**International Journal of Research & Social Sciences**

**Volume: 01 Issue: 01 (2021)**
https://ijrss.com

# Class, Inequality, and Social Mobility in Urban Contexts: Evidence from Pakistan

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***Abstract:***

*Urbanization has transformed social structures across developing countries, particularly in South Asia. In Pakistan, rapid urban growth has intensified class stratification, widened socioeconomic inequalities, and reshaped pathways of social mobility. This article examines the interrelationship between class structure, inequality, and social mobility within urban contexts, focusing on major Pakistani cities. Drawing on sociological theory and empirical evidence, the study analyzes how income disparities, access to education, housing segregation, and labor market informality influence upward and downward mobility. The article argues that while cities offer opportunities for advancement, structural constraints often reproduce class inequalities across generations. Policy-oriented recommendations are proposed to promote inclusive urban development and equitable mobility.*

**Keywords:**
*Class structure, Urban inequality, Social mobility, Urbanization, Poverty, Education access, Labor markets, Pakistan*

## Introduction:

Urban centers are often portrayed as engines of opportunity, innovation, and social advancement. However, in many developing countries, cities simultaneously function as sites of entrenched inequality and class reproduction. Pakistan's urban population has expanded rapidly over the past three decades, driven by rural–urban migration, demographic pressures, and economic restructuring. Cities such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad present stark contrasts between affluent neighborhoods and informal settlements, reflecting deep class divisions.

This article explores how class hierarchies are formed and sustained in urban Pakistan, and how these hierarchies shape patterns of social mobility. By situating urban inequality within broader structural, institutional, and cultural contexts, the study contributes to

debates on whether urbanization facilitates or constrains socioeconomic mobility in developing societies.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Class and Social Mobility**

Theoretical analyses of class and social mobility in urban sociology are grounded in Marxist, Weberian, and neo-liberal traditions, each offering distinct yet complementary insights into the dynamics of inequality. Marxist theory conceptualizes class primarily through relations of production, emphasizing ownership of capital, control over labor, and structural exploitation as the foundations of urban inequality. From this perspective, cities function as sites where capitalist accumulation intensifies class polarization, limiting upward mobility for working-class populations. In contrast, Weberian approaches adopt a multidimensional understanding of class, incorporating economic position alongside status, educational credentials, occupational prestige, and access to authority. This framework is particularly useful in urban settings, where social stratification is shaped by credentialism, bureaucratic employment structures, and symbolic distinctions. Neo-liberal perspectives, meanwhile, emphasize individual choice, market efficiency, and human capital, often framing social mobility as a function of skills, adaptability, and personal investment. However, contemporary mobility studies increasingly critique purely individualistic explanations and instead integrate structural and agency-based approaches. In urban contexts, social mobility is deeply influenced by spatial location, institutional accessibility, social networks, and public policy, rendering class a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by both structural constraints and individual trajectories.

**Urban Inequality and Spatial Segregation**

Urban inequality in Pakistan is deeply spatialized, with cities characterized by stark contrasts between planned elite housing societies and densely populated *katchi abadis* and informal settlements. This spatial segregation is not merely a physical arrangement but a structural mechanism that reproduces social and economic inequalities. Affluent neighborhoods benefit from superior infrastructure, private security, reliable utilities, and proximity to high-quality schools and healthcare facilities, while low-income areas often suffer from overcrowding, environmental hazards, inadequate sanitation, and limited public services. Such uneven distribution of urban resources restricts social interaction across class boundaries and entrenches social distance between groups. For children growing up in marginalized urban neighborhoods, spatial disadvantage translates into limited educational opportunities, reduced exposure to social networks that facilitate upward mobility, and heightened vulnerability to crime and health risks. Consequently, spatial segregation reinforces intergenerational inequality by shaping life chances from an early age, making urban mobility increasingly dependent on place of residence rather than individual potential.

**Education, Employment, and Class Reproduction**

Education is widely regarded as the primary mechanism for achieving upward social mobility; however, in Pakistan's urban contexts, the education system itself is highly stratified and plays a central role in the reproduction of class inequalities. Elite private schools offer high-quality instruction, English-medium education, and international credentials that provide students with a competitive advantage in higher education and professional labor markets. In contrast, under-resourced public schools and religious seminaries often lack adequate infrastructure, trained teachers, and market-relevant curricula, limiting the mobility prospects of students from lower-income households. This parallel education system mirrors and reinforces existing class divisions. Urban labor

markets further compound these inequalities through widespread informality, employment insecurity, and a mismatch between educational outcomes and labor market demands. Middle- and upper-class families are better positioned to convert educational credentials into stable employment by mobilizing social capital, professional networks, and cultural familiarity with formal institutions. Conversely, lower-class urban residents frequently remain confined to low-wage, informal, and precarious forms of work, resulting in limited career progression and the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.

**Gender, Informality, and Mobility Constraints**

Gender intersects with class in powerful ways to further restrict social mobility in urban contexts, particularly for women from low-income households. Urban women often face multiple, overlapping barriers including concerns over personal safety, restrictive cultural norms, limited access to affordable childcare, and the unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work. These constraints significantly reduce women's participation in formal education and labor markets, thereby narrowing their mobility pathways. At the same time, urban economies in Pakistan are heavily dominated by informal employment, characterized by low wages, job insecurity, absence of labor protections, and limited opportunities for skill development. Women and young people are disproportionately concentrated in these informal sectors, such as domestic work, home-based production, and casual services, where upward mobility is rare. The lack of social protection mechanisms—such as maternity benefits, health insurance, and pensions—further entrenches vulnerability. As a result, gendered patterns of informality reinforce intergenerational inequality by limiting women's economic independence and constraining the accumulation of human and social capital within disadvantaged households.

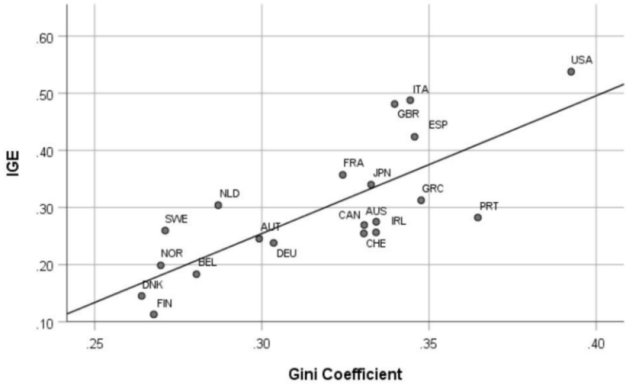
**Policy, Governance, and Inclusive Urban Development**

Public policy and urban governance play a decisive role in shaping patterns of inequality and social mobility in rapidly growing cities. In Pakistan, weak urban governance structures, fragmented institutional responsibilities, and limited fiscal capacity have undermined effective service delivery, particularly in housing, education, transportation, and social protection. Inadequate and poorly regulated housing policies have contributed to the expansion of informal settlements, reinforcing spatial segregation and limiting residents' access to economic opportunities. Similarly, unequal education financing and disparities in school quality perpetuate class-based inequalities, while insufficient investment in vocational and technical training exacerbates skill mismatches in urban labor markets. Inclusive urban development therefore requires integrated and coordinated policy interventions that prioritize affordable housing, equitable education systems, targeted skill development, and the expansion of formal employment opportunities. Strengthening local government capacity, improving inter-agency coordination, and adopting data-driven urban planning approaches can enhance policy responsiveness and ensure that marginalized populations are effectively integrated into urban growth processes, thereby improving long-term social mobility outcomes.

**Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad** is a public sector professional and researcher with extensive expertise in governance, public service delivery, and the integration of emerging technologies into institutional processes. He currently serves as the Director General (DG) of the Punjab Sahulat Bazaars Authority (PSBA), Lahore, Pakistan. His professional work focuses on regulatory oversight, public service reform, and

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**Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad** actively contributes to academic research on public governance, human–AI collaboration, and sustainable service delivery models. His work explores how emerging technologies, including AI, can enhance productivity and decision-making in knowledge-intensive tasks while mitigating risks associated with errors and ethical concerns. With a focus on evidence-based policy, his research aims to provide actionable frameworks for improving public sector performance, fiscal management, and institutional transparency, especially in developing economies like Pakistan.




Note: r = 0.77 (p < .001). Gini coefficient is historical average for each country from 1967-2018. For IGE cohorts, see GDIM 2018.
Source: Authors' calculations using GDIM (2018) and World Bank (2020) data.

**Summary:**

This article demonstrates that urbanization in Pakistan has produced both opportunities and constraints for social mobility. While cities offer access to education, employment, and services, entrenched class structures, spatial segregation, and institutional inequalities limit upward mobility for large segments of the population. Without targeted policy interventions, urban inequality risks becoming self-reinforcing across generations. Promoting inclusive urban growth, equitable education systems, and decent work is essential for transforming cities into genuine pathways of social advancement.

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