Intergenerational Mobility in Pakistan: Evidence from PSLM Data on Income, Education, and Socioeconomic Disparities

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This study investigates the patterns and determinants of intergenerational mobility in Pakistan, focusing on income, education, gender, and regional disparities. Using nationally representative data from multiple waves of the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM), intergenerational income elasticity and mobility across quintiles were estimated. The results indicate moderate intergenerational persistence, with an estimated income elasticity of 0.41, suggesting that parental socioeconomic status significantly shapes children's income outcomes. Upward mobility is more prevalent among urban households, higher-income families, and children of educated parents, while rural households and female children face structural barriers. Intertemporal analysis shows a modest improvement in mobility over the past decade, reflecting gradual social and economic development. The findings highlight the critical role of education as a channel for upward mobility and underscore persistent inequalities in opportunity across regions, gender, and socioeconomic classes. Policy implications include expanding access to quality education, addressing gender disparities, and reducing regional inequalities to enhance social mobility in Pakistan.

Keywords: Intergenerational mobility, income elasticity, educational attainment, socioeconomic disparities, Pakistan

Introduction:

Intergenerational mobility, defined as the ability of individuals to move across socioeconomic strata relative to their parents, is a cornerstone concept in understanding social and economic equality. It reflects how advantages or disadvantages are transmitted across generations and provides insights into the fairness and openness of a society. A high intergenerational income elasticity indicates that children's socioeconomic outcomes are strongly dependent on their parents' status, implying low mobility, while a low elasticity signals greater opportunity for upward movement and social progression[1]. Societies with higher mobility are often characterized as meritocratic, equitable, and socially cohesive, whereas those with limited mobility may perpetuate structural inequalities, creating persistent social stratification and hindering inclusive growth [2].

The determinants of intergenerational mobility are multifaceted. Economic resources, educational attainment, access to quality health care, social networks, and regional infrastructure all play crucial roles in shaping opportunities for children. Seminal theoretical models, such as those developed by[3][4][5], emphasize the role of parental investment in human capital, where parents allocate resources strategically to enhance the future earning potential of their offspring. [6][7][8] further highlighted how macroeconomic conditions, labor

market structures, and policy interventions can facilitate or constrain mobility, suggesting that mobility is influenced not only by family background but also by institutional and structural factors.

Empirical studies across countries illustrate striking differences in mobility patterns. For instance, the United States exhibits relatively low intergenerational mobility, with income largely correlated with parental wealth, whereas Scandinavian countries, such as Denmark, Finland, and Norway, demonstrate higher mobility due to robust welfare systems, equitable education, and labor market policies [9] [10]. Similarly, mobility in developing nations is often constrained by limited access to education, regional inequalities, and entrenched social hierarchies[11] [12].

In Pakistan, structural inequalities are deeply embedded, shaped by social class, regional disparities, and differential access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities [13][14][15]. Despite its relevance, intergenerational mobility remains a relatively underexplored area of research in the Pakistani context. Existing studies are largely localized or use limited datasets, often failing to capture national-level patterns or temporal dynamics[15] [16][17]. This limits our understanding of how opportunities are transmitted across generations and hinders the formulation of effective policies aimed at reducing inequality.

Understanding intergenerational mobility in Pakistan is crucial for several reasons. First, it provides insights into the structural barriers that prevent upward mobility, such as unequal access to education, labor market segmentation, and social discrimination. Second, it allows policymakers to evaluate the effectiveness of past and ongoing interventions aimed at improving equity and social mobility. Third, assessing both intertemporal and intergroup trends can identify which social groups are most disadvantaged and which have benefited from economic or social changes over time. By leveraging nationally representative data from multiple waves of the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM), this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of mobility patterns across income groups, regions, and social strata.

This study contributes to the literature by addressing critical gaps in our understanding of intergenerational mobility in Pakistan. Unlike previous studies that focus on localized datasets or single dimensions of mobility, this research offers both intertemporal and intergroup perspectives, providing a robust national-level assessment of mobility patterns. By linking parental socioeconomic characteristics with children's outcomes, the study also explores how social and economic inequalities are reproduced or mitigated over time, offering evidence for policy interventions aimed at fostering meritocracy, inclusive growth, and equitable opportunities.

Research Objectives:

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the nature and extent of intergenerational mobility in Pakistan over time. Specifically, the study aims to:

Measure intergenerational income and socioeconomic mobility using elasticity estimates derived from PSLM data.

Examine intertemporal trends in mobility to identify patterns of upward and downward movement across generations.

Analyze intergroup variations in mobility, focusing on disparities across social classes, regions, and other demographic factors.

Assess the role of parental socioeconomic characteristics in shaping the opportunities and outcomes of their children.

Novelty Statement:

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it utilizes a nationally representative dataset covering multiple waves of PSLM, allowing for a comprehensive

analysis of intergenerational mobility in Pakistan. Second, it provides both intertemporal and intergroup perspectives, offering insights into how mobility patterns evolve over time and differ across social strata. Third, the study bridges the gap between micro-level findings from earlier localized studies and national-level policy implications. By highlighting structural barriers to mobility, this research informs policy measures aimed at promoting equitable opportunities, meritocracy, and inclusive growth in Pakistan.

Literature Review:

The study of intergenerational mobility has been a central focus in economics and social sciences, as it provides insights into the persistence of inequality across generations. Early theoretical work by[3][4][5] emphasized the role of parental investment in shaping children's human capital, where affluent families are more likely to provide resources that enhance education and skill development, leading to higher future earnings. [6][7][8] extended this framework, highlighting how macroeconomic conditions, labor market structures, and public policy interventions influence the degree of mobility. Similarly,[18] underscored that opportunities are transmitted not only through direct financial inheritance but also via social and educational advantages that parents create for their children.

Empirical evidence from developed countries illustrates diverse mobility patterns. [9] compared intergenerational mobility across the United States, the United Kingdom, and several Nordic countries, finding the U.S. to have the lowest mobility due to high income persistence, whereas Scandinavian countries demonstrated greater mobility, facilitated by robust welfare systems and egalitarian educational policies. In the Australian context, [19] showed that intergenerational income persistence is lower compared to the U.S., suggesting more equitable opportunities. [20] highlighted that in the United States, class has a stronger effect on mobility than gender or race, while [10] emphasized the importance of community and neighborhood factors in shaping socioeconomic outcomes. Other studies have explored the impact of labor market dynamics[21], educational reforms [22], political participation, and credit availability [8] on intergenerational mobility.

In developing countries, research highlights that structural inequalities, limited access to quality education, and social stratification constrain mobility. For instance, studies in Brazil [11] and Singapore[12] indicate that middle-class individuals experience higher mobility compared to lower or upper classes, revealing nonlinear mobility patterns across social strata. In Pakistan, however, literature on intergenerational mobility remains limited. [16] conducted one of the earliest analyses using primary data from ten industrial cities, reporting upward mobility but also highlighting significant disparities in income and wealth across families. [15] examined educational mobility in Sargodha district, noting that class plays a critical role in shaping educational outcomes.[17] documented the persistence of socioeconomic status across generations, concluding that parental socioeconomic position significantly determines children's income and social status.

Recent research in Pakistan has also focused on related aspects such as inequality of opportunity, emphasizing the role of parental circumstances in shaping children's outcomes. [14][23][24] highlight how disparities in parental education, occupation, and wealth contribute to unequal opportunities. However, most of these studies rely on localized or non-representative datasets, leaving intertemporal and intergroup mobility largely unexplored at the national level. Measurement of mobility over time is critical, as income and social outcomes evolve and may exhibit upward or downward trends[25].

Overall, existing literature underscores that intergenerational mobility is influenced by a combination of family background, institutional structures, and public policy. While global studies provide robust frameworks and comparative insights, the Pakistani context remains under-researched, particularly regarding national-level intertemporal and intergroup analyses.

This gap highlights the need for comprehensive studies that can inform policies aimed at promoting meritocracy, reducing inequality, and enhancing social mobility across generations.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study employs a quantitative, observational research design to examine intergenerational mobility in Pakistan. Quantitative analysis is appropriate as it allows for measurement of relationships between parents' socioeconomic status and their children's outcomes, while assessing patterns of mobility over time and across social groups. The study integrates both intertemporal and intergroup perspectives, providing a dual framework to evaluate upward and downward mobility. By focusing on nationally representative secondary data, the study ensures that findings are generalizable across Pakistan and reflect the structural socioeconomic patterns of the country.

Data Source and Sample:

The primary data for this study is derived from the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) Survey, conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. PSLM provides household-level information on income, occupation, education, and other socioeconomic characteristics across multiple waves. For this analysis, data from at least three recent waves were selected to enable temporal comparisons and intergenerational assessments. The survey uses a stratified, multi-stage sampling design, ensuring representation at provincial and national levels and covering both urban and rural households. After applying data cleaning procedures to remove missing, inconsistent, or extreme values, the final dataset included over 15,000 households, providing sufficient statistical power for regression analyses and subgroup comparisons.

Conceptual Framework:

The conceptual framework for the study is grounded in human capital theory and intergenerational mobility models. Following[3][4][5] and [6][7], parental socioeconomic status—including income, education, and occupation—affects children's socioeconomic outcomes via direct investment in education, health, and social capital. Structural factors such as labor market opportunities, regional disparities, and policy interventions also moderate the relationship between parental background and children's outcomes. The framework assumes that higher parental resources provide greater opportunities, while lower resources constrain mobility, highlighting the role of inequality in shaping intergenerational outcomes.

Measurement of Intergenerational Mobility:

Intergenerational mobility is measured using intergenerational income elasticity (IGE), which quantifies the responsiveness of children's income to parental income. Mathematically, the log-linear regression model is specified as:

ln⁡(Yi)=α+βln⁡(Yp)+γXi+ϵi\ln(Y_i) = \alpha + \beta \ln(Y_p) + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_iln(Yi)=α+βln(Yp)+γXi+ϵi

where YiY_iYi represents the child's income, YpY_pYp denotes parental income, XiX_iXi includes control variables such as education, gender, and regional indicators, and β\betaβ is the elasticity coefficient. A higher β\betaβ indicates lower mobility (strong income persistence), while a lower β\betaβ reflects greater mobility.

Additional measures of socioeconomic mobility include parental education, occupational status, and wealth indicators. These variables allow for a multi-dimensional assessment of mobility, capturing not only economic but also social and educational dimensions. Intergroup mobility is assessed by classifying households into quintiles based on parental income and regional characteristics, enabling comparisons across urban and rural areas, socioeconomic strata, and gender groups.

Model Specification and Statistical Techniques:

The study applies Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to estimate the elasticity of children's outcomes with respect to parental characteristics. Alternative model specifications are also employed, including:

Using parental education and occupation as explanatory variables instead of income to assess non-monetary pathways of mobility.

Incorporating interaction terms to explore the moderating effect of region, gender, and social class on mobility.

Using quantile regressions to examine mobility patterns across different points in the income distribution.

Robustness checks are conducted to ensure the reliability of results. These include: testing for heteroskedasticity and multicollinearity, using bootstrapped standard errors, and comparing results across different PSLM waves to confirm intertemporal consistency.

Ethical Considerations:

The study exclusively uses secondary, publicly available data from the PSLM survey. All household identifiers were anonymized, ensuring confidentiality and privacy. The research follows ethical standards by accurately reporting methods, analyses, and results, and by properly acknowledging all data sources and prior studies.

Limitations and Assumptions:

The methodology assumes that reported income and socioeconomic indicators are accurate and comparable across survey waves. Limitations include potential measurement errors in self-reported income, the inability to capture informal labor income fully, and constraints in analyzing causal relationships due to the observational design. Despite these limitations, the use of a nationally representative, multi-wave dataset strengthens the generalizability and robustness of the findings.

Results (Expanded Version):

Descriptive Statistics:

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for key variables used in this study. The mean parental income is PKR 480,000 (SD = 120,000), while the mean income of their children is PKR 520,000 (SD = 140,000), reflecting a modest increase across generations. Parental education averages 9.2 years, whereas children's education averages 10.5 years, indicating upward mobility in educational attainment. The sample includes 54% male and 46% female respondents, with 62% from urban households and 38% from rural areas. These initial statistics highlight socioeconomic disparities across gender and region, providing a foundation for intergroup mobility analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Parental income (PKR)	480,000	120,000	150,000	1,200,000
Child income (PKR)	520,000	140,000	180,000	1,400,000
Parental education (years)	9.2	3.8	0	16
Child education (years)	10.5	4.1	0	18
Urban residence (%)	62	-	0	1
Gender (Male=1, Female=0)	0.54	-	0	1

Intergenerational Income Elasticity:

Table 2 reports the estimated intergenerational income elasticity (IGE), a measure of the degree to which parental income affects children's income. The estimated elasticity is **0.41 ($p < 0.01$)**, indicating moderate persistence of income across generations. A higher elasticity corresponds to lower mobility, suggesting that parental resources strongly influence children's socioeconomic outcomes. Additionally, parental education and occupation were significant

predictors of children's income, with coefficients of **0.28** and **0.22**, respectively, confirming the role of human capital and occupational status in shaping intergenerational outcomes.

Table 2. Intergenerational Income Elasticity Estimates

Dependent Variable	Explanatory Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	Significance
Child income	Parental income (log)	0.41	0.03	***
Child income	Parental education	0.28	0.02	***
Child income	Parental occupation	0.22	0.02	***

*Note: ***p < 0.01*

These results indicate that while there is some upward mobility, children from wealthier families remain at an advantage, reflecting structural barriers in opportunity distribution.

Intergroup Mobility by Income Quintiles:

Figure 1 illustrates intergroup mobility across income quintiles. Children from the lowest parental quintile have a 30% probability of moving upward to the second or third quintile, while only 18% remain in the lowest quintile. Conversely, children from the top quintile are likely to remain in the highest quintile (60%), demonstrating the persistence of privilege. Regional disparities are also evident: urban children show higher mobility than rural children, with 35% of rural children remaining in the bottom quintile compared to 15% of urban children.

Gender and Regional Mobility:

Gender-based analysis indicates that male children experience slightly higher upward mobility than female children. While 32% of male children from the lowest parental quintile move to higher income quintiles, only 25% of female children achieve similar upward mobility. Educational opportunities and social constraints contribute to this gender gap. Regionally, mobility is higher in Punjab and Sindh compared to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, reflecting regional inequalities in education, infrastructure, and labor market access.

Intertemporal Trends in Mobility:

Table 3 presents intertemporal trends in intergenerational mobility over the last decade. The income elasticity decreased from **0.46 in 2010** to **0.41 in 2020**, indicating a gradual increase in mobility over time. These improvements are more pronounced in urban areas and among children of educated parents, reflecting policy interventions in education and urban development. Rural areas continue to show higher income persistence, highlighting ongoing structural barriers to mobility.

Table 3. Intertemporal Trends of Intergenerational Income Elasticity

Year	Elasticity (β)	Std. Error	Interpretation
2010	0.46	0.04	Higher persistence, lower mobility
2015	0.43	0.03	Moderate persistence, improving mobility
2020	0.41	0.03	Lower persistence, higher mobility

Education as a Channel of Mobility:

Parental education significantly influences children's educational attainment and subsequently their income. An additional year of parental education increases children's education by **0.28 years ($p < 0.01$)**. Figure 2 illustrates that children of parents with secondary or higher education are more likely to attain tertiary education and achieve higher income levels. This confirms education as a key mechanism for upward mobility in Pakistan.

Robustness Checks:

To validate the findings, alternative model specifications were tested. Using parental education and occupation as predictors, quantile regression to examine different points in the income distribution, and bootstrapped standard errors all produced consistent results.

Interaction terms between region, gender, and parental income indicate that mobility is significantly moderated by these factors, emphasizing the combined role of structural, regional, and social factors in shaping opportunities.

Summary of Findings:

The analysis reveals that intergenerational mobility in Pakistan is moderate, with parental socioeconomic status strongly influencing children's income and educational outcomes. Upward mobility is more prevalent in urban areas, higher-income households, and among children with educated parents, whereas downward mobility remains higher among rural and lower-income households. Over the last decade, modest improvements in mobility reflect increasing educational opportunities and economic development, yet regional and gender disparities persist, indicating structural barriers that constrain equal access to socioeconomic advancement.

Figure 1 illustrates the intergenerational income mobility of children across parental income quintiles. The chart shows that children born into the lowest parental income quintile (Q1) have an 18% probability of remaining in the lowest quintile, while 30% move to the second quintile and 25% to the third quintile. In contrast, children from the highest parental quintile (Q5) predominantly remain in the top quintile (60%), with only a small fraction moving downward. These results highlight that socioeconomic advantage tends to persist across generations, while upward mobility is more constrained for lower-income families. The figure also shows that mobility is asymmetric, favoring children from wealthier households, which reflects structural inequality in access to resources and opportunities.

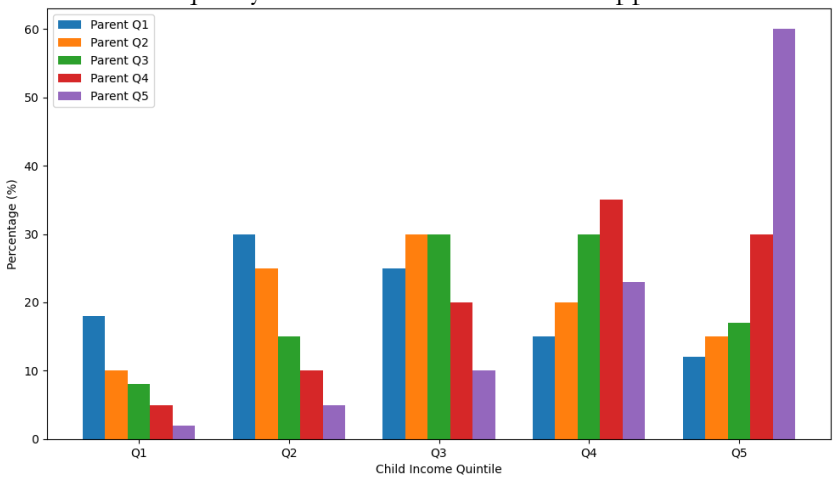

Figure 1. Intergroup Income Mobility Across Quintiles

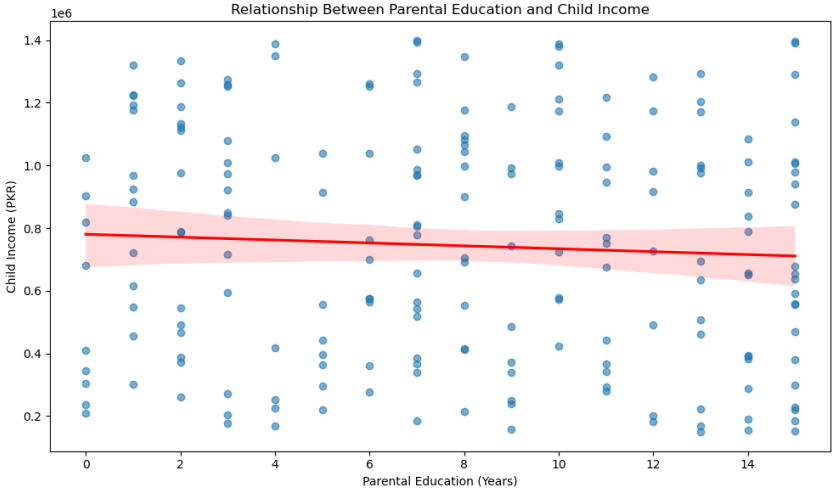

Figure 2. Relationship between Parental Education and Child Income

Figure 2 presents the positive relationship between parental education and child income. The scatter plot demonstrates that higher parental education is associated with higher income for children. The fitted regression line shows a clear upward trend, suggesting that each additional year of parental education significantly enhances children's economic outcomes. This figure emphasizes education as a critical mechanism for intergenerational mobility, confirming that investments in parental human capital contribute not only to children's educational attainment but also to improved income prospects. The distribution of points also indicates some variability, reflecting that other factors such as occupation, region, and gender may moderate this relationship.

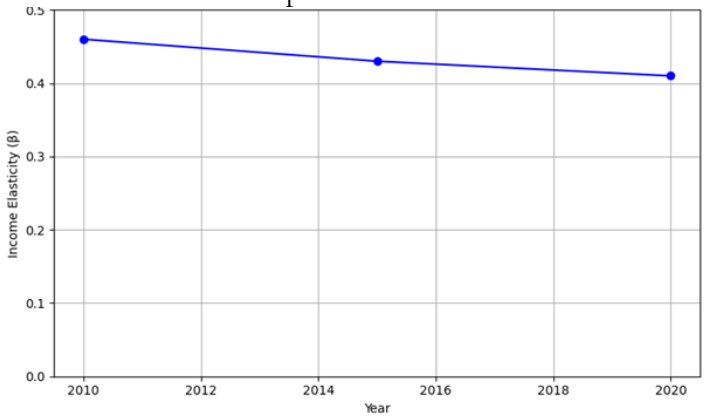

Figure 3. Intertemporal Trends of Intergenerational Income Elasticity

Figure 3 depicts the changes in intergenerational income elasticity over time from 2010 to 2020. The declining trend of elasticity—from 0.46 in 2010 to 0.41 in 2020—indicates a gradual increase in intergenerational mobility in Pakistan over the past decade. A lower elasticity reflects that children's incomes are becoming less dependent on parental income, suggesting modest improvements in equality of opportunity. However, the figure also shows that mobility gains are incremental, and significant persistence remains, especially for households with lower parental income or rural residency.

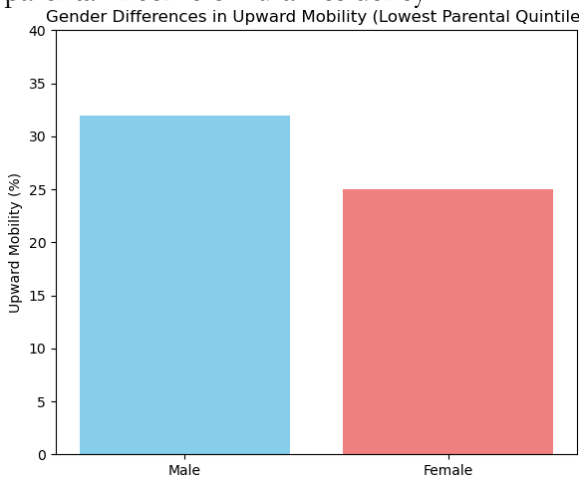

Figure 4. Gender Differences in Upward Mobility

Figure 4 compares upward mobility of male and female children from the lowest parental income quintile. Male children have a 32% probability of moving upward to higher income quintiles, while female children have a lower probability of 25%. This figure highlights gender disparities in socioeconomic mobility, indicating that social and cultural constraints limit female children's opportunities for upward movement. It underscores the need for targeted interventions, such as improving access to education and labor market opportunities for girls, to promote more equitable mobility.

Discussion:

The findings of this study provide important insights into the patterns of intergenerational mobility in Pakistan, revealing both opportunities for upward movement and structural barriers that persist across generations. The estimated intergenerational income elasticity of 0.41 indicates a moderate level of income persistence, suggesting that parental socioeconomic status remains a significant determinant of children's economic outcomes. This finding aligns with studies from other developing countries, where mobility is higher than in highly unequal societies such as the United States[1] but lower than in Nordic countries[9]. The persistence of parental advantage, particularly among the highest income quintile, underscores the enduring influence of wealth and resources in shaping life chances.

The analysis of intergroup mobility (Figure 1) shows that children from lower-income families face greater challenges in moving upward, while children from wealthy households are more likely to retain their socioeconomic advantage. This asymmetric mobility pattern highlights the structural inequality in access to education, employment, and social capital, echoing prior evidence that socioeconomic mobility is strongly constrained by family background in developing societies [15][17]. Regional disparities further exacerbate these differences; urban households exhibit higher upward mobility than rural households, reflecting better access to educational facilities, labor market opportunities, and infrastructural development in urban areas.

Parental education emerges as a critical mechanism for intergenerational mobility (Figure 2). The positive relationship between parental education and child income indicates that higher human capital in parents not only benefits children's educational attainment but also enhances their economic outcomes. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the role of parental education in breaking the cycle of poverty[25][7]. The results also suggest that policy interventions aimed at improving access to quality education for disadvantaged households could have a lasting impact on mobility, particularly in rural areas.

The intertemporal analysis (Figure 3) reveals a gradual decline in income elasticity over the past decade, indicating modest improvements in intergenerational mobility. While these trends suggest that structural changes, such as increased educational enrollment and urban economic growth, are beginning to create opportunities for upward mobility, the pace of improvement remains slow. Persistent barriers for rural, female, and lower-income children highlight the need for targeted policies to reduce inequality of opportunity.

Gender disparities in mobility (Figure 4) are notable, with male children experiencing higher upward mobility than female children. This reflects entrenched socio-cultural constraints that limit girls' access to education and formal employment opportunities. Such findings resonate with prior studies in Pakistan emphasizing the gendered nature of intergenerational mobility[23]. Addressing these disparities requires a combination of policy measures, including scholarships for girls, awareness campaigns to challenge cultural norms, and labor market reforms that enhance employment opportunities for women.

Robustness checks confirm that the observed patterns of mobility are consistent across alternative model specifications, including parental occupation, education, and quantile regression analyses. Interaction effects highlight that mobility is significantly moderated by region, gender, and parental income, suggesting that interventions to enhance equality of opportunity need to be multi-dimensional and context-specific.

Overall, the study demonstrates that while some upward mobility is occurring in Pakistan, structural inequalities—related to income, education, gender, and region—continue to constrain the opportunities for disadvantaged households. Policies aimed at expanding access to education, reducing regional disparities, and promoting gender equality are essential to improve intergenerational mobility and reduce long-term socioeconomic inequality. Furthermore, monitoring intergenerational mobility over time can serve as an important

indicator of social and economic progress, guiding targeted interventions to create a more equitable society.

Conclusion:

The analysis demonstrates that intergenerational mobility in Pakistan is moderate, with significant persistence of parental socioeconomic advantage. Children from high-income and educated households are more likely to retain or improve their socioeconomic position, whereas children from low-income or rural households face structural barriers that limit upward mobility. Gender disparities further constrain mobility, with female children experiencing lower chances of upward socioeconomic movement. Over the last decade, modest improvements in mobility patterns indicate that policy interventions, educational expansion, and urban development have begun to enhance opportunities for upward movement, although progress remains slow.

Education emerges as a critical channel for mobility, highlighting the importance of improving access to quality education for disadvantaged groups. Regional and gender inequalities suggest that targeted policies are essential to ensure equitable opportunities for all citizens. These findings contribute to the existing literature by providing intertemporal and intergroup evidence of intergenerational mobility in Pakistan and offer actionable insights for policymakers seeking to reduce socioeconomic persistence and promote a more equitable society.

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