

# Middle Classes, Moving and Staying in Karachi

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The urban middle classes in Asia are growing. One Asian city experiencing such growth is Karachi in Pakistan.

What characterizes middle-class families in Karachi and their processes of becoming middle class? And does migration matter for families' social mobility?

## Brief Points

- Becoming middle class in Karachi is perceived as related to work, acquiring an education, preferably in a private school, and being hardworking.
- Internal migration to Karachi has been and remains substantial, making it a destination city.
- In Karachi, international migration has historically been significant, especially in relation to Partition, but also in later international mobility patterns.
- This city brief offers insights from the ERC-funded project, Migration Rhythms in Trajectories of Social Mobility in Asia.

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## Urban Middleclassness

Asian cities are witnessing growth in middle-class populations amid rapid urbanization. A deeper understanding of the expanding middle classes in Asia provides valuable insights into the mechanisms by which individuals and families pursue and attain upward social mobility.

Karachi's population is marked by traces of Partition, as many Karachi-born dwellers are '*muhajirs*' (immigrants), often referred to as '*Urdu-speakers*', the descendants of people who arrived in Pakistan as refugees in 1947, or in the following years. Meanwhile, Karachi is also known as Pakistan's main commercial hub, a site of political contestation, and of late-night dining out, literature and art.

While there is no set measure to identify middle-class categories in Asia, researchers refer to income, education, employment and occupation as useful indicators. Studies on consumption and spending patterns also draw attention to socio-economic and cultural markers. These factors matter when thinking about social mobility, and people striving for and achieving improved living standards.

But how do the residents of Karachi who define themselves as middle class perceive what it means to be middle

class? And what is viewed as important to ensuring a family's improved socio-economic standing? We explore these questions, and whether migration also matters in this context.

## Migration Rhythms Data

To better understand how residents in Karachi perceive middle classes, and how migration might matter, the MigrationRhythms project conducted a household-based survey with middle-class residents (N=508) in three parts of Karachi (Central, West and Malir) in 2023. The survey is representative of middle-class residents in these selected areas.

The project also included family history interviews with 25 families (56 interviewees) in Karachi, who shared their families' experiences of being and becoming middle class, including their histories of migration.

## Perceptions of Middleclassness

What do residents in Karachi think about being and becoming middle class in the city?

Our survey respondents were aged 25–74, with 45% women and 55% men. The educational backgrounds and occupations of the respondents were very diverse, with a

significant proportion belonging to lower middle-class strata, often with lower levels of education, especially among women and older adults.

The survey asked respondents to agree or disagree with statements about middle-classness. As illustrated in Fig. 1, a significant proportion of the respondents associate middleclassness in Karachi with sending children to private schools and the use of motorbikes, while a smaller share disagrees with these statements.

The fact that more than three out of four of our respondents perceive middle-class families in Karachi as inclined to send their children to private schools underscores the value placed on education, and the belief that private schools are better than public schools. In Pakistan, almost half of school enrolment is in private schools.

More than 80% of the respondents perceive owning a motorbike as typical of middleclassness in Karachi. This illustrates the perceived importance of convenient transportation for an urban middle-class lifestyle.

Only 20% of respondents agree with the statement that *air conditioners* are a marker of middleclassness. Given the heat of Karachi summers, this should be interpreted in relation to the extensive use of ceiling fans and air coolers, which use less electricity. For lower middle-class Pakistani households, electricity costs remain a massive challenge.

The survey also aimed to gauge perceptions of what is deemed necessary to *become* middle class in Karachi.

As Fig. 2 shows, there is consensus among respondents that most of the factors they were asked about are important for becoming middle class.

At the time of our survey (2023), many lower middle-class households were struggling to maintain a middle-class life. Many

### If you are middle class in Karachi...

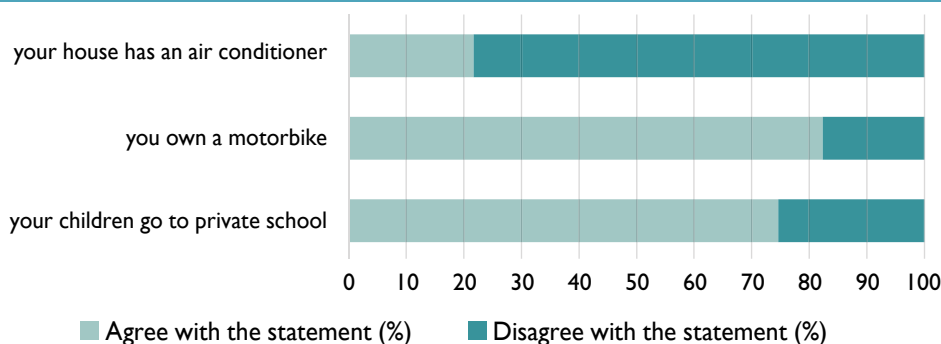


Figure 1: Perceptions about being middle class. Source: MigrationRhythms survey (2023).

## To become middle class in this city...

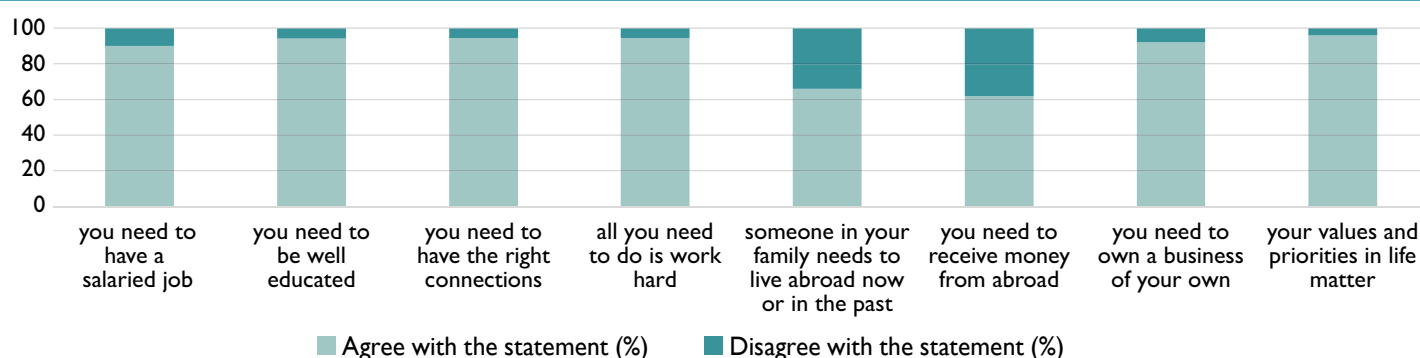


Figure 2: Perceptions of becoming middle class. Source: MigrationRhythms survey (2023).

were fearing sliding back into poverty, due to economic circumstances in Pakistan.

Thus, the agreement among our respondents here can be interpreted to reflect their sense that ‘becoming middle class’ is an extremely challenging pursuit, with no one right way to follow. Instead, to make it into middleclassness, our respondents perceive it necessary to mobilize all possible factors that might play any positive role.

More than half of our respondents say that they consider having family members abroad and receiving money from abroad as key to becoming middle class. Estimates suggest 3% of Pakistan’s population (of some 240 million) are emigrants, making Pakistan one of top 10 emigration countries globally. In popular culture, migration is well known, regardless of whether people have close relatives abroad themselves. Among our lower middle-class respondents in Karachi, very few did, and fewer still received remittances from emigrants. Thus, we interpret the perceived salience of migration and remittances as underscoring the perception (and experience) that becoming middle class is a struggle against the odds in today’s Karachi.

middle-class families in Karachi, who reflected on differences and diversity within and across middle-class strata. In one interview, a woman in her mid-twenties reflected on different concerns among upper middle-class vs. lower and middle middle-class families in the city, and compared the two latter groups:

*“I guess ‘lower middle class’ are those who live on rent and they are doing jobs, and ‘middle-middle’ are those who maybe have their own home or they have some secure property and their basic necessities.”*

There are multiple ways in which the middle classes are stratified in Karachi. Another interviewee, a 40-year-old man, relates belonging to the middle classes in Karachi to income and spending habits within the household:

*“I see it in a way, it’s mostly job-oriented, how long can they survive without a job? This can actually define the status. And one has to have a home as well. So, your running expenses, just like electricity, water, having guests at home, whether you are sufficiently able to meet those expenses. That is one parameter of gauging that you fall in the middle class.”*

various levels as central to belonging to the middle classes in Karachi. As this capacity manifests in diverse forms, middleclassness in the city proves to be multi-faceted, encompassing a variety of experiences and lifestyles.

The interviews also suggest that many participants recognize the roles of parents, in-laws, as well as extended family. Some foreground education, others entrepreneurship, and looking back, public-sector jobs and opportunities gained by working with the armed forces feature in families’ histories of upward social mobility. As in the survey, values also play a role, and the role of religion and piety – either for becoming middle class, or for showing middleclassness, also emerge, to an extent, in our data.

### Moving, Leaving and Staying: Does Migration Matter?

We asked respondents about their birth-place, whether they had lived elsewhere and whether they had family members who had moved. In our survey, we sought to capture different instances of internal and international movement.

Our data shows that many respondents have some history of moving in their personal biographies and even more so across generations. Karachi is an

### Plural Middle Classes

The survey responses resonate with findings from our interviews with

The above responses highlight the capacity to meet household expenses at

important destination for internal migrants in Pakistan. Furthermore, the history of Partition, and related migration to Karachi, is a key backdrop.

About three quarters of the respondents were born in Karachi itself, 20% were born elsewhere in Pakistan and around 2% outside Pakistan. The picture meanwhile changes drastically when we examine the birthplaces of respondents' parents and grandparents. Only a third of the parents and just 15% of grandparents were born in Karachi, reflecting in-migration to Karachi in the previous two generations. Rural–urban migration and migration between urban centres explain part of these migrations, while migration to Karachi following Partition is a crucial feature.

Though there is a generational shift in the frequency of internal migration to Karachi, a housewife in her 50s highlights the role of internal migration to Karachi in improving quality of life:

*“We lived in poverty; I got married and lived there for 4-5 years and had children and then we moved and bought our own home (...). We had to ultimately move from there to Karachi. Here we are doing okay with whatever we have, thanks to God. We wish that our children get successful and they progress in their lives.”*

Migration in her story was part of a trajectory of upward social mobility, involving marriage, her husband climbing a career ladder, gradually being able to buy a home, and moving to Karachi when he was offered a promotion, and continuing

their trajectory into comfortable middle-classness in the city. Thus, migration appears to have played a role in shaping middleclassness, especially when considering spatial mobility across generations and time.

### Aspiring to Move or to Stay?

Moving and staying can also figure in the future aspirations of middle-class families in Karachi. We did not ask about future aspirations in general, but whether respondents expected to migrate elsewhere in the next five years.

Of the respondents, close to 85% did *not* expect to move out of Karachi in the next five years. Among the 15% who saw themselves moving elsewhere in the next five years were those returning to places of previous residence, or moving elsewhere *within* Pakistan, as well as moving abroad, either within Asia or beyond.

The fact that just three in 20 were expecting to leave Karachi in the next five years is reflective of the city's status as a destination city in Pakistan. A woman in her 50s shared a reflection on future migration, which resonates with other interviewees' sentiments. She highlights how staying is a preference, whereas hopes for her children's future include potential mobilities, all set within a religious universe of meaning:

*“We can't move as a family, but we'd wish for our children to move anywhere they want to. And we wish that God*

*gives us enough that we are able to perform Umrah [pilgrimage].”*

Thus, we find that migration – and staying – can play various roles in how families in Asia become middle class, often as part of longer histories of rural-to-urban migration, and in the context of Karachi, against the backdrop of Partition.

Meanwhile, hopes of staying or migrating intersect with different priorities and choices central to families' striving towards, or investing in maintaining 'a good life', now and in the future. ■

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### THE PROJECT

Migration Rhythms in Trajectories of Upward Social Mobility in Asia (MigrationRhythms) investigates connections between migration and the growth of middle classes in Hanoi, Karachi, Manila and Mumbai. The project is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) (Grant agreement No. 94840, 2021–2026). [www.prio.org/migrationrhythms](http://www.prio.org/migrationrhythms)

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