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**Not Only Economics Gain-Much More: How Pakistani Migrant Women Interpret the Migration Success to the UK, A Case Study Applying Relative Deprivation Theory**

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**Abstract**

While migration is often associated with economic improvement, this study finds that the migration decision-making process is not linear, but more complex. Through the theoretical lens of Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), this paper analyses how Pakistani women interpret their migration experience from Pakistan to the United Kingdom. The findings of case studies explored how migration shaped and reshaped their perception of deprivation and well-being, not only on economic upgradation but also on emotional, social and cultural domains. Our findings challenge the famous narrative of economic growth and empowerment as a result of migration, adding more to the thesis that perception of deprivation moulds and is reshaped contextually. This study significantly contributes to disseminating the migrant women's lesser voices echoed in the literature.

**Keywords:** Relative Deprivation Theory, RDT, Migrants, Migrant Women, Pakistani Women, Pakistani Migrants, Migration, Life Experiences, Gender, Migration.

**1. Introduction**

Migration is contributing as a major factor in shaping global economics, cultural and social trends around the globe. It is not a one-way traffic, but the economy influences both countries, the country of origin, as well, the country of destination. The remittances flow, as an economic gain for the country of origin, and supply of skilled human capital for the country of destination. A sharp increase in remittance escalating from USD 128 billion to USD 831 billion between 2000-2022 (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2025), in 2023, remittance to low and middle-income countries rose by 3.8%, making an estimated \$656 billion (The World Bank, 2023). These significant growths in remittances are advocating the surge of migration in said years, also indicating the economic value of migrants in their country of origin. This can significantly contribute to the country's development and its assets (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2024). On the other side, the report also focuses on the value of these migrants as critical human capital in countries of destination. Immigrants fill the labour shortages, creating job opportunities for locals as entrepreneurs, paying taxes and other social security contributions.

Migrants could be an opportunity for the host country (United Nations, 2016) by promoting cultural diversity, bringing their expertise in science, arts, medicine, and technology (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2025). The sociological aspect of the migration also indicates the social capital of the migrants as agents of promoting diversity in the culture, aiding the exchange of ideas, discoveries, and technological innovation. International migration is becoming more complex and complicated, where the reality is beyond the simple bilateral interconnectedness of two countries. Nation/states not only operate with their respective mutual interest of give and take, rather, it embodies a wider process that enhances global connectivity and promotes the evolution of new forms of hybridisation (George Ritzer, 2015). To add more to these fabrics, the trio of origin, transit and destination countries, all together creating and shaping behaviours, attitudes and experiences of migrants.

A migrant went through a critical transformative phase of his life. Migration impacts his individual, social identity, as well as a continued struggle to adjust and adapt and a tension to balance their traditional values with the new social context and realities. Migration itself and post-migration adjustment are an exhausting process faced by both men and women migrants. However, literature identified the serious need for evidence and knowledge regarding female migrants across the globe. How they are evaluating the whole life-changing transformation process of migration, how they judge their economic wellbeing and where they stand their social integration needs. Most importantly, they decide that their decision to migrate was correct by comparing their lifestyle with their reference group in the country of origin. This study uncovered above mentioned unanswered puzzle with in-depth interviews with Pakistani women migrants, to the UK and currently they are residing in different cities of the UK.

Grounded on the theoretical framework of Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), this study aims to determine the factors that influence to shape the subjective interpretation of migration outcome, other than economic factors; how Pakistani migrant women determine their migration decision success to the United Kingdom (UK). RDT provides two models for assessing the relative achievements among migrant women: (1) the comparison with their reference group in their country of origin, and (2) by their past experiences.

### **Contextualization of the Migration to the UK and Gender Gap in Migration Literature**

Migration is getting a more critical positioning in the era of globalisation. Today, 3.6% of the global population is entitled to migration (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2025). Asia still holds the position of a key migration hub, with more than 40% of the global migrants, around 115 million individual entitled migrants (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2025). The United States, Germany, Saudia-Arbia and Russia are the top destination countries for international migrants during 2023 (World Population Review, 2023).

The United Kingdom ranks 5<sup>th</sup> globally with 9.5 million migrants the UK is hosting, making up 15% of its population (Migration Observatory, 2024). Interestingly, we observe a significant shift in the migration pattern of the UK, in 2023, where in June 2023, net migration was 90600, which was a record high (UK Home Office, 2024), but in the very next year, it reduced by 20% in the year of 2024. (Migration Observatory, 2024).

The popularity of the UK as a migrant destination among Pakistani migrants is continuing, and there are still Pakistani migrants arriving in Britain for marriage purposes, or on temporary student and work permit visas. The latter trend is to be highly skilled professionals, such as doctors and other health professionals. Pakistan stands in the 3rd rank of countries of origin for migrants to the UK, with 533000 migrants in 2023, following India in 1st rank, 920,000 and Poland at the 2nd rank (743,000) (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2023). According to the 2021 Census, Pakistanis accounted for about 2.7% of the total population in the United Kingdom,

with 1.6 million, nearly equal gender distribution between Pakistani males and females in the UK (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024). Pakistanis encompass many distinct regional and linguistic groups, including Pakhtoons, Punjabis, Mirpuris, Sindhis and Balochis. (Hopkins, 2009). This Pakistani diaspora has established a strong network of communities across the UK. Although there is a lack of representation of Pakistani migrants, especially the female migrants (Craig, 2015)

### **Where are Women in Migration?**

Women historically constitute around half of all international migrants, with 49% of the gender share (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2023). There is also a serious gap in the literature available on gendering perspective in migration studies; however, researchers now also illuminate the attention toward gender-specific experiences of migrants (Ahmad, 2022). As we are lacking in seeing the true picture of women migrants, we can foresee the challenges in differentiating the women migrants. Some of them are living with their family, some arrived for higher studies, and some women migrated for better jobs, as all of them carry different portfolios, there are challenges to observe their social experiences and challenges uniformly.

Women comprise 52% of its total migration population of the UK in 2022 (OECD, 2024). From that, the total Pakistani males and females comprise 2.7% population. The accurate data on the gender distribution of Pakistani migrants is still a challenge, as the Pakistan Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment, Government of Pakistan, does not provide detailed statistics on female migration to the UK. Although, national census of the UK mentioned an almost equal distribution of male and female Pakistani migrant's population. The factors of migration for the Pakistani women are well defined and its evolved; traditional marriage and family union were the dominant factors for women. However, a recent change in social trends allowed women to migrate for education and employment and women individually seeking greater autonomy and financial independence (Donato, Piya, & Jacobs, 2023). These skilled women are contributing significantly to the UK's economy. Some of the highly pursued careers for Pakistani migrant women include healthcare Professionals, education, and entrepreneurship. Yet, their participation in the different sectors in the UK also reflects their identity, shaped by their cultural foundation, gender role and adjustment in new social structures.

The gaps in the behaviour of available data itself advocate the ill positioning of gender specification in migration statistics, as we don't know the officially correct, exact number of women who migrated to the UK. The next question is, why? What are the factors, influence women of Pakistan to migrate? The neglect of official interest also leads to the neglect to acknowledge the social and individual struggles of these women.

Economic upgradation in one's life is the biggest achievement considered in the migration process, however, they deal with challenges such as social integration and remain practising their traditional norms in a new country. Literature indicated the doubling of the struggle in migrant women, balancing the complex context of cultural heritage and new demands of integration at a societal level. The dual affiliation required them to negotiate their role simultaneously in both societies, by maintaining their relationship with their cultural and social demand, concurrently, adapting to new British social norms (Vertovec, 2004). Better to understand the struggle; by following the integrative approach (Berry, 1997), where women migrants try to create a balance to preserve traditional culture, at a same time, they participating in a conventional British society (Donato, Piya, & Jacobs, 2023) (Donato et al., 2023). This social integration is also a complex process for these women, such as language barriers, socio-cultural structures, including patriarchal family setups and religious foundations (Dwyer, 2000).

Studies on migrant women also reported the social and psychological trends, traits and their experiences, how they are negotiating their identities while considering their culture, religion, gender and family patriarchal structure and creating new hybrid identity by adapting and rejecting new aspects of both culture (Dwyer, 2000) , (Bhatia, 2009). This transformative process of integration often results in creating an ongoing psychological stress and pressure among immigrant women, especially when they belong to a Muslim community in the UK, and holders of some specific religious, cultural, and national affiliations (Eade, 2006). In this transitional phase, these women adopted many strategies to achieve a sense of validation for their migration decision. While focusing on relative deprivation theory, we see that migrants from South Asian countries, including Pakistan, perceive migration as a way to achieve relative improved economic positioning compared to their reference group, and their further behaviour and actions about migration are heavily influenced by this comparison.

Relative Deprivation Theory, the Framework of the study:

In this study, we are grounded in Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT) (Runciman, 1966). Relative Deprivation Theory proposes a critical lens for understanding trends of migration of Pakistani women, principally related to economic structural disparities. The core idea of RDT is to measure the relative deprivation; as theory posits that an individual or group feel deprivation by comparing their economic status with their reference group, or feels that what economic status they are entitled to. However, they do not feel deprived because of the complete condition of economic deprivation, but it is relatively applied. Relative deprivation theory focuses on economic motivations only, while the paradox of this theory proposes that despite achieving economic standing, migrants are subject to face inequalities, discrimination and challenges in social integration (Faist, 2016).

Generally, most of the migrants recognise migration as an avenue for improving their socio-economic life compared to the reference group they have in Pakistan. Despite all economic upgradation, these migrant women consider other social factors for defining their overall migration attainment. Our study fills the gaps, by targeting the personal and social traits of migrant's women to understand the complex interplay of economic, social, cultural factors contributing their experiences in Pakistan and the UK, based on them, how women migrant assesses their personal and social life before and after migration with their reference group, and despite all inequalities and social challenges, and how them make decision to continue their stay in host country. From the perspective of relative deprivation, migrants from South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, view migration as a means to improve their relative economic position within their reference group. (Bodvarsson, 2013). This attitude of continuous comparison to reassure their overall improvement in life explains the scenario, why an increase in migration remains despite all documented discrimination, wage gaps, and ethnic group treatment (Stark, Migration incentives, migration types: The role of relative deprivation, 1991).

## **2. Research Methodology**

We conducted a total of 5 case studies, with respondents, Pakistani women, and currently residing in the UK. It is worth mentioning that the researcher was positioned in Islamabad, Pakistan, at the time of data collection. All interviews were conducted at different available times with respondents via Skype and WhatsApp. Before initiating the data collection, ethical considerations were followed, including informed consent taken from the participants before the interview. Confidentiality was maintained by hiding the actual names and other identification of respondents as well as their responses throughout the research process. Since all data was collected via using internet, the researcher made sure to use good-quality internet for smooth communication and clarity of response. All interviews were conducted in the national language,

“Urdu”, by the authors. Active notes were also taken during the interview sessions. As soon as the interviews were completed, all interviews and audio files were transcribed into English. After receiving all interview transcripts, a careful three-layered data coding was completed, which was followed by narrative analysis.

All five participants of this study, Pakistani migrant women were fell in the bracket of age group of 25-40 years. Four are married, and only one was unmarried at the time of the interviews. The respondents were from different provinces of Pakistan, including Mandi Bahaud Din, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Mardan, and Karachi, and currently residing in different areas of the UK including; currently residing in different cities of the UK, including London, Birmingham, and Manchester.

### 2.1. Introduction to Respondents:

<b>Case Study</b>	<b>Profile</b>
<b>Case#1</b>	Rukhsana was a 37-year-old migrant Pakistani woman who belonged to Mandi Bahaud Din (a district in the Punjab province of Pakistan). She was married and had 3 children. She has been staying in London for 8 years after her marriage to her cousin in Pakistan. Migration to the UK aimed to study; however, the family opted to stay there to get the permanent residence status. Case#2: Shabana was an unmarried, 27 years 27-year-old young student in London. She is from Rawalpindi and currently works with the education department on their educational research.
<b>Case#2</b>	Shabana was an unmarried, 27 years 27-year-old young student in London. She is from Rawalpindi and currently works with the education department on their educational research.
<b>Case#3</b>	Kausar was 39 years 39-year-old married woman migrant, had 2 children and was from Karachi. She was staying in Birmingham and currently working in the community sector as a parenting guide.
<b>Case#4</b>	Samina was from Mardan, Khyber Pakhtwan Khawan-KPK, and she was 35 years old, mother of one girl child. Although she was a master's holder in anthropology, she currently works in Art and theatre. She writes and directs a theatre play in Manchester.
<b>Case# 5</b>	Nida is a 42-year-old lady. Nida is also from Karachi. She was married with two children. Upon arrival in the UK, she brought her son from Karachi, and her other child was the UK, and now both her children are UK passport holders. She arrived in the UK on a student visa, but she was very clear to migrate permanently from Pakistan to the UK in this way.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### Comparing their Deprivation with the Provision: What they Attained with the Migration

Overall, the findings of this case study, from these Pakistani migrant women, reflect a broader vision of migration patterns among South Asian women, especially women from Pakistan. Their responses included the push and pull factors, gender norms and structural inequalities in the country of origin. Generally, existing literature lead toward two different steams for male and female; where most of the South Asian man migrate for economic prospects while marriage and family reunion are highlights for women (Kofman, 2004), interestingly; these reason of migration play a vital factor in their adjust and adaptation in new social structure of country of host. Our research also supports this argument that Pakistani women continually compare their social and individual standing in the UK with Pakistan. The key factor of their migration among women from South Asia is to reunite after marriage and to adjust to a new family environment. This conventional narrative is challenged by a sharp trend, when women from South Asia

independently migrate for education as well as for their employment in the UK. This difference we captured in our study that women migrating to the UK for education and employment reported their experiences of increased confidence, mobility, and self-expression, as compared to women migrating for marriage and family integration or limited mobility (Yeoh, 2014). Our findings indicated the intersectionality of some major social factors, including development, education, gender, protection, health, politics and religion, as well as family dynamics in the UK and Pakistan.

For this study, we applied the comprehensive framework of Relative deprivation theory (Runciman, 1966) for a better understanding of the interpretation of migration attainment among migrant women of Pakistan. Migration to the UK significantly improves the financial and social positioning of migrants (Bodvarsson, 2013), however, they deal with challenges such as cultural adaptation, social integrity, and a continuous juggling with their previous life in their own country and current life in the UK. Where the theory suggests that individuals embrace a continuous assessment process to judge and evaluate their well-being in contrast to their reference group, mainly influenced by social and economic factors. Our study found that respondent posit deprivation while talking about Pakistan, a country of origin for them, and they exhibit a sense of gain, and they glorify their experiences of life in the country of destination, the UK. This labelling and justification, they provided, reaffirmed them in the correctness of their migration decision.

### 3.1. Synthesis of the findings

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Reference Models</b>	<b>Transformation</b>	<b>Direction</b>	<b>Relative Deprivation</b>
<b>Infrastructure and development</b>	Comparison of Country (Pak vs the UK)	Protection and safety during commutation, the result of an improved and maintained transportation system	↓	Decrease deprivation
<b>Education</b>	Comparison of Country (Pak vs the UK)	Meaningful change in the lives of their children	↑↑	High deprivation (in Pakistan)
<b>Health Care</b>	Self (Pre vs Post-migration)	Vast improvement, Major gap in dignity/empathy	↓	Decreased deprivation
<b>Economic</b>	Self (Pre vs Post-migration) + Pakistani relatives	Better affordability, lifestyle	↓	Decreased deprivation
<b>Employment</b>	British-born workers	Discrimination in job workplace	↑	Increased deprivation
<b>Social Support</b>	Family networks in Pakistan	Loss of informal childcare	↑	Increased deprivation

Almost all of the respondents appreciated the better infrastructure and the developed and maintained transport system in the UK. These factors heavily contributed to their greater

mobility, autonomy and sense of self-improvement, as well as a sense of improvement in their living condition compared to those in Pakistan. This comparison raises awareness of the deprivation they were experiencing in Pakistan. The framework of RDT guides them by comparing with their past while living in a traditional environment and underdeveloped and ill-maintained infrastructure, giving them awareness of the achievements and what they were missing in their previous life.

RDT provides a powerful framework to understand the assessment of the respondents about the educational gain, for them and their children. Interestingly, for them, education success is not only access to quality education, better infrastructure of schools, or other material resources, but they also shared their deprivation related to education in Pakistan. They shared some painful experiences, disparities and discrimination in the educational system, which served as an emotional logic and also a reference point to compare their experience with the better educational system in the UK. This aspect of the findings confirms the assumptions, this case study aims to assess, that not only economic and material gain is considered important in migration to the developed countries, but some underlying emotional indicators prevail. These factors offer affirmation in analysing one's deprivation in any situation she is dealing with. For the educational system in the UK, they showed the relative gratification to validate their success of the migration choice, especially for the well-being of their children. The sense of achievement for them is to observe their children thrive in a respectful system, with their identification is appreciated and their weaknesses are also handled with care. Here, by analysing previous deprivation with current gratification, they not only validate their migration decision but also feel a sense of meaningful alteration in their life.

Our four respondents reported their free participation in the political domain in the UK, such as voting and campaigning. In contrast, none of them participated while staying in Pakistan. This transition from inactive to active political participation generates a strong feeling of relative deprivation for the Pakistani political environment, where structural, cultural and political systems themselves, involved in creating an unfavourable environment for women to freely participate. In the UK, they feel a sense of relative gratification by observing accessible, enabling and protected conditions for women to participate in politics, as their civic right and democratic choice based on performance. The empowerment of her practice in her political activities in the UK confirms her voice and choice in migration, which she was missing in Pakistan.

All the respondents participated in this case study; all of them posit the freedom in religious practice in the UK. They perceive more freedom of religious practices in the UK compared to Pakistan; this notion of findings challenged the assumption that a Muslim majority country like Pakistan provides a better religious environment by default. The framework of RDT makes this paradox clearer, with the detailed explanations of the religious practice among respondents. The availability of halal food, accessibility to the mosque, and imam bargarh in a multi-faith neighbourhood, where all people respect others' faith, responded gloriously to the features in the UK. This compares the religious freedom in Pakistan, where a serious problem of sectarian tensions delivers a sense of deprivation, with different sects being more visible with separate religious centres. On the other hand, the UK they are perceived as a Muslim community. Here, we make a solid argument with the lens of RDT, where the theory stresses that the availability of resources or material means is not merely a desired phenomenon to see the migration success; perception of experiences with these resources is also important to determine the holistic definition of success of migration. In the case of religion, although Pakistan is a Muslim state, women migrants feel positive satisfaction while living in the UK.

Women's agency was also discussed concerning the theory of deprivation, where respondents acknowledged the improved decision-making power they exercise in the UK, compared to Pakistan. Typically, Pakistan is considered a patriarchal society, dominated by the male members of the family. The type of family, that extended or joint family system, also contributed significantly to the social standing of women within a family. Respondent reported limited or no decision-making power while staying in Pakistan. The migration in the UK, where they feel empowered to make decisions about their household, or participate in the decision-making process. Considering the overall improvement, they acknowledge that due to migration, they share as a classical marker of relative deprivation with their country of origin, Pakistan and a sense of gain in the country of host, within RDT.

There are some flip sides we observed in this case study, where respondent admired their current positioning as a result of migration concerning RDT, as well as they also highlighted some deprivation they perceived due to migration. These concern challenged their overall understanding of the achievements and upgradations. Respondents posit the challenges they face in the upbringing of the children along the lines of traditional norms and values. Here we analyse the contradiction, where with the change in age of children, the perception of parents related to their children's wellbeing also transforms. They feel that they are losing their control over their children, as the system enables them to carry individualism, such as discipline, taking responsibility and cultural norms such as respect for elders. In contrast, the respondent highlighted the Western values that British families carry within their family system. Here we can observe that the Pakistani migrants evaluate many benefits of their migration, but simultaneously, they experience the feeling of cultural inferiority. This comparison of overall well-being consists of material and emotional parameters, which contribute to the normative well-being of their children, where they consider their decision to migrate was not an absolute failure but a relative drawback. Here, they also reflect the provision of traditional socialisation of their reference groups in Pakistan.

Our findings explored this interesting dimension that these migrant women remain in a process of dynamic comparison, not concerning their economic situation in the past, but also with their group of reference in their country of origin and even with their host culture.

Women migrants compare their maternal experiences in Pakistan and the UK. They mentioned the UK's free, respectful health care services, especially for maternal and child healthcare. Here, these women illustrate their cognitive awareness of the availability of services with respect, giving them a sense of achievement in the UK. Although the healthcare system of the UK has its shortcomings, respondents also acknowledge them, including difficulty in taking an appointment in a public hospital. Even though they criticise the maternal health care system, where they have experienced several challenges during their pregnancy and label their pregnancy and delivery experience in Pakistan as inhuman. Here we explored the emotional and symbolic side of deprivation, what our respondents expressed during receiving their maternal healthcare services.

Pakistani migrant women demonstrate a clear comparison with their family, peers and another reference group, who are still residing in Pakistan, on many bases. This comparison gives them a sense of relative success and a sense of relative gratification while living in the UK. They acknowledge their improved purchasing capacity and consider it a huge difference in their socioeconomic status in both countries. Our findings are aligned with Stark (1991) (Stark, Migration incentives, migration types: The role of relative deprivation, 1991), as he argued that the motivation of migration is not influenced with absolute deprivation or complete poverty one



experience in his country of origin, but there are many other factors, contributed them to feel relative deprived.

Our representative also shared their thoughts on discrimination, which they deal with in the UK. However, these migrant women feel relatively improved and better off in life in the UK as compared to Pakistan; simultaneously, they recognised many challenges they face, including social integration, adjustment in the new social structure and challenges in work workplace. The way they compare their life with reference group in Pakistan and feel gratification in many ways of life, they also compare themselves with the native British citizens, as well as other migrant groups of people with higher-income groups in the UK.

Demireva and Rafferty contextualised this context; where the country of origin is creating the sense of gratification in these migrants, in the same way, the host country also produces deprivation in this group. So we can understand that gratification and deprivation can coexist in these migrants and can make them feel ambivalent about their migration decision.

Another big factor of deprivation in these women, while living in the UK, is the lack of social capital. Here we can analyse the intersectionality of economic gain in these migrants and the loss of social support, as a result of migration. Traditionally, Pakistani women get support from their family and other social circles in many ways; for instance, taking after of their children, availability of moral support during the hardship of life, community activities and get-togethers.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

The findings of this study suggest that women's experiences are shaped by the material dimensions and economic upgradation, but also equally important psychological and social dimensions of deprivation. These social and emotional factors play an important role in the transformative and transitional experiences of migrants, which are usually ignored in much of the literature, while only focus is given to economic movement and upgradation of the migrants. Our findings also aligned with the famous migration theories, emphasising push and pull factors for migration decisions, where our study added the need to assess the underlying factors, such as social identities and reshape hybrid identity in migrants. All considerations of economic factors, along with social contributors, result in a decision for further migration, not only for economic purposes, but also for a holistic upgradation of individual and family lifestyle.

This research highlighted the significance of social capital and the critical importance of diaspora and networks in dealing with the undesirable consequences of migration, specifically, in the marginalised segment of migrants, such as women. In case of Pakistani migrant women, the transitional phase needs critical support to mitigate as these women transit from a traditional and patriarchal social structure in Pakistan to a liberal one, thus in a challenging environment of the UK, where these networks support them in better social integration and adjustment. Even though they still need emotional confirmation and validation of balancing their cultural heritage with the new social environment. Here, the theory of RDT guides the ways in, these women evaluate their life experience to get an inner confirmation and validation of upgradation as a migration success.

The finding directs to work further to explore in detail and in-depth perception of social institutions and social contact of the migrants about their country of destination and the comparison of the country of origin on the dichotomous versions (1) with reference of gender; male perspective and female perspective (2) to explore each social institution and the practice for in-depth understanding of the context. Furthermore, these types of studies stressed on motivational aspect of the migrants, also a source to add push and pull factors in the contemporary world.

In the closing of this paper, this study calls for a nuanced attitude and approach to understanding the migration experiences of marginalised groups, particularly Pakistani women, to recognise and identify the needs to be addressed, the socio-economic, emotional and social integration challenges faced by migrant women. Our research is also opening the avenue of a new series of studies, focusing on the intersectionality of migrant women, their emotional and social needs, with other host countries, to better understand the factors influencing the lives of migrant women.

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