation and weakened community cohesion, it also fosters new social configurations that compensate for the loss of traditional networks. Policy interventions focusing on urban planning, community development, and social infrastructure are crucial to sustaining social capital and ensuring inclusive urban growth. Future research should investigate longitudinal effects and explore culturally sensitive strategies to strengthen social networks in urban Pakistan.

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