

**ARRANGED/LOVE MARRIAGE: INFLUENCE OF BANGLADESHI SKILLED  
MIGRANT PARENTS IN SYDNEY ON THEIR CHILDREN'S MARITAL PARTNER  
CHOICE**

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**Abstract:** *This paper draws upon qualitative interview data to illustrate the parents' influence on marital partner choice of children of Bangladeshi skilled migrants in Sydney. An analysis of interview data suggests that Bangladeshi skilled migrant parents are perceived to be most influential in shaping their children's perception of arranged or love marriage and spousal selection. The ways in which parents socialize their children around spousal selection are diverse, though, more or less, interweaved with transnational family ties as well as Bangladeshi migrant community in Sydney. However, their views on this issue change over time and context. The diversity and fluidity of parental influence challenge the dominant Western representations of migrant Muslim parents as traditionalist, collectivist and autocratic in their influence on the marital partner choices of their children.*

**Keywords:** Marital Partner Choice, Bangladeshi Skilled Migrant Parents, Socialisation, Transnational Ties, Postcolonial and Post Structural Feminist Perspectives

**Research Area:** Marriage, Migration and Integration

**Paper Type:** Research Paper

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Marital partner choice of Muslim temporary labour migrants' descendants, particularly in the European context, has received considerable academic attention in recent years. Yet the topic has received little attention in Australia, one of the major migrants receiving societies. This paper aims to address the lacuna in current literature by looking at parents' influence on marital partner choice among the young adult children of Bangladeshi skilled migrants in Sydney<sup>1</sup>. In the sections that follow, I have provided the setting of the research, the methodology and an overview of the current literature on family influence on marital partner choice of migrant descendants. I have detailed findings drawn from qualitative data. Using postcolonial and post-structural feminist perspectives for analysing interview data I argue that Bangladeshi skilled migrant parents' norms, expectations and process of socialising their children around marital partner choice are diverse. Some parents prefer arranged marriages for their children, while others showed openness to love marriages. Though transnational family ties and Bangladeshi migrant community expectations to some extent shape parents' norms and views, these views change over time and context. Thus, the findings challenge the dominant Western representation of arranged marriages as an essential

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<sup>1</sup> The subjects of this study are young adult children of skilled Muslim-Bangladeshi migrants in Australia. These individuals were born in Australia or overseas (in Bangladesh or elsewhere), but are all currently living in Australia. Throughout this paper, I use the summarizing term 'young adult Bangladeshi-Australians' to identify this specific group.

marker of Muslim migrant descendants within which Muslim migrant parents disregard their children's personal choice.

## **2. RESEARCH SETTING**

Arranged marriages are largely practised among Middle Eastern, South Asian and Maghrebian cultures, particularly among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs (Dale & Ahmed 2011; Selby 2009). In arranged marriages, parents and family members of the person to be married take the lead in introducing him or her to a prospective spouse and the choice to agree or disagree with the match is always present (Pande 2015, p. 173). Like the majority of South Asian cultures, Bangladeshi marriages are usually arranged by senior male family members and the interests of the wider family unit outweigh that of the individuals concerned (Marriott 1990, cited in Samuel 2012). Migrant descendants, such as British and American Bangladeshis largely reproduce the arranged marriage practices through transnational marriages. That means they bring a spouse from Bangladesh, their parent's country of origin (Dale & Ahmed 2011; Kibria 2012).

Muslim migrant descendant's transnational arranged marriages have been negatively depicted in the policy, public and media discourses in the host societies, such as the UK, Belgium and Netherlands to name a few, as a sign of failed integration of immigrant descendants. The dominant Western discourses raised concerns about continuous migration of uneducated, rural, inward-looking transnational spouses, as well as the assumed correlation between arranged marriages and the human rights issues of forced marriages (Van Kerckem, Van der Bracht, Stevens & Van de Putte 2013). In opposition to Western marriages, individual autonomy and agency, particularly for women, and love have no role to play in dominant Western constructions of transnational arranged marriages (Charsley, Bolognani & Spencer 2017).

In Australia, the skilled migration stream forms the major source of permanent settlement. For example, in 2016-17, skilled migrants accounted for 67.3% of total permanent migrants (DIBP 2017). However, heightened Islamophobia since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 2002 Bali bombings and the contemporary geopolitical context, has introduced tensions regarding Muslim migrants' 'integration' and belonging to Australia in terms of values and citizenship (Blair, Dunn, Kamp & Alam. 2017). Hostility and discrimination against Muslim migrants have intensified. Blair et al. (2017, p. 4) reported that 32% of Australians have negative feelings about Muslim Australians.

Despite the tensed situation regarding Muslim migrants in Australia, few studies have investigated the marriage practices of this group, let alone their descendants (discussed in the Literature Review section). This paper addresses the gap in current literature by looking at the ways in which socialisation of parent's shape perception of love and arranged marriages in a transnational social context among young adult Bangladeshi-Australians. This paper also discusses how this group negotiate those expectations around marriage. Though previous works have addressed marriage practices among children of British and American Bangladeshis (Dale & Ahmed 2011; Kibria 2012), studies, particularly in the UK context, have been either overlapped with other migrant communities or dominated by examinations of temporary labour migrants with a 'Sylheti' background. This study distinctively involved Bangladeshi skilled Muslim migrant children in Sydney since they form one of the fastest growing Muslim skilled migrant communities in Australia, yet under-researched (DIAC n.d.).

### **3. EXISTING LITERATURE**

A marriageable subject's marital partner choice is not divorced from collective norms and expectations. The desire a subject consciously or unconsciously holds is often constructed based on a shared understanding of the socializing agents such as family, and a peer group that make a subject a part of 'We' (Taylor 1999, p.35). Existing literature studied the diverse role of family (migrant parents and extended family back home play in marital partner choice of migrant descendants, particularly of temporary labour migrants in Europe.

With the shift from homeland to host land, non-White migrant parents from South Asia often fear to lose their culture (Mohammad 1999; Ghosh 2008). According to Samuel (2010), the more marginalisation and exclusion migrant parents experience in the host society, the more they may strengthen their cultural identity through rigorous practise of homeland customs; therefore, migrant parents adopt arranged transnational marriage for their children to reinforce their cultural identities and cultural continuity (Casier, Heyse, Clyck, Zemni & Timmerman 2013; Kibria 2012; Hense & Schorch 2010; Gopalkrishnan & Babacan 2007).

Apart from cultural continuity, repairing the ruptured family connections ensued by migration as well as meeting family obligation to bring close kin from poor periphery to the rich West, especially within the context of rigid immigration policies in the European migrant-receiving countries, drive many temporary labour migrant parents, such as British Pakistani and Turkish in Belgium, and Germany to arrange close kin transnational marriages for their children (Ballard 1982; Lievens 1999; Beck-Gernsheim 2007). Muslim skilled migrant parents' transnational ties and its influence on their children's spousal selection remained largely under-researched.

Economically marginalised migrant families mobilise transnational consanguineous marriages to obtain upward economic mobility for. Shaw (2014) pointed out that these marriages aided British Pakistani families to consolidate their family assets and reduce the remittance that they are obliged to send back to their country of origin. For example, the migration/settlement of a son-in-law may replace dowry payments (Bhachu 1995, cited in Charsley & Shaw 2006) or families may accumulate capital by sharing household space and expenditure among parents and married children (Ballard 1982; Selby 2009). Economic benefits may also be in the form of migrating children-in-law providing cheap labour in small-scale family businesses such as restaurants (Ballard 1982).

Economic benefits related to transnational arranged marriages might not be a priority for skilled migrant parents. Studies, such as Iqbal 2014; Shafiq 2016, have pointed out that many Bangladeshi skilled migrants in Australia have self-rated themselves as economically well-integrated and satisfied with their jobs and income. According to the ABS (2016), 11,948 people with Bangladeshi ancestry are employed in professional, managerial or community services. As such, Bangladeshi skilled migrant parents may have different reasons for selecting or rejecting transnational arranged marriages for their children. This paper sheds light on this issue by exploring Bangladeshi skilled migrant parents' preferred sons- and daughters-in-law.

Studies have found that a relationship exists between parents' level of education and their children's mode of spouse selection (Baykara-Krumme 2017). For example, De Valk &

Liefbroer (2007) and Huschek et al. (2012) found that Turkish and Moroccan guest worker<sup>2</sup> parents in Northern European countries such as Switzerland, Germany and Belgium usually have low levels of education and are inclined to arrange transnational consanguineous (close kin) spouses for their children. In contrast, migrant parents with high educational levels, such as Anglo-Indian migrant parents in Australia and Turkish migrant parents in European countries, are more liberal in their views regarding couple-initiated, interethnic or co-ethnic marriages (Gopalkrishnan & Babacan 2007; Huijink Verkuyten & Coenders 2013; Baykara-Krumme 2017). The paper drew upon (and extended) this predominantly quantitative body of research to qualitatively investigate how Bangladeshi migrant parents who are highly skilled and highly educated socialise their children regarding marriage and how their children interpret that process.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

The findings discussed in this article are based on a wider research project aimed to investigate the ways in which young adult Bangladeshi-Australians challenge Western discourses of transnational arranged marriages. One of the objectives of the study was to analyse the role family (parents and family back home) might play in young adult Bangladeshi-Australians' marital partner choice. The research project was a partial requirement of the Master of Research degree.

I have utilised postcolonial and post-structuralist feminist perspectives to achieve the research aim and objective and thus challenge essentialist notions of Muslim 'Others' and arranged marriage practices as the epitome of Muslim culture (Belli & Loretoni 2017). These perspectives and approaches are useful, as they address the diversity of individual subjectivity, such as norms, values, beliefs, experience (Hall 2004; Weedon 1997) and experience according to the intersections of race, religion, history, language, gender, age, ethnicity, education, ability and so on, as well as multiple discourses and relations of power (Brah 1996; Hall 1992).

In this paper, I have drawn on the narratives of seven male and female children of Bangladeshi skilled migrants in Sydney. The narratives were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, conducted from April to July 2018. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. The interview participants were aged eighteen to thirty years of age. Notwithstanding, religious diversity characterises the broader Bangladeshi community, in line with the research aim and objectives of this project, recruitment focused on the Muslim segment of the Bangladeshi community in Australia. Male and female participants were recruited to get a clearer picture of how gender operates within the framework of arranged marriages in a transnational social context.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the interview process. Participants were fully informed about the aim, objectives, potential risks and benefits of the project. I de-identified participants' name and addresses and used pseudonyms in all publications.

I have opted snowball sampling to access participants. This decision has been guided by two important factors. Firstly, there is no pre-existing sample frame e.g. list for Bangladeshi immigrants in Sydney. Secondly, external validity and generalisability was not a

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<sup>2</sup>Turkish guest worker parents in Switzerland and Belgium intervene in their children's couple-initiated partner selection through verbal reprehension, various forms of emotional and financial sanction, such as disinheriting children or ceasing contact, and so on (Topgiil 2015; Van Kerckem et al. 2013).

priority for this qualitative research which was more concerned with being 'suggestive' rather than 'representative'. By this, I mean that this study was focused on individuals' subjective perspectives, not on the 'truth' or objective reality.

Participants for this research were accessed through Bangladeshi student associations and Muslim student associations at Western Sydney University, University of New South Wales, University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), and Macquarie University. Respondents are all young adults under the age of thirty, are highly educated (tertiary educated), but diverse in terms of employment status. The respondents were either born in Australia or born overseas and reached Australia before adulthood.

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, or thematic 'coding'. The first step in thematic data analysis of the interview material involved open coding. I developed a coding framework aligned to the themes of the interview schedule and consisting of 11 themes or organisational categories (See Maxwell 2013). In open coding, I looked for subcategories within the organisational category. These subcategories are primarily descriptive and included descriptions of participants' words, concepts and beliefs (Maxwell 2013, p. 97). I utilised NVivo, computer-assisted analysis of qualitative data software (CAQDAS). After coding was accomplished, the qualitative data were analysed, interpreted and compared with broad patterns in existing theory and literature (Creswell 2014, p. 65).

## **5. PARENTS' ROLE IN MARITAL PARTNER CHOICE**

Participants accounts point out that Bangladeshi skilled migrant parents shape their children perception of spousal selection through socialisation. Postcolonial and post-structural analysis of interview data also suggests that parents also diverge in their socialisation processes around arranged marriages and couple-initiated love marriages. For example, Ipshita, a 24-year-old female government service worker, states that her parents are more inclined to an arranged marriage for their offspring:

They've [my parents] socialised me to think arranged marriage is good, but they have also socialised me to think that choosing my spouse is bad. A lot of the time they look down upon people that have chosen their own spouse. To them, you know, it means that they did not choose someone that was 100% perfect, 100% compatible.

Ipshita's statement suggests that because of her parents' views, she had developed dispositions that ascribe negative connotations to self-selected couples. In contrast to Ipshita's case, Renuka's (19-year-old female participant), parents, more specifically her father, expected her to avail of couple-initiated love marriage:

He [Renuka's dad] is more inclined to want me to find someone for me and then – not dating or any of that like, we don't want that, I don't want to do that either. But if I find someone who I think may be potentially is good, who is my friend or something like that, then tell them.

Most of the respondents reflected that their parents have two key expectations: cultural continuity through language (the speaking of Bangla) and retention of religious practices. Zahid, a 27-year-old engineer explained:

They were very open about their expectations. So, they had a few key requirements which are someone of the same culture, definitely someone from the same religion. But they were very open in saying 'whoever that person is ultimate, it's your choice. If you don't feel like that's the person you see yourself being with, you can say straight away early on'. They were very open about it. And I liked that,

everything is up front, everything is open on the table, no secrets, no surprise, no other expectations.

Despite such openness, Zahid indicated that his parents drew a boundary of inclusion for potential children-in-law, defined by Bangladeshi cultural identity and Islamic faith. While extant literature has marshalled evidence that cultural continuity and retention motivate labour migrant parents in European contexts, such as British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani, to seek transnational son or daughter in laws for their children (Kibria 2012; Shaw 2014), none of the respondents of my research project indicate such inclination among their parents.

For some female participants, parents' views regarding their children's spousal selection took different guises over the course of time. Education and career progression of daughters was prioritised by parents when daughters were in their late teens to early 20s. In the words of Renuka:

Every interaction we've had about marriage, we agree that we are not going to do anything about it until after university, after I pass my degree. One of my biggest roles is to actually become a doctor, get into the profession and then focus on other stuff around.

Farin, also a university student at her twenties stressed:

My parents don't really socialise me with a marriage partner... if you mean like me meeting a guy and trying to talk, they didn't do it yet, most likely because I don't want to get married at the moment. I want to finish my studies.

These experiences may not be the same for all young adult Bangladeshi-Australians, as they reflect a particular cohort/educational group of children of migrants, who are (or are in the process of being) university educated. Their reflections are similar to Kagitcibasi & Ataca's (2005) and Huschek et al.'s (2012) findings that many migrant parents (specifically Turkish migrants in Northern European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands) who are rich in cultural and human capital heavily invest time, personal effort and material support into their children's education. According to Huschek et al. (2012) and Atkinson (2014), this investment occurs for the purpose of children achieving material independence and psychosocial autonomy.

Despite this emphasis on education and career (for both male and female children), for some female participants, there is a clear connection between the ageing process and pressure to get married: as the age of the female marriageable subject increases, so does parental pressure to marry. This is in contrast to male children, who do not experience as much pressure. This gender difference was evident in Nondita's (a 26-year-old female civil engineer) remark:

I feel an unnecessary amount of pressure put on especially girls, especially girls of my age and I've got the same. I have had conversations with friends who have had the same experience where there is a lot of pressure on the girl to just settle and pick anything, and that isn't fair. They wouldn't say that to their son.

According to Afsana, given the pressure to eventually marry, some parents start to take liberal outlooks regarding couple-initiated marital partner selection that might open alternative lines of possibility for their 'ageing' daughters:

My mum thinks I am getting too old. My mom said, 'Why cannot you find someone and bring him home'. When I was younger, telling her like *amar pochondo ache* (I like someone) was not possible. My two older cousins in Bangladesh got married to someone they met at the university. They did not date. They told their parents and they got married. It might influence her a bit. When people in Bangladesh can do that, my daughters in Australia can do that.

Afsana's reflection suggests that through transnational ties, migrant parents come across changing ideas and reflect on their reified static notion of Bangladeshi culture. Recent studies, such as White (2016) and Rozario (2012), argued that couple-initiated love marriages were becoming a social reality among young, highly educated, middle-class urban Bangladeshis. Afsana's reflections support that assertion. A postcolonial and poststructural analysis of this finding, therefore, puts into question the essentialist dominant Western public and political discourses of arranged marriages as the epitome of non-White migrant families; instead, marriage practices are fluid over time and place, not only among diaspora groups but also in their homeland communities.

Some female participants, particularly the employed, find this temporal shift from prioritising study/career in young adulthood to later prioritising marriage counterproductive with respect to the marriage process. This is because time in young adulthood is spent concentrating on studies rather than looking for suitors and therefore the 'marriage market' becomes much narrower in later years. For participants like Afsana, by the time parents become permissive of romantic relationships, their male counterparts are either looking for younger spouses or already married. As Afsana explained:

I am 27. My choices are limited. That's what I have heard from the Bengali community. The guys suitable for me to be married are either already married or they want someone younger.

Afsana's statements indicate that women seem to be more marginalised in the community due to assumptions about their marriageable age.

Notwithstanding parents' gradual acceptance of love marriages, female participants stressed that their parents had negative attitudes towards dating. Renuka stated, "The strict rule is that I just shouldn't date and I'm okay with that". Most of the respondents in this study were inclined to conform to the normative expectation of avoiding dating. In contrast, studies in European and Canadian contexts demonstrated intergenerational conflict among parents and children regarding this issue (Samuel 2010; Topgiil 2015). One of the reasons behind the conformist stance found among the Bangladeshi-Australian participants is the conscious desire to keep a 'clean image' in the community. An underlying factor to this is the Islamic religious ideology that prohibits interactions between men and women who are not blood-related.

Interviewees also suggest that both in arranged or love marriage settings, parents' involvement in the marriage processes is common. Prioritizing parents' approval in spouse selection is a shared cultural norm among Bangladeshi-Australians, irrespective of age, education, income and gender. In the words of Renuka;

My mum and dad both need to like this person as well as approve of him and [his] background.

It is clear from the discussion above that migrant parents continue to influence their children's marital partner choice and the process of finding a future spouse. At the same time,

they provide space for their children to negotiate their choices. For the majority of participants, it was believed that open discussion between parents and children would resolve issues, as there is reciprocal respect between both parties.

In the following section, I have discussed the transnational family ties maintained by Bangladeshi skilled migrants and their descendants to grasp more fully how this connection might influence marital partner choice. This issue is particularly important responding to the argument placed by Fournon & Schiller (2002) that children of non-White migrants usually live “within transnational social fields linked by familial, economic, religious, social and political networks” (p. 193, cited in Lee 2008, p. 8); therefore:

Much empirical research needs to be done to examine the degree to which network density, overlap, and the flow of various resources and personnel within these fields shape the identity and actions of this second generation.

## **6. TRANSNATIONAL TIES AND MARITAL PARTNER CHOICE**

In the previous section, it has been shown that parents attitude towards couple initiated love marriage is influenced by transnational connection to Bangladesh. In accordance with one of my research objective, transnational activities (such as visiting Bangladesh) among young adult Bangladeshi-Australians and their parents, and the ways in which these ties may influence their marital partner selection were examined. This study indicated that Bangladeshi skilled migrant parents maintain strong transnational ties via frequent visits to their homeland, whereas their adult children only visit Bangladesh occasionally. The frequent visits allow parents to revisit their norms and values regarding marriage. However, most of the participants consider visits to Bangladesh a ‘holiday’ rather than a ‘return to the homeland’ or a strong sense of belonging. The interviewees stressed that transnational family links did not have any decisive role in their spouse selection. Ipshtita explained:

I don't visit, I don't see them that often. I am not close to them. I do communicate with them but I feel that because I don't see them very much, I don't think they have a very big impact.

Similarly, Farin explained:

If you go somewhere for a holiday for a very short time you don't even know what judgements, they might have. So yeah it would not have that much importance.

These remarks align with Straßburger's (2004) observation that the quality of transnational familial ties changes over generations: for members of the first generation, the ties are rooted in solidarity, and obligatory reciprocal dependence; for the migrant descendants, transnational ties are voluntarily maintained for emotional cohesion. In this study, these voluntary transnational family connections do not seem strong enough to influence important life-course decisions such as spouse selection. The respondents also reported that being born and raised in countries other than Bangladesh and having considerably rich social capital in Australia, including family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances, alongside increasing life commitments, contributed to a loosening of transnational family ties.

As suggested by previous works (Beck-Gernsheim 2007; Shaw 2014), transnational family pressure to bring family members from the homeland to the West through marriage migration is a major impetus to transnational arranged marriages. In British Pakistani transnational arranged marriage context, individual family members from the migrant ethnic



group work together to ensure the socio-economic wellbeing of the whole family; that means, the moral economy of kin is more important than individual choice (Afsar 1989, cited in Bolognani & Mellor 2012, p. 214). The respondents of the current study reported no family obligation to such transnational arrangements. One reason could be that the family 'back home' is aware that young adult Bangladeshi-Australians are not keen to marry transnationally. Recent changes to the Australian Spouse Visa process, indicating a more conservative stance on sponsorship (Department of Human Affairs n.d.) than ever before, may also deter family expectations for transnational marriages. In the UK and European contexts, stringent family reunification policies and high rates of Spouse Visa rejections have reduced the number of transnational spouses (Dale & Ahmed 2011; Rytter 2012). As migration involves complex processes of decision-making at both the countries of immigration and emigration, further research on migrant parents' transnationalism, as well as on the urban middle class in Bangladesh, might shed light on how social, political and economic dynamics in contemporary Bangladesh shape perceptions of transnational marriages.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I focused on the role of parents and transnational family in spouse selection of young adult Bangladesh-Australians, to attain one of my research objectives, that is, to analyse the ways in which the target group negotiates family expectations of marriage. By employing postcolonial and post-structuralist feminist perspectives, I underlined that the dominant Western representations of migrant Muslim parents as a traditionalist, collectivist and autocratic (Huijink et al. 2013) in their influence on the marital partner choices of their children are essentialising and homogenising. Based on interview data, I illustrated that Bangladeshi skilled migrant parents take the middle ground between modern and traditional socialisation. While parents may have strict views about Western notions of dating, their attitudes to couple-initiated love marriages are diverse and change over time. I also unveiled that young adult Bangladeshi-Australians showed an inclination to conform to their parents' expectations, not because they are forced to do so, but by choosing to inhabit the norms, which according to Mahmood (2005) is a form of agency. I also demonstrated that the transnational ties to family in Bangladesh are not strong enough to significantly impact the marriage decisions of the participants. Above all, the research finding indicates dynamism of young Muslim Australians around spouse selection, that is in opposition to dominant, Western essentialist representations.

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