

PAKISTANI LABOR MIGRATION TO SAUDI ARABIA: THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF REMITTANCE INFLOWS (2015-2025)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20392522>

Received
28 March 2026

Accepted
07 May 2026

Published
26 May 2026

ABSTRACT

Taking Pakistani workers mobility to Saudi Arabia, this research aims to explore patterns and trends of workers' migration; and socio-economic effects of remittances inflows in the receiving country between 2015-2025. The researchers have used secondary sources and data from the Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (BE&OE) and State Bank of Pakistan (SBP). This research explores how trends in migration have changed over time and how remittances contribute to the socio-economic growth of the country. Findings indicated that total migration has had many fluctuations with major declines from 2017-2018 and also from 2020. Following by these declines, remittance inflows significantly increased each year up to 2025, indicating an expected peak in total migration to Saudi Arabia. A sub-analysis of the data demonstrated that majority of the people from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, migrated for overseas employment relative to the people from other provinces/regions. In terms of remittances, there is an overall positive upward trend in workers' remittances from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, Overall, workers' remittances showed a positive impact on socio-economic development in the receiving country. The trend line demonstrates that the number of remittances is also influenced by cyclical fluctuations due to external economic factors, as well as workers' demand in the Saudi Arabian labor market and external shocks such as COVID-19. Undocumented flows

Keywords: Growth, Pakistani Migrants, Remittances, Trends, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is one of the fastest-growing economies in the Middle East, due to recent economic growth; therefore, Pakistanis have become one of the largest expatriate communities in Saudi Arabia (Munawar et al., 2019). In addition to contributing to job security and job opportunities for thousands of Saudi and Pakistani citizens through their employment in construction and many other fields in Saudi Arabia, Pakistani migrants living in Saudi Arabia have also played a significant role in the overall development of the Saudi economy (Munir et al.,

2016). Pakistani nationals working in Saudi Arabia enhance their own economic prospects through remittances. The role of remittances to the overall economy is to reduce poverty and improve the socio-economic status of the people in Pakistan. In Pak-Saudi Arabia relations' setting, Pakistani migration to Saudi Arabia has significantly supported the national economy and provided many new opportunities to generate income through remittances (Rao & Hassan, 2011). Pakistani migrants are important to strengthening Pakistan-Saudi Arabia bilateral relations beyond just an economic basis as they

develop cultural exchange between the two countries and have assisted with long-standing diplomatic/religious/social connections (Waheed & Aleem, 2008). Pakistani migrants also offer crucial services, especially in regards to Hajj and Umrah, to the overall Islamic community. As a result, it is very important to comprehend the experiences, contributions and obstacles of Pakistani migrants in Saudi Arabia to properly develop migration policy for sustainable labor practices (Siddique et al., 2016).

Due to recent changes in labor market parameters in Saudi Arabia, including but not limited to: the nationalization of the workforce and diversification of the economy through initiatives such the implications on Pakistani migrants working in Saudi Arabia are significant (Dilshad, 2013). These labor-related policy changes and changes to employment conditions, skills required by employers, and labor regulation are creating new opportunities for foreign workers in Saudi Arabia (Khan et al., 2019). As such, increased attention must be given to assessing how Pakistani migrants will adapt to this transition, obtain the necessary job skills, and remain competitive in the workplace (Nisah & Fayissa, 2013). Policymakers in both countries need an understanding of this migration transition related to Pakistani migrants to protect the rights of migrant workers, improve the productivity of these workers, and promote sustainable migration practices for the benefit of both the host and origin countries (Nwaogu & Ryan, 2015).

Based on the discussions above, this research focuses the patterns and trends of migrants from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia during 2015 to 2025 and socio-economic effects of remittance inflows in the origin country during the same study period.

Literature Review

The research on the economic factors causing and sustaining Pakistan's labor migration to Saudi Arabia has been very extensive (Babar, 2021; Amjad, Arif, & Iqbal, 2017; Rafique, Saeed, & Israr, 2022; Arif, Farooq, & Iqbal, 2018). For example, push factors include limited

job opportunities in Pakistan, low wages, and population pressures; while pull factors include Saudi Arabian employers seeking low and semi-skilled construction, service and domestic workers (Pradhan et al., 2008). Many authors have cited the importance of migration being the only solution for many Pakistani households to survive (particularly in rural areas) through better income and social mobility than they are able to achieve in Pakistan. The growing number of Pakistani families migrating or sending their family members overseas is quickly becoming a pattern of behavior based on the economic realities in both countries (Uddin et al., 2020). Likewise, economic effects of Pakistani migration to Saudi Arabia focus the labor force and work ability (Gul and Mahmud, 2012). Numerous studies indicate that Saudi Arabia is among the leading countries transferring remittances to Pakistan (Umer & Waheed, 2017; Rizvi, Jamil, & Sheikh, 2019; Kock & Sun, 2011), thus playing an important role in increasing household income, decreasing poverty and building up foreign exchange reserves. Remittances do not only provide for basic necessities such as food and clothing, but are also spent on education, healthcare, housing and small businesses. However, authors writing on this topic also have expressed concern about the potential for developing dependency on remittances and limiting productive investment into the local economy (Siddique & Selvanathan, 2010). Social and working conditions for Pakistani migrants in Saudi Arabia are another important area of study within this body of literature.

Migrant workers face many challenges while living and working in Saudi Arabia (Abbas, 2016), including working long hours, limited labor rights, being tied to their employer through a contract (Kafala system) and having difficulty moving to new employment opportunities. Migration from low-income countries to developed countries continues to be a dominant strategy for earning through gainful employment. Migration affects the social fabric of families in Pakistan, such as changes in gender roles, family structure and children's education goals (Ullah, 2022; Hassan, 2010; Farooq & Jave, 2009; Salik,

2023). Researchers advocate for improving migrant rights through better policy frameworks and to maximize the economic development benefits to Pakistan from international migration.

Research Method

To determine patterns and trends of Pakistani migrants in Saudi Arabia, this research employs quantitative methodologies and uses secondary data sources. The data used for the creation of the current study is numerical in nature, collected from the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, the State Bank of Pakistan's remittances databases. The data of BE&OE to identify trends in migrant flows, which includes the location of the migrant workers based on skills or qualifications, as well as present employment sectors, and the remittances to Pakistan.

The present study analyzed migration trends and remittance flows from Saudi Arabia using descriptive data, referred as statistical format which provides a general view of the situation rather than examples (Thompson, 2009). There are three key variables in this descriptive data analysis, which are: a) Number of Pakistani migrants working in Saudi Arabia per year; b) total amount of remittances sent to Pakistan from Saudi Arabia; and c) the number of migrants across Pakistan (e.g., federal, provinces, GB, tribal areas and Kashmir).

The statistical data contained in this research is organized into tables, graphs, charts for determining patterns, flows, and trends over time. Basic statistical tools (percentages, growth rates, averages, and trend analysis) have been employed to provide results of the research.

Results and Analyses

The province of Punjab is the largest contributor to the overseas labor migration from Pakistan, accounting for 3.71 million migrant workers each year. This is no surprise as Punjab has a large population, established recruitment networks and

has created a culture of migration. Migration flows from Punjab are highly volatile, though, with significant declines in 2020 caused by COVID-19, followed by rapid recoveries in 2022 and 2023 (Table, 1).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) ranks second in total migrant workers, exporting 1.8 million people annually. In contrast to Punjab, KPK's overseas employment numbers remain relatively consistent and demonstrate almost no considerable year-to-year variance in the numbers of individuals being sent abroad. However, there are certain years (e.g., 2019, 2022, and 2025) where there are significant spikes in the number of people migrating abroad as individuals pursue employment opportunities in the low- and semi-skilled labor markets of the Gulf Region (Table, 1).

Sindh has a relatively low volume of migrant workers (approximately 644,000) compared to the number of workers from Punjab and KPK, and its migration flows are consistently stable from year-to-year with no significant spikes. Whereas Baluchistan, Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), and Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) collectively export only a small number of individuals. In terms of total numbers of migrant workers, AJK has the highest number of individuals (343,000), while GB has the lowest number of labors sent as overseas workers (21,750) (Table, 1). The Federal Territory and Tribal Territory are not left out. There are 66,000 immigrants who are in the Federal while for the Tribal area there were approximately 33,900. The Tribal area demonstrates consistent migration indicating a lack of good jobs in the area. If we look at migration from a macro level, everyone faced challenges in 2020 with COVID and a sharp decrease was seen in migration throughout 2021. Overall, it is evident that the majority of labor migrants come from the Punjab and KPK. In relation to the two larger areas, the smaller regions barely register, making the total picture uneven throughout the migration (Table, 1).

Table 1: Province Wise Labor Migration from Pakistan 2015 - 2025

Years	Punjab	Sindh	KPK	Baluchistan	GB	Azad Kashmir	Federal	Tribal Areas
2015	478646	116935	220993	7686	2899	64586	9028	45798
2016	446566	85326	206929	6378	2961	43093	8472	39628
2017	261849	53590	107366	4528	3417	33318	4635	27583
2018	185902	41551	88361	2930	2760	33028	2471	25436
2019	312960	57206	186283	5103	2554	30158	4298	27314
2020	119067	17093	68382	1871	256	7691	1823	9030
2021	157699	21501	76484	2473	1095	10705	2285	16038
2022	460302	59337	225272	8018	1180	29512	6554	42164
2023	489301	72382	210150	836	1551	33904	10359	36609
2024	404345	60424	187103	5668	1692	29591	8621	29937
2025	393729	58733	227858	5441	1626	27422	8092	39598
Total	3710366	644078	1805181	50932	21991	343008	66638	339135

Source: (Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment <https://beoe.gov.pk/reports-and-statistics>, 2026)

Table 2 shows fluctuations in the number of Pakistani migrants from 2015 to 2025. Saudi Arabian job market attracted Pakistani workers and made it their primary destination. In the first two years (2015 - 2016), 55% of Pakistani migrants settled in Saudi Arabia, while by 2017 and 2018 only 26% - 29% of them came to the Kingdom.

Factors that would have contributed to such a drop could have been stricter labor regulations imposed by the Saudi government or decreasing demand for foreign labor in the Kingdom. In 2019, there was a bounce back for Pakistani

nationals wanting to settle in Saudi Arabia as that figure rose to 53.1%. In 2020, there was an unprecedented event; total migration surged (> 1 million persons), yet 13.5% (lowest figure during the analysis period) were headed to Saudi Arabia, due largely to the disruption caused by COVID-19, travel bans, and tightening the labor market of the Gulf Region. From 2021, migration to Saudi Arabia increased exponentially reaching almost 70% by 2025, indicating Saudi Arabia as a primary settlement destination for Pakistani workers (Table, 2).

Table 2: Total Migrants and Migrants to Saudi Arabia

Years	Total Migrants	Saudi Arabia	Percentage	Difference
2015	946571	522750	55.2%	-
2016	839353	462598	55.1%	-.1%
2017	496286	143363	28.8%	-26.3%
2018	382439	100910	26.3%	-2.5%
2019	625876	332764	53.1%	+26.8%
2020	1008315	136376	13.5%	-39.6%
2021	288280	155777	54.0%	+40.5%
2022	832339	514909	61.8%	+7.8%
2023	1120619	426951	38.0%	-23.8%
2024	727381	452562	62.2%	+24.2%
2025	762499	530256	69.5%	+7.3%
Total	8029958	3779216	47.0%	-

Source: (Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment <https://beoe.gov.pk/reports-and-statistics>, 2026)

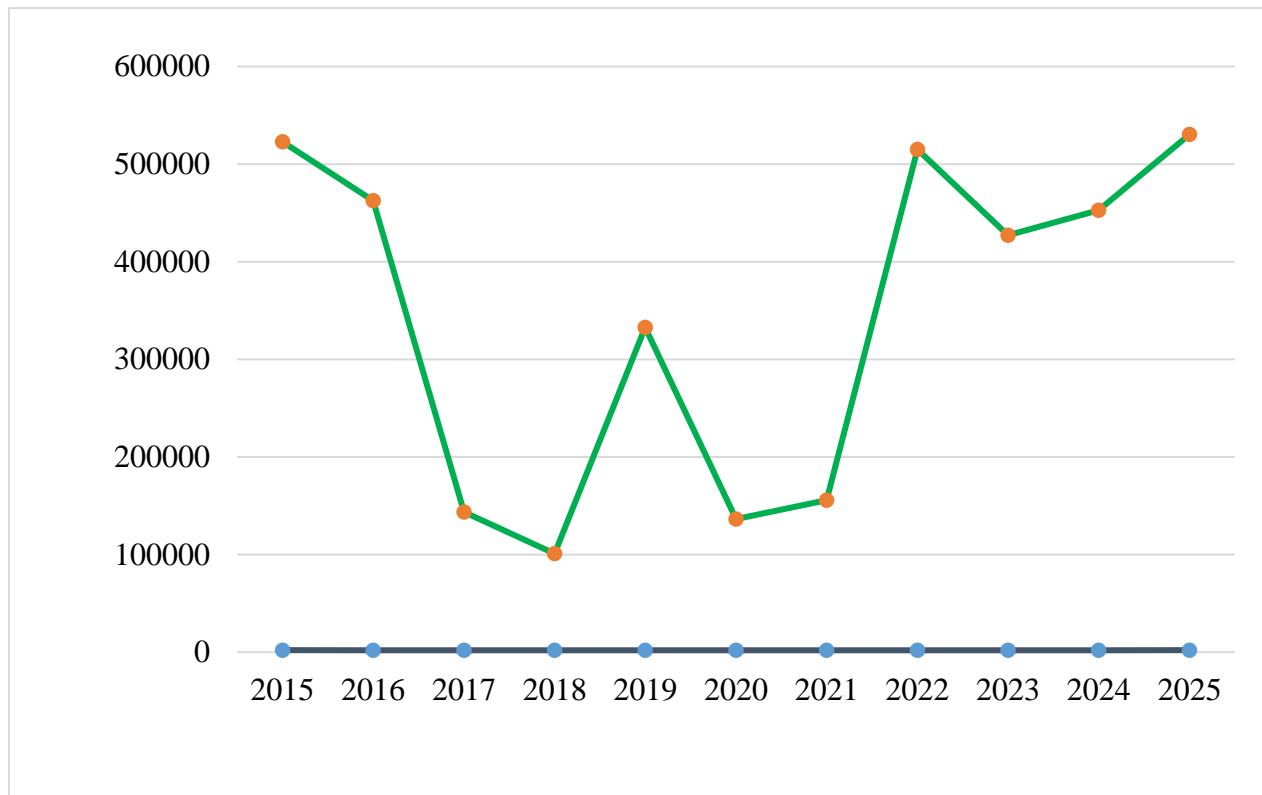


Figure 1: Migrants' Trend from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia 2015 – 2025 (Data Source:<https://beoe.gov.pk/reports-and-statistics>)

Migration patterns from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia are marked by significant fluctuation, however, as illustrated in the numbers below, during this time period, there was a cyclical trend within this data set identifying defined patterns throughout approximately 15 quarters of historical data.

From the data, it is noted that during the initial two years of data (2015 and 2016) the total number of immigrants from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia remained relatively steady with over 500 + thousand immigrants in 2015 and just under 462,000 immigrants in 2016. For this data sample, both 2017 and 2018 illustrate a downward pattern summary in respect to the total volume of Pakistani immigrants to Saudi Arabia with just 143,363 immigrants in 2017 and just 100,910 immigrants (the lowest pre-pandemic immigration volume) in 2018. Several variables could have contributed to the downward trend in the total volume of Pakistani migrants, including whole or partial bans on the issuance of work permits or labor market restrictions related to the

KSA immigration policy during this time (Figure, 1).

A slight increase in the volume of Pakistani migrants to Saudi Arabia was identified in 2019 with the overall total reaching 332,764 individuals. It suggested that there was an increase in demand for additional labor from Saudi Arabia, particularly as indicated by the increase in immigration numbers when comparing the totals to those from 2018. Conversely, the COVID-19 pandemic created significant interruption of the total volume of Pakistani immigrants to Saudi Arabia by causing a massive drop (approximately 136,376) in the total number of Pakistani immigrants moving to Saudi Arabia in 2020, (>75% drop in the number of individuals; despite overall global migration rate, was increased) due to COVID-19. However, in 2021, the total number of Pakistani immigrants moving to Saudi Arabia did show a part of a return to pre-COVID-19 migration levels

as indicated by the total of just over 155,777 immigrations into Saudi Arabia (Figure, 1).

Between 2022 and 2025 there continues to be a trend of growth that began in 2020, as well as new period of growth starting in 2022; however, there was decrease in numbers of migrants during the period between 2022 (514,909) and 2023 (426,951) and then, an increase in numbers of migrants from 2023 (426,951) and 2024 (452,562). The peak for migration occurred in 2025 with 530,256 migrants making this year the highest for the defined period. Overall, the trend does not demonstrate stability caused by fluctuations due to the effects from external factors. However, the data on workers who have migrated from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia revealed KSA as a main destination (Figure, 1).

Discussing Pakistani workers' remittance to the home country between 2015 and 2025, Saudi Arabia experienced two main trends in this regard: a decreasing trend for remittances (2015-2018) followed by a strong increasing trend for remittances in 2019-2025, with variability. During the time from 2015-2018, there was a steady decline from USD 5,876 million to USD 4,895 million representing low economic growth, low crude oil pricing or a decline in the number of jobs available to Pakistani workers in Saudi

Arabia. This consistent decline represents a decline in cash flow to Pakistan during those years (Table, 3).

The beginning of the recovery phase for remittances started in 2019, with an increase in remittances to USD 5,609 million. Remittances continued to increase significantly in both 2020 and 2021, with remittances of USD 7,393 million and USD 7,806 million, respectively, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in remittances during this time indicates that migrants may have also sent a larger amount of money home to provide stability and to assist with family support, especially during uncertain times as a new crisis was emerging (Table, 3).

The trend experienced another temporary decline in remittances in 2022 and 2023 when remittances returned to USD 7,290 million and USD 6,216 million, respectively. The temporary decline in remittances may be associated with global economic adjustment and inflation or changing labor market conditions in Saudi Arabia. However, following the temporary decline in remittances, the trend strengthens and peaks in 2024 and 2025 with the highest remittances during the entire period, USD 8,593 million and 9,636 million, respectively (Table, 3).

Table 3: Remittances from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan 2015 – 2025 according to State Bank of Pakistan

Years	Total Remittance in USD	Growth
2015	5876.2	-
2016	5807.8	Decreased
2017	5265.7	Decreased
2018	4895.51	Decreased
2019	5609.81	Increased
2020	7393.512	Increased
2021	7806.034	Increased
2022	7290.851	Decreased
2023	6216.163	Decreased
2024	8593.72	Increased
2025	9636.93	Increased
Total	74392.23	-

Source: (State Bank of Pakistan, <https://easydata.sbp.org.pk/>, 2026)

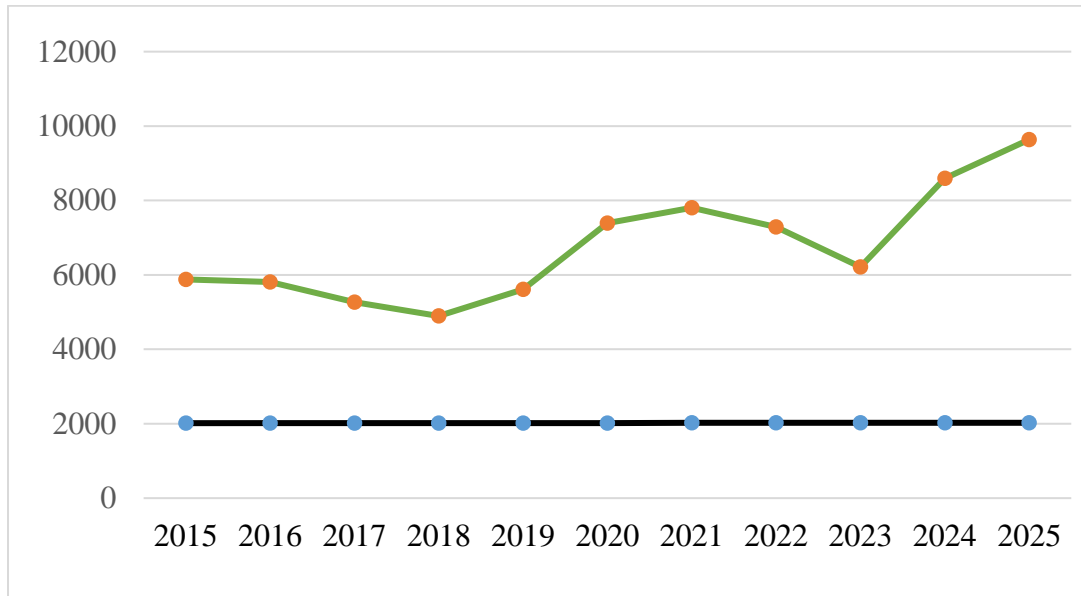


Figure 2: Trend Analysis of Remittances from Saudi Arabia 2015 – 2025 (Data Source: <https://easydata.sbp.org.pk/>)

During the years from 2-15-2015, remittances generally have been increasing. Although there would be fluctuations over periods of time, the trend line from 2015 to 2018 indicates that remittance transfers from the amount of 5876.2 to 4895.51 USD declined continuously. This is representative of the period of 2015 to 2018 as a period of negative trend since the inflow of remittance transfers had weakened. This was the result of the economic adjustment experienced in Saudi Arabia, which would have resulted in decreased earnings and/or employment opportunities for migrants (Figure, 2).

The trend line from 2019 through 2021 shows a dramatic positive slope, representative of a very strong phase of recovery and growth. During this period, remittance transfers increased from 5609.81 USD in 2019, to 7393.512 USD in 2020, and then to 7806.03 USD in 2021. Given the very steep positive slope during this period, migrants have generated remittances at an accelerating rate, perhaps due in part to crisis-driven savings behavior exhibited during the COVID-19 pandemic and also as a result of improved formal channels for sending remittances (Figure, 2). From 2022 through early 2023, the trend line again declines, indicating a temporary phase of decline (from 7290.851 to 6216.163). This would be representative of a

period of contraction for remittance transfers, most likely as a result of global inflation, the normalization of the economy after COVID-19, and/or migrants leaving less disposable income in their home countries (Figure, 2).

Finally, the trend line is again very steeply positive from the period 2024 through 2025 to the highest values during the entire period at 8593.72 and 9636.93. This would be representative of a strong expansion phase for remittances, and therefore, overall, the long-term trend for remittances is upsloping. Despite the fluctuations in the year wise remittances, the trend line is positive which shows the sustained growth of Pakistani workers' remittances from Saudi Arabia (Figure, 2).

Impacts of Remittances on Economic Growth to Pakistan

As a source of capital, workers' higher remittances are associated with the economic growth particularly for the developing countries including Pakistan. There is no denying the fact that remittances have positive and significant effects to the economic growth in receiving and sending country. For Pakistan, workers' mobility to Saudi Arabia indicates that remittances have potential benefits such as economic growth, poverty reduction, and improving the social and

economic conditions of the locals. Higher remittances have positive effect in improving economic growth, reducing the current account deficit, and external borrowing as well as debt burden. Sustainable level of migrants' remittances is considerable element in enhancing the real output growth in the country. Considering the effects of workers' remittances, most of the migrants' families save a specific amount by investing them in rural assets and lands. The remittance inflows improve the income level and social status of the poor people in the origin country. In this connection, Pakistani workers' remittances help in supporting family members, children's education, skills, planning for business, and motivation to work more in the receiving country.

The Pakistani workers' remittances from Saudi Arabia are directly associated with economic growth of the receiving country. The families in Pakistan mainly rely on the remittances to fulfill the need and requirement of families and the remittances improve and strengthen the purchasing power of the families in Pakistan. The alleviation of poverty in Pakistan and improving the basic life standard of the family members left behind is the main contribution of the remittances from Saudi Arabia. For Pakistan, remittances are considered the back bone in economic growth of the country. The remittances from Saudi Arabia are prominent among the overall foreign remittances in Pakistan as the maximum number of migrants prefer Saudi Arabia is labor market. The growth of GDP in Pakistan and the short term and long-term economic benefits for GDP growth is also linked with the remittances especially received from Saudi Arabia.

There is necessity to develop the policies in order to increase the true figures of the remittances by imposing low rates for the transaction and transfer by following the legal channel (Qayyum, Javaid, & Arif, 2008; Javed, Arif, & Qayyum, 2012). For the productive purposes, both remitters and recipients should invest a specific portion of the remittance to get benefits in future. Remittances effects can be seen in two ways: appreciation of the real exchange rate and

decreasing international trade competitiveness of a country which ultimately deteriorates the economy. It is proposed to raise the trade competitiveness to reduce the adverse Dutch disease effect of remittances flows (Sutradhar, 2020). Remittances serve as a significant source of financial inflow for Pakistan. They play an important role in regard to balance of payments contribute to the growth rate of productive capacity in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The migration studies for the Gulf Region (Saudi Arabia specifically) show that Saudi Arabia is still the primary destination country for Pakistani emigrant workers even though the percentage of total emigrations to Saudi Arabia has varied significantly from year to year. There was a decreased percentage in the number of migrant workers moving to Saudi Arabia from 2017-2018; the number of emigrating workers moving to Saudi Arabia increased significantly until they reached an all-time high in 2025.

Excessive variability in migration patterns demonstrates the changes in international economic conditions and immigration policies between countries and also owing to the global effects of COVID-19. Additionally, outwards mobility for employment sustains and promotes the trend of long-term gains. From 2015-2025, there has been an increase in the number of migrants leaving Pakistan to work abroad and emigrating from Pakistan. However, the majority of migrants leave for employment in other countries within the Gulf region, most significantly to Saudi Arabia. During this period, the number of migrants is inconsistent by year indicating large decreases in population moving overseas in selected years (most dramatically during 2017-2018; and 2020) followed by sizeable increases in the number of migrants leaving Pakistan to work abroad. Province wise data on migration studies indicated that the provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, respectively, have produced the largest volume of emigrating workers and those from Sindh, Azad Kashmir, and other less populated provinces create moderate volumes of emigrating workers but

those from Gilgit-Baltistan. Additionally, data on migrants from Baluchistan indicated the fewest people migrated to Saudi Arabia. This denotes extreme regional inequality regarding the inability to migrate for employment, access to the required social connections to migrate, and the ability to find employment overseas.

To summarize, remittance flows from Saudi Arabia demonstrate a long-term trend of growth despite short-term fluctuations. The data show cyclical fluctuations in the movement pattern, yet the overall positive trend line leads to the highest level of remittance in 2025. This supports the theory that migration has both continued over time and created substantial economic benefits to Pakistan's foreign exchange earnings. Overall, an integrated analysis indicates that Pakistani migrant workers in Saudi Arabia represent significant structural players, have a regionally unequal impact, and will generate substantial economic benefits through remittances to maintain people through the home country and impact Pakistan's economy positively despite sporadic short-term changes due to global and regional economic events.

Author Contributions:

Iffat Tahira: Conceptualization, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing; and supervision; Muhammad Messam: methodology, Analysis; validation, investigation; Maryam BiBi: data collection, visualization, resources, All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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